The novel *To Tam* by Hoang Ngoc Phach, published in 1925, was a dramatic exposition of the dilemma borne by the younger generation of the time in face of conflict between a strict Confucian family-oriented tradition and allure of the freedom to pursue personal happiness. It brought tears and suicide to many urban youths. Nine years later, in 1934, Khai Hung's novel *Nua Chung Xuan* appeared (1). This work can be seen as a response to *To Tam* in that it treats the same theme with a different attitude and resolution.

The novel relates the story of Mai, a young woman coming from a good family, whose only remaining relation is her younger brother Huy. Being in financial difficulties, Mai does not have enough money to pay for Huy's school tuition. By chance she meets Loc who used to know her as a little girl. They are attracted to each other. Subsequently, Loc looks for Mai and offers to help her. He rents a house for Mai and Huy in Ha Noi. The two fall in love and Loc marries Mai without his mother's knowledge and consent, whereas the old lady has arranged for Loc to marry the daughter of a province chief. Soon Mai is with child. Using a mean stratagem to make Loc believe that Mai has betrayed him with another man, Loc's mother is successful in separating the two lovers. Consequently, Mai overcomes many obstacles to bring up her child and to see her brother through school. She declines offers of marriage from a doctor and from a painter. Six years pass and Huy becomes a teacher in a village outside Hanoi. Mai and her son live with Huy in quiet, peaceful happiness. As for Loc, after Mai's departure from his life, he obeys his mother and marries the girl chosen for him. His wife gives him two children who die in infancy. One day
Loc happens to see Mai's portrait displayed at the College of Arts. He learns from the painter what has happened to Mai, including the scheme his mother used to destroy his relationship with Mai. The damage has been done and Loc resolves to atone for it. He finds out where Mai lives, and visits her to beg for her forgiveness, so they can be reunited. Though still loving him, Mai does not want to break up his marriage. They agree to be with each other in spirit only.

While To Tam and Dam Thuy in *To Tam* live their love in a world of its own, the love between Mai and Loc is placed neatly and properly in the conventional framework of marriage. They meet on a train and recall the past when Mai and her late father lodged in Loc's house during the time her father was teaching Chinese to Loc's sisters. The past acquaintance serves to eliminate any anxiety Mai may have in talking freely to a young man. After having told Mai news related to his family, Loc asks about Mai's marital status.

*Embarrassed, Mai did not answer. Loc repeated his question.*

“Well, I asked you if you are married, but you haven't answered me.”

“Sir, who would want to marry a poor person like me?”

“I'm not poor, how come nobody has married me either?”

*Mai detected a note of flirting in Loc's words and she realized then that she could no longer consider him an elder brother as when they had been very young.*

*(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 35)*

At this first meeting, Loc's question may be regarded no more than a common form of greeting one addresses to young acquaintances or friends after a lapse of time --albeit coming from a young man to a young woman it may have a flirtatious connotation. Nonetheless, the awareness of each other's eligibility seems to encourage their attraction to each other. It allows Mai to immediately build her dreams around Loc.

*Mai dreamed that he would propose to her, that she would then enjoy happiness in a family that included Loc and her brother Huy. In her dream world, like that of most young women of the middle class, love implied marriage.*

*(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 48)*

Similarly on the part of Loc, when his attraction to Mai and his care for her turn to love, it is not enough simply to dream of sharing a future with her. He wants to realize that dream. Loc proposes to Mai, then goes home to ask his mother's permission to marry her.
Thus, so far as Mai and Loc are concerned, love is seen in terms of its conventional ultimate aim: marriage. Given the fact that Mai's parents are dead and she has no close relations to speak of who have any authority over her life, Mai needs to consult only herself. Loc's situation, on the other hand, does not give free rein to his wishes. Though a product of a modern westernized education, he comes from and still lives in a mandarin's family, trapped in all the old rules and principles of a disintegrating feudal society. One of the rules says that marriage is not a matter for the individual to decide upon for himself. This rule is invoked when Loc confesses to his mother his affection for Mai and his wish to marry her. He tells his mother of Mai's good background, her recommendable personality, as well as her difficult circumstances. As might be expected, Mai is not up to his mother's standard, simply because Mai is poor.

His mother banged her fist on the table, interrupting Loc.

“I said I didn't agree and I meant what I said. Go ahead and marry her if you dare. I've asked for the hand of the daughter of the province chief for you, and her family has accepted the proposal. Do you think her family and I as adults can go back on our words like children?”

Loc frowned when his mother mentioned the province chief's daughter.

“Mother, I've begged you not to pursue this matter, because I'm not happy with the match.”

“Ah, so now you're changing your tune and talking to me about being modern, is that right? It's about freedom of marriage, isn't it? You don't agree with the match but I do. You must know that in the matter of marriage, it's important that the two families are equal in status and wealth. How can you expect me to be associated with peasants? With a bunch of villagers? You're causing me loss of face and dishonoring your ancestors. You're an impious son. Do you hear me?”

Seeing his mother's fierce anger, Loc bowed his head and apologized to her, firmly promising to obey her. Loc had always been a pious son.

(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 91)

The choice of mate arrived at for Loc by his mother -- the wife of a deceased judge -- is not based on whether the girl meets Loc's dreams. Rather, it rests on the family from where she comes, whose social prestige can help Loc advance his career, as his mother envisions. The crucial point is that the family of this promised girl is compatible with his. For Loc to marry below his social station would mean a disgrace to his clan. It would appear that her genuine concern for Loc's future and for the family's reputation gives Loc's mother license to act as she deems fit, for in spite of Loc's protest, she has gone ahead negotiating with the girl's family about the match.
This scene does not exactly reveal a debate between mother and son who represent the old and the new, respectively. Throughout, the voice of tradition speaks loudest. Loc's mother calls on the power of tradition, especially the immutable value of filial piety, to firmly reject Loc's request to marry the girl he loves. As seen earlier, Mai and Loc have placed their love in the context of marriage. Upon his mother's rejection, the context is shifted, so that their love is now caught in conflict between old and new value systems concerning this important issue.

From the beginning, cast in the normal context of marriage, the love relationship between Mai and Loc is meant to be real and practical, as much as that between To Tam and Dam Thuy is romantic and idealistic. The author does not dwell on the sentiments that each lover may have for the other. The courting stage is rather uneventful, for the circumstances are not such as to induce Mai and Loc to indulge in dreams alone. Certainly their love develops from a physical attraction, as is normal to young adults. This is clearly revealed through one of their early conversations. When learning of Mai's financial difficulties, Loc offers to help her out with some cash before she can manage to sell her house. Mai declines his offer without directly telling him the reason why.

 Loc smiled.
 "Oh, I know. You think I want to help because you're no longer a little girl but have become a beautiful young woman, don't you? You're wrong, if you think so. All these years that we didn't see each other, I've often asked after you. It's not only now when I see your beauty, that I begin to care about you."
 (NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 40)

We do not know whether Loc is correct in reading Mai's thoughts. We are only told that she does not feel comfortable in accepting monetary assistance from him, as one would welcome support from one's relations. Loc may be very honest in saying that he has not stopped thinking about her in the period before meeting her again. After all, it is he who picks her out from the crowd before she recognizes him. The fact remains, however, that Loc does notice and appreciate Mai's beauty. And Mai is conscious of his attention. In return, his physical appearance appeals to Mai, as it would easily be the answer to any girl's dream of a handsome young man.

*Her lips broadened into a smile when she thought of the man she had met on the train. What a refined and gallant person!*
 (NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 46)
Indeed, Mai and Loc share the initial physical attraction and the subsequent serious consideration of marriage. But the similarities end there. The value each of them chooses to emphasize in their relationship makes Loc's love different from Mai's.

Loc's interest in Mai is surely not a passing infatuation. After the train ride they happen to take together to their different destinations, on his way back to Hanoi, Loc stops by Mai's village and looks for her. Upon learning of Mai's various problems in the village, Loc offers to help Huy finish his studies in Hanoi and suggests that Mai move to the city to live with her brother. This is done, and in the first few months Loc visits them frequently and attends to their everyday needs. Nourished by this constant closeness, attraction turns to love.

In spite of this, Loc's view of love remains confined to the fascination it brings him, with little consideration of the accompanying responsibilities. News of Mai's pregnancy alarms him, and he confesses that in loving her he only dreams of the happiness love brings, wanting their love to remain forever an undivided sentiment, with no thought of family and children entering his mind. (NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 114) This self-centered involvement with love, a kind of love of love, would seem to make marriage no more than a practical means for him to secure Mai's affection and commitment. When his choice of Mai is rejected by his mother, he spends a whole month concocting a plot to marry Mai regardless. He lies to Mai that he has obtained his mother's consent. Loc even goes so far as to have a woman posing as his mother visit Mai and formally confirm the marriage arrangement. One lie leads to another. Loc sets up a separate household for himself, Mai and Huy, explaining to his mother that he needs the quietness of an isolated room to prepare for an examination that will promote him to a higher office. The painful effort he makes to consume his love without damaging his filial piety results in Loc's being more possessive of Mai. Mai cannot allow herself to see this, but Huy notices Loc's jealousy, and Loc's mother also recognizes this weakness in her son. A guilty conscience, moreover, can hardly allow Loc to trust anyone more than he trusts himself. So he is doomed to walk straight into his mother's trap.

With the prospect of added responsibilities when the baby comes along, Loc anxiously goes back to his mother to seek her forgiveness and acceptance of his marriage to Mai. The mother sows some doubt in his mind about Mai's fidelity by hinting she has knowledge of questionable activities of Mai while Loc is at work. A few days later, Loc notices a suspicious looking boy hanging about the gate of their home. Loc raises questions and finds in the boy's hand a letter addressed to Mai. Jealousy getting the better of him, Loc opens the letter and finds a twenty piastre bill as well as a note apparently from a man asking Mai
for a rendez-vous at the city zoo the following afternoon. Immediately, Loc suspects Mai of carrying this secret lover's child. He goes so far as to set a trap to catch Mai in her betrayal. Loc asks Mai and Huy to visit the zoo with him at the time indicated in the note -- which, of course, he keeps to himself. When the appointed time comes, Loc sends word home that he is too busy to join them and urges them to go ahead with the planned outing. He then makes his way to the zoo and waits. Mai and Huy decide not to go, after all. Loc, therefore, sees nothing to help him interpret the import of the note one way or another. In any event, his mother's ruse eventually works. The older lady visits Mai when Loc is at work, asking her to leave Loc. Learning for the first time of Loc's betrothal to another woman, which his mother makes clear she has no intention of cancelling, while also noting the sudden and unpleasant change of attitude by Loc of late, Mai decides she has no choice but to go her separate way.

Loc's reaction to Mai's departure from his life is indicative of the narrow shallowness of his love. Readily, without even bothering to inquire into the matter, he is convinced that Mai has eloped with her lover.

In his heart rose hatred for humanity as a whole. Mankind, for the sake of heaven, most foul! Who would have thought that a person who exhibited such a love for him could have turned out to be so promiscuous?!
Loc was very angry and indignant. He wanted to cry, but could not. Nor did he have a desire to look for Mai.
(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 220)

Resentful of being robbed of his pleasure in love in such a humiliating fashion, Loc sees no reason to long mourn the relationship. Three months later, he marries the province chief's daughter. The image of Mai rapidly fades in his memory, so much so that one day not long after her departure when he sees Mai leaving the house of the painter Bach Hai, Loc no longer feels a pang of jealousy, only contempt for the one who betrayed him. We are told, however, that Loc can only love as he loves Mai once in his life. Though Mai's absence makes him forget her and seals his pain, her unexpected reappearance six years later rekindles this love. Visiting the College of Arts, Loc is mesmerized by the image of a young woman seen in a painting on display, which he believes to be the very image of Mai.

Like a pile of burned charcoal covered with ashes which glows more radiantly with flame when poked by a stick, the love believed to have cooled in his heart suddenly rose profusely when Loc stood facing the image of his old love.
(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 224)
This happens at a time when his marriage, which has been sustained mainly by the exclusive efforts of his affectionate and devoted wife, has become quite lifeless -- especially following the loss of their two children. The memory of Mai and happy times with her triggered by the painting certainly are more appealing than is his present life with a companion he does not love. When he learns from the painter the truth of Mai's suffering, Loc resolves to amend for past mistakes. Loc visits Mai to explain the devastating nature of the misunderstanding, and to beg for her forgiveness.

“I swear to you, yes, in the name of all the most sacred things in life, I swear to you that you're the only wife to me, the wife whom I love, whom I still love, and will love, with all my heart and mind, with all my soul.”

(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 284)

But Loc is still Loc, seeing himself and his own pleasure at the center of everything, giving no thought to others.

Loc talked very fast, deliriously.

“No, you don't need to sacrifice anything. Only I may sacrifice in return for your love. I'll give up everything, my position, my wife, everything else to go with you to another place to rebuild our happiness. In fact, I've had everything arranged, with ready cash in my suitcase at the hotel. Only I dared not confess to you of having done so.”

(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 286)

Loc's love, selfish as it is, nonetheless is quite consistent with the limited framework he sets for it. It fulfills his basic human need for physical and emotional comfort. When that comfort is apparently withdrawn from him by Mai, the agent embodying it, love ceases to exist. And later the possibility of reaching out to touch the old comfort again brings back that love. His love is most human and very commonplace.

Mai's love, on the other hand, is of a more noble nature, shaped and sustained by elements other than self-gratification. Mai is a giver, probably conditioned by the circumstance that at a tender age, as a teenager, she had to play the dual role of mother and sister to her younger brother Huy. She is now prepared to become a hard working small vendor to support him and his schooling. Her selfless consideration is fully appreciated by Huy. And it is immediately noted by Loc when Mai first explains to him her concern for Huy's future.

“How about you?” Loc asked with a smile.

“I don't understand.” Mai was puzzled.
"I'd like to ask about you, about what you would like finally to become. I have not heard your ideas about yourself."
Mai was rather surprised. She had not often actually thought about herself. (NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 39)

Given her character, Mai's initial feeling of affection for Loc is not allowed to take the self-centered course and develop into the romance of infatuation which To Tam lives in To Tam. Coming from a rural area hardly at all affected by modernization, and having been under the influence of her late father who was a Confucian scholar, Mai does not have in her vocabulary the notion of romantic love as To Tam knows it. In fact, she has no sooner noticed Loc, and is moved by his attention, than the idea of marriage naturally enters her mind. At this point, however, her sentiments toward Loc do not seem to have a clear shape.

Even for the person who sat beside her, speaking gently and comforting her amicably, she had only a warm innocent feeling. She loved him, but she loved him as an elder brother.

Since she knew him, she felt happy and very hopeful. She felt less lonely and less afraid. She did not know why. (NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 48)

Mai's later unsettled thoughts about Loc -- seeing him as a prospective suitor, rather than as an elder brother -- suggest the capriciousness of a young girl's fancy, before concrete emotions help turn it into a well-defined wish or dream. This affection may also hint at the need for a moral support which implies trust, an important ingredient in her love relationship with Loc. At the time when she meets him on the train, Mai is faced with the dilemma of either selling the house where her dead parents are worshipped or having Huy discontinue school for lack of funds. Choosing either alternative would make her less than a pious daughter. The spiritual value placed on the ancestral house cannot be made light of. On the other hand, tradition will not sanction her going against her father's last wish that Huy finish school and become a useful citizen. She must feel painfully lonely in making the realistic decision to take care of the immediate need of survival at the expense of spiritual obligations, for Mai has nobody to turn to except for her younger brother and an old servant -- who are both powerless to offer her any workable alternative. Just then, Loc comes into the picture and presents her with a better solution. That self-respect prevents Mai from readily accepting his sincere offer of help does not obscure her consciousness that there is someone who wishes to make her "less afraid" of life. Perhaps this comfortable feeling of security makes her think of Loc more
in terms of being a close relative. This image of Loc may have been reinforced by the memories of their childhood, when Loc treated Mai the way he did his own younger sisters.

It is when Loc appears at her door the next day, anxious to know if she has been able to sell the house, that Mai's true feelings for him surface. She is thrilled when Loc shows his anger upon hearing about her humiliating encounter with a lustful landowner. Mai then has no choice but to agree to Loc's suggested solution.

_Touched with emotion, Loc talked very fast. As for Mai, she was also moved, her cheeks ablush. From that moment, the two did not dare look at each other, as though engaged in a conspiracy._

(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 84)

By making this first move to protect her, Loc becomes Mai's hope of a happy secure future. His generosity deepens her feelings for him.

_It was true that since she knew Loc, many times she had felt the throbbing of her heart because of his noble sentiments and his correct behavior. She only wished she had an opportunity to return his care._

(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 92)

Thus, her affection is no longer skin-deep. Mai is now drawn to Loc because of his total personality. Blended with the emotional response is gratitude, which in the context of her upbringing means loyalty.

_The opportunity presented itself that afternoon when Loc proposed to her. Mai smiled. One would likely interpret her smile as one of happiness. But it was not so. To Mai, happiness had reached a peak since the day she met Loc. This smile of hers carried another meaning. It seemed as though Mai could hear her heart whisper: “Don't you know that my body and my soul have already been yours? Why should you feel the need to beg for them?”_

(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 93)

Loc's proposal and Mai's acceptance put the finishing touch to a commitment lodged in her heart. What her heart says is a subtle admission of her profound love for him. It also suggests the disinterestedness of her love, which sees her ever ready to give of herself voluntarily -- he does not "need to beg" for it.

Mai brings that spirit of giving to their relationship. In return for his affection which she gratefully accepts and cherishes, Mai always has his welfare
 foremost in her mind. After having made the decision to fulfill his heart's desire at the expense of filial piety, Loc proceeds swiftly with the wedding arrangements. Since the period of mourning for her father is not over, Mai thinks it is proper to observe only the most necessary formalities to become husband and wife.

At the mention of mourning her dead father, Loc felt rather uneasy. “Do you think people will talk because we get married while you're still in mourning?” Mai looked at Loc before answering. Seeing him worried and anxious, Mai felt sorry for him. In this whole world, she only thought of the happiness of two persons: Huy and Loc. She had no concern for anything else. As for formalities? Ethics? How could one be so sure that those who made them up were not quite unreasonable in their thinking? Could those formalities compete with her noble sentiments? Thereupon, Mai firmly answered Loc. “If we talk about being impious and acting contrary to moral principle, just by loving each other like this, we have already been guilty of all that.” At Mai's words, Loc smiled, gazing at her happily.

(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 95)

Mai does not actually reject customs and tradition. It is rather a matter of realistically balancing her values, assessing them in proper proportion. In view of her being still in mourning, she is content with the thought of a very simple wedding ceremony, which would otherwise be the celebration to remember in a woman's life. What seems to stand out is her conviction that the genuineness of her feelings can justify some minor deviation from strict rules. She is described as constantly worships her father in her heart, so much so that cutting short the formal period of mourning does not alter that fact.

Mai gives the same thoughtful consideration to Loc's lie when Huy accidentally finds out about Loc's scheme of having a woman pose as his mother. Mai begs Huy not to mention that they have learned the truth. And the wedding proceeds as planned, though she realizes that its falsehood in the eyes of tradition promises her no smooth future sailing.

Many times she intended to tell Loc that she knew his secret, and to ask him to prostrate before his mother and confess his wrong doing. But Mai was afraid she would disturb him or make him sad. Loc was so deliriously happy in his dreams, she had no heart to soon wake him up.

... If Huy touched upon the subject of Loc's lie, she would implore him: “I beg
you, please let me enjoy my happiness as long as it lasts. There's no point talking about what has passed. Don't you think it's enough that Loc loves and cares for both of us so much?"
(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 98)

Granting Loc his wish by doing away with conventional formalities is one thing, but sparing him despair by bearing the burden of guilt and anxiety herself is quite another. It attests to Mai's devotion to Loc and confirms once again the altruistic nature of her love. What she says to Huy would seem to explain why she has married Loc, knowing full well that the union is not socially recognized because it is not known and blessed by his real mother who is legitimately vested with family authority. The argument is that Loc's sincere affection and care for her alone matter, in the same way that her own noble sentiments matter.

If formal rites and rituals are not called upon to seal her union with Loc, Mai's faithfulness to him is not based upon them either. In other words, not being ceremoniously wedded to him does not render her commitment any less serious. She rejects the proposals of doctor Minh and painter Bach Hai as, similar to To Tam, Mai maintains she can only give her heart to one person.

“If I were to remarry, sir, you would certainly be the husband I respect. But I've loved Loc, and I can't love anybody else.”
“Lady, how can you go on loving Loc who has treated you so cruelly?!” Minh said, disappointed and sad.
“Sir, now it's possible that I don't love my husband any longer, nor do I wish to see him again. But as I've said before, having loved one man completely, I considered my life ended with that, though I'm still in the midst of my youth.”
(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 196)

Mai may not be sure if she is still in love with Loc, but it appears that she does not forget the love that once was, as significant to her as life itself. In any event, the reason for the possible change of her feelings toward Loc as expressed in this conversation, can be traced back to the visit paid Mai by Loc's mother after the incident of the false note which was supposedly from Mai's secret love. The old lady asks Mai to leave Loc so he can marry well without any complication. The shrewd woman lies about Loc's agreement to the match, appeals to Mai's altruistic nature which could be expected to make her think of putting Loc's future above her selfish happiness, offers her a monetary reward and even the position as Loc's second wife, all in return for her self sacrifice. It would have been more reasonable for Mai to confront Loc with the information given by his mother, and to hear his side of the story. But knowing that he has
lived once may have clouded Mai's thinking. She even discourages Huy from seeking an explanation from Loc.

Mai leaves Loc believing she is betrayed, as much as, being left behind, Loc is convinced that he himself is the wronged one. Thus, while To Tam's love for Dam Thuy remains constant and even grows more intense after their separation, because she is sure of his feelings and her own, Mai's love suffers from doubt and loss of confidence in the sincerity of Loc's affection. However, as can be gathered from her conversation with Minh, whether she likes to admit it or not, the fact that she can only think of love in connection with Loc and nobody else would seem to show that her love for him is far from dead. She loves him with a disinterested love which does not depend exclusively on what it can bring her. Moreover, loyalty, a blind loyalty at that, no doubt strengthened by gratitude, may have come into the picture at this point. She explains to the painter Bach Hai the reason why she has abruptly stopped being a model for him.

“Sir, please sit down and allow me to explain the whole matter to you. I know that you haven't finished that painting. I really didn't treat you right when I suddenly stopped showing up like that. But that afternoon when I happened to run into...my husband outside the gate of your house, I was immediately reminded of my duties. It's true that I always think of my duties, but I don't wish to give anyone any cause to doubt my righteousness.”
(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 234)

Obviously, to her subconscious mind, Loc has not ceased to be the husband to whom she owes loyalty. It does not seem to matter whether or not Loc has a right to say anything about her life now that he has betrayed her. What stands out is Mai's unnecessary concern that Loc would have reason to suspect some wrongdoing on her part, even though this is not the case. If she did not care for Loc any longer, what he might think would not disturb her so.

The constancy of Mai's feelings is also revealed when Loc's mother finds her way to Mai's house, this time with the intention of claiming her grandson, or Mai's son. The ghost from the past triggers sad and happy memories. Huy notes his sister's struggle to suppress the old heartache, which Loc's visit some time later brings back to the surface. Mai finally comes to accept the truth of her heart.

Loc spoke, he spoke without pause, as though intoxicated with a passionate love. But catching a glimpse of the indifferent expression on Mai's face, he stopped short. Then he asked in a soft voice.

“Are you angry with me to the extent of hating me?”
“If you can't understand, I'll really be hurt...If only I could hate you!”
Loc waited patiently for Mai to finish her sentence. Mai repeated, and her voice broke.
“If only I could hate you!”
“If you don't hate me, why don't you agree to a reunion?”
As if she had not heard his question, Mai continued:
“Had I been able to hate you, I wouldn't have suffered so much.”
(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 301)

The resentment that appears subdued here is only so after Mai and Loc have had a talk. It was explosive earlier when Mai first faced Loc when he found her, her son, and Huy enjoying fresh air on a hill near their house. Now, though Loc has explained to her the unfortunate circumstance that led to his past conduct, and expresses his continuing affection for her, Mai seems to have a hard time convincing herself of his sincerity. Resentment keeps getting in the way. Then, finally, as though it is enough that the purity of her heart is recognized and appreciated by Loc, Mai thinks she is ready to dismiss the love that has been fettered by anger, resentment, and pain. Thus, she sends Loc away and turns her attention to her son and her brother whose love and affection she can depend on always. But Loc misses the train, then walks for hours in the rain before ending up at Mai's door again in the evening, soaking wet. Huy teases Loc when Loc evasively says he was taking a walk after dinner.

At Huy's witty remarks, Loc was embarrassed and Mai, bending over her sewing, burst out laughing, her heart filled with happiness. She realized that Loc had missed the train because he loved her. He walked for hours in the rain and in the wind because he loved her ardently. Their eyes briefly met. Both bowed their heads.
(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 299)

It is like a revelation of what deep down in her heart she has hoped to see, a convincing sign that restores her faith in Loc's love. Their avoidance of looking at each other recalls the same gesture they had had in the past when they first shared the secret dream of being united for life -- Loc having Mai agree to leave the village and go with him to Hanoi. The gesture is tantamount to an admission that their affection for each other is far from gone and forgotten. Reassured of his sincere feelings, Mai recounts her past heartache to rid herself of the last trace of resentment as much as to confirm her love for him. The renewed confidence in her own emotions and his seems to revive that old disinterested love in Mai. Loc's happiness once again dominates her thoughts.
For him, she even considers the idea of eloping, the very idea that Loc proposed and she rejected in their encounter a few hours earlier. This idea, however, is short-lived. Mai is conscious of what it implies.

“...Now only two persons suffer, you and I. If we elope, we'll not suffer less, in fact we may suffer more, and besides we'll make many people unhappy because of us: your mother, your wife, your children, your friends on your side, and my brother on my side. \(\square\) Why don't we sacrifice our love and our happiness for the sake of others. It's even more worthwhile to sacrifice the happiness which we only imagine we'll enjoy...I don't know about you, but as for me, I'll be happy just to know that you're happy, especially from now on, as I no longer have any doubt about your feelings. Please be glad then to resume your responsibilities, to fulfill your duties toward your family and society. All the while in this corner, a person whom you love and who loves you will think of you always, day and night praying for your happiness.”

......

Loc was still gazing quietly at the fire place. Mai contemplated the matter. Then as if suddenly the idea came up, she said to Loc.

“Look here, dearest! Why are we so silly as to confine ourselves forever in the circle of physical love, of union? Can't we love each other without being united in one place?”

(NUA CHUNG XUAN, pp. 308-309)

On the surface, the final solution suggested by Mai calls to mind the position taken by To Tam when she enters the romantic relationship with Dam Thuy. Both women resolve to give their heart and mind to the men of their choice without the benefit of marriage to them. Both choose this course of action so as not to burden the lives of their lovers. But while To Tam seems to adopt this stand primarily to justify her immediate indulgence in the rewarding experience of love, Mai selects this alternative to let go of an intimate involvement which will negatively affect everyone concerned. In To Tam, the decision can be seen as a rebellious act against customs and a tradition that stem the free development and expression of personal emotions. In Mai, it is a courageous resolution that is made with love, care, consideration for others, self-sacrifice, unconditional faithfulness, all the other qualities we have seen in her. The giving again predominates, which puts her love above Loc's, and even a level above To Tam's.

The work thus ends in a manner suggesting joy and contentment for both of them.
Calmly, Loc said.
“Well, I'm going. With joy, I'm leaving. We'll be apart, each living a separate life. I'm sure I won't have to worry about you. As for my life, it's going to change completely, though I don't know as yet how it'll turn out. I only know I'll be happy always, as I believe that you'll be constantly thinking of me with affection, and that's enough to console me. You'll be far away from me, but we'll be close to each other for the rest of our lives because we are always together in spirit.”

(NUA CHUNG XUAN, p. 311)

It is difficult to imagine that the author was so idealistic as to expect young lovers to follow in the footsteps of Mai and Loc by continuing to love each other in spirit if marriage is not possible. It would seem, rather, that it is the principle governing their final solution that is proposed: individual freedom in love should not entail neglect of responsibilities to others. Mai's attitudes and reactions to the events of her life culminate in the final act of sacrifice, which is no less than denying herself the opportunity to indulge in personal pleasure at the expense of other people.

On the other hand, when placed in the world of real people, it can be said that Mai is a character too much idealized to be believable. She is seen as a happy mixture of old and new values. She is pious, chaste, and faithful as any virtuous traditional woman can be, and at the same time liberated and independent. She can be logical and realistic or emotional and idealistic as circumstances dictate, so that things fall into places because of her. Viewing the work in the context of Khai Hung's background, we may understand why the image of Mai was conceived as such.

Two years senior to Hoang Ngoc Phach, author of To Tam, Khai Hung was born Tran Khanh Giu in 1896 to an elite family, his father being a province chief. Khai Hung received a classical education, before switching to modern westernized training. His absorption of both Eastern and Western cultures would account for the projection of different sets of values through the character of Mai. The title of the novel itself suggests his familiarity with traditional literature. "Nua chung xuan" is the first phrase of a familiar verse in the masterpiece of Vietnamese literature, The Tale of Kieu, written by Nguyen Du in the early part of the 19th century. The phrase -- which means in the midst of spring, or in the midst of one's youth -- refers to the sorrowful fate of Dam Tien, a beautiful talented courtesan who died young, and alludes to the concept of "hong nhan bac menh", which pairs beautiful women with misfortune, because fate seems always unkind to them through a balancing act. We may also note that Mai's disinterested love for Loc is closer to that of Marguerite in
La Dame aux Camélias than To Tam's love can ever be. The scene in which Loc's mother visits Mai in Loc's absence and asks her to leave him for his own good closely parallels to that in which Armand's father comes to persuade Marguerite to sacrifice her own happiness for Armand in the name of love. In addition, Khai Hung wrote *Nua Chung Xuan* while teaching at a private school in Hanoi. The role of an educator accounts for his upholding the immutable value of filial piety, of chastity and faithfulness in the woman, all the while advocating the new value of love. It also explains the ending of the story that sees Mai and Loc placing duties and responsibilities above personal interests.

Like *To Tam*, *Nua Chung Xuan* deals with a love affair that is disrupted by the tyranny of the traditional family. However, while To Tam's unfulfilled love destroys her life, the unfulfilled love between Mai and Loc gives meaning to theirs. The milieu in which the work was produced must have played a big role in shaping this positive view of what is tantamount to unrequited love in *Nua Chung Xuan*. This novel appeared in 1934, in a social climate quite different from that which had witnessed the birth of *To Tam* nine years earlier. Around this time, the prevailing tendency among young people in big cities was to live their life fully and merrily. This was an immediate response to the dark political reality. The events of 1928-1930 -- the bloody and unsuccessful Yen Bay uprising in 1930 led by the patriotic hero Nguyen Thai Hoc, who was consequently executed along with twelve other patriots -- led to ruthless repression by the French. All this resulted in a feeling of uncertainty and fear among the populace who sought escape in attending various fairs with a lot of fun and games, in dancing and in sports. In that atmosphere *Phong Hoa* (Customs and Morals) appeared, a paper produced by a group of young intellectuals -- Khai Hung being the oldest among them. Its policy of combating despair and pessimism with pages sparkling wit and humor and celebration of beauty in nature and of romantic love seemed to correspond to the mood of the time, so that in a few months the copies of each issue more than tripled. In 1933, these young writers formed an association called "Tu Luc Van Doan" (Self-Reliance Literary Group). The manifesto of this group published in *Phong Hoa* in February of 1933, a year before the appearance of *Nua Chung Xuan*, may shed light on the construction of Mai's world. The group declared, among other things, their respect for individual freedom of choice, their inclination toward modernization, youthfulness, optimism, progress. Mai certainly places greater value on the personal happiness of Loc and herself when she goes ahead with marrying him even in the knowledge that their marriage does not have the sanction of tradition. She rejects the old practice of polygamy which has served to save underprivileged women like herself from poverty, in favor of the new valuation of a love exclusively involving a man
and a woman. Mai undergoes more difficulties than To Tam experiences, including the belief that she is betrayed by the one she loves. Yet she does not indulge in self-pity; instead, she overcomes all with courage and faith in her own true feelings. Being, as such, the embodiment of Tu Luc Van Doan's ideology, or vision of life, it is only to be expected that Mai should triumph over all obstacles unscathed, without succumbing to her grief as does To Tam. The introduction to the novel by Nhat Linh, leader of the group, points to Khai Hung's departure from the previous literary tradition of despair, represented by To Tam:

Young people, especially those of the weaker sex, in the enthusiasm of their youth, want to enjoy life to the full. If they meet with obstacles in the area of love, of course they will be disappointed and discouraged. Discouragement leads to suicide. This plight has been the theme of many novels. Mai of Nua Chung Xuan is also disappointed, but proudly she does not want to accept defeat by returning to the old way, something she could easily do. Instead, she lives a simple life with courage and without complaint, willing to sacrifice her own happiness. Although life has given her a scar that will never fade away, though she has witnessed her happiness shattered like a flower in a strong wind, still Mai proves that she loves life very much... Mai learns to use the bitter pleasure of self sacrifice to console herself in her days of sadness and to encourage herself to continue her life with vigor and optimism.\(^4\)

Nhat Linh, perhaps unwittingly, seems to have drawn out the ultimate meaning which an alert reader can gather from the overall development of the story: a celebration and glorification of suffering selflessness, with a view to perpetuating it as an ideal norm for the Vietnamese woman.

At the same time, one may very well suspect that a just and happy ending is not something new or difficult for Khai Hung to visualize, given his background in classical education. The verse narratives before his time all have a generous ending that gives the audience satisfaction in seeing justice done. In this respect, Khai Hung's novel definitely stays closer to literary tradition than Hoang Ngoc Phach's work does. The same can be said of the form of Nua Chung Xuan. The structure of the novel follows traditional plot development, consisting of three stages: meeting, separation, reunion. However, there is no statement of truth or thesis as an introduction to the story as seen in traditional works. Rather, it begins with a chance meeting that promises dreams and hope. It follows with a union that implies much difficulty, which leads to the stage of separation. The story ends with the two lovers drawn to each other again by a different kind of dream. The denouement has all the ingredients of a traditional verse narrative: Loc's discovery of Mai's innocence, her being rewarded with
love and respect, the humiliation suffered by Loc's mother in acknowledging and apologizing for past mistakes, and, finally, the satisfactory solution. Aside from the traditional general form, the work exhibits many techniques of the modern novel not seen in traditional story telling: the use of flashback; motives of actions examined; ideas being contemplated, discussed, argued and acted upon. The intrusion of the author into the flow of the actors' world is not as frequent and noticeable as it is in To Tam, but it is there.

Perhaps the strength of Khai Hung's art is in his ability to develop his own voice from the inherited literary tradition in order to express new content. This new content, which represents his vision of conditional individual freedom of love and union, was shaped by his personal background and the sociocultural conditions at the time of writing. Addressing an audience more exposed to new ideas, Khai Hung was not as indecisive as Hoang Ngoc Phach had been, and therefore the ambivalence which the cautious Hoang Ngoc Phach expressed with regard to the matter of love is not found in *Nua Chung Xuan*. The clarity of his message is matched by his clear and consistent style. Indeed, the style of this novel represents what Tu Luc Van Doan claimed to be "a truly Vietnamese style", which was meant to be different from the very Westernized style consisting of sentences short and terse to the extreme advanced by Hoang Tich Chu in 1931, and also dissimilar from the style of the journal Nam Phong used by Hoang Ngoc Phach. The idea was to copy the ordinary colloquial speech, but make it clearer and coherent, and to write sentences that are simple and easy to understand. It is true that parallel prose, allusions, figurative language, and folk sayings are not found in *Nua Chung Xuan*, all of which are spread throughout *To Tam*. However, the soft flow of the Nam Phong style can still be detected in Khai Hung's sentences which give them grace. On the other hand, though Tu Luc Van Doan might not want to admit it, Hoang Tich Chu's suggestion of a new style borrowed from French grammar and sentence structure appeared to have had some impact on Khai Hung's writing. His sentence patterns, punctuation, particularly as seen in dialogue, betray the influence of this then much advocated style.

In general intent, content and style, *Nua Chung Xuan* can be said to have been written against *To Tam*. While in *To Tam* love is placed outside the context of marriage, in *Nua Chung Xuan* it is in the center of it. Given the contexts, the first novel dwells upon love itself, while the second centers on the contrast between the marriage of love and the marriage without love. The authors' self conception, their consciousness of writing within a particular literary tradition and a particular social milieu certainly played an important role in defining the general direction in which the actors and their actions move. Hoang Ngoc
Phach only ventures so far as to sing the beauty of love, then cautiously retreats before going too far, while pointing out its dangerous and damaging effects. Khai Hung seems to talk more freely and matter-of-factly of this sentiment and takes a step forward by defining love and suggesting freedom of marriage based on love. In this light, these two novels reflect different degrees of tolerance and readiness on the part of society to accept this new concept of love associated with the notion of individual freedom.

In terms of form, besides the fact that both works are written in prose, thus showing a complete stylistic break from story telling tradition, the influence of preceding literature cannot be discounted. Though not strictly following the structure of a traditional verse narrative, To Tam ends with the traditional formula that explains the moral lesson one should gather from the story. Nua Chung Xuan has both the traditional structure and closing formula which spells out the intended message. On the other hand, it should be noted that it is in the style of writing that one can see indication of growing departure from literary tradition. Nua Chung Xuan benefited from the trials and errors of To Tam, finishing what the latter had started, bringing the language of prose fiction closer to the everyday speech which the Vietnamese audience could identify with. Hoang Ngoc Phach was still very much a classicist, while Khai Hung moved away from the classical mode of expression.

Perhaps one indication of the more successful art of Khai Hung is in the fact that many of his works, including Nua Chung Xuan, have been studied in school. Nua Chung Xuan is still being read today, while To Tam is very little known to the general audience. To Tam is like a forgotten past, while Nua Chung Xuan is the transition blending well with the present. The sacrifices of women like To Tam and Mai promoted awareness of the changing time and the consequent need to modify and alter the old rules accordingly, so as to give women room to grow and really live. The transformation has been steady and almost imperceptible since, with women involved in all aspects of social and economic life, thereby gaining greater independence and control of their own lives. The contemporary Vietnamese woman can look back at To Tam and Mai with sympathy and gratitude, but she may prefer to walk a different path.

Notes:

2. Mai or Khai Hung forget that Loc's children are dead at this point

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