

AUTHORS OF *THE TALE OF KIỀU* MANUSCRIPT AND THE VIETNAMESE – FRENCH CULTURAL EXCHANGE AT THE END OF THE XIX CENTURY

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Abstract

The Tale of Kiều Manuscript (the Manuscript) currently preserved at the British Library is an unique print among the publications of *The Tale of Kiều*, Nguyễn Du most renowned work, as its story entails an East – West journey. The recently discovered *Manuscript* bears significant artistic, literary and textological values. The *Manuscript* is an integrated text, in which one can find many traces of the Thăng Long prints, and influences from the Southern prints of *Kiều* made by Abel des Michels and Trương Vĩnh Ký. Studying the *Manuscript* also reveals the string of fate between Trương Minh Ký and Arthur Chéon, Paul Pelliot and Abel des Michels, French culturalists who lived and studied the Viet culture during the end of the XIX – early XX century. Based on several textological traces and historical documents, this article describes the journey in which the author of this artistic work which bears the mark of a Vietnamese – French cultural exchange is identified.

Keywords: *The Tale of Kiều, Manuscript, Arthur Chéon, Paul Pelliot, Trương Minh Ký*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Tale of Kiều is a masterpiece in Vietnamese literature, having been much researched for its thoughts, literary and artistic values, as well as its ability to be broadly passed on. Yet, this work seems to still hold significant potential for further study

as the mysteries surrounding *The Tale of Kiều* continue to be unfold. A recent (albeit a few decades ago) discovery is an unique *Manuscript* of *The Tale of Kiều*, never having been found in previous *Kiều* texts, which has been held by the British Library. *The Manuscript* is named *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện – Kim Vân Kiều truyện Hội bản*

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(hereinafter the *Manuscript*), labeled: OR.14844 and is part of the South East Asia Collection of the British Library in London. The *Manuscript* is a text made entirely different from other prints of the *Kiêu*, and its journey is also unique with intriguing revelations. According to current documentation, the *Manuscript* is a single-script text, containing both hand-written texts and hand-drawn ink-washed drawings. This can be considered the only *Kiêu* text with both writings and drawings known to date. The texts could be traced back to the end of the XIX century, and the author of the *Manuscript* had divided the *Kiêu* into story parts accompanied with illustrations – one for each of the opening and the ending, and 44 illustrations for the story. Each story page contains an illustrative drawing. In other editions of *The Tale of Kiêu* until now (including those written in the current Vietnamese national language), several versions have illustrations, but none have the type of illustrations which are connected to the story-telling, thus introducing both artistic and poetic values for the *Manuscript*. Standing alone, these illustrations could also be compiled into a full story of *Kiêu*, though they could not yet replace reading the texts in its entirety; but, within the context of this *Manuscript*, they also assist readers in understanding more profoundly this Nguyễn Du work and introduces novel sentiments due to

their artistic values, suggesting further understanding of the aesthetic philosophy of *Kiêu*, which words, due to their constraints, may not have been able to deliver completely or with utmost clarity... With the *Manuscript*, readers may not only enjoy the poetic beauty of Nguyễn Du's writings, but also the classical arts in ink-washed forms. The authors of this article have also carried an intensive and comprehensive study on this *Manuscript* alone, and hope that it will soon be published. In the framework of this small article, we would like to focus on a separate uniqueness of the *Manuscript*, that is its relationship with French academics whose careers were strongly linked to the Nôm literature and Việt language, and whose roles were fundamental to the *Manuscript*. They are Arthur Chéon, Paul Pelliot and Abel des Michels. Through this work, we hope to explore more on the Vietnamese and French cultural exchange towards the end of the XIX – early XX centuries.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. Speculations around the hand-written scripts in latin letters on the 1a folio and their writers

Towards the end of the 1990s, as the *Manuscript* suddenly became known to the Vietnamese literary field due to its appearance on the webpage of the British Library, the

introduction by Mr. Nguyễn Ngọc Trí, Curator of the South East Asia Collection of the British Library, and the documentation made by two Vietnamese researchers – Assoc. Prof. Nguyễn Văn Hoàn and Assoc. Prof. Trần Nghĩa, *The Tale of Kiều Manuscript* became a new sensation among those who study ancient Vietnamese literature. A never-before-seen print of *Kiều*, the *Manuscript* comprises of both drawings and poetic texts, and is made with special decorative features.

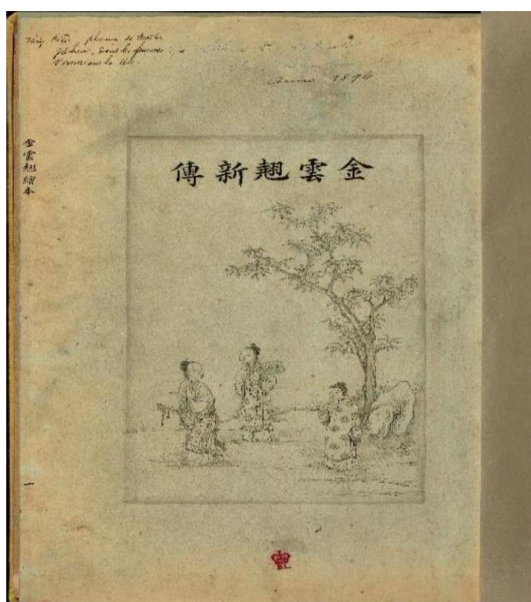


Photo 1: Cover of *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện* - *Manuscript*

The binding materials and drawings on the covers of the *Manuscript* prompted speculations that the *Manuscript* is somehow linked to the Royal family. Another speculation pertains its date of making, the author of the *Manuscript*,

how and why the *Manuscript* had traveled, and especially the writings by pen, mostly in French, scribbled on the side of some folios, and the 49b folio. These French notes are revealing: the year that the *Manuscript* was completed might be 1894, and the academic Paul Pelliot had purchased this *Manuscript* from an antique bookstore on Pont Sully Street in 1929. These notes say: “Paul Pelliot, acheté 432 Fr, Pont Sully, Juin 1929, No 518”. It is from these notes and the words “anno 1894” scribbled at the top of the 1a folio that the British Library as well as many Vietnamese and Chinese scholars nearly agreed that the *Manuscript* was finished in 1894 (Trần Nghĩa provided a more particular speculation, that 1894 was the year when the *drawing* of the *Manuscript* was finalized); and Paul Pelliot was the author, as well as the scribbler of the French notes on the *Manuscript* folio.

The researchers have focused on finding out the remaining mysteries, namely the author of the *Manuscript*¹, its origin and the journey of the *Manuscript*. These researches were in-depth and preliminarily made several explanations. At the beginning, we are also convinced by the preceding explanations. However, upon closer study of the *Manuscript*, we believe there are more issues and

¹ We refer at this stage to the author of the *Manuscript* as the individual who makes the

physical copy of the *Manuscript*, not the author of the *Tale of Kieu* who is Nguyen Du.

speculations that deserve further study, in particular:

1/ All the notes written in ink near the edge of the inner folios of the *Manuscript* – from folio 1a to 49a – do not belong to the original texts of the *Manuscript*. The information note of Paul Pelliot only indicates the time, place and price at which he purchased the *Manuscript*.

2/ According to the label of the book, it could be understood that the *Manuscript* was

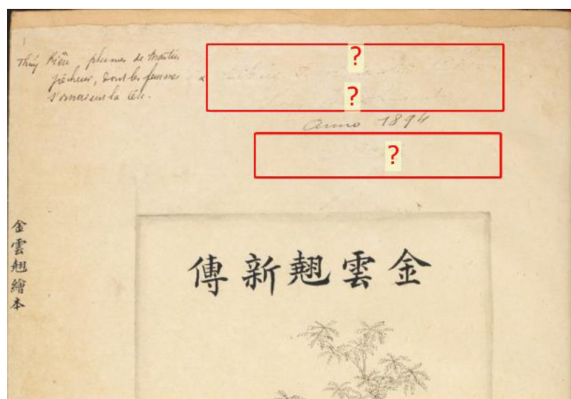


Photo 2: The erased/blurred letters on folio 1a.

named *Truyện Kiều*, *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện* (*The Tale of Kiều*), collected or finalized in 1894 in Hanoi. However, these are the conclusions of the British Library. Further evidence and bases will be needed

3/ The letters around the Italian notes “anno 1894” are blurred and unreadable, their contents require further determination

4/ The conclusion that the notes in ink near the edges of the *Manuscript* folios

from 1a through to 49b belonged to Paul Pelliot requires further proof. It could not be ruled out that these notes belonged to a different individual which had been in contact with the *Manuscript* either prior to or after Paul Pelliot.

It took us quite some time to find the explanations for the above questions. Fortunately, we have received an active and most sincere support from Dr. Gallop Annabel from the British Library. One team member of ours – Ms. Mai Ngân Hà – had been able to access the profile of this *Manuscript*, especially from its acquisition by the British Library to the process of restoration and



conservation.

Photo 3: Ms. Mai Ngân Hà in British Library

Dr. Gallop also informed us that the words surrounding the note *anno 1894* had been intentionally erased, thus damaging the paper. This led us to understand the importance of these

erased words, and the need to restore them. The British Library had been with us on this journey. By using the new multispectral scanning technology, the Library has been able to provide a clearer image of the pages and the blurred notes, but it is still not clear enough for the notes to be readable.

After months of learning to adjust the contrast of the pages and each line

in the erased parts, we have been able to decipher a few letters. With the support of Dr. Nguyễn Thị Dương, who defend her Doctoral Thesis on Sino-Nôm study in France, in correcting the French notes and identifying the word *Chéon* in the first erased line, we have been able to read these four very important lines as follows:

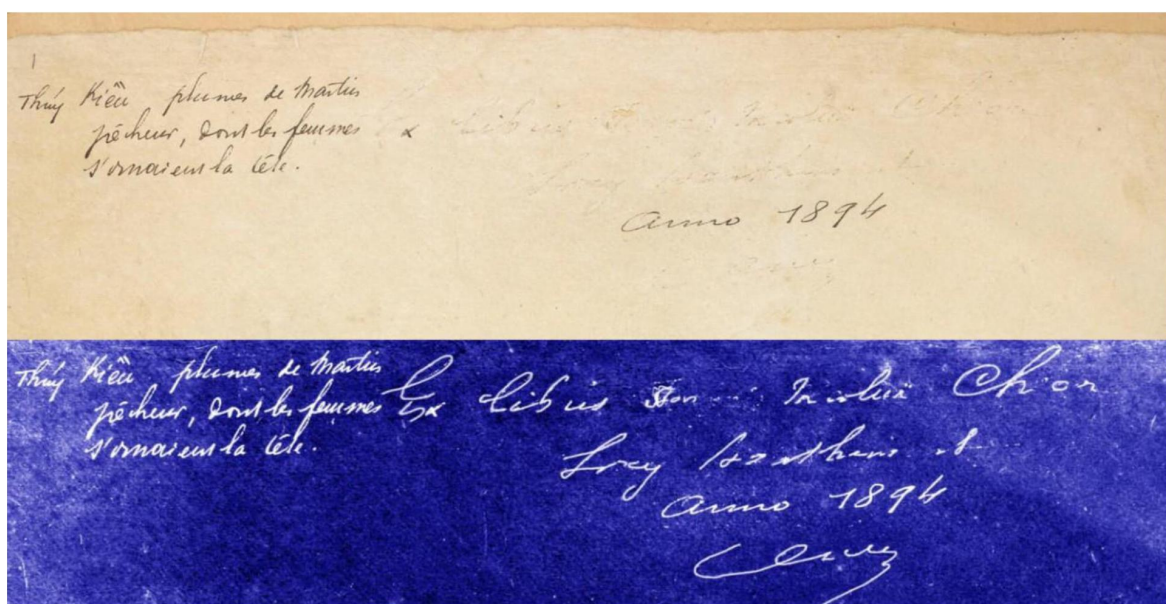


Photo 4: Restored image of the faded handwriting on page 1a of *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện* manuscript

Librairie Jean Nicolas Chéron

Sorcy – Bauthémont

anno 1894

Chéron (signature)

In English:

Library of Jean Nicolas Chéron;

Place: Sorcy – Bauthémont,

Year 1894.

Chéron (as signed).

As such, the first important and focal point of the network of relationships surrounding the *Manuscript* has emerged. The above lines indicated a very clear answer: In 1894, Jean Nicolas Authur Chéon had/was in ownership of the *Manuscript*. The rest of the issue would be who was *Chéon*, why he was in possession of the *Manuscript*, meaning of the number 1894, and the trip traveled by the *Manuscript* after it came into Chéon's possession.

After reading about Chéon in the works of researchers, including Dr. Nguyễn Nam, in his groundbreaking work *A Forgotten Treasure*, an obituary of Victor Goloubew when Chéon passed away, works by Cao Việt Anh (Institute of Sino-Nôm Studies) and information from Nguyễn Văn Trần in his essay *A winter rose*¹, the author will touch upon some important information relating to Vietnam in the biography of Chéon. Chéon, full named Jean Nicolas Arthur Chéon, born on 25 May 1856 (some document says 1857) in Sorte-Bethemont, Ardennes, was an Orientalist. He arrived in Cochinchina in 1882 at a very young age and as a lecturer at the Chasseloup-Laubat College (in Vietnamese – Khải Tường College, also known as Indigenous

College). He was also a high-ranking officer of the French government. In 1889, he worked as an assistant for Antony Landes, Chief of the Political Department, Cochinchina Government. In the following year, in 1890, he went to Ha Noi to become the Lord Chancellor of the Résident supérieur du Tonkin. After working as a lecturing in Viet Nam, he developed a passion in studying this strange culture and became very fluent in both the Vietnamese languages and cultural traditions, and the first fellow of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient in Ha Noi. According to the assessments of Đào Duy Anh, among the French academics who studied the Vietnamese culture and language through the Confucian characters and the *Nôm* characters, Chéon had the most serious and systematic study on the *Nôm* characters with the "*Cours de Chữ Nôm*". This is a textbook on the *Nôm* characters, perhaps the most well-composed, well-versed with methodological approach textbook of Vietnam in modern times. It was also the first textbook on *Nôm* script which lectured on text structures to be used in Việt Nam. Thus, Chéon deserved the acclaim as the pioneer in *Nôm* character study, among his other achievements in language, textology and Việt Nam - *Nôm* studies. His

¹ Nguyễn Văn Trần (2022). *A winter rose* (Một bông hồng mùa đông), *Tập san Việt học Journal*, 2022.

groundbreaking works on Vietnamese linguistic studies include:

1. Cours de langue annamite, (Hanoi, F. -H. Schneider, 1901 ; tái bản, Hà Nội, F. -H. Schneider, 1904)
2. Analyse des cent textes du Cours d'annamite transcrits en chữ-nôm (First published 1890, 1910) ;
3. Recueil de cent textes annamites, annotés et traduits et faisant suite au Cours d'annamite (Hanoi, F. -H. Schneider, 1899) ;
4. "L'Argot annamite", (Bulletin de École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1905)
5. Phong Thần Bá - Ấp - Khảo tragédie annamite, Imprimerie colonial, Sài Gòn (1889)...

Notable among them is the *Recueil de cent textes annamites, annotés et traduits et faisant suite au Cours d'annamite* (Hanoi, F. -H. Schneider, 1899, 1905). This book comprises of 3 parts, whereby parts one and two cover 100 annotated stories, including folklores, fables, forms for petition, trade, inquiry, announcement, proverbs, aphorisms, tales about relics, mountains, river, villages, stories about books, weddings, funerals... Part three translates 100 stories into the French language. There are two lecture excerpts from *The Tale of Kiều* in this textbook, the first verse is about *Thuy Kiều's spring promenade and visit to the tomb of Đạm Tiên (Thúy Kiều đi chơi xuân, viếng mộ Đạm Tiên)* (sentences from 41 through to 80), the second verse on *Hoan Thu's*

vengeance against Thúy Kiều (Hoan Thu sai bắt Thúy Kiều) (from sentence 1637 to 1654). We believe these are lectures compiled by Chéon during his time at the Chasseloup Laubat College (1882 – 1889) and later printed when he went to Ha Noi.

Chéon never mentioned the source of his *Kiêu* excerpts, but at that time, it is likely that he might have in possession versions of *Kiêu* circulated in the Cochina, including prints made by Duy Minh Thị, Trương Vĩnh Ký, Abel des Michels and some Tonkin prints by the Liễu Văn Đường. We have compared the lecture excerpts of Chéon with the *Manuscript* and other famous prints of *The Tale of Kiều*, and in general, it seems that although Chéon based his lectures on one version, he did reference different versions of *Kiêu* to select the wordings that he believed to be appropriate. Looking at the excerpts, it can be deduced that Chéon mainly relied on a text published by the Liễu Văn Đường house, but one can also draw the link between other works by Liễu Văn Đường and Abel des Michels, Trương Vĩnh Ký. We can also see some similarities in the *Manuscript*. At this stage, Trương Vĩnh Ký was teaching at the Collège des Interprètes in Saigon and the Chasseloup-Laubat College; Trương Vĩnh Ký was also a Professor at this institution. We have not been able to identify how close the relationship between Abel des Michels and Arthur Chéon was, but Abel des Michels was indeed a notable

figure with many achievements in studying and teaching about the Vietnamese literary language, therefore, it is conceivable that Chéon was to some extent influenced by A. Michels. It is also likely that through

Abel, Chéon might have had an eye for *The Tale of Kiều*, because if it had not been so, he could have chosen a more manageable work to bring into his language lectures for students to practice.



Photo 5: Handwriting of Chéon and the authors of *Manuscript*

Returning to the link between Chéon and the *Manuscript*, after discovering information about Chéon's previous works, we have compared the signature at the top of the 1a folio with his autograph in the *Recueil de cent textes annamites*, and a similarity was found ¹. Further comparison between the annotations written in latin letters and the writings in Chéon's books, more similarities in the italic forms and the shapes of the words f, d, l, s were

detected, indicating a likelihood of these writings belonging to the same individuals.

Additionally, among the 99 annotations in the 2 lecture excerpts, there are no annotations that are the same with those in the *Manuscript*. It may be speculated that these annotations both belonged to the same individual. Since the *Manuscript* might be owned by Chéon afterwards, he might have only needed to note those letters that he had not known

¹ A portrait of Chéon – reused from Nguyen Nam's article.

before, or had recently discovered and needed further research. In the notes contained in the *Manuscript*, aside from several annotations on the meaning of the words such as explaining the words *Thúy Kiều* meaning feathers of the kingfisher birds that young women often used as hair pins, the words *trach trach* that he misunderstood as ‘scolding’, or the phonetics of the words *da de...*, the author also compared the *Manuscript* with Abel des Mischels’s *Tale of Kiều* print, and found the mistakes in each print due to misreading or misspelling for later review. For example, he discovered that relating to the part on So Khanh pretending to be a hero to save the damsel in distress (*Tổ chí anh hùng cứu mỹ nhân*) to trick *Kiều* at the Ngung Bích Tower, Abel de Mischels’ version only contained 4 sentences, while the *Manuscript* and the prints made by the Thăng Long house had 6 sentences. Chéon also identified and corrected places where Abel des Mischels or the *Manuscript* itself misread or misspelled some *Nôm* characters (for example, the *Manuscript* misspelled the character 役 as a 沒; or Michels mistaking *vừa ngoài mười dặm* 皮外迺𪛗, to *bề ngoài lên dặm* 皮外𪛗𪛗). He also noted the illustrations to identify how to understand certain sentences. For example, he identified the place where Kim reunited with *Kiều* is next to her house (as noted in the illustration on the 12b folio), or *Guom đàn nửa gánh* is indeed *sword* and a

music instrument, not a machete or bow (folio 49b) ...

These highly specific, in-depth and acute observations of the notes indicated that the reader had read deeply into the texts of *Kiều*, had a profound understanding and fluency in the Vietnamese language and the *Nôm* characters, and had researched and been interested in the *Kiều*. This corresponds to Chéon’s works on the *Nôm* characters, the Vietnamese – *Nôm* literature and *The Tale of Kiều* which had been used in lectures and studies published in Viet Nam. Therefore, the authors believe that Chéon is the true author of the notes in French, *Nôm* and modern Vietnamese on the side of the folios in the *Manuscript*. This is a different interpretation from the British Library’s first and current assessment, that the author of the notes in latin and by pen on the side of the *Manuscript*’s folio was Paul Pelliot, based on the fact that the *Manuscript* was purchased from Pelliot and also because the erased lines could not be deciphered. This was a reasonable speculation, especially when the erased words could not be confirmed. The authors therefore believe the theory that Paul Pelliot was the author or had a part in writing these notes deserves closer examination. As such, the authors carried out similar evidentiary research as we did with regards to Chéon.

The authors made a comparison between the note indicating the

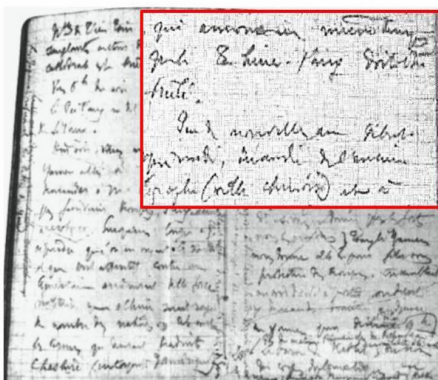
Authors of *The tale of kiêu* manuscript and the Vietnamese – French cultural exchange at the end of the 19th century

purchase of the *Manuscript* by Paul Pelliot – «acheté 432 Fr, Pont Sully, Juin 1929, No 518» and his notes in *Beijing Diary* and found a similarity. However, these handwritings were

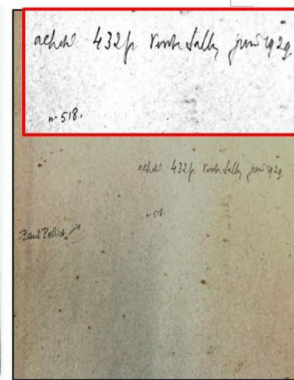
not similar with those written in French and the national language in other parts of the *Manuscript*.¹



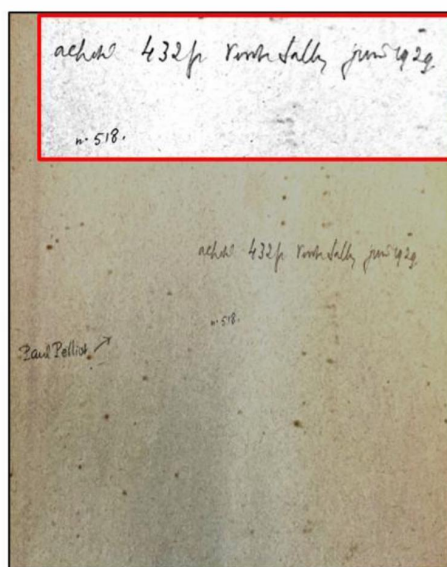
Paul Pelliot (1878-1945)



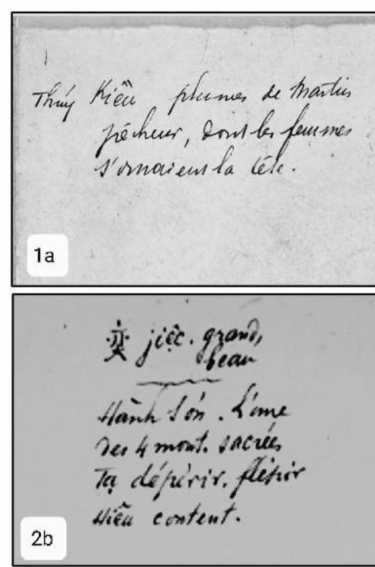
Bút tích của Paul Pelliot trong *Nhật kí Bắc Kinh*



Bút tích của Paul Pelliot trong tờ ghi địa chỉ mua KVK hội bản



Bút tích của Paul Pelliot ghi địa chỉ mua KVK hội bản



Bút tích của người chủ thích KVK hội bản

Photo 5: Handwriting of Paul Pelliot and the authors in *Manuscript*

Paul Pelliot, on the other hand, was a significant archeologist and Orientalist, with a profound background in Han-Chinese language.

He arrived in Saigon in November 1899 and moved to Hanoi in January 1890 to assume a position at the École Française d'Extrême-Orient. He did carry out several field works in areas

¹ Portrait of a young Paul Pelliot, from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Pelliot

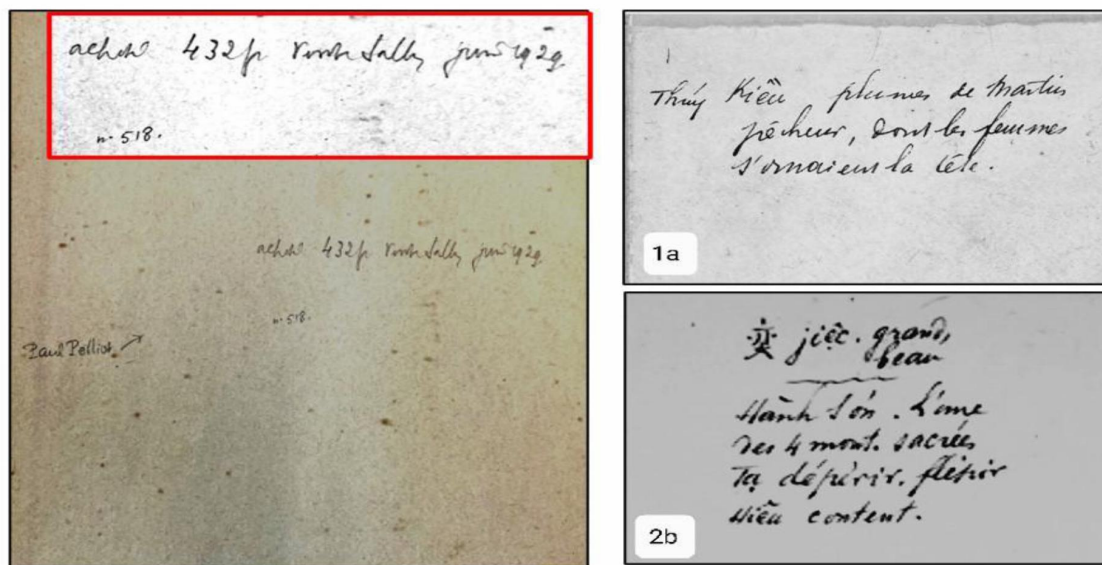
around Hà Nội... From 1903 – 1904, he carried out many translation and research works on the areas of Chân Lạp, Phù Nam, on the route from Giao Châu, Quảng Châu to India, and published a long monograph on the history and geography of Phù Nam. His research had helped further the detection of Việt Nam's Oc Eo archeological relic. He only stayed in Hà Nội until 1904 then returned to France. Among his works on the Indochina and Việt Nam, there was no mention of his understanding of the Nôm writings and there was no work on *Kiều*. Therefore, the authors believe there is no evidence supporting the identification of Paul Pelliot as the writer of the notes in Vietnamese, Nôm and French on the sideline of the *Manuscript* folios. However, Paul Pelliot could be considered a benefactor of the *Manuscript*. Perhaps based on his vision and interests as an archaeologist, a member of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient, who stayed in Viet Nam and understood the Vietnamese culture and literature, Paul Pelliot was able to “discover” the *Manuscript* – hidden among the shelves of an antique bookstore on Pont Sully Road, in the bustling city of Paris.

2.2. Arthur Chéon and his connection with the *Manuscript*

How did the *Manuscript* come into possession of Arthur Chéon in 1894?

2.2.1. Arthur Chéon was gifted the Manuscript

Chéon was a high-ranking official in the French colonial administration in Việt Nam, having worked in the country for many years. He was considered a French "Orientalist in colonial Vietnam" with intentions to "build his long-term educational career there." It can be said that Chéon was a French official who had a friendly attitude towards Vietnamese culture. In 1890, when he was transferred to Hà Nội to serve as the Chief Secretary for the Governor's office, he had *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện – Hội bản* completed by 1894. The origin of this book is a mystery. Whether Chéon bought it, was gifted it, or organized its creation himself, remains unclear. Fortunately, in 1926, on the occasion of Ngô Tử Hạ Printing House in Hanoi publishing Bùi Khánh Diễn annotated *Kim Vân Kiều*, his son Bùi Thiện Căn provided some information that might relate to this matter in the preface.



Bút tích của Paul Pelliot ghi địa chỉ mua KVK hội bán Bút tích của người chủ thích KVK hội bán

Photo 6: Handwriting of Paul Pelliot and the authors in *Manuscript*

In the preface, Bùi Thiện Căn wrote:

“Between 1881 and 1903, my father, who was the editor-in-chief of *Đồng Văn nhật báo*, created a version of *Kim Vân Kiêu* divided into episodes, with half a page featuring character and landscape sketches matching the corresponding episode in the lower half. The illustration and calligraphy were meticulously done, taking more than two years to complete the entire work.

After completing that version, my father worked on an annotated *Kim Vân Kiêu*, correcting errors in the Nôm script version. One side featured detailed annotations of each reference, while the other explained the story in prose. He began this work in early 1902 and finished it in July 1903. Both works, upon completion,

were submitted to Commissioner Chéron, who sent them to France, resulting in the Academy awarding my father an *Officier de l'académie* medal.

Unfortunately, the illustrated version did not have a preserved draft because the intricate illustrations could not be replicated. However, the annotated version was copied by me under my father's direction.”

Thus, the illustrated *Kim Vân Kiêu* that Bùi Khánh Diễm presented to Chéron was an art book similar to the *Manuscript* and it cannot be ruled out that it was the same book. However, as Bùi Thiện Căn mentioned, Bùi Khánh Diễm's draft did not have a preserved copy, and aside from Chéron's notes asserting ownership of the HB and his reading annotations, there is no additional information. Comparing the two texts to determine

their connection logically lacks solid evidence. Nonetheless, we infer that since Bùi Khánh Diễm created two versions of *Kim Vân Kiều* in the same period, he likely used the same text to ensure consistency. Therefore, it can be deduced that the illustrated version and the annotated *Kim Vân Kiều* (KVKCT) used the same text. Upon examining *Manuscript* and KVKCT, we found significant textual differences, as detailed below:

(1) *Differences in page layout:*

- KVKCT: Each page has the upper half illustrated and the lower half with corresponding *Truyện Kiều* text. This layout unintentionally emphasizes the illustrations as the main focus, with the text merely providing explanations.

- KVKTT – *Manuscript*: The upper half of the page contains the *Truyện Kiều* text, and the lower half features illustrations depicting the story's content. Nguyễn Du's story takes the primary role, with the illustrations serving as supplementary, albeit aesthetically valuable, elements.

(2) *Textual differences:*

The two texts have several intentional differences, not due to unconscious errors or typos:

+ The passage where Kim Trọng receives a letter from home:

- KVKCT:

*Mở xem thủ bút nghiêm đường,
Dạy rằng thúc phụ xa đường mệnh chung.
Hãy còn ký táng Liêu Đông,
Cổ hương khơi diễm nghè trùng sơn khê.
Rày đưa linh thần về quê,
Thế nào con cũng phải về hộ tang.*

- KVKTT – *Manuscript*:

*Đem tin thúc phụ từ đường,
Bơ vơ lữ thấn tha hương để huê.
Liêu Dương cách trở sơn khê,
Xuân đường kíp gọi sinh về hộ tang.*

+ The passage where Hoạn Thư interrogates Thúc Sinh and Kiều (from lines 1886 to 1897):

- KVKCT:

*Nét sầu khôn cưỡng giọt tình còn hoen.
Tiểu thư trông mặt quả liền
Sao mày nặng mặt bởi duyên có gì
Bì tiền trao lại một khi
Cậy chàng hỏi nó bởi vì làm sao
Sinh thì ruột xót như bào
Nói ra chẳng tiện trông vào chẳng đang
Loanh quanh cua lột bỏ sàng
Sợ kia thương đẩy đôi dàng chữa xong
Dưới thuyền chân ghế đều trông
Một lời chưa ngỏ đôi dòng đã sa
Lấy lòng giả cách hỏi tra*

- KVKTT – *Manuscript*:

*Tiểu thư chạm mặt đề tình hỏi tra.
Lựa lời nàng mới thưa qua
Phải khi mình lại xót xa nỗi mình.
Tiểu thư hỏi lại Thúc Sinh :
Cậy chàng tra lấy thực tình cho nao.
Sinh đà ruột xót như bào,
Nói ra chẳng tiện trông vào chẳng đang.
Những e lại lụy đến nàng,
Đánh liều mới sẽ liệu đường hỏi tra.*

Besides these, there are other minor differences. Generally, Bùi Khánh Diễm's text aligns with Nguyễn Hữu Lập's version, whereas KVKTT – HB follows the Liễu Văn Đường version, referencing the Nam Dục Minh Thị and Abel Des Michels versions.

(3) *Differences in annotations:*

Specific annotations may differ as the literary and classical references might be the same, but their views on the original story used by Nguyễn Du

differ significantly. Bùi Khánh Diễm's version points out that Nguyễn Du used *Kim Vân Kiều truyện* by Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân, whereas the *Manuscript* mistakenly identifies it as *Kim Vân Kiều lục* by a Vietnamese Confucian scholar. This viewpoint follows Trương Minh Ký and Abel Des Michels.

Given these fundamental differences, we conclude that the *Manuscript* cannot be the illustrated *Kim Vân Kiều* by Bùi Khánh Diễm. Therefore, the *Manuscript* must have been created independently by Chéon.

2.2.2. Arthur Chéon was the author or the organizer of the making of the Manuscript.¹

The possibility of authorship of the *Manuscript* of Chéon is impossible, because the *Manuscript* was not listed in Chéon's diverse collection on Viet Nam. On the contrary, it was informed, with great honor, at the very top of the 1a folio his name, hometown and signature - "*Librairie Jean Nicolas Chéon, Sorcy – Bauthémont, anno 1894. Chéon*".

Therefore, **Arthur Chéon might be the person who proposed and organized the making of this *Manuscript***, whereas the direct implementer might be one or a group of Vietnamese. This theory is based on

the intricacy and elaborateness of the textual requirements of the *Manuscript*. Unlike familiar editions of *Kiêu*, the texts of the *Manuscript* had to be arranged and organized in an entirely different way to match with the respective drawing for each part. This was the requirement of a work of both art and text. The *Manuscript* introduced a novelty in the system of editions of the *Kiêu*, as it represented a move towards a combination of poetic and artistic storytelling, before a true form of visual storytelling could be made.

Normally, the artistic and scientific ideas belong to the person who organizes the scientific project and writes the book. However, in this case, Chéon had Bùi Khánh Diễm's *Manuscript*, which was indeed such a project. The only thing is, J. Chéon might not have agreed with Bùi Khánh Diễm's views and book layout. For Chéon, Nguyễn Du's masterpiece was the main subject; the artistic value of the paintings, although very high, should serve to clarify Nguyễn Du's ideas, not the other way around. Therefore, Chéon rearranged it: the top part of the page contains the story, and the bottom part contains the paintings. As for the story's prototype, due to Chéon's trust in Abel Des Michels and his close friendship with Trương Minh Ký, he believed in

¹ The author of the *Tale of Kieu* is Nguyễn Du, and the author of the *Manuscript* is merely the maker

of the *Manuscript of Kieu*, such as Kiều Oánh Mậu, Nguyễn Hữu Lập, Abel des Michels who published different editions of *Kiêu*...

Trương Minh Ký's theory that the original model for *Truyện Kiều* was *Kim Vân Kiều lục*, and Chéon chose a different version of *Kiều* from Bùi Khánh Diễm. Although this conception was mistaken, it provided clues that helped solve many questions about the *Manuscript*.

3. The author of the *Manuscript* is a group: Arthur Chéon, Bùi Khánh Diễm, Trương Minh Ký, an artist, and other collaborators whose names are not yet known

3.1. The role of Bùi Khánh Diễm

According to the verified information from Bùi Thiện Căn, Bùi Khánh Diễm completed a *Manuscript* on the picture book *Kim Vân Kiều* and "submitted it to Commissioner Chéon," likely sometime after 1890, when Chéon took office in Hanoi. And 1894 was the year Chéon had the *Manuscript*. As we have demonstrated above, the *Manuscript* cannot be Bùi Khánh Diễm's version, but it is possible that Bùi Khánh Diễm's *Manuscript* inspired J. Chéon to create the *Manuscript* and that he might have inherited the illustrations from Bùi Khánh Diễm. However, at most, Chéon had the illustrations redrawn by other artists based on Bùi Khánh Diễm's models. At that time, there were no reproduction methods like today, so it

was impossible to reverse the layout of Bùi Khánh Diễm's illustrations to include in the book. Unfortunately, there are no additional documents available today to know more about Bùi Khánh Diễm's *Manuscript*. We can only speculate that Bùi Khánh Diễm played a very important inspirational role in the formation of the *Manuscript*.

3.2. Trương Minh Ký, the compiler of the *Manuscript*: The grounds for the argument

3.2.1. The idea on the origin of the "Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện" being "Kim Vân Kiều lục"

Kim Vân Kiều lục is a novel written in classical Han-Chinese characters by an unnamed Vietnamese Confucian during the 19th century. The book was first printed in 1876, under Emperor Tự Đức's reign, as part of the Cẩm Vân Đường Collection, Cổ Vũ street, Hà Nội¹, the second print might have taken place during the 1880 – 1883 period in Ha Noi (Trương Minh Ký purchased the print in 1883 and sent to Abel des Michels); other editions currently kept in France and at the Sino-Nôm Library are all named *Kim Vân Kiều lục*. The Sino-Nôm Library is currently holding only one 1888 edition. Phạm Tú Châu once commented on the literature of the

¹ This information was acquired from the cover page of the *Kim Vân Kiều lục* (1876 edition) provided by Assoc. Prof. Nguyễn Tuấn Anh (Ha

Noi University of Education) and Nguyễn Thị Sông Hương (EHESS: École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, France). The authors deeply appreciate this support.

work as follows: "The novel was written in a clear and concise narrative, whilst having a certain degree of elegance as it employed clauses in parallel prose style and beautiful uses of words and ideas, thus conveying fully poetic and storytelling values", and "was also scribed by many". But overall, she also felt that the work was quite simplistic, and its content could not be "uniformly delivered", "the author seemed to grow more fatigue, therefore tried to tell a story as an excuse to show off his poetic words", which is "incomparable to *The Tale of Kiều*"¹. Indeed, within the literary sphere, there are no documents or research works on *The Tale of Kiều* that say *Kim Vân Kiều Lục* might be the original story, the plot of which was used by Nguyen Du in *The Tale of Kiều*. There is a near consensus, as the majority of researchers agreed with the theory that the *Đoạn trường tân thanh* (*The Tale of Kiều*) was at the latest written during the early years of the Gia Long rule, whereas the *Kim Vân Kiều Lục* was written during the Tự Đức period. Trương Minh Ký was the first to raise this idea, which was formally mentioned in the *prologue* of the *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện* translated into French by Abel des Michels.

Therefore, it is certain that in 1882, Trương Minh Ký had initiated and Abel des Michels had gladly endorsed and brought this idea to the public, as the latter wrote in the *Prologue* of the *Kiều* which was about to be sent to the publisher and was read before the Academie des Inscription et Belles – Lettres² : "...When I said it was impossible to find a Chinese novel to associate with Nguyễn Du's poem, the very next day, I received from Professor Trương Minh Ký, who found it in Saigon and immediately sent it to me, a novel that I have long looked for. It has the name *Kim Vân Kiều truyện*; which is, sensibly speaking, also the name of the poem itself"³. Chéon agreed with Trương Minh Ký, because in the *Manuscript*, he put an emphasis on the detail when Kim Trọng "unlocked the love haven" to meet Thúy Kiều as they reunited next to her house through the note under the drawing on folio 12b: "L'entrevue a lieu chez Thúy Kiều" (The meeting at Thúy Kiều's house). This detail on the reunion between Kim and Kiều could be considered an evidence to identify the difference in opinions about the "origin" of Kiều. In the *Kim Vân Kiều lục*, in the first reunion, Thúy Kiều welcomed Kim Trọng to her music chamber, and Kim

¹ See Phạm Tú Châu, *Bước đầu nghiên cứu Kim Vân Kiều lục*, Translation and studies on *Kim Vân Kiều lục*, Nxb Khoa học xã hội, 2015.

² Académie des Inscriptions et Belles – Lettres, it is Institution of French Literature.

³ Introduction by Abel Des Michels in *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện*, translated and introduced by Nguyễn Thị Thanh Xuân, published in *Nghiên cứu trao đổi* (June 12, 2021). The note from the Introduction.

Trong left in the late afternoon, whereas Thuy *Kiều* would visit Kim Trọng's house later that night. In both the *Kim Vân Kiều* of Qingxin Cairen and Nguyễn Du's *Kiều*, both rendezvous between Kim and *Kiều* happened at Kim Trọng's house.

3.2.2. The implementation of the original 'Kim Vân Kiều Lục' opinion through the Manuscript.

After Abel des Michels' announcement, no further information could be found. As such, it could be temporarily concluded that until the *Manuscript* was published, only three persons: Trương Minh Ký, Abel des Michels and Chéon believed that *Kim Vân Kiều lục* was the « original story » of Nguyễn Du's *New Kim Van Kiều Story*. However, if in 1884, Trương Minh Ký had only informed his suggestions to, and Abel des Michels had only accepted such a further step was taken by the maker of the *Manuscript*, by introducing new evidence (i.e. Madame Vương's dream at the beginning of *Kim Vân Kiều lục*) to initiate a theoretical thought throughout the *Kiều*, and by writing a summary at the end of the story, the author emphasized the theory « the self is the origin of all » that considered *The Tale of Kiều* a story of ethic – talent – goodness – karma, rather than of worldly affairs, human and the society. The author of the *Manuscript* had yet reached the level of empathy with Nguyễn Du as Phạm Quý Thích, Master Mộng Liên Đường.

In addition, the author also compared several lines and parts of the *Kiều* text with the story to ensure. These comparisons were not random but intentional and methodological. It is fortunate, however, that the author did not intervene with the original as *Kiều Oánh Mậu* did based on the *Tale of Kim Vân Kiều* of Qingxin Cairen to modify *The Tale of Kiều*! Other than that, the annotations in the *Manuscript* also showed some differences from the traditional way. If one reads the comments and notes in the *Kiều* editions of Thăng Long or Huế publishers towards the end of the 19th century, there were still many who paid attention to the ethical and moral aspects of the work, without failing to acknowledge the theory on the relationship between talent and fate, with the talented but fated lives because of the God's jealousy. From these bases, the authors of this article believe that Trương Minh Ký, who had formally proposed that *Kim Vân Kiều lục* was the origin of *The Tale of Kiều*, at that time, seemed to have the opportunity to better explain his opinion in the *Manuscript*.

3.2.3. The editor's literary interests and annotations in classical Chinese writing

The annotations in the *Manuscript* are unlike other annotated *Tale of Kiều* texts, as most ancient Confucian annotations of texts tended to paying attention to assisting the reading of the texts and commenting. But the

difference in the *Manuscript's* notes is that the author of these notes seemed to be more inclined to make artistic references and showing off his personal knowledge in books. For example, only in relation to women's jealousy, the annotation made several references. *Chiến quốc sách* was quoted near the part where Tú Bà was jealous; *Nữ đồ truyện* was referenced when Kiều worried that being a secondary wife might be more of a suffering than being a prostitute; Ta An's *Lưu phu nhân* was quoted when Hoạn Thư was jealous; also quoted were the original story of the saying "Hà Đông lion", the traditional remedy of oriole soup that husbands used to cure wives' mistrusts, the six spiteful Ngô sisters, the green-eyed monster Trịnh Tụ, ect. The materials used are very diverse, including classics, histories, philosophies, stories, miscellaneous theories, anecdotes, and folk proverbs. It can be seen in the published works of Trương Minh Ký that there is a clear scholarly and creative trend closely aligned with the knowledge he references in the notes. It seems he paid considerable attention to the genre of dramatic literature. Regarding his topics, trends, and strengths in scholarship, he leaned towards the performing arts and had produced plays such as: The play *Tuồng Joseph* (1888), *Tuồng Phong Thần Bá Ấp Khảo* (1896), and the transcribed version of *Tuồng Kim Vân Kiều truyện* (printed in 1896).

Correspondingly, in his original notes, he frequently references dramatic literature, *The Story of the Western Wing* (*Tây Sương ký*), citing it about thirty times, including two or three references to its predecessor, *Hội chân ký*. In his research, Trương Minh Ký had also paid attention to *Truyện Kiều* for a long time. He was significantly influenced by Trương Vĩnh Ký in his scholarly pursuits and maintained a close relationship with Abel des Michels.

With such evidence, we find that there was no one more suitable than Trương Minh Ký for the role of the author of the story portion of the *Manuscript*.

However, another question arises: why did Trương Minh Ký not include his name under *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện – Hội bản*, despite being a renowned author with a modern outlook, who typically credited his works with his name and the date of creation when published in *Gia Định báo* or printed books?

Perhaps Trương Minh Ký did not intend to create another version of *Truyện Kiều*, especially when those close to him, such as Abel des Michels, had already compiled a Nôm version with annotations and translations into French, and Trương Vĩnh Ký had produced a romanized version. He might have undertaken this text

mainly due to his friendship with J. Chéon. Additionally, his fondness for *Truyện Kiều* and the pleasure of book collecting, a hobby cherished by the erudite and the antiquarian of any era, might have also played a part.

3.3. Arthur Chéon organized the making of the Manuscript

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, cultural activities in the new Western style were also developing in Hanoi. Several newspapers following Western journalistic methods were operating regularly and systematically, and the printing and dissemination of classical literary works had become more feasible. Bùi Khánh Diễm, who held various official positions such as Judge and Minister of the Supreme Court, was also a cultural activist and the editor-in-chief of *Đồng Văn nhật báo*, a major newspaper in Northern Vietnam supported by the government at that time. He had the idea and dedication to create an illustrated version of *Truyện Kiều*, a unique edition distinct from traditional reproductions.

This product was the work of an individual, a meticulously crafted project that likely took more than ten years (from 1881 to around 1900), with the illustration and calligraphy alone taking over two years. The division into segments and the conceptual illustration were entirely his innovations, independent of the

original story's chapter segmentation, and today, anyone who reads it might find it reasonable. Professor Trần Đình Sử even suggested that this segmentation might best reflect Nguyễn Du's artistic intentions. This was Bùi Khánh Diễm's significant contribution. However, the author himself had no means to preserve his work.

Fortunately, the *Manuscript* came into the hands of J. Chéon, a person well-versed in *Truyện Kiều*, who had studied and taught the work. Inspired by Bùi Khánh Diễm's project, Chéon continued to create a work of a similar format, although there were many differences in content and scholarly ideas. *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện – Hội bản* can be seen as a twin work to Bùi Khánh Diễm's illustrated *Truyện Kiều*. Regardless, to this day, we only have *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện – Hội bản*! This is the contribution of J. Chéon.

Considering that Chéon had been closely associated with *Truyện Kiều* for a long time, he could have been one of the three who shared Trương Minh Ký's perspective on the original plot of *Truyện Kiều* since 1884, when they were colleagues at Chasseloup Laubat College and later at the Translation Office of Southern Vietnam. Trương Minh Ký later joined the French circle. Their scholarly viewpoints were quite similar, as seen in their scientific topics and published works. For example, Trương Minh Ký

authored *Tuồng Phong thần bá ấp khảo*, and J. Chéon translated the play *Phong thần Bá Ấp Khảo*. Both had works titled "100 lectures," and they co-authored books such as *Leçon de langue annamite. Cours autographié au collège des Interprètes (et MM. Chéon)* (1886?) and several others.

Given their long-standing friendship and shared research interests, it is understandable that J. Chéon would propose a project that Trương Minh Ký would readily support. The preliminary conclusion is that the *Manuscript* was a collaborative effort by a group of authors. The academic concept and the book's layout might have originated from Bùi Khánh Diễm's *Manuscript*, with J. Chéon leading the project and Trương Minh Ký compiling the story text. The artist and calligrapher were from Northern Vietnam, but their identities remain unknown.

Why did the group not leave their names, with only J. Chéon appearing as the one "with the book"? We have yet to find a definitive answer, but it might relate to unresolved copyright issues among the members or connections with the Academy, which prevented the book from being publicly released. J. Chéon kept it in his private collection (library) until he returned to France with it. Thus, *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện*

– *Hội bản* never reappeared in Vietnamese literary communities and drifted further into obscurity after Chéon's passing.

Discovering this collaboration helps explain the integrated nature of the *Manuscript*. The text retained many elements of the Liễu Văn Đường version in language and meaning but also included aspects of the Duy Minh Thị version. It featured words pronounced with a Southern accent and many terms updated to modern language similar to Trương Vĩnh Ký's edition. The *Manuscript* textually reflected a scholarly viewpoint closely aligned with Abel des Michels, with the *Kim Vân Kiều lục* source theory being a group consensus. This theory might have been agreed upon as early as 1884 when Trương Minh Ký sent books and exchanged ideas about the source of *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện* with A. Michels. Given A. Michels' scholarly reputation and extensive research on Vietnamese literature and *Truyện Kiều*, his acceptance carried significant weight and was decisive.

4. SOME THOUGHTS ON THE VIETNAMESE – FRENCH CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF FRENCH SCHOLARS IN VIETNAM AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY FROM THE CASE OF THE *MANUSCRIPT*

Towards the end of the 19th century, French officials sent to Annam in general were all well-trained people, among them many were specialists in their different areas. After arriving at the colony, beside their administrative work as colonial government officials, they had also begun or continued their academic career, or performed academic research and made scientific contributions, not only to the world but also to the colonial nation. Researches on Đông Sơn culture, Hoabinhian, Bronze Drum civilization, on ethnology, linguistics, education, on the Sino-Nôm collection of the École française d'Extrême-Orient... of the French scientists and lecturers were valuable contributions to the world and Việt Nam, serving as an opening to further the development of archaeology in Việt Nam... The three scholars Abel des Michels, Jean Chéron and Paul Pelliot played an important role in the *Manuscript* and the study of the Sino-Nôm and Vietnamese national language and characters. Abel des Michels was an early comer to the Việt language. He was the first to introduce and translated the *Tale of Lục Vân Tiên*, *Tale of Kiều* and other important Vietnamese literatures into French. For *The Tale of Kiều* in particular, he also researched, made books and introduced the work to the French literary field, and at the same time expressed some accurate perspectives on the *Kiều* texts. He could point out mistakes and assess

the quality of the edition of *The Tale of Kiều*, somewhat even more accurately than some contemporary Vietnamese researchers. Perhaps Abel did not intervene in the making of the *Manuscript*, but he had a profound influence to the *Manuscript*, first and foremost through his academic view on the value and art of *The Tale of Kiều*. Perhaps Abel des Michels did have some inaccurate explanations about *Kiều*, and mistakenly identified its original story, but the initiator of this view was Trương Minh Ký. And nevertheless, he was the French who first opened the door for *The Tale of Kiều*, named *the New Tale of Kim Van Kiêu*, to enter the Western world. For the *Manuscript*, Abel des Michels played the role of a spiritual mentor.

For Paul Pelliot, aside from his achievements in archeology, his contributions to the Vietnamese Sino-Nôm collection were significant. For the *Manuscript*, he was a savior, as he 'picked' up the book from an antique bookstore and kept it carefully for over fifteen years, so that the *Manuscript* could travel to England for us to have a special edition of *Kiều* today.

Finally, we turn to Jean Nicolas Arthur Chéron. Unlike the other two, Chéron's contribution to the *Manuscript* (HB) was immense; he was a key member of the group that created and completed the book. In our view, without Chéron's efforts and leadership, *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện* –

Hội bản might not have existed, thus marking a significant renewal in the transmission of *Truyện Kiều*. J. Chéon also brought the *Manuscript* to France for safekeeping. He was a French official passionate about understanding and affirming Vietnamese local culture, significantly contributing to teaching and establishing the importance of Nôm script in cultural life while also promoting Western civilization in Vietnam. The influence of this new civilization helped the Vietnamese gradually overcome the negative aspects of Song Confucianism that had long affected them. J. Chéon held an indispensable position in relation to the *Manuscript*.

The three individuals we have mentioned were officials of the French colonial government, a fact that history will study and evaluate. However, in terms of culture, *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện – Hội bản* represents a collaboration between the elite intellectuals of Vietnam and France. It is a refined work of Vietnamese culture, symbolizing a simple and civil cultural exchange between Vietnam and France with a beautiful significance. Unfortunately, within the group of authors of the *Manuscript*, aside from J. Chéon and Trương Minh Ký. The identities of the artist and calligrapher remain unknown, and we cannot definitively assert the role of Bùi Khánh Diễm.

Additionally, some of our discoveries in this article can be confirmed. For instance, the ownership and authorship of the Latin notes in the margins of the *Manuscript* pages belong to Jean Chéon. We have traced the *Manuscript* through five stages of its journey, but due to the article's scope, we have only presented the first three stages here. The *Manuscript* was not a royal book or part of the royal library. Furthermore, although we are somewhat confident in our discovery of the *Manuscript's* group of authors, we consider these findings preliminary steps rather than the "final word."

Finally, Arthur Chéon, who, unlike the other two, had an important contribution to the *Manuscript* as a maker of the book. We believe that without his initiative and influence, there might not have been the *Manuscript*, so that the edition of *Kiều* could enter a new phase. J. Chéon was also the person who brought the *Manuscript* to France and kept it there. He was a French official who was enthusiastic with the idea of teaching the Vietnamese language and culture to French bureaucrats and soldiers coming to Việt Nam, and actively researched and acknowledged the Vietnamese indigenous culture. He had many contributions in teaching and

recognizing the position of the Nôm language in the cultural life of Việt Nam, as well as in promoting Western civilization. The influence of a new civilization also assisted the Vietnamese in slowly and selectively remediating the negative aspects of a long-influential neo-Confucian culture in Việt Nam... J.Chéon thus had an indispensable role to the *Manuscript*.

These three individuals were French colonial government's officials, whose history would have its own research and assessment. But solely in terms of culture, the *Manuscript* was a manifestation of a cooperation between esteemed Vietnamese and French scholars, a quintessential work of art of the Việt culture, and an evidence of a meaningful, simple and civil cultural exchange between Vietnam and France. It is unfortunate that we still have the gap in the identities of the artist and the scribe among those who made the *Manuscript*, aside from J. Chéon and Trương Minh Ký

Furthermore, our discoveries entail several confirmed elements, such as Arthur Chéon's ownership and authorship of the annotations in Latin words on the sideline of the *Manuscript's* folios, the journey of the *Manuscript* through five stages among which, in the framework of this article, only three were described. On the other hand, despite our certain confidence on the authorship of the

Manuscript, the authors of this article only consider these discoveries *prima facie* or the first step, without resolving this to be 'the last word' on this matter.

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