



by sea to Peking. Unfortunately, this apogee was only of short duration because his successors, surrounded by confucianist mandarins and entangled in the obscurantism, continued to adopt a policy of exacerbated isolationism in spite of the memorandum of the modernistic scholar Nguyễn Trường Tộ, which made it possible for the french navy to succeed in dropping anchor a few decades later in the vietnamese waters after having sunk in the port of Tourane ( Danang ) the first five armored junks of the vietnamese fleet on April 15, 1847.

Although the Vietnamese neglect the maritime transport, paradoxically they do not haggle the means of manufacturing a large variety of boats to facilitate their daily displacement because Vietnam has, in addition to the second mangrove of the world (the forest U - Minh 1000km<sup>2</sup>) after that of Brazil in the peninsula of Cà Mau, thousands of small rivers, affluents and distributaries, streams and rivers ( Red River, Mekong River ). Moreover, the vietnamese road network is quasi non-existent. The vietnamese boats are divided into two categories: those manufactured with bamboo plates coated in lacquer (thuyền nan) and those carved from tree trunks or made with wooden plates ( thuyền gỗ). With regard to the first category, if the boat is of a small size, it is often called in Vietnamese (thuyền câu). It is a small boat where only one person can be placed. If the light boat is of a round shape, it is called " thuyền thúng " and is frequently used by the fishermen of the Center of Vietnam.

This tight round basket existed in the Xth century. Dương Vân Nga, a girl from Hoa Lư, was known at that time to excel in the art of rowing with this floating basket. But on the day of competition, Đinh Bộ Lĩnh, the leader of a rival band of boys, succeeded in immobilizing her floating basket by perforating it with the means of a pole. This victory enabled him to win not only the admiration but also the love of Dương Vân Nga. This floating basket allowed the fast transport of the troops through the marshes and the rivers and ensured the couple Dương Vân Nga and Đinh Bộ Lĩnh the victory over the Chinese a few years later. As for the second category, the basic constitution is made with wood. There is a multitude of different boats but the most known and the most used by the Vietnamese is the sampan or the boat with three boards (Thuyền tam bản). It is that which is employed to cross the streams or the rivers. The majority of the people who advance the sampans are young girls.

This is why there are many stories of love born of these boats. One continues to tell them, in particular the story of emperor Thành Thái with the oarswoman. If a Vietnamese man was used to crossing the river in his youth, this could probably incite in him intense regrets, memories and emotions when he has the occasion to return to the river bank to take the vat. He feels more or less distressed when he learns that the oarswoman, the girl whom he continues to pity the fate and whom he is not far from falling in love with is no longer there. Probably, she is now the mother of a family or she has joined another world but she is no longer there to welcome him with her charming and ingenuous smile.

He is not long to recall that he no longer has the occasion to hear her refrain, or to see the sides of her worn tunic flying in the wind of the river during the crossing. It is in this unusual context that he feels an indescribable affliction. He regrets missing so many occasions to find his dock, his river, his native land and to leave for too long in the lapse of memory the eternal charm of the sampan, that of a Viet-Nam bygone .

The film director Đặng Nhật Minh, most known currently in Vietnam, does not hesitate to show the opposite case, the discrete love of the young boatwoman living on the River of the Perfumes, to the foreign and vietnamese public through his film.



**The girl from the river ( 1987 ) ( Cô gái trên sông ).**

It is the story of its heroine Nguyệt who, to the peril of her life, does not hesitate to save a wounded young man known for his subversive activities by the south vietnamese police during the war. She tries to hide him in her sampan. Once peace is returned, this young man becomes an important communist cadre. The girl tries to find him because she continues to harbor deep feelings for this man. Unfortunately, she feels afflicted and betrayed because this man pretends not to know her and does not like to recollect the troubling periods of his life... She tries to remake her life with her former lover Sơn whom she rejected a few years earlier and who had the occasion to spend a few years in the reeducation camp for having the offence of being enlisted in the south vietnamese army.

In spite of the few things in their constitution, the boats, in particular, the sampans (đò ngang ) continue to charm the Vietnamese. They do not hesitate to integrate them not only in their everyday life but also in the songs and the poems. The songs " Con Thuyền Không Bến " ( The sampan without dock ) from the composer Đặng Thế Phong and Đò Chiều ( the sampan of the Evening ) from Trúc Phương going back to several decades and several generations continue to be appreciated and show at such point the profound attachment of all the Vietnamese to their rudimentary boats. As for the poems describing them, there is only the Vietnamese having the occasion to take the vat who manages to appreciate the finesse and the beauty found in the verses because one perhaps rediscovers through these poems a fragment of one's life so animated and so closely hidden in one's memory with more emotions and sadness than joy and happiness. By reading the following verses,

*Trăm năm đã lỗi hẹn hò  
Cây đa bến cũ con đò khác đưa*

**Our rendezvous did not take place a long time ago  
The banyan and the dock are always the same but the sampan has changed owner.**

The reader could realize that he is also caught up as so many other Vietnamese by memories that he thinks of erasing from his memory with the passing of the years. He cannot continue to sadden himself as that could be made when one was young and in love through the two following verses:

*Tương tư thuyền nhớ' sông dài  
Tương tư là có hai người nhớ' nhau*

**To languish of love is to remember the sampan and the vastness of the river  
To languish of love is to continue to remember for always**

But one should have the courage to forget when the sampan is no longer there as that was said in the following four verses:

*Vô duyên đã lỗi hẹn hò  
Mong làm chi nữa con đò sang sông  
Thôi đành chẳng gặp là xong  
Nhớ thương bền chặt bền lòng ra đi*

**One misses the chance to be at the rendezvous  
One no longer hopes when the sampan has already left  
It is no longer worth seeing each other again  
It is best to leave definitively when one loves intensely**

What becomes of her at this moment? Is she dead or happy? Does she deserve the life she leads? Is she like the young boatwoman, sister Tham who saved many people from drowning and who died drowning without anybody rescuing her in the story "Chảy đi sông ơi ( Run, my river, 1988 ) " of the talented writer Nguyễn Huy Thiệp? Is she like the young boatwoman Duyên who continues to hum a lullaby for her child:

*Nước chảy đôi dòng ...  
...Con sông Thương ...nước chảy đôi dòng ...*

**One can go up or descend the current... of the river Love...  
one can go up or descend the current..**

and never asking questions about the life that was laid out for her just like the river that follows its course to the sea in the short story " Nước Chảy Đôi dòng ( At counter-current, 1932 ) from Nhất Linh?. These are the questions that the reader overcame by memories continues to ask intimately. It is also the deep sadness, the poignant pain of the one who no longer has the occasion to find the freshness of his youth through the sampan and its dock which he was accustomed to take at a distant time. He had thought that with time this could erase all the memories as the water of the river evoked in the song with a strange sadness which sister Thắm likes to sing on the bank in the story " Chảy đi sông ơi ( Run, my river, 1988 ) " from Nguyễn Huy Thiệp:

*Chảy đi sông ơi  
Băn khoăn làm gì ?  
Rồi sông đã hết  
Anh hùng còn chi ? ...*

Run my river  
Why be tormented?  
The river erases all  
Even memories of the heroes...

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(1) Author of two works *Bắc sứ Thi Tập* (Collection of poems written during a mission in China ) and *Cần Trai Thi Tập* ( Collection of poems from Cần Trai) .



## ✓ *The boat*

Viet-Nam, my native country. Land of dragons and legends.  
Đặng Anh Tuấn. Copyrigh 1997-2009