Ladies,

I am very happy to have this opportunity to speak to you about "The Vietnamese Woman in the Course of History", a subject which has always profoundly interested me and which, I hope, will interest you also.

Before delving into the treatment of the specific subject, I think it is necessary to begin with background considerations on the matriarchal and patriarchal systems as well as on the transition from one to the other and the consequences which resulted. For in the scope of Vietnamese civilization their history is relatively recent and profoundly marks the present laws and especially the customs of our society.

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It would be sufficient for us to skim through any general history to see that, in all countries of the world, under whatever system, there have always been women who have been conspicuous because of their wisdom, their intelligence, or their courage despite a world and a mode of life more or less hostile to their emancipation or their entire fulfillment.

Their merit is the greater, since to leave the place so long assigned to them, that is to say the hearth, it was first necessary to meet many and varied obstacles. Before winning the battle beyond the household, it was necessary to overcome first the obstruction existing within their own families and then to face the prejudices of their fellow citizens. It would seem that after so many struggles they would have lost their courage, especially when one compares that in the same situation all was made easy for men, society being naturally disposed to expect from them the most brilliant of accomplishments. Each family awaited sons who could become great men and who would one day bring to it glory and prosperity. For the daughters all that was hoped was a good marriage or a good but simple life of obscurity in which they disappeared, swallowed into complete anonymity for the greater tranquillity of their families.

Of these two totally different mentalities, one can easily see that if a son were to show a bit of intelligence in addition to some inclination to independence, the family, dazzled by these striking signs of a promising character would never try to inhibit it. For the daughter it is entirely different. In fact, if she showed such signs, the family, immediately desperate at the idea of having brought forth a little monster, only for fear of ridicule -- an attitude created by the prejudices of a patriarchal society -- does all within its power to snuff out these germinations of
character and reduce them to a normal pattern, that is to say, to nothingness.

One wonders how such a strange pattern of thought can be arrived at.

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Many sociologists believe that primitive human societies were organized as matriarchal systems.

Its presence in all primitive societies still in existence in certain countries, such as the tribes of the Sahara, of Tibet, of the North Pole, in Africa or even in the mountainous regions of Viet Nam, bring credence to this hypothesis.

In these countries as in the first ages of our era, man, in quest of subsistence, used all his physical force to run in the forests and the wilderness. He hunted, fished or plundered. Woman stayed in the caves or in the huts to tend to everything else: taming the animals for useful purposes, making clothing, first with the skins of wild beasts and then through more and more improved methods — cloth made of the fibers of cotton and linen and other plants, or of animals: sheep, silkworms, and such.

She divided the catch as she wished, because man in general exhausted by the rigors of a hunter's life, wished nothing more on his return than to enjoy the care of his wife:

Once rested and the provisions exhausted, he was off again. Since the man was constantly away, in mountain or valley, the child who was brought into the world knew only his mother and respected only her. It is then easy to understand how the matriarchal system came into existence in the past and has endured to this day in certain areas of the world where it is still practiced.

With the comforts born of domestication of animals, hunting became less important than labor. And labor is entirely another thing. It requires the strength of man, but not his absence.

Man now came to know what was going on in his community. And this labor was not as engrossing as was the work of woman, so it is easy to understand that he had time to observe and care to envy and covet her power. The desire for power from which grows covetousness is a human trait and essentially one of the male. Moreover, especially during his life of hunting man had exhibited that characteristic: coveting his game and stalking it were so vital to him that he kept this throbbing desire throughout his life. (This is not to be lamented, for this atavism, when it is not warped, constitutes the spirit which engenders progress.) And then our man, clothed and caressed by woman, but keeping latent this spirit which is proper to his nature, it is natural that he should desire the power of the woman as his prey, and to obtain it a simple little blackmail was sufficient: "We will work no longer if...."
A little sentence like that may well have been sufficient to completely change the face or rather the foundations of the world of those times.

Thus it can be said that woman is not contented merely to procreate, raise and clothe men, but that she has even emancipated herself to become his lord and master. One might believe that the change from the matriarchal to the patriarchal regime -- that abdication, as the feminists call it -- was accepted without any great reticence on the part of women. This can be said without much risk of error when we think of the attitude of women toward men after this change.

In the patriarchal system which followed thereafter throughout the world, history shows that woman has never manifested any animosity toward men. When recently she has sought to escape from the prison where man has confined her, her efforts have never been directed against him in order to dominate him; she only asks her emancipation, her liberty, her right to life and that is all. It is strange to see that men has always a tendency to consider the least of these efforts as an act directed personally against him.

It would be interesting, moreover, to compare the attitude of man towards woman since the establishment of the patriarchal regime. Although in the matriarchal system the woman left him free as air and required nothing degrading of him, man -- as soon as woman allowed him to be master -- found nothing better than to shut her up literally and morally. Laws were created for woman all with the same end: to take from her all liberty. The law -- the very heart of that prison -- prevented woman from being free by giving her no legal protection. But man being instinctively distrustful and megalomaniacal toward woman, found even these bars insufficient. To reinforce them, he created moral codes, customs, prejudices, which he modestly called the crystallization of the spirit of the times.

Thus in order to prevent man himself from emancipating woman, a prejudice was concocted which persists even now and which considers as something disgraceful all submission of man to the influence of his wife no matter how intelligent, what good counsel, or how capable she may be. For centuries fun has been poked in every language at "l'homme rougis en laisse par sa femme", "the henpecked husband", or the "chong so va".

Moreover, to prevent the woman from emancipating herself, another prejudice remains although it may be considered as a ridiculous and abnormal one, whether it be in the domain of the mind or other, that woman seeks to equal man. What has not been said about the asexual woman, the androgyn, the tomboy, the "used blouses", the "females savantes", the "precieuses ridicules" !!!!

In order to facilitate the acceptance of the two aforementioned prejudices, man appeases and flatters woman by making her believe she is really his queen and mistress and that he can do nothing in her presence except adore her or trouble. In addition, he performs a thousand courtesies which cost him nothing while he jealously retains the essential.

Always to the same end, tradition also attempts to persuade the woman that beyond the hearth the world is for her full of pitfalls, cruel men dangers and treachery. This conception is most amusing when one notes that since woman is confined, the only wild beast at large in society must be man. It then becomes the duty of a good man to keep her at the hearth and becomes an action of intelligence and
savoir faire for the woman to stay there.

Thus, all possible is done to engray in the mind of woman that the hearth, the only place where she can be mistress, far from being a prison, is a place of bliss that she must merit.

It is then due to this variety of truly surprising means -- education, ridicule, persuasion, flattery, threats -- that man has attained his ends with respect to woman: depriving her of all means of resistance and in this manner completely enslaving her.

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From this very clever Machiavellianism have come abuses which are not only ridiculous but also cruel and inhuman.

Under the patriarchal system woman is polyandrous. That is in response to a necessity: Man the hunter is always wandering over mountain and down dale, but it is still necessary to perpetuate the race. Under the patriarchal system, the same goal was evoked by man to establish and maintain polygamy, but the only plausible reason did not exist: Woman being confined, that is, always at hand, one should be sufficient for each man. All the other arguments advanced for the defense of polygamy are no more than fallacious excuses destined to hide two principal objectives: satisfaction of a vice which is essentially male and further subjection of woman, even within the home, by the pressures of competition. From that custom, even when polygamy was abolished in many countries, there arose even more persisting prejudice, favoring extra-marital follies of the male while in similar circumstances or even at the slightest suspicion of this nature, woman is pitilessly crushed by society. And this is not figurative. Witness the torture of being crushed by an elephant in Viet Nam, of old.

It was this same state of mind born during the patriarchal regime and supported from all sides by the same society which reduces woman to the status of slave with which all faculties were directed at one single desire, one sole objective: to conquer and keep the favor of the male, the master. It is thus that we see unbelievable caprices on the part of the latter and a degradation as extraordinary on the part of his slave.

In the Orient, for example, the latter has pushed submission to the point of binding the feet out of love for the love of her lord who, except for a minority of the mentally ill, was only stricken with admiration by small feet of the woman because he doubted stumps could take her far or alone. In the Occident, the woman was corseted to the point of losing her breath, also for the pleasure of her master. And men admired that hour-glass waist which prevented the poor woman from making the least movement without fainting. Man truly did not therefore have to fear a feminist revolution in those times. I only cite here known and undeniable facts. The list would be too long if it were necessary to enumerate the barbarous customs and modes inspired by man in the most policed countries as well as the most savage tribes of the world in order to better enslave his own.

In this same train of thought, here is an amusing and significant fact: when woman first began in the West to agitate, to demand her freedom, and to understand that before having a free spirit she first must have a free body, man did not protest; he even appeared comprehending and cooperative. The result was not long
in coming. Woman, enthusiastic with the idea of doffing her corsets, long hair, multiple and encumbering skirts, did not pay attention to what was hidden behind the benevolent aid man gave to her trans formation. Blinded further by the magic formula "men like that", she burst forth one day in 1920 in Europe a strange sight. It was not what she expected. She did not at all appear as the replicate of man, but as his caricature. Such he wanted to see her and to make her see herself, defrocked of what he called her femininity. It was such a fiasco that she should have been completely discouraged for ever from all attempts at emancipation and returned with haste to her corsets of yesteryear. Fortunately, this same blindness con cerning men which had enchained her in the past for so long a time, this time saved her. Keeping an ungraceful mode of dress which permitted her complete liberty of movement and which she later im proved upon with art, she had made a step forward on the road to freedom.

This is an attitude which, on either side, can appear completely incomprehensible if we forget for example that woman is essentially maternal and that since creation she has loved man, as a mother loves her child, that is to say with a fervent and blind love. That is why the "I like this" and "I do not like that" of man has so much power over her. For man, he can think that under matriarchy, although free, he had to consider woman as a terrible and all power ful goddess and tremble more than one can believe before her. From there derived this instinct of fear and of mistrust and dupli city with regard to her.

We must not, however, believe that man harbors real animosity toward women. On the contrary, he loves her enough, and respects her, but in the measure that she is submitted to him. His preventive artifices, sometimes cruel, aim only at the one who shows the will to independence, and his mischievous revenge is only directed against the one who transgresses his laws. But for the submissive one, man knows how to compensate her with so much love that even in these modern times when woman is free, certain of them would abandon voluntarily all they have won with so much difficulty in exchange for a little of that compensation if it is sincere and lasting.

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If one accepts to consider man and woman under that light, it is easy to understand why history, written moreover to this day by men, mentions only very briefly and rarely the exploits and actions of women.

Though if for other countries the passage from matriarchy to patriarchy came much earlier in remote times when the human being was still half barbarian, for Viet nam, though already civilized, matriarchy did not quickly disappear. It was maintained for a rather long time. Some say that it endured even to the era of the Trung Sisters, that is at the beginning of our era (40-43 AD) This is not, however, proven and that is why I prefer not to minimize their exploits by letting it be thought, as some have done, that their brilliant feats of arms would have been impossible in an Asian world already devoted to a patriarchal regime.

What appears to be more probable is that the matriarchal regime disappeared under the reign of Trieu-Da (207-111BC) who created Viet Nam and imported the ploughshare from China.

Nevertheless all the Vietnamese legends and traditions recall this era of the birth of Van Long (ancient Viet Nam) showing that the people were under the influence of matriarchy then and had been for a long time.
For example, the first well-known personage in the history of Viet Nam was a woman, the Queen Au Co. She was united with King Lac Long Quan, descendant of the mythical King Than Nong who developed our agriculture. From this union came 100 sons of whom half, the Lac Hau, dispersed into the mountains with the Queen and the other half, the Lac Tuong, into the China Sea with their father. This legend concerns the era about the time of 2679 B.C. It seems, Au-Cu then, is the ancestor of all Vietnamese. These legends and traditions, reflections of popular thought, like to refer to her as a supernatural being, a sort of goddess who was united with a Dragon.

The same experience is said to have come to the mother of Phu Dong Thien Vuong, a young man of the time of the sixth king of the Hung Vuong Dynasty, who saved his king during a war against the An (258 B.C.). According to this legend, he was able to accomplish his feats because he was conceived at the moment when his mother walked on the footprint of a genie. In the book on the King Dinh Thien Hoang (368-979 A.D.) it is said that his young widowed mother conceived him with a genie of the sea. The legend attributes a supernatural origin also to Ly Cong Uan, first king of the Ly Dynasty (1010 - 1225), son of Phan Thi and an unknown father. All this is enough proof that the Vietnamese for a long time found it normal that the child should know only his mother. There have also been discovered, it seems, at An Khu, tortoise shells bearing the ancient characters indicating that the children called fathers all of the brothers of their father and called the sisters of their mother, mother as well. It has also been said that the kinds of early Viet Nam were called "duc", that is to say "hau" (second) in place of "vuong" as they were later called.

The first Vietnamese women who are not ascribable to pure legend were the Trung Sisters; These were two sisters, daughters of a mandarin Lac-Thong of Ho Linh (Province of Phu Yen). The older sister was called Trung Trac, the younger Trung Nhi. The older had for a husband Thi Sach of the District of Chau Dien (Province of Vinh Yen). Viet Nam was under the domination of the Chinese at that time. In 39 A.D., the Chinese Governor of Giao Chi (ancient Viet Nam), the cruel To Dinh, gave the order to kill Thi Sach. Trung Trac revolted and decided to avenge her husband. With the aid of her sister, she raised some troops, chased To Dinh from the national territory, recaptured 65 cities, declared Trung Nu Vuong (the reigning Trung) as ruler and took Ho Linh for her capital. Three years later the Chinese King Quang Vu of the Dong Han Dynasty sent his best general, the celebrated Ha Vien to head a considerable army into combat with the Trung Sisters. After a bitter resistance, though inferior in number and less experienced, they endured the battle though in retreat. Trung Trac and Trung Nhi crossed the Hat Giang River (branch of the Day and the Red River) preferring to drown rather than to surrender. It was on the sixth day of the second lunar month of the year 43.

Just as the Trung Nu Vuong many other women also became famous. Among others are:
Man Thiien Hoang-Hau, the mother of the Trung Sisters. Learning that her daughters were encircled she united the remains of the routed army in the district of Huoc Loe and went to their assistance in Can Hie (Province of Vinh Yen). She was attacked by the army of Liu Hong, assistant to Ha Vien, was vanquished but, refusing to surrender, she threw herself from the wharf of Nam Nguyen where she drowned.

Hoang thi Nuc, of the District of Gia Hung in the Province of Thanh Hao, learning that the two Sisters were raising troops to attack To Dinh, also recruited an army, led it to them and fought as commander of the eastern wing, from whence comes her title Dong cung Tuong Quan. When the sisters became queens, wishing to honor her, she refused to accept the recognition, saying, "I am a long girl, what need have I of honors?"

Another heroine in combat of the Sisters was Phung thi Chinh, wife of Dinh Luong of Phu Nghia (Province of Son Tay). Intelligent and very astute, she commanded the army of the Center with the title of Thi Noi Tuong Quan enjoying the complete confidence of the two Sisters. When the troops of Ha Vien attacked her, she was pregnant but leading the battle all the same. Surrounded, she delivered at the front itself, after which, putting the newborn baby on her back and brandishing a sword in each hand, she opened the bloody route in the ranks of the enemy and escaped. Learning later that the vanquished queens had committed suicide, she followed their example.

Another heroine, Le Chan, of the Prefecture of Dong Trieu, Province of Hai Duong, helped the two sisters to raise troops and chase To Dinh to Nam Hai. She was later named Trien-phong Nu Tuong Quan (General of the Advance Troops), and remained with the sisters throughout their reign following them through defeat the death.

After the Trung sisters, many other women later followed their example as warriors. The most famous was Trieu An.

Her true name was Trieu-thi-Chinh, of the District of Cuu Chan (now Dong-cong, Thanh Hao). An orphan at an early age she lived with her brother Trieu-quoc Dat. When about 20 years of age, persecuted by her cantankerous sister-in-law, she killed her brother's wife and fled to the mountains. There she recruited a following of more than 1,000 faithful. Exhorted by her brother to return to the hearth, she replied by an ardent and proud letter which remains to this day a masterpiece of its kind: "I wish to ride the tempests, walk over the unchained waves, besmear the sharks of the sea of the East, cleanse the national territory to the frontiers of our enemies to save the people from their distress. I will never condescend to imitate those who bow their heads, bending the back to remain the servants of others."

In the year 246 A.D., the people revolted against the Chinese mandarins of the Dong Ngo Dynasty (222-280). Trieu quoc Dat raised some troops and went to battle in the District of Cuu Chan. His sister did the same thing and joined him. The troops of Trieu quoc Dat, enthusiasm mounting at the courage of Trieu An, raised her to the rank of general in chief. She went to combat, mounted on an elephant and carrying armor of gold. She called herself Nhuyn Kien Tuong-Quan. After six months of fighting, vanquished by numbers, she had to retreat with her troops to the village of Bo Dien (now Phu Dien, in the district of Ky Hao) and to kill herself rather than to surrender. She was only 23 years old.
Four hundred years later, in the year 635, under the Duong Dynasty (618-907) the most cruel Dynasty of Viet Nam, Tran-thach-Trinh of the District of Nhat Nam, revolted, raised troops, took Luc Chau (now Quang-Yen, Lang-Son) and became queen under the name of Van Giai Hoang De. Here was an ephemeral rule. After only a short time she was vanquished by the troops of the Duongs and was killed.

In the year 1252, under the Dynasty of the Tran (1225-1400), the King Thai Tong went into battle against Champa which, instead of paying tribute, pillaged and tried to recapture the land ceded to Viet Nam. With his warriors Tran Quoc Chan went to war, accompanied by his second wife. She was called Tran-ngu-Nuong. This was a woman remarkable for her courage and her intelligence. One day, as her husband was wounded, she mounted her horse and took the direction of the troops. After one day of furious combat she succeeded in killing hundreds of the enemy forces and sent the remainder fleeing.

Under the Early Le Dynasty (1428-1527), the daughter of the Duke Hien quan Cong, Nguyen Nhi, was renowned for her resourceful intelligence to such a point that she was called Nu Khong Minh (the name of a Chinese Ulysses of the era of the Three Kingdoms). She was named Nu tong Binh (Woman Generalissimo) by the king and was authorized to follow her father to the fields of battle. Having realized the same great military feats as did her contemporary Joan of Arc, she was raised to the rank of Princess under the title of Doan Trang Cong-Chua.

During the year 1771, in a war against the Nhi-som people of the Northern Lord Trinh on the territory of Huoc Thi, Truong-tra-Duc, Duke Tra-quan-cong, of the district of Tong Son, was killed by an arrow in an ambush. Learning this news, his wife put on the garments of a man of war, mounted an elephant and, at the head of her troops took them to combat to avenge her husband. Surprising the enemy by her dash and her courage, she won the battle and dispersed them. She was recompensed by the Lord Gia Du who gave her the title of her husband: Tran Quan Phu-Mhon.

Under the Tay Son (1771-1802), Bui-thi-Xuan, daughter of the imperial tutor Bui-Dac-Tuyen and married to a Tay Son General of great repute, Tran quang Dien, was long habituated to following her husband to combat and to assist him militarily in all the battles. In a battle against the future Emperor Gia Long, they were captured alive by the troops of the latter and were executed.

Confronting Bui-thi-Xuan in the other camp, were Chau Luci Nuong of Dong Xuan, sister of General Chau-van-Tiep and wife of one of the companions of the king, Duke Le van Quan of the district of Kien Hung (Province of Gia Dinh). Sharing in the fortune of Nguyen Anh she followed him to Bangkok with her husband. There she participated in the wars of the Siamese, and triumphed with them over the Burmese and Malayan troops. She became famous in Thailand where her military talents were much admired.

Under the reign of Dong Khanh (1885-1888) during the French Protectorate, Co Ba, the wife of De Than a resistant well-known to the population, was a loyal aid for her husband and terrified the enemy by her stratagems and her courage.

In 1930, a patriot named Nguyen-thi-Hoe of Yen Bai organized a movement of revolt called the Quoc-dan-Dang. He was taken and executed, but his wife and faithful fighting companion, Nguyen-thi-Giang was able to escape and learning of his death ended her life at the
same time as Do-thi-Tam, a young girl of 18 years and a brilliant member of the movement who lived in Du-Hung near Hai Phong.

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The mistake must not be made, however, of believing that the Vietnamese woman knew and excelled only in arms. It is true she has been and still is very much impressed by the example of the Trung Sisters, who remain her supreme ideal. But history also is replete with names of other Vietnamese women famous because of their feminine virtues honored during their time. And this is important for it will enable us to understand another aspect of the Vietnamese woman.

Even now, in order to complete the education of a young girl, we urge her to practice the great principles of feminine virtue in reminding her of examples drawn from the lives of some women famous for those virtues.

We tell them, for example, the story of Phan-thi-Vien of the district of Hung Nguyen (Province of Nghe An), wife of Dinh-ngo-Hoan, who saw, after two years of marriage, her husband leave to be ambassador to China. Staying at home, like Penelope, she waited faithfully and, less fortunate than the wife of Ulysses, Phan-thi-Vien learned one day that he had died en route. When the remains of the body of the deceased were returned she gave it a worthy funeral. Returning later alone to the tomb of her husband, she strangled herself with one of his garments.

During the time of the Mac (1527-1592) Nguyen-thi-Nien, wife of Bui-van-Xhue, Duke of Ly-quan-ong, having learned that her husband had been assassinated traitorously by his brother at arms, Phan-Ngan, decided to revenge him. Ngan, attracted by the beauty of the young widow, asked her to marry him. She did not refuse and even accepted a rendez-vous on a boat. There she encouraged him to become drunk. Then, like Judith, Nguyen-thi-Nien, drawing a cutlass from her dress, cut off his head, offered it to the soul of her husband, and then took her own life by throwing herself into the water.

In the same dynasty of the earlier Le's, Phan thi Thuan, of the district of Thach Ha, wife of second rank to Admiral Ngo Canh Hoan, of the village of Trac Mha, and Nguyen thi-Kin, of the prefecture of Luong Tai, wife of second rank to King Le Chieu Thong (died in 1788) both committed suicide, the first by drowning herself, the second by poison, at the news of the deaths of their husbands. (End of XIXth Century).

In the time of the wars of the Yellow Pavilion, a young woman of the people, very beautiful and known by the name of Co Nuoi Hai in the village of Dong Ngac committed suicide to escape being taken prisoner by the soldiers who were pursuing her. More recently, the widow of the Prefect of Thuy Duong brought an end to her days because she thought she had been soiled, having been touched on the breast by a stranger who coveted her. These are some classic
examples of women known for their intransigence of purity and fidelity.

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The list of our celebrated women is already long but it would not be complete if I were not to mention those who have shone in the field of letters:

Under the Mac Dynasty (1527-1592), Nguyen thi Du of the village of Kiet Doc, District of Chi Linh (Province of Hai Duong) left a reputation in this field without compare. At the early age of seventeen, Nguyen-thi-Du brilliantly passed her doctoral examinations with the honors of "Trang Nguyen" the highest university honors, while her professors had passed the same course with no more than the rank of Bang nhan, a grade behind her.

Under the earlier Le Dynasty, Doan thi Dien (1705-1759), daughter of a lettered mandarin Doan Doan Nghi, of the village of Hien Pham, sub-prefecture of Vang Giang (Province of Bac Ninh) was particularly distinguished by her vast erudition and her rare literary talent. She excelled particularly in parallel sentences, a practice which requires a strong poetic sense and much wit. She also composed, in Chinese characters, a book of stories "Truyen Ky Tan Pha" comprising five sensitive tales: Van Cao Than Nu (The Goddess of the Palace of Clouds); Hai Khau Ling Tu (The Pagode of the Seaport); An Ap Liet Nu (The Heroine of the Harlet of Peace); Yen Anh Doi Thoai (Dialogue between the Swallow and the Nightingale) and Hai Ruyen (The Mysterious Apricot Tree). Her most celebrated work is a translation into Vietnamese of a poem written in Chinese characters "Chinh Phu Ngan" (Complaint of a Warrior's Wife) by the great man of letters, Dong Tran Con. The original text is particularly pleasing by its elegant form. By translating it, Doan thi Dien gave it the inspiration that was lacking, a soul, her own. Actually the translation was so much more beautiful than the original that only the translation is remembered. This work, however, raised much controversy. At one time it was believed that in fact the translation was done by an old scholar by the name of Pham Huy Ich, but the family of the latter possessing the originals of his writing, it was learned that he also made a translation of this work though it was far from being equal to that of Doan thi Dien. This young woman whose fame spread from day to day was called to the court as tutor of the princesses. After some years she left the Court and opened a school attended by all the elite of her time. One of her students, Doan duy Doan brilliantly succeeded at the doctoral examination and became an eminent personality.

Under the reign of Le thanh Ton (1460-1497), Ngo chi Le, born in the village of Phu Tu, district of Kim Anh, Province of Phu Yen, and wife of Dong cac Hoc Si (one of the four top mandarins compared to the four columns of the empire) Phu phuc hanh of the village of Phu Xa, was a well known scholar whose precocious intelligence was so well known by the king that he requested her to come to the Court as Phu Gia Hoc Si. (Scholar to teach the royal family.)

The Princess Ngoc Han, daughter of King Le Hien Ton (1497-1504) and wife of Nguyen Hue, alias Emperor Quang-Trung, was also a scholar known especially for her funeral orations whose eloquence equalled their emotion, especially those which she composed in the memory of her husband.

But what Vietnamese does not know the great poetess Ho Xuan Huong who lived at the beginning of the 19th century under the dynasty of the Nguyens? This was an author whose work still raises many heated discussions. As a woman she was the first to dare to show
a lightness of spirit and of expression which verged on being scandalous. But in reading these roguish, singing, mischievous, sometimes very free, you might well imagine what she really might have been: a young woman non-conformist of all, revolting against an epoch which she considered hypocritical and against her status of a woman considered as an inferior creature. With lively and witty words, full of nuances and suggestions, she composed satires on men, Buddhist monks, the fundamental virtues of a patriarchical society which became harder and harder for the woman with the advent of the Gio Long Code. She has been reproached for insinuations of eroticism in her poems. In discussing her poems, the word of Freudian frustration has even been applied. This is not quite exact for there is nothing morbid in the poems of Ho Xuan Huong. It would be more exact to see in her poems the expression of a very full and free woman, humiliated by her condition of a woman and seeking vengeance wittily against man by scandalizing and troubling him with her daring expressions until then unknown. What is certain is that in this domain she has succeeded well enough, for during her lifetime she always had at her feet a court of delicious lovers as well as intellectual admirers.

About the same era, the wife of the Under Prefect of Thanh Quan, named Nhan Khan, from the village of Nghi Tam, prefecture of Hon Lang near Hanoi, was also known as a poetess of great talent. Her poems show exquisite sensitivity of ideas and a rare elegance of form. These are the poems of a great lady, with a pure and reserved language, classical rhythm, and impeccable composition. She also was invited by Emperor Tu Duc (1847-1883) to the Court as teacher of the children in the royal family.

Of the same period, Madame Bang Nhan, born in Quang Nam, the wife of Phan Quy was well known as a poetess of great talent, as was Nguyen thi Ngoc Khue, surnamed Nguyen Anh, the daughter of a blind poet Nguyen dinh Chieu and born in the District of Ba Tri (Province of Ben Tre) in 1863. The latter had quite a difficult time. To keep her independence she did not hesitate to write for a woman's magazine "Nu Gioi Chung" (La Cloche des Femmes), which, thanks to her collaboration knew a great popular success. Her natural and simple poems have a form in which the elegance reminds of Ba Huyen Thanh Quan.

Finally, in our era other women poetesses are as well known as Van Dai, Kong Tuyet, Anh Tho, Luu thi Hanh, and others. It is difficult to name all because, obeying a tradition full of modesty in our country, they rarely sign their poems other than putting a pseudonym.

Among the peoples of Asia, Vietnam has always been one of those most sensitive of the belles lettres. She is also favored by having always a rich reservoir of lettered men. In the heroic Era when her inhabitants had to dispute with her neighbors of China and Champa for a piece of land stretching across the Indochinese Peninsula, the name of Van Lang (Men of Letters) was recurrent.

This tradition has been transmitted to succeeding generations and it is the reason why Viet Han, later to become a warrior nation by necessity, has always guarded, thanks to a happy atavism, a profound predilection for belles lettres. One can see by our poetesses that the Vietnamese woman has not wished to cede anything to man in this domain. She has, moreover, plainly and brilliantly succeeded and has consequently commanded the admiration of her male colleagues.

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As we have been able to see, the Vietnamese woman in the course of history has not only guarded her position but has surpassed it with ease and dignity in all domains. Her merit is great, even immense when one realizes that she had to live in a world and an era governed, as far as she was concerned, by the three principles of Confucius, the basis on which the patriarchal regime was established with solidarity. These principles, well known, but interpreted differently by men are:

1) The principle "mon nu tho tho bat than" (Separation of sexes). Woman by virtue of this principle had to live apart, even cloistered. It was necessary by this separation to convince her at an early age that there is not any possibility of fraternity or equality with men who saw in this principle only a parapet of virtue.

2) The principle "tam tong" (the three submissions), first that to the father, then to the husband and finally to the oldest son. Outside of the family, woman had no protection from the law, and man saw in this principle only a natural condition for woman who is born weak and cannot protect herself.

3) The cult of the ancestors would be practiced only by the son thus yielding the sentiment of inferiority in woman causing her to feel useless, especially if she was not able to find a husband and procreate sons. For this principle, man simply finds that it suits him well, it goes without saying.

In considering these principles which have ruled the life of the Vietnamese woman for centuries, one cannot but shudder at the thought of the poor unhappy girl who might be alone in the world or who, instead was able to submit with happiness to the three men, masters of her destiny, to be exploited and maltreated by them. Who would be there to protect her?

And even now one hears the insensible male — I do not wish to say ingenuous or cynical or even egoistic—sighing deeply at having lost the sweet and submissive "wife of the hearth" of a day now past. I ought to say that before their sighs, I have the impression that I hear those of cannibals longing for their old possessions.

"How beautiful was this country of coconut trees always green, they say, with her lovely girls so gentle, its inhabitants so polite, so obliging, so assiduous, and where one had only to make the sign and all your wish is brought to you on a platter! That compared to the hell of today! !!!!"

The Vietnamese woman then, since the establishment of the patriarchal regime has lived in a world ruled by these principles which have consolidated that system. Fortunately for her, however, the patriarchal regime left xx its profound marks in the minds of the people. From this devolved a certain habit which reserved for the Vietnamese woman, although confined, an independent spirit and the capability of initiative, and the Vietnamese man, a natural deference for woman, which he preferred however to call indulgence.

Fortunately, also, for the Vietnamese woman, the increasingly cultured man of Viet Nam decreed that the only occupations noble enough for him were those of the military and of letters. He disdained commerce, relegating it to the category of crude occupations.
The Vietnamese woman, by nature shrewd and active, as history has proven, seized it and, sensing that a certain independence could come to her from this, she applied herself with enthusiasm and succeeded, although according to a law of the Civil Code of 1833, which is still in force now, she cannot have any commercial enterprise herself and for all business transactions must have not only the approval of her husband but more than that, must be represented by him. When it is not the husband, it is another man; woman was considered before the law as an eternal minor. It was by holding the purse strings that she finally held the reins of the household. She came to be called "noi-tuong" - General of the Interior.

However, she was still far from independence despite a timid try for emancipation of the Vietnamese woman undertaken by Le Thanh Ton (1460-1497) with the promulgation of the Long Duc Code which stipulated the equal division of the heritage between the children of both sexes. This code admitted polygamy but recognized a difference between the wife of first rank and those of other ranks.

With Gia Long (1802-1819), the situation became worse for women, because this latter though loving and respecting his wife (for the first time in the history of Viet Man, a king demanded that his wife be buried at his side on the same rank) promulgated a code copied after the Manchu Code and in which were recognized to man seven reasons (sterility, adultery, lack of respect toward his parents, slander, thievery, jealousy, leprosy) for which he had the right to simply repudiate his wife. This code ruled the destiny of the Vietnamese woman until the most recent years.

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Now, with the new Constitution and the laws which will follow, she is completely emancipated. But the laws do not change a great deal if the spirit and the customs do not change. And these latter change only with more difficulty since the Vietnamese man is persuaded in his conscience that he has never had any animosity against woman, that he has always cherished her and sometimes overlooker her caprices. He thinks then that this ought to suffice, but even if this were true, it certainly cannot suffice. Woman has evolved and matured. She wishes no longer to be considered as an eternal minor, a doll without a soul. She wants to be treated in equality, that is to say, as a reasonable and useful companion.

For this first step toward the equality of the sexes, for her understanding and her harmonious usefulness, man must then decide to abandon all his archaic prejudices. And to help him in that way, I think that we, the Vietnamese women, must insist, each in her own circle, in her own milieu, on being consulted or at least informed of everything which can have any repercussion on ourselves, for man has absolutely no right to decide by himself on a thing for which the consequences can touch woman, too. He also has no right to decide, even in good faith, that woman has not the necessary aptitude to be a good counselor. It is for the woman to decide that herself, and there is nothing to be feared. Indeed, just as all humans, she has also her instinct of preservation to guide her. Woman will see then by herself if it is worth more to leave men to decide and act alone or to counsel and cooperate with him. Whether it is in the one sense or the other, it is at this moment only that man can act. If he clings to his idea and does not wish the counsel of woman, he must try to convince her. If he cannot convince her, this in itself shows
that his idea is not very good or that the woman and he are both stubborn. In this case, each will seek to triumph with his own idea according to his own means. The results will show who is right. It is not sure that the strongest always triumphs.

It is in this manner only that man maintaining his leadership which no woman contests yet, can establish by himself this equality of the sexes so much in demand and which brings only good to the two parties: Woman, now legally protected can put all her faculties to the service of a more interesting and valuable goal than that of finding and keeping a protector. If man is reasonable and sensible, he will know how by this sincere and effective practice, to utilize a new force for a fruitful collaboration.

All considered, this collaboration is surely better than carrying all the burden on himself: decision, action, responsibility and also risk in case of error (to err is human) and to find before him, in his home, an ulcerated woman, angry, thinking and acting in the manner of those vengeful mobs who brandish the clenched fist at their fallen dictator before lynching him.

History has proven the effectiveness of the Vietnamese woman, her sense of duty, her good common sense, her courage and her determination.

The present day has confirmed that she is the equal of man, and the latter ought to be loyal and sincere and to help in the construction of the country without reticence, without defiance and without preconceived ideas, this new assistance so full of order and faith which offers itself. To act differently is to show themselves unworthy of confidence and to risk also to needlessly lose a leadership that until now no one has disputed.