

Translating *Chí Phèo*: A journey through
the world of literary translations

By

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Introduction

Nam Cao's *Chí Phèo* is often regarded as one of the most influential pieces of literature in Vietnam. Published in 1941, it was seen as a “literary phenomenon” (“Nam Cao”) at the time as it portrayed a newer look into Vietnamese society and how the status quo had changed culturally. This becomes more evident when assessing the biography of the author himself.

Trần Hữu Tri (1915–1951) was born in a poor farming family in Lý Nhân District, Hà Nam Province. He was the only child in the family to have received a full education. Post high school, he moved to Saigon to work as a clerk at a tailor's, this was when his first works—*Cảnh cuối cùng* (lit. *The last scene*), *Hai cái xác* (lit. *Two bodies*)—were written. Suffice to say, his works at the time were heavily influenced by contemporary Vietnamese Romanticism. Eventually he moved back North to teach, only for the school he was working at to be repurposed by the invading Japanese Empire as a rice barn. During this time, he was unemployed and was authoring short stories and publishing them under many different aliases, one of which was Nam Cao.

One notable story that marked the zenith of his writing career was *Cái lò gạch cũ* (lit. *The old brick kiln*). However, during the publication, Hanoi Modern Publishing independently changed the title to *Đôi lứa xứng đôi* (lit. *Compatible couple*). Finally in 1946, in a publication by the Cultural Association for National Salvation, Nam Cao himself changed the title to *Chí Phèo*. As to why the book titles are so important that they deserved a separate paragraph, there will be a section later that disseminates the meaning of the titles and their relevance to the main story.

What is crucial to understand about Nam Cao is the subject of his works. They are often focused on two main themes: the life of the impoverished lower middle-class intellectuals, and the destitute life of the farmers in rural areas during the war. Through these stories he successfully depicted the plight of miserable people in the society with unfeigned vivid words and flexible

descriptions. He specifically concentrated on the lingering distressful tragedies of their inner souls, indirectly brought forward the prevailing social problems of his period (Lê Hoài).

In a way, one could say that *Chí Phèo* is a commentary on Vietnamese society at the time. As a story written during the last years of the Nguyen dynasty, *Chí Phèo* offers a rare view into the societal struggles of people living in small villages during the feudal eras (Nam Cao, *Chí Phèo*). Featuring a main character who is an alcoholic pariah in his own village, the story portrays the human essence in a way that fuses Western romanticism and individualism with Confucianist and traditional beliefs to craft a complex figure of human suffering and reveals the core of what give us life.

One would imagine such an impactful story would be translated by now, and they would be right. However, these translations are either old or not in circulation anymore. To me, that is an unfortunate loss as the lack of accessibility to acquire these books to the average means that some of these great stories will never be discovered or will be buried in history. Inconvenience should not be the case when it comes to books in modern time. Case in point: the only widely available version of *Chí Phèo* is in French, and not everyone speaks French. The single English translation of the piece is ancient and is not in circulation. It was published in the eighties and cannot be found anywhere online (I had to ask my best friend from UF to borrow it from their library), not even on pirating sites (yes, I was that desperate to find it).

Great literature should not be hard to find. Works like *War and Peace*, written almost two hundred years ago at more than a thousand words, are still in circulation and are digitized. Why couldn't *Chí Phèo* be like that? Why is the only widely available, digitized version out there being in Vietnamese? I am hoping to change that by translating the piece into English and ensuring it is digitized and available for years to come.

Translating this story, though, poses a massive challenge. That being the story bearing insurmountable significance to Vietnamese literature demands a proper, respectful translation

from the translator. Which, in turn, faces another problem. Would the translator risk readability to emphasize heavily on all the cultural elements and historical significance within the piece, or would they sacrifice the connection to the original and make this piece theirs such that the flow is better? The obvious answer would be: “it depends” or “why not both?” The challenge here is that though one could attempt to swing either way or staying dead center, how would the audience perceive it? And who really is the audience for this project?

To answer this question, I decided to investigate literature about the art of translation to find a common ground that I could take to translate this piece. In the next section, I will be reviewing all relevant literature and how I could utilize them to translate this amazing work of art.

Literature Review

My journey started with some simple questions:

1. How can I translate dialogues without losing the power dynamic in Vietnamese?
2. What themes are there in the original text that must not be lost during translation?
3. Are there details that I should omit when translating to match the cultural perception of the target audience?
4. How have other works about Vietnam during this era been translated if they exist?

The first question is one that was quite interesting to explore as Vietnamese is a very “dense” language. “Dense” here refers to the weight of each word in a sentence, not the grammar. The analytic nature of Vietnamese allows meaning to be conveyed through helper words instead of inflection (“Vietnamese Grammar”). This is even more important when considering terms of address. In English, these terms of address are often simple pronouns: I—you, we—they, etc. But in Vietnam, these are a little more complicated. Tôi—anh, em—anh, mình—bạn, tớ—cậu, tao—mày, etc. all mean I—you, but each are used in different circumstances. Example: em—anh is for a younger sibling to talk to their brother, tôi—anh is for two adults, the “you” person being slightly older, possibly a close friend, talking to each other.

It is important to nail this power dynamic in the translation as this is an integral part of Vietnamese culture. Thanh Ngo (2006) discusses the intricacies of the Vietnamese terms of address and reference and how they play into the power dynamics between people. For example, a son who is mad at his father can use pronouns that diminishes the father’s role so that they are on the same level; however, if the son feels guilty about something, he could use a different pronoun that diminishes his own value so that he can beg for forgiveness (Ngo). These linguistic features do not exist in English and thus it can be hard to convey the same conversational dynamic. However, the translator could adjust their approach accordingly to integrate this dynamic in better. Ngo suggests making the target text more readable by replacing some English

pronouns with the correct Vietnamese translation of the roles or explaining the use of these pronouns in the footnotes.

Footnotes can be jarring to the reader when a page is filled with them, but is it really? Hilda Kuper's *a Witch in My Heart* (2015) gives a good look into tackling such a dilemma. Kuper's original play focuses on the life of a Swazi family during the colonial period and features a detailed description of the family without having to take away many of the cultural marks of the siSwati language and their cultures. Her strategy? Use half her footnotes on the first fifteen pages of her play to ease the culture into the audience's perspective so that everything felt natural as the story is told (Vincent). This could also be done more subtly according to Nhan Luong (2015) who examined the Vietnamese translation of *Romeo and Juliet* to find a better approach. This is often executed through replacement of whole sentences to better reflect dialectic differences between characters. For example: to translate "the dog of Montague," the more explicit Vietnamese equivalent "thằng chó" (lit. "mongrel") was used. This fits the Vietnamese language where certain insults are more upfront while being more euphemistic in English and vice versa.

Question number two is harder to answer as it requires a full analysis of the piece which is not what we are here for (we will still have a small analysis at the end by Nam Cao's close friend). A theme I found to be crucial, however, is the theme of death. Uyen Thanh (2017) investigated the concept of death in Nam Cao's works and found a core theme in all his works: "the death of the soul". What is interesting is that his belief of "soul death" persists through time, even long after the French occupation. Such a theme was uncommon in Vietnamese literature until Nam Cao came along and brought up a very existential question about death and how a person can die before they do so physically. To translate Nam Cao's work, one must be aware of this theme and try their best to elaborate his intentions.

One must question; however, must everything be well-elaborated in a translation? Should the translator try to make this work an extension of the original or an original itself? Al-Fouzan and Nouf (2019) says otherwise. Analyzing the translations of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Tom*

Sawyer and making comparisons versus the original, they reasoned that a translated work is intended for the audience it is translated to, and therefore, must adapt to that audience while also trying to not alter the story too much. As they put it “if the audience likes it, then it is a successful TT.” If there are to be adaptations, there are certain techniques that can be used, for example: additions, deletions, etc. Changes like “inches” to a local unit of measurement, changing a character’s gender/making up a new character to accommodate local customs, taking out puns or doing major abridgments to correct the content are normal in a translated work. Certain questions were posed, however, about the translated work: is it intended for any audience other than its place of origin? Can it be translated at all without losing most of its contents? These are questions I want to spend a long time thinking about as this also brings up the question of whether I want to adapt this piece for an American audience or to translate the piece as is. Preferably, I would go for the latter. The reason will make more sense later (hint: it has something to do with *Chí Phèo and Other Stories*).

Of course, one does not go into such a project without trying to find other Vietnamese works translated around this time. References are required to make accurate translations or transliterations as they can provide valuable information on how certain words are used at the time. My first thought was to look for *Chí Phèo* in languages other than Vietnamese. That was a disaster. There are no other English translations of the piece except for one: *Chí Phèo and Other Stories* published by Red River, Hanoi Foreign Languages Publishing House in 1983 (Nam Cao, et al.). The closest one I could find is all the way in Gainesville at UF, which is better than the second closest one in Vancouver, nine hundred miles away. After receiving the book from my friend (and a generous 90-day loan duration), I was pleased to find that the book was a decently faithful translation. However, the translation team took one too many liberties with the piece and changed numerous details about the piece, the details of which will be better explained in the analysis section. In any case, the reason for this change is clear: the author wasn’t around to oversee the piece as he was already dead ten years prior. A proper analysis of both the original

and the 1983 translation is important in understanding the work and convey the full meaning of both pieces.

Regardless, translation work doesn't just mean sampling different translations of the same work. One should also choose a similar translation of a piece written around the same time. For that, I chose my other favorite Vietnamese book: *Dumb Luck* by Vũ Trọng Phụng. *Dumb Luck* (Vũ et al.) was written roughly around the same time as *Chí Phèo*, albeit different in almost every way but for the language. *Dumb Luck* is a satire about Hanoi's rapid Westernization and how the class conflict is slowly rearing its ugly head. The story follows Red-haired Xuan and his rise to fame and riches following a series of fortunate events, hence the title.

I chose this book because the language and dialect used in the book is remarkably similar to that of *Chí Phèo*, meaning the translation can be used as the basis for the project. However, there are things to note. The story takes place in a very Westernized city where many characters use French or more formal language, meaning dialogues and descriptors must be taken with a huge grain of salt as *Chí Phèo* takes place in a poor farming village where not everyone had a proper education and thus their language may be cruder.

Local customs and hierarchical structure changes within the ruling class could also be considered as one character represents this well. Ha Nguyen (2017) investigated the changes in culture and customs in North Vietnamese villages after the French invaded. For example, customs like literature and politics examinations to elect the village, ward, province, regional leaders are removed to make room for purchasing these positions instead. These purchases tend to be made by people who own tons of money who also happen to be working for the French government; thus, fostering a corrupted chain of command that plagued the nation. Bá Kiến is one such character that embodies this archetype and thus, we must be elaborate in description to detail both him and the corruption that he represents.

Such details may be trivial in the translation process as they often get lost in translation; yet we should keep them in mind as the process continues just in case that they become important

later. It does not hurt to have a handful of tools at our disposal even if most of them will be obsolete at the end.

Methodology

Examination of Reference (*Chí Phèo and Other Stories*)

If you wish to read the story and not get spoiled, skip this whole section, and go right down to the Completed Translation section.

*

Upon analysis, I found some major differences between my version and the 1961 version. Major abridgements were indeed taken in order to match the perception of an international audience. One example of this is the switching of one the characters' gender. On page 20, when briefly mentioning Chí Phèo's past and how he was abandoned as a baby, the text reads:

“Who is that idiot that fathered him so that he was so unhappy? [...] Let him come, the rascal who begot him!”

However, in the original text, the text instead reads:

“Did anyone know what [dreaded woman] delivered him into this miserable life? [...] That's right, he continued swearing, he swore at whichever whore that birthed him, that birthed this Chí Phèo!”

Such a difference, though minimal at first glance, is major in the context of the work for two reasons. The first reason being the theme of the story. One of the major themes in the work is how there is a never-ending cycle of violence and how children who are born in this society will grow up to make the same mistakes as their predecessors. At the end of the story, thị Nở—Chí Phèo's partner, notices an abandoned brick kiln and pondered about the child within her. This is an immensely powerful moment as it perfectly parallels the opening scene of the story: Chí Phèo, as a baby, was abandoned at a brick kiln by his mother. Thus, having Chí Phèo talk about his father is a very drastic change as the theme of non-ending cycle of violence will not perpetuate as much unless there is a connection between the beginning and the end.

The second reason being the fault getting shifted onto the father. This, although makes sense, is not accurate in the sense of the story as they are pointing out the source of the problem

to be the father raising and abandoning him. This is not true. In fact, it would be a misinterpretation of the matter. Throughout the piece, there has been zero mention of a father figure for Chí Phèo. It is intentional as the piece is supposed to make a point clear: father figures in that society either turn into criminals or turn up dead. This is shown in the piece when the character binh Chức—a modest, upstanding man—enlisted for the French army and came home a bloodthirsty gangster who threatened to kill his own family. A fatherless society where wives are left to birth and raise kids for themselves is one the original work seeks to portray and one that the translation did not do well at.

Certain word choices were also questionable in the translation as Vietnamese is a very colloquial language, especially in these works where the main focus isn't to have flowery and formal Hán-Việt but to tell a story that's compelling using the most average and common tongue. Analyzing these word choices and figuring out an equivalence for this requires an in-depth look into the language, and that would take too long to explain in detail. For the sake of keeping this thesis manageable, we will be referring to Nguyen Dinh Hoa's *Colloquial Vietnamese* and cite the changes from there.

There are certain words in Vietnamese that are multi-faceted and, depending on context means different yet similar things. An English example would be the term “man” from Multicultural London English (MLE). For a culturally relevant example that might not make much sense ten years from now, I'd like you to think of Big Shaq's *Man's Not Hot*. In this rap, the term “man” was used as a pronoun, to mean “I,” “me,” “they,” “him,” etc. based on the context of the sentence. This is a real thing by the way, check out University of York's article on that (*What Is MLE? - Language and Linguistic Science, University of York*).

Anyways, these terms also exist in Vietnamese, and they are incredibly annoying to translate. One of these terms is “lôi thôi” (Nguyễn). Oh, God, no words in the Vietnamese language have caused me as much distress when I translate it. The word itself means something like “lollygagging.” However, when used as an adjective to describe a person, it means “disorganized,”

to describe a room it means “messy,” to describe someone’s way of speech it means “long,” “confusing,” “convoluted,” to use as a verb, it could also mean “loitering,” “doing something useless.” It’s a pain to figure out what it all means, even when provided with context. It’s worse when attempting to make parallel sentence structures with them. Solution: ignore the structure and make sure it works somehow. And for the most part, I think I did a pretty decent job.

Certain words in the story are also language or culture-specific and thus cannot be properly translated. These terms are referred to as *realia*, and they have been a constant pain for translators throughout the eras. The number one reason being: “how does one even begin to translate it?” Luckily, there are seven (Caniato et al.) ways around it:

- Retention: Retains a term from the source text
- Specification: Using an extra-specific word by expanding/explaining a name or acronym
- Direct translation: Transliterate a word or a phrase, mostly for institutions or names
- Generalization: Using a less-specific word through a hypernym or paraphrase.
- Substitution: Use other *realia* that may or may not belong to the same culture.
- Omission: Omits the word partially or entirely (more often seen in film subtitles where there are text constraints).
- Official equivalent: Using a common word used by both languages or a word agreed upon at an administrative level.

Interestingly enough, many *realia* in *Chí Phèo and Other Stories* actually were substituted for Western equivalences or being mistranslated as other things. An example of which would be a phrase early on in the story. On page 21, the text reads:

“Early one morning, a catcher of eels found him naked and purplish blue, wrapped in a patched-up skirt near a deserted brick kiln.”

This “patched up skirt” they referred to is not a patched-up skirt at all. The original term is “*váy đụp*” where “*váy*” means “skirt” while “*đụp*” means “patched up in layers.” But, due to the

monosyllabic nature of Vietnamese, having two words put together can change the overall meaning of the compound word. In this case, “váy đen” is in fact a style of black layered skirt worn during feudal Vietnam. And thus, the traditional outfit of Vietnamese women was misconstrued into a torn dress. In fact, certain articles of Vietnamese clothing survived the translation craze and are now recognized by their original name. “Yếm”, and in turn, “váy đen” are officially used by Google Arts and Culture, citing Wikipedia, to describe the article of clothing (Google Arts and Culture). For more information and image references, refer to Appendix 3.

Other translation liberties that the previous author(s) took with the literature was to translate titles. To keep this section manageable, I have decided to talk about this in Appendix 1, so check that out if you’re interested.

The “Trot” approach

Translations require a methodical approach as they are not necessarily one-to-one between languages. Many linguists and translators have argued that translation is embedded in the sociocultural language of a particular context and also described the translation process as basically a boundary-crossing between two different languages (Torop). In other words, the process itself is more of a conversion of ideas from one language to another rather than conversion of words. Thus, a more careful approach must be taken so as to not lose out on the underlying messages beneath the words. However, over-translation can happen and cause information overload for the reader who are only looking to read a piece of literature and not to research an entire host country’s culture.

We then must rely on transliteration to help us tackle this dilemma. Transliteration is the practice of directly converting a word from a language to an equivalent word in the target language. Note that equivalent means similar in meaning, not necessarily that there exists a one-

to-one correlation between the two, for example: coin—*xu* is a direct translation from English to Vietnamese¹.

To tackle ensure the balance between readability and detailed elaboration, I have decided to only briefly explain certain details that I felt would impede on a person's ability to read through the piece using footnotes. For additional information, I added appendices for those who are interested in reading up about Vietnamese culture during the Indochina era.

Why there were three different titles for this story

As mentioned earlier, the story that we are translating originally had many different titles. The reason for these changes were due to the publishers disagreeing on what title would fit the story most. The original title was *Cái lò gạch cũ* (lit. *The old brick kiln*), which then changed, without the author's acknowledgements, to *Đôi lứa xứng đôi* (lit. *Compatible couple*), before finally being named *Chí Phèo* by Nam Cao himself.

Our story begins in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when Nam Cao was at his prime. He was authoring short stories and poetry for the local news and his stories had pretty vague names, e.g., *Xuân Du* (lit. *Spring journey*) or *Nguyệt* (lit. Moon). The naming convention was not able to convey a clear sense of what the piece would entail, but rather to paint a colorful image of what the elements of the story would look like. Basically speaking, they were highly romanticized.

In 1941, a book was published with the title *Đôi lứa xứng đôi*, written by Nam Cao. Contemporary famous authors, upon reading his work, realized his talent, but also acknowledged that it might not have been given a chance to shine due to the second World War's rippling effects throughout French Indochine (UBND tỉnh Hà Nam). However, little did we know until now, that the name was not his first choice. The original name was *Cái lò gạch cũ*.

¹ This is terribly oversimplified, please refer to Appendix 1

The reason he chose that name, and this is all my personal interpretations, is because the imagery of the brick kiln is a recurring theme within the story. The imagery represents the lack of human rights that Chí Phèo had to live through—a purgatory, if you will, of society’s pariah to forever repeat the cycle of violence and misery with no escape. This is signified by thị Nở looking down at her belly at the end of the story to show us that she will one day give birth to a child of Chí Phèo, but they too will be abandoned at another brick kiln and restarting the cycle. This imagery would be a very direct connection to the core theme of the story.

As if sensing that the title was too pessimistic, Hanoi Modern Publishing changed the title to *Đôi lứa xứng đôi*. This title is a bit more human per se, as it tells a story of an unlikely relationship between Chí Phèo and thị Nở. The title would have been a bait-and-switch, to cause curiosity among readers to then pull the rug from right under them and tell a darker tale. However, the title was only doing a disservice to the work itself as it downplays the suffering of the main character while diverting attention away from the main plot point.

After sensing a disturbance in the force, Nam Cao returned to republish the story with another publisher and changed the title to the name of the character himself: *Chí Phèo*. With this title, it is more apparent that the story was about the character, his life, his struggles, while also highlighting the societal issues that Vietnamese farmers had to face at the time. It is the best possible name for this work.

Sample translation

From the literature that we have analyzed, we can now construct a technique that will allow us to translate the text somewhat. First, we will attempt to transliterate or “trot” word-for-word, then form sentences from them, then hopefully we can imbue some literature into the sentences to transform it into a proper work. On the topic of cultural notes, we will take a simplified approach of just-footnotes-everything for now before figuring out the best way to add them into the piece. We are aiming to have the definitive version be close to Hilda Kuper’s play with the number of footnotes steadily decreasing slowly and stop entirely around halfway. Of

course, this work will go through at least a dozen iterations before it feels fluent, so we won't focus too much on the details yet.

Some of the pros of this technique include reducing grammatical differences between source text (ST) and target text (TT) to mere building blocks so that they may be reconstructed appropriately and preserving context and cultural details. However, this technique may not play well with sayings or idioms (which may require footnotes to elaborate), and it may be especially tough with *Chí Phèo* as most of the piece follows a nonstandard dialect. There is a solution, though. Since languages often have similar ways of expressing an idea or a different but equivalent expression for the same idea (Adelnia and vahid dastjerdi), we can refer to the target language's idioms instead. If the phrase is ambiguous, we will notate it in square brackets with slashes between each interpretation. And if an interpretation requires extra elaboration, we may use either footnotes or parentheses (preferably the former).

Some examples of this technique at work:

- “as soon as possible” = “sớm nhất có thể (soonest possible [moment])”
- “Nó tên gì?” = “What is [his/her/its] name?”

To evaluate out this method, we will experiment on the first paragraph of page one. Here is the original:

Hắn vừa đi vừa chửi. Bao giờ cũng thế, cứ rượu xong là hắn chửi. Bắt đầu chửi trời. Có hề gì? Trời có của riêng nhà nào? Rồi hắn chửi đời. Thế cũng chẳng sao: đời là tất cả nhưng chẳng là ai. Tức mình hắn chửi ngay tất cả làng Vũ Đại. Nhưng cả làng Vũ Đại ai cũng nhủ, "Chắc nó trừ mình ra!" Không ai lên tiếng cả. Tức thật! Thế này thì tức thật! Tức chết đi được mất! Đã thế, hắn phải chửi cha đứa nào không chửi nhau với hắn. Nhưng cũng không ai ra điều. Mẹ kiếp! Thế thì có phí rượu không? Thế thì có khổ hắn không? Không biết đứa chết mẹ nào đẻ ra thân hắn cho hắn khổ đến nông nỗi này? A ha! Phải đấy, hắn cứ thế mà chửi, hắn chửi đứa chết mẹ nào đẻ ra thân hắn, đẻ ra cái thằng Chí Phèo! Hắn nghiêng rằng

vào mà chửi cái đứa đã đẻ ra Chí Phèo. Nhưng mà biết đứa nào đã đẻ ra Chí Phèo? Có trời mà biết! Hắn không biết, cả làng Vũ Đại cũng không ai biết...

Here is the transliteration:

He both walk and curse. Always the same, when wine done he curse. Start curse [sky/god]. Have matter what? Sky is belong private house which? Then he curse life. That also no matter: life is everything but is nobody. Angry himself he curse immediately all village Vũ Đại. But all village Vũ Đại who also tell, "maybe [he/it] exclude me out!" Nobody speak up. Really angering! This is really angering! So angry can die! Not only that, he must curse the father of who no curse with him. But also nobody come out to order. Mother die! So then waste wine no? So then poor him no? No know who dead mother give birth to his body so he suffer this much? A-ha! That's right, he keep curse, he curse the dead mother that birthed him, birthed the guy Chí Phèo! He grind teeth and curse the [thing/bitch/animal] that birthed Chí Phèo. But know who birthed Chí Phèo? Only [sky/god] knows! He no know, all village Vũ Đại also no nobody know...

To remedy this (mess of a) transliteration, we can start by plugging in the expressions. Since many sentences are self-explanatory, it should not be too hard: "Start curse [sky/God]" is essentially "He started cursing the sky", or "Only [sky/God] knows!" is just "Only the heavens would know!" With this information in mind, we can start shaping these sentences into more intelligible phrases and leave the harder, more ambiguous ones underlined.

He walked and cursed. It was always the same, when wine done, he curse. He started cursing the sky. Have matter what? Who even owns the sky? Then he cursed life. But that did not matter either: life is everything but is nobody. Angry himself he cursed all of Vũ Đại village. But all of Vũ Đại told themselves, "maybe he'll exclude me!" So, nobody said a word to him. Really angering! This is really angering! So angry can die! Not only that, he must curse the father of those who didn't argue with him. Still, nobody responded. Mother die! So then waste wine no? So then poor him no? No one knows who dead mother birthed him

into this misery? A-ha! That's right, he kept cursing, he curses the dead mother that birthed him, that birthed guy Chí Phèo! He clenched his teeth and cursed the [thing/bitch/animal] that birthed Chí Phèo. But who knows who birthed Chí Phèo? Only God would know! He does not know, and neither does Vũ Đại village...

That's much better. However, we have hit three major roadblocks: lack-of-equivalence, ambiguities, and lack-of-context. Many of the underlined phrases above do not have a direct word or phrase that can be translated into. However, there are phrases that are similar enough that they could pass but using these phrases risks losing the elements that made the original text special. For example: the term “đứa chết mẹ” is transliterated into “the dead mother” but that's not what it means. The term refers to someone whose mother died, not that the person is a dead mother. This, in turn, brings up an interesting observation: why dead mother? Why that insult specifically? [might consider taking this out entirely]

The origin for that insult (and its variants) stem from ancient Vietnamese society. Way before the Chinese invasion and assimilation, Vietnam was a matriarchy. Thus, everything good stems from a woman's blessing and everything bad stems from the loss/death of a woman. In this case, the mother, as motherhood in Vietnamese society has always been regarded as something holy. So, when one's mother dies, their life goes down the drain. And thus, the phrase “chết mẹ” (and its variants) was born to express frustration, anger, disappointment, astonishment, etc.

This is merely speculation, however, as there are no found records of this word. But Occam's Razor suggests that the simplest explanation is the correct one so do what you will with this information. In any case, we can now speculate what the word could mean based on the context of the sentences around that word. For example: the simple “Mother die!” phrase is simply a frustrated exclamation, thus we could use the equivalent “Damn!.” Thus, “mẹ kiếp” (one of the variants) = “damn” and “đứa chết mẹ” = “bitch.”

Next, we shall address ambiguities. Vietnamese is a syntactically dense language, meaning a word can hold multiple meanings depending on the context. Some words can mean multiple things at the same time regardless of context. For example: “He started cursing the sky.” The sky here refers to God, a.k.a. “ông trời,” a.k.a. “Mr. Sky/Lord Sky/Old man of the sky” or just “sky.” So whenever “sky” is mentioned, it refers to both the physical sky and God and this fact must be known to the reader else confusion might arise. Thankfully, the word “heaven” exists to completely solve this issue. Finally, for the other underlined parts, we can easily find a phrase/sentence that would fit the context. Thus, our translation now becomes:

He walked and cursed. It was always the same, he would curse after every drink. He started cursing the heavens. But what would that even do? Who even owns the heavens? Then he cursed life. But that did not matter either: life is everything but is no person in particular. Enraged, he cursed all of Vũ Đại village. But everyone in Vũ Đại told themselves, “maybe he’ll exclude me!” So nobody said a word to him. Damn! This is infuriating! This is so damned infuriating! In that case, he would curse the father of those who didn’t argue with him. Still, nobody responded. Damn! So was that just a waste of liquor? Was that simply pitiful? No one knows the bitch that birthed him into this misery? A-ha! That’s right, he kept cursing, he curses the bitch that birthed him, that birthed this Chí Phèo! He clenched his teeth and cursed the bitch that birthed Chí Phèo. But who knows who birthed Chí Phèo? Heaven knows! He does not know, and neither does Vũ Đại village...

Now that the translation is coming together, I will attempt to finalize it by making it feel more natural to read through. This can include removing text, adding phrases that would make more sense, and paraphrase sections for clarity. Such examples include adding certain contexts that was lost during the translation progress. Such a context would be “A ha! Phải đấy, [...]” missing the context if Chí Phèo realizing he has found a new target to curse at—his mother. So, adding whole phrases would allow for more clarity and consistent information.

Thus, our final product would be:

He was walking and cursing. It was always the same, he would curse at everything after a drink. He started with the heavens. But no one owns the heavens, so what good would that do? So, he cursed life. But that did not matter either. Life is everything, but it is no person in particular; it's just not satisfying. Frustrated, he cursed all of Vũ Đại village. But everyone in Vũ Đại are convinced that maybe he'll exclude them. Thus, no one said a word to him. Damn! This is frustrating! This is so damned frustrating! Fine, if no one wanted to argue with him, then he would curse the fathers of those who didn't argue with him. Even with that, no one responded to him. Goddamn! Was that just a waste of liquor then? Did anyone even pity him? Did anyone know what bitch delivered him into this miserable life? A-ha! That's it, he's found someone at last, he turned on the bitch that birthed him, that birthed this Chí Phèo! He clenched his teeth and cursed the bitch that birthed Chí Phèo. But who birthed Chí Phèo? Heaven knows. He did not know, and neither did Vũ Đại village...

Applying the same method to the rest of the piece should allow for a consistent translation, as shown in the next page. Please keep in mind that the version presented above is not the definitive version as the complete translation will take many iterations to be perfect. For an example of what a fully realized translation would look like, refer to the next part, first paragraph.

Complete translation

He was walking and cursing. It was always the same, he would curse at everything after a drink. He started cursing at the heavens, but no one owns the heavens, so what good would that do? So, he cursed life, but neither did it matter. Life is everything, but it is no person in particular; it's just not satisfying. Frustrated, he cursed all of Vũ Đại village, but everyone in Vũ Đại was convinced that he excluded them. Thus, no one said a word to him. Damn! How vexing! How terribly vexing! If no one wanted to argue with him, then he would curse the fathers of those who didn't argue with him. Even so, no one responded. Goddamn! Did he drink for nothing? Did anyone pity him just then? Why was he delivered into this miserable life? Ah! That's it, he's found a reason to keep cursing. He turned on the wench that birthed him, that birthed this Chí Phèo! He gritted his teeth and cursed that woman with all his being. But who birthed Chí Phèo? Heaven knows. He did not know, and neither did Vũ Đại village...

*

An eel catcher found him one early morning, naked and gray, and bundled in a *váy đụp*², left by an abandoned brick kiln. He took the child home and gave him to a blind widow who then sold him to an old mill craftsman, and when the man died, he was alone, hopping from one house to the next. At age twenty, he worked as a farmhand for the village doyen—the great bá³ Kiến, who at the time was still lý⁴ Kiến. His third wife, despite her youthful self, was often “sick” and thus, repeatedly asked the farmhand to massage her foot, belly, or back. It was told that the tyrannical and fearsome *lý trưởng*, actually feared his young third wife back at home. She was plump with rosy cheeks, but he suffered from lumbago; men with lumbago are often scared of their wives and are ferociously jealous. Some said that the *lý trưởng* was jealous of the strong farmhand, but, in

² A traditional, layered, silk skirt often worn by Vietnamese women during the feudal eras. See Appendix 3 for character clothing references.

³ Short for *bá hộ tiên chỉ*, a title equivalent to village elder, the richest and most powerful person in the village. These titles are treated as first names. See Appendix 2.

⁴ Short for *lý trưởng*, a title that manages paperwork, tax, and infrastructure in the village.

the presence of his third wife, he was too scared to speak up. Some said that the farmhand, with the third lady's trust, would often pocket the family's food and money. Each person told a different tale with the truth nowhere in sight. All they knew was that one day, Chí was seen escorted out of town and he was gone for seven to eight years. He drifted back into town one day, unrecognizable. The man looked as tough as a *săng cá*⁵. His head was shaven, and his teeth were scraped white, his face was dark and impudent, and his leers were hostile and repulsive! He wore black silk pants and a beige Western shirt⁶ with his chest open. On his bare chest and arms, tattoos of dragons and phoenixes flew around a club-wielding general. It all looked so terrifying.

Less than a day after his return, he drank and ate dog meat at the market all morning till late afternoon. After he was drunk, he carried an empty bottle to the gates of bá Kiến's house, called the man by his birth name⁷, and buried it under mounds of curses. But the man wasn't home to begin with. Sensing his aggressive tone, the first wife nudged the second, the second pushed the third, the third called on the fourth, alas not one of them would risk a levelheaded talk with him. Why would they? The brute was reckless, drunk, and he was armed with a glass bottle, plus the only ones home were all women... For now, it was best to just keep that gate shut tight, and to hell with the vandal, his curses were relentless, he'd go off then pause for a response before continuing. Thus, it was just three dogs barking with a drunkard. Such terrible clamor! The neighbors might have gotten an earful of curses, but they were no doubt happy inside: all these years, they'd only heard the wives cursing at other people, but today someone was finally cursing back at the whole family. Such satisfying insults! Such rotten language! They told one another: At this rate, bloodied bá Kiến and junior won't be able to go anywhere with their faces up anymore! Their ancestors would roll in their graves! A good-natured person chimed in: "Heavens bless this scoundrel, he's so lucky the *lý trưởng* isn't home." The *lý trưởng* here is lý Cường, son of the great

⁵ *Soldat* (soldier)

⁶ Button-up shirt

⁷ It was disrespectful to call someone superior by their given name rather than their title.

bá Kiến, known for his ruthlessness from which he viewed people as mere trash. Imagine if he had been home at the time! Oh, but the neighbors weren't wrong! Hark, a sonorous shout: "What ruckus are you raising here? You orphaned bastard! What are you trying to do?" I told you! That war cry was lý Cường himself. Lý Cường came home! Lý Cường came home! Now this was starting to get fun... Aha! A loud resonant slap. But oh! What is this? Thudding blows of kicks and punches, someone was going home with broken bones today! Oh no! A sudden crashing noise, he had smashed the bottle into the gate posts... Oh he shrieked! He cursed and shrieked as if someone slit his throat! Oh, how he shrieked!

- Oh please! Please anyone! Save me... Oh please good sirs and madams! Kiến's family stabbed me! Bloodied lý Cường stabbed me, oh please help me!...

And they saw Chí Phèo rolling on the ground, screaming, and cutting his face with shards of glass. Blood smeared and pooled in the disgust of the bystanders. The dogs surrounded him and barked violently. Lý Cường turned pale, frozen, then he stared and gave a dry, dull laugh, a laugh of detestation. Tch! So that's what it was, harassment for loose change! He came to beg for money!

The neighbors flocked to the scene of the crime. People poured out dark alleys and corners. The crowd was as noisy as a fish market. The four wives, with their resolves having steeled by the doyen, vexed at the beggar. Their main reason, however, was just to see how Chí Phèo was doing, just in case he brought misfortunes on the old bá Kiến.

But the old man came home. He polite called out to the villagers: "What is the meaning of this crowd?" A person bowed and muttered a "My Lord," another bowed "My Lord," and the people made way, splitting the crowd to reveal a Chí Phèo lying motionless on the ground, silently moaning as if he were going to die.

A glance was all it took for His Lordship to understand the situation. Being a *lý trưởng* and then *chánh tổng*⁸, and now having his son be *lý trưởng*, he was no stranger to situations like these. He shouted at his wives who were trying to show their usefulness by shouting at Chí Phèo:

- You ladies get back inside; women are so nosy, what do they know?

Then, turning towards the villagers, his voice softened up a little:

- You sirs and madams too, go on home! There's no reason to crowd around like this.

No one said a thing and the crowd eventually dispersed. Maybe because they respect His Lordship, or maybe because they realized their own peace and quiet was not worth the trouble: country people inherently hate lollygagging. Who'd be foolish enough to stand around there just to be summoned as a witness later. Thus, there was left Chí Phèo and the bá Kiến father and son duo. Only then did bá Kiến approach him, shook his shoulder, and called out to him:

- Mr. Chi! What happened to you?

Chí Phèo with his eyes half closed, groaned:

- I was just risking death against you two that's all. But if I were to actually die, someone here will lose their job, they might even rot in jail for all I care.

Old bá Kiến laughed blandly, but his laugh was hearty: they say that he's better than most people by his laugh.

- My man, you are funny! What did people do to you that you should die? We're talking about a human life here, not a frog. You're drunk again, aren't you?

Switching his tone, he amicably asked:

- When did you return? Why didn't you visit us? Come inside for a drink.

Noticing Chí Phèo's motionlessness, he continued:

- Stand up now. Come in for a drink first. Let's all have a nice, polite conversation, no need to make a ruckus like that, it's bad rep.

⁸ Canton chief

Picking Chí Phèo up by the shoulder, he complained:

- Poor man! If only I were home, none of this would have happened. We'd talk and it'd all be resolved. We're both adults, a single talk is more than enough. It's all because of bloodied lý Cường's short temper and lack of thought that led to all this. Hey, did you know that you might be related to him?

Chí Phèo didn't know a thing about his family relations, but he could feel his soul calming down. He feigned cumbersome and pushed himself up laboriously. Knowing he had won, His Lordship winked at his son before shouting at him:

- Where is lý Cường! You deserve death for your crimes against this man. Why don't you get someone to boil some drinking water, huh? Hurry!

He lifted Chí Phèo up and after a few more nudges, Chí Phèo started walking; he forced a limber as if he were crippled. That was because inside him, the alcohol had started to fade; and without all the shouting and cursing, the rush was gone. His Lordship's sweetness made him feel soft, plus, with all the bystanders having gone home, he felt... lonely. A primal fear arose in his soul, a fear from a long time ago that he felt was too reckless. But if he hadn't been reckless, he wouldn't have quarreled with the bá Kiến father and son whose family had been officials for four generations. With that thought in mind, he instead felt mighty. What role did he even play in this village? No gang affiliations, no relatives; no brothers or sisters, and no parents... And still he had the guts to go toe-to-toe with the *lý trưởng*, the *chánh tổng*, the *bá hộ tiên chỉ* of Vũ Đại, *Chánh Hội Đồng kỳ hào*⁹, *huyện hào*¹⁰, and the representative of the people of Bắc Kỳ¹¹, so notorious was he that he had been known throughout the district administration. Ask anyone if they've seen a person in this two-thousand-*đình*¹²-village who would do such a thing. He would have died

⁹ A title roughly equivalent to Municipal Councilman. A more accurate description would be Head of the Council of the Region.

¹⁰ A title roughly equivalent to District Chief.

¹¹ An archaic and now-offensive term for Tonkin—The Northern region of French-occupied Vietnam.

¹² A unit of tax. See Appendix 1.

happily knowing that he was the one to do just that. But no: the fire-breathing tyrant decided to resolve the issue softly, inviting him in for a drink and all. Oh well if he was invited then so be it. Then he turned all hesitant; how would he know if this old fox won't trick him into coming in and then deceive him once again? Oh, but it was very possible! He could just lug out trays or pots of gold or silver, throw it onto Chí Phèo, have his wife scream for help, then noose the brute's neck, give him one hell of a beating, then accuse him of robbery! Why would bá Kiến, old and corrupt, have any reason to be as submissive and passive as chaff? There was no reason for Chí to enter the tiger's jaws. He'd rather just stand right here, maybe roll on the ground again, maybe scream for help again. But he thought, if he were to roll around and scream, would anyone come for him? His Lordship bá Kiến could just cough and everyone would return home. So, if he were to do so again, would anyone be there? Plus, the alcohol has faded already, cutting his face now would just hurt. Heck, might as well come in. No need for alcohol. If he wanted to smash his own head in, might as well do it in Kiến's house rather than outside. Worst case, if the old weasel pulled something, Chi would just go to prison. Prison is nothing new to him. Yeah, might as well come in...

After he entered, he realized that all his fears were just in his mind. Bá Kiến seemed to really want to talk to him. Not that he was meek or humble, no, he was wise being fearful only of but two things: those who think they're heroes and those who have a death wish. Chí Phèo was no hero, but he was a desperado, and no one wants to deal with desperados! One must understand when to ease up on someone. Being an official, if one were to use force all the time, they might as well end their career early on. The old geezer told lý Cường that. Someone who was as physical as Cường only got his current title thanks to his father. If bá Kiến were to die one day, "they" would make him eat mud.

Despite what they say, being *tổng lý*¹³ was no easy job. In this village of two thousand people, far from the *phủ*¹⁴ and the province, it was too easy to leech off their taxes, but not just because one is a village chief that they are allowed to sit around and do just that. The other year, a geomancer came by and noted that the geography of this village was “at an impasse” and that its elders were a school of predators hunting for prey. The prey was good but there too many predators, all of which were starving for a feast. They might look polite on the outside, but within, they preyed on each other’s downfalls so that they rise above one another. The fact that Chí Phèo was here, terrorizing the village could easily have been set up by one of them. If His Lordship hadn’t yielded, it might have cost him plenty. Being an official, if one were to grab someone by the head, they target those still with hair¹⁵. It would have been too easy to put him behind bars; but eventually he’ll be out. Would he let it slide next time around? Having lived through the Năm Thọ situation, His Lordship could never forget.

Năm Thọ was one bullheaded maniac. Back then, when bá Kiến started out as the *lý trưởng*, the nutjob was vehemently against him; lý Kiến wanted to quell that but never got the chance to. After a while, the man was found to be directly involved a robbery and was arrested; lý Kiến then lobbied for him to head straight to jail. The thought was that for someone with as much power as Năm Thọ to have fallen so far astray that he ended up in prison, he would never be able to drag his face back to the village. Lý Kiến was elated to have gotten rid of a pest that had been bugging him. Who could’ve guessed that one night, while lý Kiến was alone at home doing paperwork, Năm Thọ lunged into his house with a blade. He blocked the doors and said: if even a breath was heard, he would stab the geezer. It turned out that he had broken out of jail and decided to return to ask the *lý trưởng* for a forged I.D. bearing a noble-sounding name and a hundred *bạc*

¹³ Another name for *lý trưởng*.

¹⁴ An intermediary administrative division between “provinces (*tỉnh*)” and “districts (*huyện*)” (“Fu (Administrative Division)”).

¹⁵ (Proverb) To choose the right battles, to pick the right enemies.

to run away. He added: if lý Kiến complied, then he'd be gone for life, if not then he'd stab the official and leave him to die; so, if he still wanted to live with his wife and kids, he had better listen.

Of course, lý Kiến listened, and Năm Thọ was never seen again. But life works in mysterious ways: as bamboos grow old, young shoots spring up¹⁶—there was never an end to these thugs. The day Năm Thọ left, a binh¹⁷ Chức came back to the village. Before he left, he wasn't insolent or unruly at all! They called him dirt because that was how passive he was. He'd do anything people told him to, he'd piss his pants if they shouted at him, for each *đồng* in tax he'd pay two, even his cute little wife, when she was teased, he'd silently go home and scold her rather than beefing with them. That's the thing in life: if one were too nice, they'd turn stupid. Maybe it would've been different elsewhere, but here, in this village, if you were stupid, if you put up with it all instead of fighting back, you would never be able to hold your head up high. When he worked, he worked hard but he was still dirt poor year-round; he worked hard from meal to meal, yet he couldn't even get a bite of it; everyone wanted his bite, and when they did, he let it happen. After being fed up for so long, he joined the military. Alas! When he wasn't so fed up, at least he still had his wife, even if she wasn't perfect, she was still his wife. Turns out when he did get fed up, he lost his wife. That was because the wife was still young and only had just two children, her features were still as sharp as blades, yet her cheeks were rosy all the same, and now she was husbandless? With goods so ripe for the taking, who could resist?

Mrs. binh's house was by the road. The *phó*¹⁸ stopped by at night after gambling; the head patrolman stopped by during his patrols; the neighbor would also stop by, even the damned *huong điền* with his salt and pepper hair, servant for generations of village chiefs, also stopped by with flirtations at the ready. Binh Chức's wife involuntarily became a whore free of charge for all the officials of the village to exchange. Even lý Kiến, with three wives then, could not let heaven's

¹⁶ (Proverb) The next generation continues its predecessors' duties (whether good or bad)

¹⁷ Soldier, militia

¹⁸ Vice-village chief, second in command of lý trưởng

unclaimed gift to waste; and by doing so, he even earned something. Every time Mrs. binh went to collect her wages or her husband's mandat¹⁹, she had to ask the chief to go in her place for legal purposes. No *lý trưởng*'s would waste their time to collect wages for someone without pay, that was certain. But for lý Kiến, not only did he receive lunch money and drinking money, but he also got to ride along in a carriage and got to stay within the province. And so there went all her wage; her children tomorrow would have rock candy for food, and if they were lucky, they'd get a pair of *bánh giày giò*²⁰. Thus, all of Mr. binh's hard work totaled to Mrs. binh's monthly "fun time" with the old *lý*.

No one understood why, despite him knowing what was going on, whether he was sick of home or what, but Mr. binh did not come home for three years after he was dismissed. A while after, an arrest and escort order were delivered upon the village to find one Trần Văn Chúc—binh Chúc's full name. Lý Kiến replied that the fugitive was an exile and that he did not return to this village. But the day after, he returned home. Lý Kiến commanded his servants to bring the warrant to his house and demand for him. He complied immediately but he took with him his wife and two children. Without waiting for the old *lý* to say a word, he brandished a long pig-slaughtering knife and told him: "I have nothing to hide from you, I am wanted for murder. If you have no mercy and decide to arrest me then my wife and kids will starve to death. So, since they'd die anyways, I might as well kill them both right now and you can arrest me after." His eyes were red; the blade of his knife glistened scarily. He could easily kill a person, and not just his wife and kids alone, if he gained the courage to stab them all, what was there to stop him from slitting another throat? Lý Kiến thought for a while and told him to go home while he took care of things. "Taking care of things" means he'd cover up his crimes and whenever a warrant came to the village, he'd tell them: no Chúc's has returned. Thus, he lived openly in his own hometown. And after a while they saw that his wife was upright and loyal, she worked hard to take care of him. All the elders

¹⁹ Short for *toucher un mandate* (money order)

²⁰ A pair of pounded rice cakes sandwiching a slice of Vietnamese pork sausage

contemplated: it'd be sinful to play around with someone who was already married; everyone turned out nice except Mr. *binh*, because Chúc became very unruly. He mooched off the village's food but would not pay taxes. If they urged him to, he'd curse them. If they prevented him from mooching off, he'd cut them. If someone had an issue with him, then they had an issue with the *lý trưởng* as he was housing a fugitive. But that wasn't all for *binh* Chúc. One day, something prompted him to carry his knife to tell lý Kiến directly to his face:

- When I was enlisted, I sent home a hundred. I don't know what or who my wife spent that money on but now she's got nothing. When I asked her, she said: being a woman at home alone, she didn't dare hoard money, all she had received, she entrusted it to Mr. *lý*. I thought she made that up, so I tied her up at home. Now I'm coming to you to ask for that money back so I could raise my kids. If a coin goes missing I would never forgive "them."

Lý Kiến understood that "they" could include him also. He laughed cheaply and told him:

- So, here's how it is, Mr. *binh*: she did not send me anything.

His eyes opened widely as he yelled:

- Then who took it?

Lý Kiến quickly jumped in:

- But if you happened to need money, you can tell me. If she had already spent it all then killing her won't bring it back. There's no need to sin for this.

He opened a small box and tossed him five *bạc*. He took them, properly kowtowed "thank you my lord," and walked home with his knife. From that day on, he was nice to lý Kiến and considered himself his muscle, his slave, yet lý Kiến still had to give him money every so often. It was only until the year prior did he die...

*

This year, there's Chí Phèo, a man who was as nice as dirt—indeed he was so nice that one time, lý Kiến saw him massaging Mrs. Thị's thighs and was quivering! Without warning or consideration, lý Kiến flew into a rage and threw bloodthirsty words at the poor farmhand. Turns

out His Lordship was just being too uptight about it all. The doyen of Vũ Đại realized: to hold his people so tightly in his grip that they leave was a foolish idea. For every ten that had left the village, nine came back violent, their insubordination stemming from the outside world. A wise person would only do a half-grip. Discreetly push them down a ravaging river but offer a hand to pull them from the torrent so that they owe you their lives. Tear up their place to demand five *đồng*, but once you've gotten it, hand them back five *hào*²¹ because you were "worried about their financial circumstances!" But it depends, too: those with power, a pretty wife, and a flock of kids were easy to grip; in contrast, those with no family, no origin, it would be easy to kill them, but if you killed them, there would only be bones left of them, you wouldn't be able to make good use of the free muscle; but if you were to beef with them then you'd make it easier for your oppositions to rise against you. Every village had many gangs, and each gang aligned themselves around a person: great bá Kiến's gang, Mr. đội Tảo's gang, Mr. Tư Đạm's gang, Mr. Bát Tùng's gang... All of them would band together to oppress the villagers, but would secretly divide one another, betting on every nook, every slipup to keep the other gangs in check. His Lordship realized: in this back country, kind villagers would work their asses off to feed the officials, but it was them officials that had to yield at times to feed those who were more wretched than the villagers, those who could always pick up a knife and stab some poor hicks, or worse, stab you.

But he wasn't the type to complain. Complaining wasn't helpful for anyone: those villagers who were forever oppressed deserved it because when they were oppressed all they could do was complain and did nothing else. Old bá Kiến didn't need to complain: if he couldn't take care of his "problems," he'd use them to his own gain. He thought that there must always be some bullheaded idiots somewhere: if they didn't exist then who'd take care of the other bullheads? His power dominated all the other gangs, greatly because he knew when to strike and when to yield, he knew to recruit those desperados who weren't afraid of death and prisons. Those were the ones who

²¹ 1 *đồng* \cong 10 *hào*. For a more accurate conversion, see Appendix 1.

could get the job done. When he needed them, he could just toss them some *hào* for liquor and he could order them to harm anyone who wouldn't listen to him. If they ran into someone headstrong, incisive, then they'd burn that person's house down or give them a few shanks; if they met someone unexperienced with the politics in this village, they'd toss that person a prohibited bottle of liquor, or cause a fight and then play the victim. Only when they caused trouble could His Lordship make some money, else among this zen-loving group of villagers, the best one could do is to mooch off their taxes. But taxes only come once a year so if one expected only income from that then even selling their fathers won't even be enough to cover up the four-, five thousand *bạc* spent on their position.

Therefore, that night, after heading home from bá Kiến's house, Chí Phèo was over the moon! Not only did bá Kiến not accuse him of anything, but his Lordship also slaughtered his own chicken to treat them both to dinner and bought liquor for him to drink, then he was also offered a *bạc* so he could take medicine for his wounds. A *bạc* was more than any medicine would cost! Chí walked wobbly and laughed; he didn't even need three *xu* for meds. When in prison, he learned some secret remedies: with just a handful of leaves and his face would be as good as new. Then he could use that *bạc* for liquor instead.

That money lasted him only three days. On the fourth day, he glared at the liquor shop lady:

- I ain't got money today; how about you sell me a bottle now, and tonight I'll bring you the cash.

The lady hesitated. So, he pulled out a matchbox, struck a matchstick and lit her roof²² aflame. She screamed and flailed loudly as she tried to extinguish the fire. Then, with tears in her eyes, she reluctantly handed him a bottle. He grunted, pointing at her and said:

²² Some old village houses have roofs made of palm/coconut leaves.

- Fuckers like you don't want it easy! Here I am buying your shit, and you're acting like I begged for it! Do you think I'd scam you? Ask anyone in this village if I've ever scammed a person. I'm not short on cash! In fact, I have so much cash, I entrusted it to Bá Kiến; I'll withdraw some this afternoon and pay you.

She lifted her shirt up to wipe her nose and said:

- We wouldn't dare suspect you sir, but we are indeed low on cash.

He yelled back:

- If you're low on cash then I'll pay tonight! You're acting like your whole family was dead or something.

Then he walked off with the bottle. He returned to his "home"—a small joss house by the river—because he had never had a home to begin with. On the way, he managed to steal four green bananas from a random family's garden and pocketed a handful of salt from a spice lady's shop. Now he was drinking booze like a king. Salt-dipped green bananas and liquor was pretty good, he found. To him, booze could make anything good.

After he finished drinking, he wiped his mouth and teetered to bá Kiến's house. Every person he ran into, he'd tell them: he was going to bá Kiến's place to demand his money back! The moment bá Kiến saw him step on the yard, he knew trouble was brewing.

His eyes were red, and his steps were unsteady, his lips were purple and twitching. Luckily, he wasn't carrying around a broken bottle this time; bá Kiến calmly asked:

- Where are you going Mr. Chi?

He greeted loudly:

- My Lord. Oh, bless you Lord, I came to your steps to ask a favor of you.

Chi's voice slurred and his tones were twisted. But his posture seemed kind; scratching his head and ears, he babbled:

- Dear Lord, ever since you sent me to prison, I came to like living there, that much is true. Let it be declared that if I were to lie, then God would smite me where I stand²³. Oh, how great was it to be in prison. Living in prison meant I had food to eat. Now that I've returned to the village, I have not an inch of land to farm, to make a living for myself. My Lord, I've come to ask of you, please put me back in jail...

Bá Kiến yelled, he'd always start his negotiations off loud to test the mettle of those who stood up to him.

- You're drunk again, my man!

Chi rushed closer, rolled his eyes back and raised his hand up halfway.

- My Lord, I swear I am not drunk. I came to ask you to send me to jail, but if that can't be done then... then... my Lord...

He rummaged through all his pockets to find something. He brandished it: a small shank, yet very sharp. He gritted his teeth and continued:

- Yes, my Lord, if you won't send me there then I'll kill some motherfuckers, then you can have me escorted back behind bars.

Then he knelt down, meticulously carving a corner of a wooden table. Bá Kiến laughed heartily. He was still proud that he was better than all life thanks to his Cao²⁴ laugh. He tapped Chi's shoulder and told him:

- You're quite stubborn, my man. But, Mr. Chí, I'll have you know that if you really wanted stab someone, it can be arranged. Đội Tảo still owes me fifty *đồng*, if you can demand it from him, you'll have yourself a garden as you wanted.

Đội Tảo was a powerful man in the village. His gang was strong and often clashed with bá Kiến's crew, who usually did not retaliate for Tảo was a war veteran, rich from retirement funds, had plenty of connections, and was a damn smooth talker. He borrowed fifty *đồng* from bá Kiến

²³ A Vietnamese proverb: "trời tru đất diệt", lit. to be obliterated by the heavens and earth.

²⁴ Ancient Chinese warlord, penultimate grand chancellor of the Eastern Han dynasty, cool facial hair.

a long time ago, but suddenly acted up and flaked on his payment, saying he was holding on to lý Cường's recompense from when he got the *lý trưởng* title. Bá Kiến was furious but didn't know how to approach it since binh Chức, his right-hand man, the only one who could potentially oppose him, died last year. Only now when he met Chí Phèo, he realized he could replace binh Chức. He riled Chí up. If Chí could take care of đội Tảo, that would be fantastic. But if đội Tảo took care of Chí, well, his Lordship wouldn't lose out on anything, either. Either plan worked for him.

Chí Phèo immediately took up the deal! He rushed to đội Tảo's house and cursed the man even before he entered the neighborhood. If this were any other day, Chí would have died already: đội Tảo could slice someone up with ease, and he would never yield before a fight. But thankfully for the war veteran, or for Chí Phèo, that day he was bed-ridden and could not lift himself up at all, he probably didn't even hear Chí Phèo cursing him out. His wife, noticing liquor in Chí's breath and knowing about the debt, secretly took fifty *đồng* from behind her husband's back and passed it to another family member to hand off to Chí Phèo. Women tend to resolve issues peacefully; they just wanted to be left in peace, what good was there to start a fight. Plus, she also thought: my husband is sick... my husband clearly owed someone money... and fifty *đồng* is but a dime for our family, why make a mountain out of a molehill and cost themselves three times that amount.

And thus, Chí Phèo walked off with pride in his chest; he even felt a bit mighty himself. He declared to himself with pride: "no heroes of this village could rival me!." Seeing that an enemy of his had yielded without needing to be taken to the village council for fines and paperwork, bá Kiến was elated. He gave his new henchman a whole five *đồng*.

- Mr. Chi, all this fifty *đồng* you've collected is yours to keep. But, if you were to take it all, you'd burn through it all in three days. How about you take these five instead for liquor and I'll sell you a plot of land for farming; can't make a living without a farm, no?

Chí Phèo bowed politely and left. A few days later, bá Kiến told lý Cường to give the brute five *sào*²⁵ of land in the floodplain that had been seized from a villager as tax some days back. And thus, out of the blue, Chí Phèo had a home. Back then, he was just twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old...

Now he's become ageless. Thirty-eight or thirty-nine? Forty or past forty? His face was not young nor old; it wasn't even a face of a man; it was the face of a strange beast, and with beasts, how does one tell their age from just their face? His face was yellow yet ashy; it was stripey all over, full of countless scars. They were glass-cut scars from all those times he had feigned injury for booze money, but how many times, how could he possibly remember? All the oppression, destruction, murdering, harming, people tasked those jobs onto him! Those crimes were his life; the life that he could not count how many years it had been. He did not even own a birth certificate, village records still noted him as a migrant who had not come home in many years. He vaguely recalled that there was a time when he was just twenty-years old when he went to jail, then maybe he was twenty-five? He wasn't not sure if that was correct. He wasn't sure because from that day on, to him, days/time didn't exist anymore. It was because from that day on, he had always been drunk. But his drunkenness carried over from one stupor to another, melding into a long, endless dream. He ate while drunk, slept while drunk, woken up drunk, smashing his own skull, cutting his own flesh, cursing, threatening people while drunk, drank while drunk, just so he could keep being drunk, to keep his dream lasting for eternity. He was never sober, and maybe he had never been sober, sober enough to realize that he existed in this collective journey called "life." Maybe he never knew that he was the devil of Vu Dai village that wreaked havoc on countless villagers. He never knew that he had destroyed many lives, ravaged many peaceful moments, trampled over much happiness, shed blood and tears from many noble persons. He never knew that he had done

²⁵ *Sào* is an old Vietnamese unit of measurement that differs in each region. For example, in North VN: 1 *sào* = 360 m², Central VN: 1 *sào* = 500 m²; South VN 1 *sào* = 1000 m². Here, it's 360 m².

all that while drunk; when he was drunk, he would do anything people asked him to. All the villagers feared and avoided him every time he passed.

That was the reason for his endless cursing, or maybe there were no reasons at all, after he drank he would curse. He cursed those who'd sing while drunk. Maybe if he knew how to sing he wouldn't need to curse. Pity on him and everyone else because he could not sing. So, he cursed, just like how he cursed this afternoon.

He cursed the heavens and life. He cursed all of Vu Dai village. He cursed all those who did not curse back at him. But alas, no one would waste their breath on such nonsense. Vexed, he cursed whoever birthed him, yet no one cared either! He got so mad; mad because he couldn't argue alone; it was simply not logical! Thus, an idea formed in his head to fuel his anger, an idea that, to him, was justified enough for him to aggressively seek vengeance. That's right, he must seek vengeance, and he would seek it from anyone. He must break into a house; any house would do. He would turn every corner he could find to vandalize, to burn down houses, or to roll around on the ground pleading for cash. That's right, he'd turn any corner he could find... Ah, there he is, run, run quick...

But the moon was rising, and the full moon was oh so round, and its silvery moonlight poured and glistened on the streets. Oh, but what is this, something black and distorted was dancing on the moon-washed road? It shifted left, shrank, and then grew long, showing holes along itself. It kept dancing underneath Chí Phèo. He stood and looked at it and suddenly broke out in laughter. He laughed until he couldn't breathe. If only he were still cursing, it would have been easier to digest than his laughter! That mysterious figure was no other than his shadow. And so, he laughed, and he forgot about vengeance: he already missed the first corner he was supposed to turn into. Now he was on the road leading to tỵ²⁶ Lãng's house, an old shaman with long, sparse facial hair. Chí Phèo immediately came up with an idea: he would come into the house and destroy

²⁶ A title for shamans

the châu văn²⁷ offering table the old fool randomly came up with. That was because the old man both did shamanism and pig fixing²⁸. His shaman musical instrument screeched worse than the pigs he neutered. When Chí Phèo came in, the old man was drinking; he drank right in his courtyard, drinking and stroking his beard, happily shaking his head. Chí Phèo stopped to look and saw that he was quite funny. He saw that anyone who drank was funny. Then he suddenly felt thirsty, God, the thirstiest he had ever felt! So parched was he that he felt his throat burning... Without hesitation, he came to the old man's side, picked up the bottle of liquor and chugged it. The old man stretched his neck out to look, his eyes wide open, but couldn't say anything. His tongue was already shriveled up from the booze. He had already drunk two thirds of the bottle. The last third, Chí Phèo consumed. Chí Phèo downed it all in one breath, then let out a long exhale, smacked his chops as if he still wanted more. Then he reached for the old shaman's sparse beard, examined it under the moonlight and laughed. The shaman also laughed. Two drunkards laughed together like two crazed soulmates. Then the shaman went inside and brought out two more bottles; he still had exactly two left, he invited Chí Phèo to keep drinking, to drink like no one cared. Just drink, my friend, nothing to worry about! His wife has been dead for seven to eight years, his daughter left him after carrying a bastard child, he was all alone, but with no wives to nag, he could drink all he wanted. Just drink! Just drink, my friend who came from the moon! Drink to your heart's content, drink till you piss alcohol, that's the way. Why would you refrain from drinking at all? Even if you're rich, powerful, even if you become a Mr. or a Mrs., no one will call you by your titles when you die! He's lived to fifty and had never seen a single titled person survive! After all, we're all going to end up in graves, dirt graves. Everyone who dies goes to a grave, if you die drunk you're still going to a grave, so what are you worried about? Just be drunk.

²⁷ Châu văn is a type of traditional singing where one would "sing" to the god they worship, commonly in traditional religions. An equivalent of this would be the Eucharistic adoration.

²⁸ Fix (v): to neuter an animal

Never had Chí Phèo been so elated! He was confused why he had never sat down and drank with this man till today. They drank so much together. So, so much. People even thought that the entirety of Vu Dai had to stop drinking just for those two to have enough to drink.

When the two bottles were up, tỵ Lãng was already on the ground. He crawled around like a crab and asked Chí Phèo: what do people often stand with? Chí Phèo flipped him on his back, stroke his funny beard a couple times and left him as is and walked home.

He walked with his bare chest out and gave it a good scratch. He scratched his chest then his neck, his ears, and his head. Sometimes, he'd have to stop still to scratch. He could just lift his leg up and scratch. He felt irritated and itchy, and in his itch, he thought of the riverbank near his place. His garden was close to a small river whose water was clear and still, and the bank housed many strawberry plants whose soft stems were brushed by the winds to curl together like vines. Only his garden grew bananas, and in the corner of his garden was a small hut. On moon-filled nights like tonight, the flat garden was riddled with black shadows of bananas, shadows that hung like shirts hung up to dry. Some fallen banana leaves lay upside down, curling up to collect the azure shimmers of moon drops, and at times, they'd get rocked by the wind and splashed around like they were making love.

Chí Phèo curiously looked at the leaves while walking down the garden. But he didn't stop at the little hut, rather, he headed straight for the river. He planned to jump in for a quick shower to wash the itch off and then just sleep on the garden soil. Who needs the hut anyways? It was so stuffy he could hardly breathe. A person like him, you couldn't even kill by smashing his head, so what would some wind do? He stopped at the riverbank, seems like there was a person. Oh, that was a real person, and he was staring at them.

He saw between two vases of water, a woman sitting with her legs spread and her back leaning against the banana tree. It was definitely a woman, he knew that because of her long hair covering her bare shoulders and chest... Her bare hands were loose, and her mouth was gaping against the moon as she slept, or died. Her legs were stretched out in front of her, and her black

skirt was wrinkly... On the other side, looks like she thrashed her uneven yếm²⁹ to show her pale ribs. All of that baked under the moonlight which whitened up those that probably weren't white in the daylight; the moonlight made it better. Chí Phèo suddenly felt his mouth fill up with drool despite his dried throat, he swallowed it down, he felt something tingling throughout his body. Suddenly, he shivered. Oh, how could it be? It should be that damned woman who should be shivering, that foolish woman who lay asleep unashamed near his house.

But that woman was *thị Nở*³⁰, a person who was as airheaded as the dumb character trope in fairytales and as ugly as a demon spawn. Her face was truly a joke of mother creation: it was so short that its width looked greater than its length, yet her cheeks were so sunken it was a beauty disaster. If her cheeks were puffy then she'd look like a pig, a face surprisingly common face sitting atop frail human necks. Her nose was short but huge, red, and as rough as a King orange; it was so big it was competing with her huge lips: maybe because they were competing so hard, her lips physically cracked under the pressure. To add insult to injury, she ate betel leaves along with tobacco³¹, thus her thick lips were even thicker, thankfully the red betel juice thickened up and covered her grayish buffalo-meat-colored lips. Not only that, but her massive teeth were also pointed outwards: maybe they thought that by growing evenly they could balance out her ugliness somewhat. That, and she's also a loony; that was a special gift from God that was bestowed on her; if she were wise, she'd be suffering the day she bought her first mirror. And she was poor. If she hadn't been poor, the next man she married would have been miserable with her hideousness. Plus, she was from a long line of family with leprotic graves³²: this made it so that no man would have to be hesitant about the relationship. People avoided her like a disgusting rat. Past thirty, and she was still single. In this Vu Dai village, people would make friends at eight, and sometimes

²⁹ An undergarment commonly worn by Vietnamese women. See Appendix 3 for reference photos.

³⁰ *Thị* was a derogatory pronoun used to address lower status women, used interchangeably with the pronoun "she". See Appendix 2.

³¹ Betel leaves are often eaten with quicklime in Vietnam. ("Paan"; Siciliano-Rosen)

³² When a family has a leprotic grave (*mả hủi*), it means that someone in the family died from leprosy. That family will forever be avoided, and they'll have no chance of ever communicating with anyone, let alone marry.

have kids at fifteen; no one would wait till they were twenty for their first child. If someone were to look at her situation, they'd straight up say: *thị Nở* was impossible to marry. She had no blood relatives left either, other than an aunt one would call old and, like her nephew, was single. It was what the heavens intended: for them to have each other so that no one should be lonely in this life. The aunt worked for a banana and betel merchant who often traveled to Hải Phòng, at times they'd go all the way to Hòn Gai, Cẩm Phả. Meanwhile *thị* survived on village work here and there. The two lived together in a bamboo house, a levee³³ away from Chí Phèo's garden; he lived out on the embankment, and they lived in the village deep behind it. Maybe that was why *thị Nở* wasn't as afraid of the man as the rest of the village. Living in such close proximity, *thị* was used to him, and once you were used to someone, the fear went away. Zookeepers often say that tigers and lions are as gentle as cats. Plus, there was no reason for her to be scared of him. People weren't scared of another person having to experience her ugliness, her poverty, and her looniness, but that was all she has to her name... A part of her fearlessness was because Chí Phèo was rarely at home, and when he did come home, he was quite gentle, no one is when they're sleeping, and he only came home to sleep.

Everyday *thị Nở* passed through his garden two, three times. There was a small path in his garden that led directly to the river; back then, the whole neighborhood would use that path to reach the river to get water, clean up, or wash their clothes. But ever since he moved there, they stopped coming over and instead found a longer path. Except *thị Nở*: we've already established that she was loony, and loony people don't like to do things the way normal people do. She was too trusting in people, too trusting in her reckless, bullheaded self or maybe she was just adamant on following her habits. Regardless, she went down that same path and ended up fine, so she got used to doing it. One time when Chí Phèo was asleep, she even went into his house to borrow a light from his fireplace, one time she even asked him for some alcohol to massage her feet³⁴; in

³³ Equivalent to a quay

³⁴ Alcohol is often used as a pain reliever even till this day

his sleep, he complained and told her: it's at the corner of the house, take as much as she needed, and let him sleep in peace. She was astonished: why did people fear him so much?

That evening, *thị Nở* went to the river to get water as she would normally do. But on that evening, the moon glowed brighter than other evenings, the moon glowed above the river and the silvery waves glided down the river. Those waves shimmered so beautifully, and they made one's eyes so heavy. The breeze was also as cool as a feathered fan. *Thị Nở* wanted to yawn as her eyelids grew heavier and closed. *Thị* had a bad habit: at times she'd just fall asleep, anywhere, or regardless of what she's doing. Her aunt told her that she was an inconsiderate person for that. With a yawn, *thị* thought: let's just hold off on that water, set the vases down and take a break first.

It's because *thị* had been tilling soil since noon. And rarely was there such a cool place to rest, the breeze tingled her skin and flesh, so exhilarating! *Thị* took off her shirt and sat against the banana tree, her seating posture was less than discreet, but she never knew what being unladylike meant. She had always been an unwary person, who never had to think about anything beyond the present. Plus, there was no one there either. *Chí Phèo* wasn't back yet, and even if he did, he'd just be piss drunk, half asleep on his way home to finish the rest of his slumber. He wouldn't come out here, and even if he did, so what? *Thị* couldn't be scared of him harming her simply because no one had ever harmed her before. In all honesty, *thị* didn't even think that much to begin with. In her mind, a shadow was already spreading throughout. *Thị* couldn't stop herself from sitting.

After sitting for a while, *thị* thought: if I kept sitting like this I'd fall asleep. But she was already two naps in. Thus, she thought: heck, I'll just sleep, what's wrong with sleeping? If I came home, I'd sleep too, so sleeping here is no different. The aunt was travelling with the merchant for a couple of days anyway. *Thị* would rather just sleep here instead. And so, she did. She slept soundly and peacefully.

Chí Phèo was still staring drunkenly and still shivered. Then he snuck up to thị Nở: this was the first time he was quiet ever since he had returned to Vũ Đại. First, he moved her vase far away, then he silently sat down by her chest.

Thị Nở was startled. Just as she had woken up, the man had already grabbed hold of her... Thị struggled to push him away, opened her eyes, became fully awake, and realized it was Chí Phèo. Thị tried to breathe, she wrestled with him and spoke in broken gasps: “Hey... Let go... I’ll scream... I’ll scream for the whole village... Let go. I’ll scream right now!” The man laughed. Why would she scream? He thought he was the only person who could scream for the whole village; now that another person was trying to do his thing, he started screaming.

He screamed like a man who just got stabbed, he screamed and pinned the woman down. Thị Nở stared at him. She was confused: why is **he** screaming? And he wasn’t stopping either. Luckily for him, people were used to his screams, and whenever he did scream, no one would bother come. They’d curse under their breath and go back to sleep; him screaming was equivalent to a sad person singing to the wind. The only ones who’d respond to him were the village dogs.

Thị Nở broke out in laughter. She cursed him and smacked his back. But that was a love smack, because after she hit him, that very hand pushed him closer to her. And they laughed together...

Now they were sleeping by each other... When a baby is fed, they’d sleep. People often sleep after they make love. They slept as if they’d never slept... The moon was up, and it was still clear... The moon sprinkled its dust onto the river, and the river carried many silver waves. But as morning came, Chí Phèo suddenly pushed himself half up, his one arm pushing against the ground. He felt his stomach rising, his limbs felt loose, it was his second or third day without food. Yet his belly was full, but it seemed to ache. No, it definitely ached. It ached so badly, and the pain kept growing by the moment! It kept growing more and more. Ah, and it was cold out today, too. Whenever the wind blew by, he felt a little ill. With every breath of wind, he coiled. He wanted to stand up. Why was his head feeling so heavy, yet his feet feeling so light? His vision was spotty.

His stomach reined and the pain was unbearable. He gagged. He gagged three to four times. It kept going. If only something actually came out he'd feel better. He stuck a finger down his throat. He let out a louder gag, his guts seemed to have turned upside down. But only saliva came out. He took a short break and tried one more time. It worked this time around. Dear god! He was vomiting by the gallons, it never stopped coming out, he practically vomited his guts out. It was so plenty that it woke the woman. Thị sat up and looked around confused. That heavy head of hers took a long while before she remembered and understood.

Chí Phèo was done vomiting. He was exhausted and threw himself onto the ground. His eyes blurred and he groaned: he only had just enough strength to groan. From all that vomit, a scent permeated, something that smelled like liquor, he shuddered.

Thị Nở came to his side. Putting one hand on his chest (it took her until now to figure out what happened), she asked:

- Did you just throw up?

He rolled his eyes to look up at her, they blurred again after a glance.

- Come inside?

He seemed to have nodded. But his head didn't move, only his eyelids twitched.

- Then stand up.

But he couldn't. Thị lifted under his arm and seated him upright. Then she pulled him up. He clung to her neck and they both stumbled back to the hut.

There were no beds in the hut, but for a bamboo frame. She set him down on the frame and collected pieces of torn sleeping mats to drape over him. He stopped groaning. Looked like he was sleeping. Thị also faded into a sleep. But there were so many mosquitos. The mosquitos reminded thị that she left her shirt out in the garden. Thị went to the garden. The vases reminded thị that she needed to collect water. Thị hastily put on her shirt, collected water, then carried the vases home.

The moon hadn't set, no doubt it was still midnight. Thị planned to go to bed. But remembering the strange event last night, she smiled. She didn't feel sleepy and kept turning in her bed.

When Chí Phèo opened his eyes, it had been morning for a while. The sun was up high, and its rays outside must have been vibrant. You could tell from the birds chirping outside. But in this damp hut, it was only dim. In this village, people see the evening during the afternoon, and at night the sun is still out. Never had Chí Phèo notice that because he had never stopped being drunk.

But now he's sober. He was melancholic as if upon waking, he felt a bitter taste in his mouth, and an indescribable sadness in his soul. His whole body felt weak, his limbs didn't want to move, maybe he was starving for more liquor, but that thought shuddered him. His guts turned a little thinking of that. He feared alcohol like sick people feared food. The chirping outside sounded so happy though! There's talking and laughing from people shopping. There's the tapping of the fisherman's oar shooing the fish away.

These familiar sounds have always been there. But only today did he hear them... Oh, how sad it was!

- How much is lychee today?

- Just under three *xu*, ma'am.

- That's almost nothing!

- That's true. But what can I do?

Chí Phèo guessed it was probably a woman asking another woman who was a lychee merchant that just returned from Nam Dinh. He felt sickly sad because that story reminded him of some distant memory. It seemed that once, he too wished for a small family of his own. He would be a farmhand, while his wife would sew, and they would raise a pig and sell it for a bit of funds. Once they've made enough, they'd buy a couple *sào* of farmland for themselves.

Being sober, he felt old and alone. He felt miserable! There's no way that was true, right? Was he old? He was over forty now... But that should not be the age he should be preparing to start a life. He was already on the other side of the hill we call "life." For people like him who had endured all the poisons and toxins in life and never got ill, a single sick day is a sign that the body was greatly damaged. It was the last monsoon of fall to signal the frost of winter. Chí Phèo seemed to have noticed his old age, cold and sick, and alone. That was scarier than any physical suffering.

Thankfully thị Nở came to visit. If she hadn't come and let him get lost in his thoughts, he'd cry. Thị came with a basket, within it, a covered pot of something. It was a pot of onion congee³⁵ that was still hot. That was because at midnight, thị was struggling to sleep, and then she thought: that reckless man almost seemed pitiful, nothing was more pitiful than being sick alone. If thị wasn't there for him last night, he'd be dead. Thị felt prideful for rescuing someone. She thought she loves him: it was the love of someone who's been owed a favor. But in there, there was also the love of someone who owed a favor. Someone like thị Nở could never forget. So, she thought: it would be terrible of me to leave him now. After all, we did sleep together! Slept together like "husband and wife." The phrase felt embarrassing, yet so exciting. Was that the silent desires of that wretch of a person? Or was it the bodily desires that arose in her emotions that she never knew?

All she knew was that she wanted to see Chí Phèo again, it would be funny to remind him of what happened last night. Heavens! Why did someone so bullheaded even exist? She was sitting right there, and he lunged right in, so perverse was he that when she screamed, he'd scream louder. In hindsight, it was stupid too. That god-smitten bastard, what good of calling for help when he was afraid of no one. But served him right though. After that whole vomit fiasco, he was done for the day. She had to feed him something. When someone is that sick then the answer is

³⁵ The "onion congee" here is more liquid than rice. Rice was hard to come by during this period of French occupation and thus, the dish itself was 90% water, 8% green onions, and 2% rice.

definitely onion congee. If he could sweat it out, he'd feel much better... And so, by morning, she had set out to find some rice, while onions, she still has a couple sprigs at home.

She cooked it, put the pot in the basket, and brought it to Chí Phèo.

He was incredibly surprised. After he was done being surprised, he felt his eyes water a little. This was the first time he was cared for by a woman. All his life, no one has ever given him anything out of their own volition. He had to threaten or rob them. He had to make them fear him. He looked at the steaming bowl of congee and contemplated deeply. Thị Nở stole a glance at him and smiled widely. She looked pretty like that. Love made her look pretty. He felt happy and sad all at one. And there was something else, something that felt like guilt. Maybe it was guilt. People often feel guilty about their sins when they no longer have the strength to be evil anymore. Thị nudged him to eat while it was still hot. He lifted the bowl to his face. My, how delicious it smelled! Even the steam entering his nose was enough to make him feel better. He took one huge slurp and realized: people who have never eaten onion congee does not know that it is delicious. But why did it take him so long to finally taste it?

He asked and answered it himself: because no one would cook for him. And since no one would cook, he wouldn't eat anymore! All his life, he had never been taken care of by a pair of "woman's" hands. He recalled "her", that skank that forced him to give her foot massages yet kept telling him to massage "up there," "up more," she only wanted pleasure. She never loved him. He was twenty then. At age twenty, a person wasn't made of stone, but they weren't made entirely of flesh either. If they didn't like something, they'd despise it. Furthermore, having a woman ask him to come over her house to massage her foot! He felt more ashamed than pleasurable, he was also fearful. Truly, ever since the wife of his master asked him to do something so unethical, he was always in fear. But he couldn't say no: everything in the house is up to her to decide. He didn't want to do it! So much so that the woman got mad at him. She saw that he didn't get the hint and decided to push it further. She scolded him: "You're too honest! You're a twenty-year-old boy yet you act like an old man." He pretended to not understand. She flirted: "Did you think I asked you

to come in for only a foot massage?...,” and, seeing him resist, she berated him. He only felt shame, not love. No, he had never been loved by a woman before. Therefore, thị Nở’s onion congee made him think for a long time. He could actually make friends, why then was he making enemies?

After he had finished with the soup, thị Nở scooped him another bowl. He noticed himself sweating so much. Sweat was coming from his head, his face, droplets as big as water droplets. He lifted his sleeve to wipe his face, his nose, smiled and continued eating. The more he ate, the more sweat there was. Thị Nở looked at him and shook her head in pity. He felt himself becoming a child again. He wanted to be pampered by thị like a child. Oh, how gentle he was, who could even say that he was the same Chí Phèo that smashes heads, cuts faces, and stabs people? That was his nature, one that was covered by daily life. Or maybe the sickness entirely changed him physically and mentally? Weak people are often gentle. Only the strong can be evil. But he was no longer strong. And sometimes, he contemplated and worried for his future. All his life he lived on stealing and threatening. If he no longer had the strength to do so, what would happen then? Not only that, he was strong because he was reckless. But he could even vaguely see that one day, he won’t be able to be reckless anymore. That would then be trouble! Oh dear! He craved to be noble, he wanted to get along with everyone! Thị Nở will pave the way for him. If thị can live peacefully with him then why shouldn’t others? They will accept him back into this fair and noble society full of noble people... He pondered as he looked at thị Nở, as if to probe her. Thị was still silent and smiled at him, and suddenly he felt lighter. He told her:

- It’d be great if we could stay like this, no?

Thị didn’t respond, but her red nose flared up even more. He didn’t see that as ugly. With a tone and a face that he believed was very flirty, he told her:

- How about you, ma’am, live with me as a family? It’d be fun.

Thị leered at him. Even an ugly person, when in love, leers. He laughed excitedly. When he’s sober, his laugh sounded so gentle. Thị Nở was incredibly pleased. At the time, the congee

has kicked in. He was very happy and pleased. He gave her a love pinch that made her jump. And he laughed, he said:

- Do you remember anything from yesterday, miss?

Thị gave him a quick smack, a sign that she did not appreciate jokes. Oh, how bashful. If you're ugly but you're bashful, then you can be cute. He laughed until he cried, and to make himself even more embarrassed, he gave her a really painful pinch on her thigh. This time, not only did she not jump up, but she also started screeching. She grabbed his neck and pinned him down. They flirted with one another without needing kisses. Who needs kisses when their lips were as cracked as farmland during drought season and their faces cut all over like a chopping block. Furthermore, there are more ways to express love that's more down-to-earth, they pinched or spanked each other... how practical...

They would become a really good couple. Even they themselves could see that, and they would definitely marry each other. And just like that, for five whole days, she stayed at his place day and night, except for when she had to go to work. He stopped fearing alcohol, but he tried to drink as little as possible, to save money, but especially to stay sober to love one another. Women is no alcohol, but they can make a person drunk. And he was drunk on her. But she was a loony. On the sixth day, she suddenly recalled that her aunt exists. That aunt was supposed to be back that day. She thought to herself: let's not love yet and ask for her aunt's opinion instead.

Hearing her niece's question, the old woman broke out in laughter. She thought she was joking. But she recalled that her niece wasn't right in the head to begin with. So, she started panicking. She was ashamed for her ancestors. But maybe she was actually envious because she was lonely herself. She thought about her lengthy life without a husband. She felt bitter. She resented anyone who didn't understand her, but she targeted her resentment on her own niece! That miserable woman saw that her niece was such a whore! Such degeneracy. Past the age of thirty, and she hasn't settled down yet? Past the age of thirty... who would bother getting married? Why would you bother getting married!? Of course! And if you had to marry, marry someone

else?... Did all men die or something, why would you marry a fatherless piece of trash? Why would you marry someone who only knows how to cut his own face to beg for money? My god! Shame on you! Shame on you!! Oh, dear ancestors!!! The old hag screamed like a rabid bitch. She scolded her thirty-year-old daughter who was yet to settle down. She told her niece unequivocally:

- If you've lasted this long without a husband then you should just stay that way: why would you marry Chí Phèo!?

Thị was beyond furious hearing that. But what could she even say in response? That person has the right to say that, because that person was already fifty and thus no one would want to marry her. What could thị even say? Since she couldn't respond verbally, her anger erupted violently. Thị was furious! Thị was intensely furious! Thị needs to shove all this anger onto someone, anyone. Thị ran over to her new lover's house. She saw that he was drinking, he was drinking and cursing under his breath because she took so long to come back. He was not used to waiting; because if he had to wait, he'd drink away his boredom. And when he drinks, he curses, he was used to it! And what did thị do for him to curse at her? Wait, what right does he have to curse at her? Oh, thị was going mad! She stomped the ground and then jumped up and down as if it were a shaman ritual. He was so intrigued he nodded his head and started laughing. He laughed! He's making fun of thị, heavens no! Thị is turning mad, oh dear! Thị propped both her hands against her crotch, scrunched her face up, lifted her massive lips and spewed at him all of the aunt's demeaning words. He thought for a bit, and he seemed to have understood what she meant. He was stupefied. For a brief moment, he caught the faint scent of onion congee. He sat stupefied and said nothing. Thị was done with her fit. Her red nose cooled down and flattened out. She felt so satisfied after her. She shook her behind and left. Startled, he stood up to call her back. Who wants to come back to that? What else do you want? He chased after her and grabbed her hand. She pushed his hand away and shoved him. He tumbled onto the ground. As he tumbled he shouted: it's always like this, it never changes. He picked up a brick and contemplated smashing his own head in. But it seems he wasn't that drunk yet. He thought if he were to harm

himself here, there would be no use; who'd pity him even to give him money? He had to go to that whore No's house. He had to kill her entire family, to kill that old decrepit crone. If he couldn't kill her, then maybe he'd smash his own head in and scream for the village. But to do that, he must be drunk out of his mind. Without alcohol, how will his blood flow? He needs another bottle. And thus, he drank. But vexingly, the more he drank, the more sober he got. The more sober, the sadder he is! The alcohol fumes weren't intoxicating. He kept catching the faint scent of onion congee. He covered his face and sobbed. Then he continued to drink. He left with a knife by his belt. He rambled: "I have to kill you!." But he kept walking straight. What made him forget to turn into th~~i~~ N~~o~~'s house? Psychos and drunkards never do what they intend to do in the first place.

It was really sunny, so no one was out on the streets. He kept walking, kept cursing, kept threatening to kill "you," and kept walking. Now he was in front of bá Kiến's house. He stormed into the property. The whole family were gone for work on the farm, so there was only old bá Kiến napping. Hearing his voice, bá Kiến got so mad! To be fair, he was mad to begin with because his head was hurting. He just wanted a pair of soft hands to massage his head. Also maybe, he didn't want Mrs. Fourth to be gone for so long. She was gone for so long, who knows where she was going? She looked so youthful though! She was nearly forty, yet she still looked plump, almost too plump! Bá Kiến was past sixty this year. It hurts to be so old with a wife so young. If only she were that old too, he would've been happier. She was young, plump, and as pretty as a twenty-year-old, but she was polyamorous. It was hot, but it was rather enraging. It felt no different than chewing a tough cut of beef while not having teeth. Her eyes and lips were pretty, but they looked really whorish. It didn't take much for her to smile widely and her eyes to squint, and her cheeks would turn rosy. And heavens, the young lads in the village. Bá Kiến hated them, they were young enough to be her children, yet they kept teasing her. And their teases were as stale as blanching water, they were vulgar, yet people would laugh at them as if it were funny! They have no regards for social status of people above them, such ignorant fools! It's so vexing! Bá Kiến just wants to throw all these young men in prison... At times like these, even a wise person could hardly keep

calm. Especially when seeing a deadbeat who only knows how to beg for liquor money like Chí Phèo. Even so, bá Kiến still pulled out five *hào*. It's best to have the money prepared to get rid of people of him as soon as possible. Yet even after he's got it prepared he still yelled at him, maybe just to let his annoyance out:

- Chí Phèo, is that you? Have some decency man, I'm not a money vault.

Then, after tossing five *hào* on the ground, he told Chi:

- Take it and get the fuck out of my sight. Make some living for heaven's sake, you're not expecting people to give you money forever, are you?

Chi glared and pointed at Bá Kiến's face:

- I'm not fucking here to ask for five *Hào*.

Noticing his anger, Bá Kiến calmed his tone:

- Oh, just take that much for now, I haven't anymore.

He scrunched up his face, pridefully:

- I said I'm not here to ask for fucking money.

- Oh good! Today's the first time I've seen you not ask for money. What do you need then?

He spoke clearly:

- I want to be noble!

Bá Kiến laughed hysterically:

- Oh bugger, that's it? I just need you to be noble for people's sake.

He shook his head:

- That's impossible! Who will let me be noble? How will these glass-cut scars fade from my face? I can't be a noble person anymore. Do you understand? There's only one way... you understand? This is the only way.

He lunged at bá Kiến with a knife. Bá Kiến shot up from his seat, but Chí Phèo was already on top of him. Bá Kiến was only able to let out a short scream. Chí Phèo slashed frantically and shouted as loud as he could. But whenever he shouted, no one would rush on site. Thus, by the

time people arrived, he was already thrashing about his own blood. His eyes rolled back. He gasped for words but not a sound came out. Blood was still gushing from his neck.

All of Vũ Đại was riled up. They talked plenty about the unexpected crime. Some were happy inside. Plenty were outright cheerful. A person spoke vaguely: “The heavens do have eyes after all!” Some spoke directly: “I would have felt different if someone else had died but no one gives a shit about those two! It’s clear that they killed each other, they didn’t need an extra pair of hands.” But the happiest are the *hào lý*. They flooded the family with condolences, but mainly, they’re here to look at lý Cường with their pleased and antagonizing eyes. Đội Tảo didn’t even care about euphemisms and discretion, he spoke loudly at the market in front of many people: “The father is dead, no doubt the people will make the son eat mud.” Of course, everyone understood that “the people” means him. His underlings whispered: “The old worm is dead, we should celebrate.” Those who understood were skeptical, they tsk-tsked: “Out with the old, in with the new, he might be dead but there are still others, we’re not winning anything....”

Thị Nở’s aunt pointed at her nephew’s face and scolded:

- You’re really damned lucky, you know that? You didn’t have to marry him after all.

Thị smiled and quibbled:

- I heard lý Cường had to pay nearly a hundred to a report about the situation. A waste of life and money.

But thị thought quietly:

- Yet there are times when he was as gentle as dirt.

And, recalling all her times sleeping with him, thị peeked at the aunt, then glanced down at her tummy.

- Damn, if I were pregnant, now that he’s dead, what am I going to do?

Suddenly Thị saw afar, appearing in her eyes, an old and abandoned brick kiln, far from civilization and on a path less traveled...

Conclusion

By using a variety of techniques, it was possible to produce a legible translation of an amazing work. Though this might not be perfect (and might require additional iterations before I'm satisfied), I'm at least pleased that this iteration is, by all considerations and comparisons, a faithful translation of the original work.

As mentioned, there will be many more iterations before the work is fully realized, and there are certain steps I will take to ensure it. A major thing I will do is to have the work be proofread by friends and colleagues so that I may collect feedback for improvements. Another thing I could do is to refer to the Vietnamese dictionary and thesaurus to ensure that the translation used the correct equivalence of the word it was supposed to represent.

A revision of grammatical structures would certainly help also as grammar doesn't often carry over translations and the results seldomly sound natural to the audience. That requires an English speaker's keen eye to spot the mistakes and choppiness of the sentences.

In all, I believe that the work produced here is a good representation of what the story is supposed to look like in a different language. Though there exist gaps formed from the translation between two very distant languages, the emotions and themes were correctly conveyed to the best of my abilities. I am proud of the outcome, and I hope you enjoyed it also.

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Appendix

A discussion on Official Equivalences chosen for this work

The below appendices are provided not to over-explain translation choices but to expand on them and educate the reader on certain intricacies in contemporary Vietnamese culture and language.

The language itself has changed a great deal during the French occupation and during current times. Since the Vietnamese government seeks to unite the country's people under a common tongue, some dialectic and regional differences have disappeared from the language and thus, it brought great difficulty to language enthusiasts seeking to translate old works as those words are no longer circulating nor legible.

These appendices act somewhat as an archive or analysis of these details that I have personally found during the translation process. I hope with it, future readers of this work will be able to appreciate Vietnamese culture and language and have some fun learning it.

Appendix 1: On the matter of currency and tax

Due to the history of colonization in Vietnam by multiple parties, a lot of Vietnamese words are borrowed, mainly from four main sources: Ancient Chinese, Old and Modern Cantonese, and Modern French. This, in addition to Nôm—an old Vietnamese language that uses Mon-Khmer phonology with Ancient Hanzi calligraphy, gives rise to a lot of words that share the same meaning, but are spoken differently by diverse groups of people. This factor is especially important in finding equivalences between languages. For example, in the story, there are many mentions of money and how much something costs. A problem thus arises: what currency is being talked about? French Indochina *piastres*? Vietnamese *đồng*?

Speaking of which, the term *đồng* originally means “copper,” which then evolved to *đồng tiền* or “copper money/copper coin,” and over time, it simply shortened to *đồng* as a monetary unit, regardless of the metal used in making it. Hence one will often see the term attached to its production material e.g., *đồng bạc*—silver coin, *đồng vàng*—gold coin, *đồng thiếc*—tin coin, etc. So, if you’re ever wondering about the origins of the Vietnamese *đồng*, there you go. But keep in mind: the current *đồng* is different from the old *đồng*.

In many other languages, Vietnamese included, the country’s currency can often be colloquially referred to under a different name. For example, in English: five dollars = five bucks = five (a pop) etc. The same case can be applied here for French Indochina’s currencies.

The currency we will be analyzing is between the French Cochinchine period to 1930; this period is also simply known as the French Indochina period. During this time, a system was instated (“Đồng bạc Đông Dương”³⁶; Phạm):

³⁶ Though this is sourced from Wikipedia, it is in fact verbatim from the book it was cited (see References, Phạm Thăng). However, due to its nature as an unofficial coin collector’s guide, the book isn’t widely published and are only available as low-quality physical photocopies in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the research done within the book is extensive and has been verified by many sources

- The highest value is a silver/gold coin (French: *Piastre*, Vietnamese: *đồng bạc* or *bạc*). This is worth 200 – 600³⁷ old Vietnamese *đồng*.
- 1 *piastre*/***bạc*** = 100 *centime*/*cent*/*sou*/***xu***³⁸ (Vietnamese)
- 1 ***cắc***³⁹/***hào***⁴⁰ = 10 *cent*/***xu***
- 1 *cent*/***xu*** = 2-6 *sapèque*/***đồng kẽm***/***đồng điều*** (lit. tin coin)

Since there are official translations of it, and the system isn't too complicated, I decided to use the Vietnamese terms verbatim in the translation rather than using French/English equivalences. To make sure that the words are more recognizable, I will utilize italicization.

In addition to the monetary unit, there was also a tax system that was quite confusing (personally, I could not understand a word from it). The simplified version is: it varies from province to province, individual tax exists, additional fees depends on province, and officials don't pay taxes ("Thuế thân"). However, this source lacks citation and thus should not be relied on as valid facts for discourse. Instead, I would refer you to Đào Duy Anh's *Việt Nam văn hóa sử cương*. For those who are interested in Vietnamese history, culture, and economy throughout the ages, this book will be your friend, as recommended by the Vietnamese Archaeology Association (Ngô Thị Nhung). Since this book might not be available outside of Vietnam, or should it be a hassle to acquire such important material, I have "misplaced" a certain hyperlink that is definitely not in the Works Cited section from which you could access the book (Đào Duy Anh).

³⁷ The value and materials (gold/silver) differ depending on different eras of French rule.

³⁸ *Centime* shortened to *cent*, also known as *sou*, then localized into *xu*

³⁹ Vietnamese people often call the 10 *xu* coin to be a *cắc* (a localized pronunciation of the Hanzi 角), similar to how 10 cents = 1 dime in USD.

⁴⁰ Eventually, the French officiated the unit *cắc* and wrote it in *Quốc ngữ* as *hào*, and in Hanzi as 毛 (*mao*)

Appendix 2: On honorifics and exclamations

An unfortunate side effect of having a language that's context-based and heavily pronoun-centric is that certain terms can be misconstrued to be other terms. Take, for example: Chí Phèo vs. bá Kiến. These are character names within the story, yet one of them is actually not a name but instead, a title. Specifically, “*bá*” represents a pronoun. In the Vietnamese language, honorifics are baked directly into their names. For example, “bá Kiến” is short for “bá hộ tiên chỉ họ Kiến” which is incredibly hard to translate (it means something like “guardian elder, heavens’ middleman, last name Kiến”). The 1961 version used the term “Mayor” to address him. However, I would like to argue against that.

For one, “mayor” is a very generalized term that does not full entail the power that Kiến has over the village. The reason being there's another title that's similar to Kiến's but is held by his son. This title directly rules over the village, does administrative work as a mayor does but it isn't as powerful as Kiến's. Another point is that, as mentioned, the titles are part of their names. For example, everyone calls Kiến as, “bá Kiến,” his son Cường as, “lý Cường,” where “lý” and “bá” are both titles. Think of it like saying “lawyer Frank” or “Doctor Mitchell.” The title determines the person and their power, and the translation should carry that over. Therefore, for my version, I chose to keep such titles and made sure to elaborate that they are titles and are treated as names so that we could clarify the power dynamics more. Such a method was utilized by Eva Hung when considering the difficulty of translating names and honorifics in Chinese fiction (Hung). In fact, here's what they had to say about it:

[...] no translator should let dictionary meanings lead him by the nose. In the field of translation, it is perhaps better to be a sinner than a fool.

Indeed, many names of characters in this story carry with them a pronoun, and these pronouns either identify them by the gender, social class, or occupation. An example being thị Nở and lý Cường. “*Thị*” is a derogatory term to refer to a woman in old Vietnam. According to Wiktionary (for lack of better source), “in literary contexts, used to convey, in a demeaning way,

the lower status of a female character” and “in formal contexts, used to refer to a female criminal.” Hence this word here refers to class and social status.

Meanwhile, “*lý*” refers to a position of power (further clarification of these hierarchies are in Appendix 3). Think of it as calling the character Cường-sama if he were to be in a Japanese localization. The pronoun conveys the position of the character, the social status, and conveys a sign of respect towards that character. Thus, when Chí Phèo dropped the pronoun, he would be showing signs of deference. Personally, I don’t see a problem in keeping these pronouns as the pronouns themselves add a layer of meaning to the translation. Plus, the use of title pronouns in translations have been widely accepted and internalized.

Calling someone a Sgt. John or Sultan Jerry or Sifu Jeremy or Lt. Jackson has been so normalized, people don’t realize the words aren’t even English. If these words are fine in the language, why should we shy away from having these words which convey information better?

So, to help with clarification of titles and pronouns, here is a list of all the characters in the story with pronouns and what each of their pronouns mean:

- Bá Kiến – *bá* is short for *bá hộ tiên chỉ* which roughly translates to “god-appointed guardian,” but in reality it’s more like a village chief with more “spiritual power” than the official village chief.
- Lý Cường – *lý* is short for *lý trưởng* which is equivalent to village chief
- Thị Nở – *thị* is an archaic and derogatory way of calling a woman of lower status
- Năm Thọ – *năm* is probably a numbering of which order of brother he is in his family
- Binh Chức – *bình* is probably a slang for soldier as the character enlisted in the French military for a while
- Tụ Lãng – *tụ* is most likely the title of a shaman. However, there are no official records or translations that I found that can explain it.

Other than having titles in their names, people usually refer to each other, in name or in greetings, by titles too. For example: “bẩm cụ” is often seen when certain characters greet bá Kiến.

A direct (but not necessarily equivalent) translation would be “your Highness” or “my lord.” Would I agree that “my lord, I am not familiar with this man” is equivalent to “bẩm cụ, tên này con không quen”? No, I would never. However, in the context of this piece, the term is seldomly used, and when used, it only served to show bá Kiến’s power over the villagers. In that case, is it really necessary to translate that phrase? I don’t think so. I’m not alone in this. According to Deborah Smith—translator of *The Vegetarian*, a Korean book written by Han Kang:

“It’s also a language that marks formality, and uses honorifics; Korea is a traditional Confucian society, which means it’s an age-based hierarchy. But those things demand the least attention, in the sense that they’re always the same.” (Cooke)

Of course, that doesn’t mean I will be ignoring all the formalities and honorifics. In certain cases, I will still keep them, like in titles that are embedded within characters’ names and is often what those characters are commonly known as (bá Kiến, lý Cường, thị Nở, etc.). And often times, these titles will be used by characters as if they’re first names, and that’s fine. And if you’re wondering, yes, the accents stay on. I’m not removing them for any reasons. Refer to the translation of *Dumb Luck* if you’re skeptical about the choices made in this translation. A lot of this work was inspired by Peter Zinoman and Nguyễn Nguyệt Cầm’s translation (Vũ et al.).

Appendix 3: On cultural notes and clothing

In this section, we are going to look at certain clothing that the characters wore. Some of these are easier shown than described, and thanks to modern technology, I could simply insert photos on here with ease.

Let's start off by telling you that there exists a film adaptation of this masterpiece called *Làng Vũ Đại Ngày Ấy*, and fortunately, it is fully subtitled for you to enjoy (Phạm Văn Khoa). In Figure 1, we see a tired Chí Phèo sitting beside thị Nở who is serving him a bowl of onion congee. As you could see, Chí is wearing a button-up shirt bare-chested, showing his “dragons and phoenixes surrounding a club-wielding general” tattoo and that thị Nở was in her *yếm*.



Figure 1. Still from Khoa, *Làng Vũ Đại Ngày Ấy* (1:02:32)

Speaking of *yếm*, let's have a look at the design of the article of clothing and see why thị Nở was shown to have “exposed her ribs”. We can see from Figure 2 that the piece of clothing closely resembles the modern-day apron in the front while having the back fully exposed and tied only towards the lower back in Figure 3. In the same photo, you could also see the *váy đụp* mentioned in the story (and in the long-winded rant I made about how it's not a patched-up skirt).



Figure 2. *Yếm* as seen from the front

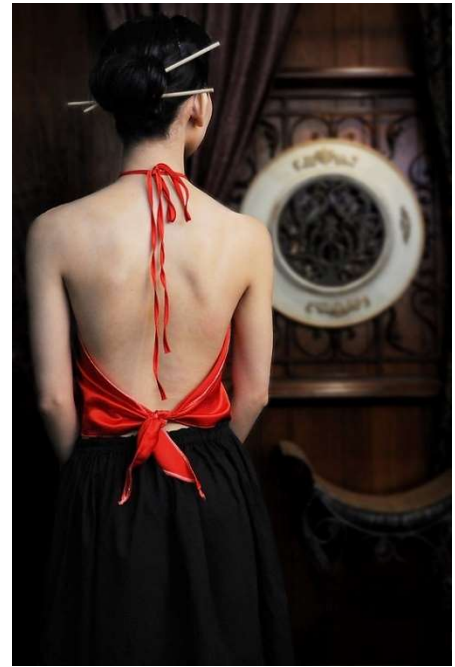


Figure 3. *Yếm* from behind plus a *váy đụp*

Certain cultural notes I should also mention is the *paan* tradition. Simply put, it's a tradition where you would chew on betel leaves smeared with quicklime or lime (not the fruit) paste. Betel leaves have a strange reaction that would make your saliva red, thus making your lips red too, hence the part where Thị Nở was described, she was described to have red betel covering her pale lips. For the sake of not grossing you out, I will not be putting a photo of that here.