

ON THE FIGURE OF THE *BOOK OF POETRY* IN VIETNAMESE VOCABULARY

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ABSTRACT – Positioned within the East Asian cultural sphere, Vietnam has long been shaped by profound influences from Chinese culture. The roots of Confucianism in Vietnam have extended for over two millennia, with the formal introduction of essential Confucian classics, including the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics* of China, occurring in the early eleventh century following the country's attainment of independence. Among these Five Classics, the *Book of Poetry* holds a significant place, garnering admiration from Vietnamese scholars of the past and endearing itself to the working populace. The linguistic and cultural interconnections between Vietnam and China, coupled with the widespread acceptance of the *Book of Poetry's* philosophy in Vietnam, have led to the gradual assimilation of numerous words and allusions from this classic into the Vietnamese lexicon. Examining the semantics of select idioms and words, this paper reveals that many of them convey aesthetically pleasing meanings, such as auspiciously blessing marriages, extolling the love shared between men and women, praising the benevolence of parents, and commending the virtues of gentlemen, women, and girls. This linguistic integration not only enriches the realms of Vietnamese literature, art, and language but also assumes a pivotal role in shaping social moral education.

Keywords – the *Book of Poetry*, Confucianism, Vietnamese culture, Vietnamese vocabulary

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Classic of Poetry*, referred to as 詩經 (Shījīng, also romanized as *Shih-ching*, or *She King*) in Chinese, and alternatively transliterated as the *Book of Poetry*, *Book of Songs*, *Book of Odes*, is the oldest extant anthology of Chinese poetry and holds a position of utmost reverence as a classic in ancient Chinese literature. Other Confucian classics, such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋), the *Book of Rites* (禮記), the *Analects of Confucius* (論語), the *Mencius* (孟子), frequently quoted from the *Book of Poetry*, attesting to its esteemed value. Confucius himself spoke of the *Book of Poetry's* profound value, stating, 'The Odes serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment. From them you learn the more immediate duty of serving one's father, and the remoter one of serving one's king. From them we become largely acquainted with the names of birds, beasts, and plants.' [4]. He also said, 'In the *Book of Poetry* are three hundred pieces, but the design of them all may be embraced in one sentence — 'Having no depraved thoughts.' [4] Since the Han Dynasty, the second imperial dynasty of China (202 BC – 9 AD, 25–220 AD), Chinese literature has been deeply influenced by the *Book of Poetry*. Vietnam, a country within East Asian cultural sphere, is no exception to this influence.

Many studies have pointed out that the *Book of Poetry*, as one of the Confucian classics, has been spread in Vietnam at least for thousands of years. The *An Nam chí lược* (安南志略, literally *Abbreviated Records of An Nam*) records that in 1007, "In July of the fourth year (of the Jingde reign of the Song Dynasty), the Acting Regional Military Governor of Jinghai Circuit (also known as An Nam 安南) Lê Long Đĩnh, dispatched his younger brother Lê Minh Xưởng and the Chief Secretary Hoàng Thành Nhã to pay tribute to China. Long Đĩnh requested the *Nine Classics* (Cửu kinh 九經) and a collection of Buddhist scriptures (Đại tạng kinh 大藏經, which was approved by the Song Emperor." In the spring of 1009, Lê Minh Xưởng returned with *Nine Classics* and the *Great Storage of Scriptures*. But in fact, during the one thousand years long history of "Vietnam under Chinese rule", the *Four Books* (Tứ thư 四書) and the *Five Classics* (Ngũ kinh 五經) have been introduced into Vietnam along with the Chinese rulers who went to Vietnam to take office. Due to the active promotion of Xi Guang (錫光) in the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC – 9 AD), Ren Yan (任延) in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 AD), Shi Xie 士燮 in the late Han Dynasty and the early Three Kingdoms period (220 – 280 AD), the Grand Governor was actively promoted, Vietnamese Confucianism has developed to a higher level which is "Xi Guang ruled Giao Chỉ (交趾, modern Northern Vietnam), Ren Yan ruled Cửu Chân (九真, modern Central Vietnam), they established schools, and taught etiquette and righteousness." Ngô Sĩ Liên (?-?), a historian hailing from the Lê Dynasty (which governed Vietnam from 1428–1527 and 1533–1789), reiterated the assertion that "Our Vietnamese people are adept in classics, notably the *Book of Poetry* and the *Book of Documents* (尚書). They possess a profound understanding of rituals and music, embodying the essence of a civilized nation since the era of King Shi (士王). The question arises: Do his merits and

* Vietnam under Chinese rule (北屬時期: 111 BC–939, 1407–1428) refers to four historical periods when several portions of modern-day Northern Vietnam was under the rule of various Chinese dynasties.

virtues extend beyond the contemporary era, resonating through the corridors of time to influence future generations?" [5] In the 33th year of the Tự Đức reign of the Nguyễn Dynasty (1880), Nguyễn Văn San in his Sino-Nom dictionary *Đại Nam quốc ngữ* (大南國語, literally *National language of The Great Vietnam*), the first sentence of the *Preface* also indirectly confirmed that in the late Eastern Han Dynasty and the early Three Kingdoms period, the *Book of Poetry* was translated by the warlord of Giao Châu (交州, modern Northern Vietnam and a part of southern China) – Shi Xie and pointed out the shortcomings of the translation: "The languages of different countries are different, and each country has their own language. Our nation has undertaken the translation of Chinese phonetics from the era of King Shi. However, numerous aspects remain shrouded in mystery. For example, include 'Jūjiū 雉鳩', the identity of which as a bird remains elusive, and 'Yángtáo 羊桃', the nature of which as a type of wood remains unknown, and there are many similarities." Since then, the *Book of Poetry* and other Chinese Confucian classics have established a profound presence in Vietnam's historical and cultural landscape. Beyond mere literary influence, the *Book of Poetry* has left an indelible mark on various facets of Vietnamese society, including literature, the imperial examination system, vocabulary, plaques and numerous other domains.

Researchers, who specifically studied the *Book of Poetry* in Vietnam have carried out various studies from two aspects of literature and culture. For instance, Trần Lê Sáng [9][10] have explored the Vietnamese people's feelings from the *Book of Poetry*, and also talked about the *Book of Poetry* in Vietnamese orthodox culture and folk culture. From the Chinese edict form, the imperial examination, the inscription to folk poetry, articles, prefaces and postscripts, and ballads, there are traces of the *Book of Poetry*. Đỗ Thị Bích Tuyền [2] and Phạm Ngọc Hàm [8] also discussed the impact of the *Book of Poetry* on Vietnamese classical literature, pointing out that Vietnamese classical literature, especially the poetry creation, borrowed the allusions in the *Book of Poetry*, and stressed the impact of the *Book of Poetry* on Vietnamese literature creation. The study of Nguyễn Tuấn Cường [7] has extensively investigated the various mumble translations of the *Book of Poetry* in Vietnam, with a total of 7 works, 19 versions and 31 volumes. He also has classified and evaluated from the aspects of textology, mumble philology and mumble literature. Finally, he proposed that the research direction of this type of literature should be carried out in three aspects: classics, poetics and linguistics. Nguyen Gia Khoa et al. [6] found that, among the investigated Vietnamese ancient inscribed plaques, the most classical cited from the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics* is the *Book of Poetry* with 120 pieces of inscribed plaques, accounting for around 17.9 percent of the 680 inscribed plaques examined.

Chen Jihua [1], a Chinese scholar, started from the perspective of Vietnamese toponymy research, used the general annals of Vietnam's Nguyen Dynasty geography general chronicle – *Đồng Khánh địa dư chí* (同慶地輿志, literally *the Descriptive geography of the Emperor Đồng Khánh*) as the corpus, and found more than 130 names that coincide with the words in the *Book of Poetry* from more than 8,500 village names in Northern Vietnam. He highlighted that the apparent correlation between these intersecting names and the *Book of Poetry* was not a mere coincidence. Furthermore, he conducted an analysis of the social and historical factors contributing to the linguistic foundations of these overlapping names, considering elements such as the promotion of enlightenment, the Imperial Examinations, and the pursuit of elegance.

II. THE *BOOK OF POETRY* IN VIETNAMESE PEOPLE'S DAILY LIFE LANGUAGE

Among the Vietnamese language lexicon, there are also certain words or idioms that are "self-created" based on the *Book of Poetry*. While the quantity of these words is limited, they are used frequently, and Vietnamese have used them skillfully in their daily life. The quintessential manifests in the imperative for individuals to encounter or partake in a significant life event, namely, the institution of marriage. Within the spectrum of traditional customs observed during Vietnamese weddings, a notable ritual unfolds on the official day of matrimony. The groom's residence displays the "Lễ Thành Hôn" (Chénghūn Lǐ 成婚禮) plaque, signifying 'the Wedding Ceremony,' while the bride's abode showcases the "Lễ Vu Quy" (Yúguī Lǐ 于歸禮), denoting 'the Going to [Future] Home Ceremony.' The term "Yúguī 于歸" finds its origins in the third sentence of each chapter of the poem *Taoyao* 桃夭 – *Zhounan* 周南 from the *Book of Poetry*:

The peach tree is young and elegant;

Brilliant are its flowers.

*This young lady is **going to her future home**,*

And will order well her chamber and house.

The peach tree is young and elegant;

Abundant will be its fruits.

*This young lady is **going to her future home**,
 And will order well her house and chamber.
 The peach tree is young and elegant;
 Luxuriant are its leaves.
 This young lady is **going to her future home**,
 And will order well her family. [4]*

The ancients held the belief that women were initially nurtured in the households of their biological parents, and that the residence after marriage constituted their own familial domain. Therefore, getting married is called "Yúguī/ Vu quy", which means going home. Nevertheless, in Vietnamese wedding ceremonies, a sign bearing the words "Vu quy" is exhibited at the residence of the bride's family. This not only signifies that a woman from the family is about to be married but also carries another meaning related to the last sentence of each chapter in a poem: "Will order well her chamber and family." Beyond being a blessing for the bride, it serves as an expectation for her future home. In addition, the word "gia thất" (jiāshì 家室, which means chamber and family) in the poem is also a common word in Vietnamese, and the idiom "yên bề gia thất" (宜其家室) refers to the lives of men and women who have entered into matrimony. The use of "Vu quy" and "gia thất" in lieu of the word "marriage" represents a cultural expression that conveys blessings and serves as a reminder for the bride to establish a happy family, thus embodying a distinct cultural essence. Additionally, various blessings from the *Book of Poetry* are integrated into daily life, such as the phrase "Bách niên giai lão" (百年偕老, meaning "live together to be a hundred years") to celebrate a married couple, and "Thọ tỷ Nam Sơn" (壽比南山, longevity akin to the South Mountain) to felicitate the elderly, and so on.

The subsequent instance continues to focus on women. The word "tần tảo/ tảo tần" (蘋藻 pínzǎo/ 藻蘋 zǎopín) originally means "蘋 pín" (which means the large duckweed) and "藻 zǎo" (which means the pondweed) – the two names of aquatic plants. The ancients often used it as a sacrifice, so "pínzǎo" is also a synonym for sacrifice. This word comes from the poem *Caipin* 采蘋 – *Shaonan* 召南 of the *Book of Poetry*:

*She **gathers the large duckweed**,
 By the banks of the stream in the southern valley.
 She **gathers the pondweed**,
 In those pools left by the floods.
 She deposits what she gathers,
 In her square baskets and round ones;
 She boils it,
 In her tripods and pans.
 She sets forth her preparations,
 Under the window in the ancestral chamber.
 Who superintends the business?
 It is [this] reverent young lady. [4]*

In a question-and-answer format, the poem vividly and clearly describes the activities of women picking algae. These items are used as offerings in ancestral rituals before marriage. The whole poem specifically points out the sacrifice used for ancestor worship, the place of picking, the utensils used to contain and cook the sacrifice, the place of ancestor worship and the person who presided over the sacrifice. This series of tedious activities described the situation that women at that time had to prepare the sacrifice and sacrifice solemnly before marriage, and praised the virtue of the girl at the same time. The preface of the poem *Caipin* of the *Book of Poetry* states that: "The meaning of the poem *Caipin* is that if the wife of a senior official can follow the rules, she can serve the ancestors of her husband and offer sacrifices to her husband's family." Therefore, "pínzǎo" later also refers to the norms of women's words and behavior. However, in Vietnamese, this word specifically refers to women who work hard and diligently to take care of household chores and children, such as: "Mẹ tần tảo nuôi con khôn lớn" (literal translation: The mother "pínzǎo" to raise her children to adulthood.), meaning "The mother worked hard to raise her children to adulthood."

Another illustration of the effort and acknowledgment parents investing in raising their children is encapsulated in the idiom "chín chữ cù lao" (勛勞九字, which means "nine words of toil") refers to nine kinds of profound virtues that parents generate and raise children. This idiom has repeatedly appeared in Vietnamese folk poetry and literature. It comes from the poem *Lu'e* 蓼莪 – *Xiaoya* 小雅 of the *Book of Poetry*:

*Alas! alas! my parents,
With what toil ye gave me birth!
[...]
O my father, who **begat** me!
O my mother, who **nourished** me!
Ye **indulged** me, ye **fed** me,
Ye **held me up**, ye **supported** me,
Ye **looked after** me, ye **never left** me,
Out and in ye **bore** me in your arms.
If I would return your kindness,
It is like great Heaven, illimitable... [4]*

Among them, "toil" refers to the tiredness of parents when raising their children. And "nine words" respectively is referred to nine verbs such as "begat", "nourish", "indulge", "feed", "hold up", "support", "look after", "never left" and "bore". After the nine verbs, there are nine "me" words. The repeated words do not bring a complex and monotonous feeling. Instead, it emphasizes that parents work hard for their children, which makes people deeply sad and cannot help tears!

Moreover, many Chinese words or idioms from the *Book of Poetry* have been directly borrowed into Vietnamese vocabulary. For instance, the word "phong nhã" (fēngyǎ 風雅, which means elegant) originated from the *Book of Poetry*. The *Book of Poetry* is also divided into three parts: *Fēng* 風, *Yǎ* 雅 and *Sòng* 頌. Among them, *Fēng* are the folk songs of Zhou Dynasty, and *Yǎ* are the royal songs of Zhou Dynasty at the royal banquet or court meeting. Later, "fēngyǎ" generally refers to people, especially a man's appearance, dignified behavior and elegance. In Chinese, there are also terms that depict the aesthetic allure, demeanor, and comportment of women. For example, "yěu điệu" (yáotiǎo 窈窕) is from the most famous book in the *The Book of Poetry*, which is also the beginning poem of this classic - *Guanju* 關雎 – *Zhounan* 周南:

*Kwan-kwan go the ospreys,
On the islet in the river.
The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:
For our prince a good mate she.
Here long, there short, is the duck weed,
To the left, to the right, borne about by the current.
The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady:
Waking and sleeping, he sought her [...] [4]*

The original meaning of "yáo" is profound, which is a metaphor for the beauty of women's soul; "tiǎo" refers to the beauty of women's appearance. Similarly, "yěu điệu" in Vietnamese also refers to the beautiful appearance of women's body shape. For another example, when Vietnamese describes the beauty of traditional Vietnamese women, they often use the idiom "mắt phượng mày ngài" (鳳眼蛾眉, which means "Phoenix eyes, moth eyebrows"). Accordingly, "mắt phượng" means the eye of the legendary bird Phoenix, which refers to the small and upward eyes. And the word "mày ngài" (蛾眉) comes from the poem of *Shuo Ren* 碩人 – *Wei Feng* 衛風 of the *Book of Poetry*: "Her forehead cicada-like, her eyebrows like [the antennae of] the silkworm moth; What dimples, as she artfully smiled!" [4]. Hence, "mắt phượng" describes female's eyebrows as long, thin and curved as silkworm moth's tentacles.

Additionally, some words or idioms in the *Book of Poetry* have significant semantic changes when introducing into Vietnamese. Such as, the idiom "Lang bạt kỳ hồ" (狼跋其胡, which means "the wolf springs forward on his dewlap") comes from the first sentence of the poem *Langba* 狼跋 – *Binfeng* 鬪風 of the *Book of Poetry*: "The wolf springs forward on his dewlap; Or trips back on his tail" [4]. This refers to the situation of a wolf walking forward is stepping on his dewlap, and then stepping on its tail when it retreats. In Vietnamese, "lang bạt kỳ hồ" has become a common idiom, but its meaning has changed. "Lang bạt kỳ hồ" was interpreted as "living a wandering life in other places" in the *Vietnamese dictionary* edited by Vietnam's Institute of Linguistics (3). This idiom can also be reduced to the two-syllable word "lang bạt" (狼跋) in Vietnamese, with its meaning unchanged and integrated into a common word in Vietnamese vocabulary. For example: "Anh ta sống lang bạt, làm đủ nghề mưu sinh." (Literal translation: He living "langba" and making for a living.), meaning: "He is drifting all his life and making for a living." It can be seen that although the meaning of the word is different, the efficacy of the lexical and syntactical elements within the *Book of Poetry* in enriching the Vietnamese vocabulary warrants scholarly investigation.

III. CONCLUSION

It is a widespread phenomenon globally for languages to borrow words from one another. However, it is rare to borrow words from a neighboring country's early poetry to enrich their own language vocabulary. Lê Quý Đôn (1726-1784), one of the most outstanding and prolific Vietnamese polymaths, once discussed in his great encyclopedia *Vân đài loại ngữ* (芸臺類語, literally *Categorized Sayings from the Van Terrace*), why the *Book of Poetry* has had such a profound and extensive influence over thousands of years, and has become a classic admired by literature throughout history: "The beginning of the poem is based on the heart of the people. More than three hundred poems were mostly written by farmers and women, but some literati of later generations were unable to reach them, which was based on their authenticity."

The enduring classic status of the *Book of Poetry* lies in its authenticity. Its extensive themes derive from everyday life, depict historical events of the era, and resonate with the populace: expressing aspirations for a better life, weariness of conflict, and admiration for the virtues of a royal concubine. Therefore, as soon as the *Book of Poetry* was introduced into Vietnam, it was quickly preached and respected by all levels of social classes. Moreover, the artistic techniques such as Fu, Bi and Xing found in the *Book of Poetry*, along with its poems characterized by rhythmic musicality, bear striking resemblance to the songs and nursery rhymes cherished by the Vietnamese people. These two characteristics make the *Book of Poetry* naturally enter the daily life of Vietnamese people, and integrate into Vietnamese literature, art, language and many other aspects. In the process of language use, people can use the allusions and sentences in the *Book of Poetry* when they need to. From the semantics of these idioms and words, most of them express beautiful meanings, such as blessing a good marriage, praising the love between men and women, praising the kindness of parents, and praising the virtue of gentlemen, women and girls. This not only enriched Vietnamese literature, arts and vocabulary, but also played a significant role in social moral education. Because of this, the literary critic Bùi Huy Bích (1744-1818), who was an outstanding student of Lê Quý Đôn, once praised the *Book of Poetry* in his collection of Vietnamese poetry anthology *Hoàng Việt thi tuyển* (皇越詩選, literally *Poetry Anthology of The Empire of Viet*): "Alas! Poetry deserves to be called poetry, only three hundred pieces (of the *Book of Poetry*) are worth it." I contend that such commendation is not unduly exaggerated.

IV. REFERENCE

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ĐÔI NÉT VỀ YẾU TỐ *KINH THI* TRONG VỐN TỪ VỰNG TIẾNG VIỆT

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TÓM TẮT— Là một quốc gia Á Đông, ngay từ xa xưa, văn hóa Việt Nam đã chịu ảnh hưởng sâu sắc từ Trung Hoa. Nho giáo đã du nhập và ảnh hưởng sâu rộng ở nước ta ít nhất một thiên niên kỷ. Đầu thế kỷ XI, sau khi Việt Nam chính thức giành độc lập tự chủ, *Tứ thư*, *Ngũ kinh* và các kinh điển Nho giáo Trung Quốc chính thức du nhập vào nước ta. *Kinh Thi* là một trong *Ngũ kinh*, không chỉ được giới trí thức và học giả các triều đại Việt Nam đánh giá cao, mà còn được nhân dân lao động nước ta vô cùng ưa thích. Do Việt Nam và Trung Quốc có nhiều điểm tương đồng về ngôn ngữ, văn hóa, cũng như sự tiếp nhận cao độ tư tưởng trong *Kinh Thi* từ mọi tầng lớp nhân dân Việt Nam, nhiều từ ngữ và thành ngữ trong tác phẩm này đã dần hoà nhập vào kho tàng từ vựng tiếng Việt. Qua khảo sát ngữ nghĩa của một số thành ngữ, từ ngữ tiêu biểu, bài viết nhận thấy hầu hết chúng đều thể hiện những ý nghĩa tốt đẹp, như chúc mừng tân hôn hạnh phúc, ca ngợi tình yêu nam nữ, ca ngợi công ơn cha mẹ, đề cao phẩm hạnh người quân tử, phụ nữ, thiếu nữ... Điều này không chỉ làm phong phú thêm nền văn học, nghệ thuật và vốn từ vựng tiếng Việt, mà còn góp một vai trò không nhỏ trong việc giáo dục và duy trì đạo đức xã hội trong mọi thời đại.

Từ khóa— *Kinh Thi*, Nho giáo, Văn hóa Việt Nam, từ vựng tiếng Việt



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