

Six Vietnamese *Ca Dao*



Dao Le Van Phuc and Dao Pham Van Vung, monks and *ca dao* singers from Phoenix Island on the Mekong, October 1971

Photo: John Balaban

Love Lament

Stepping into the field, sadness fills my deep heart.
Bundling rice sheaves, tears dart in two streaks.
Who made me miss the ferry's leaving?
Who made this shallow creek that parts both sides?

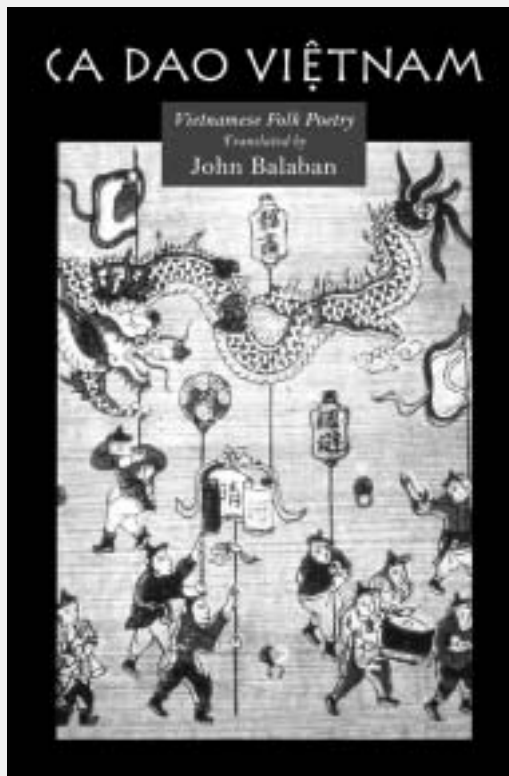
Venturing Out

Each evening, ducks paddle, egrets fly.
Mister Elephant snaps sugarcane then strides into the forest.
I'll follow to strip rattan for plaits,
Fetching them home to make a sling for you to go peddling.
Selling at no loss? Why, that's a profit.
Go on, have a look at the sun's face. At the moon's.

The Red Cloth*

Sad, idle, I think of my dead mother,
her mouth chewing rice, her tongue removing fish bones.
The Red Cloth drapes the mirror frame.
Men of one country should love one another.

* Cloth and mirror represent mặt Trời, the "face of Heaven." Before jarred baby food, mothers chewed and softened whatever they would feed their infants.



Cover of *Ca Dao Vietnam: Vietnamese Folk Poetry*, forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press

The Singer with a Bad Voice

Sing so dogs bark, oxen bolt,
so a girl walks out on her lover.
Sing so dogs bark, bulls bellow,
so the old coot crawls out of his hut.

Harmony in the Kingdom

When the rice fields lie fallow,
lying on the back of my buffalo, I play the flute.
People are happy with a Thuan-Nghieu king
whose bright mind spreads over land like the wind.
The Lo waterfalls are clear, free and high.
We shake off the jacket of the dust of life.

talking about birds

Listen. Listen here, all about birds and beasts:
Sexy and alluring? That's the little Moor Hen.
Manner offends? That's nasty Cormorant.
Slaves like an ant? Yes, the traveling Teal.
Straining to overhear? Drongoes snoop in trees.
Shaky in its knees? The skinny, brown Egret.
Stays at home each night? It's cowardly Snipe.
Hungry for their tripe, the Pelicans carouse.
Hungry by the house? There, the darting Larks.
Poling a shallow bark? Peacock plies his art.
Red crest, blue feathers? That's a jungle Pheasant.
Bickering unpleasant? The sneaky Plover.
Got a magic Book of Colors? The Soothsayer Hawk.
Never married, never caught. That's Wanderer Grebe.
Mate long since dead? The poor Widow-Wed.
Heart as thick as lead? That's the teasing Jay.
Eggs, but won't lay? Duckbirds live that way.

Sitting around, talking about kinds of birds,
Offspring grow up and look for each other.
See, the Weaver is clever and wise.
The Owl nests only at the edge of the island.
Watch: the Magpies have brought some news;
If they hover then call, our sisters are coming.
But Crows, really, are just like us, cawing
from far off, "Wash up. The journey's over."

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*Translations from the Vietnamese
By John Balaban*

JOHN BALABAN is Poet-in-Residence at North Carolina State University and currently a Guggenheim Fellow. During the Vietnam War, in 1971–72, he traveled the countryside in South Vietnam tape-recording the sung poetry known as *ca dao*, an oral tradition the Vietnamese have been composing for hundreds of years. Sung by ordinary individuals without accompaniment, about five thousand *ca dao* are thought to exist at any one time. The originals of this group can be heard at www.johnbalaban.com. They are part of a collection called *Ca Dao Vietnam: Vietnamese Folk Poetry* to be published by Copper Canyon Press in the fall of 2003.