

## QUESTIONS IN NGUYỄN DU'S CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY – A PORTRAIT OF AN UNSTABLE WORLD

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### Abstract

Question is one of the popular sentence types in Nguyễn Du's three collections of classical Chinese poetry. Questions performed many functions and expressed different psychological states of the poet, such as doubts, worries, fatigue, dissatisfaction, and indignation, among other things. Questions were associated with his journey of finding self and releasing hidden personal thoughts, finding peace in an unknown space and time, finding a distant and illusory soulmate, and re-evaluating life's values. They reflected his insecurity in an unstable world.

**Keywords:** Question, Classical Chinese poetry, Dialogue, Insecurity, Unstable reality

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Nguyễn Du's Chinese poetry impresses readers with a gloomy, dark world. Space was closed, time was stagnant, and people were in thoughts and concerns. Even when his soul turned to the outside world, connecting with sounds, colors, and movements in real life, his poetic world was not brighter or more vibrant. His 250 poems contained human experiences and deep confessions, revealing a diligent but sad and hopeless journey of finding himself, the true face of human life,

and peace. That was the voice of a person who had many desires and many complexes, of a "most talented person" <sup>2</sup> whose outstanding conscience and intelligence always made him more painful about human pain.

Prominently present in Nguyễn Du's Chinese poetry is insecurity, which is the psychological state of an individual who always felt that he was not shared or understood, being dissatisfied with the existing

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<sup>2</sup> Nguyễn Hành's description about Nguyễn Du in his poem *Having Feelings and Composing a Poem When Hearing News of My Uncle – a Mandarin in Ministry of Rituals I* (cited in Nguyễn Hành 2015).

arrangements and eternal valuation. *Thanh Hiên thi tập* [Thanh Hiên's Poetry Collection], *Nam trung tạp ngâm* [Various Poems Made in the South], and *Bắc hành tạp lục* [Various Records during the Travel to the North], three poetry collections that are considered his private world, his soul diary, and his self-portrait, have many questions. They are present in both the poems in which Nguyễn Du talked to himself and those in which he identified the world around him. Their presence creates an uneasy state for poetry collections that are inherently introverted and quiet. It depicts silent yet intense upheavals, a journey of self-awareness, and a journey of reflection on the human condition and history with all its uncertainties.

Regarding frequency, questions are present in the three above collections but to different degrees. *Thanh Hiên thi tập* has the highest percentage of poems with questions (45 questions in 36/78 poems, equivalent to 46%), while *Bắc hành tạp lục* has the highest number of questions (90 questions in 55/132 poems, corresponding to 42%). Although the number of questions and poems with questions in *Nam trung tạp ngâm* is less than that of the two collections mentioned above, it is still a significant number (9 questions in 9/40 poems, corresponding to 23%). To a certain extent, the frequency of the questions can be seen as an indicator not only of

the ideological content of the collections but also of the continuity and change in how Nguyễn Du perceived an incomplete world at different times.

Regarding the scope and object of his questions, the artistic world in Nguyễn Du's Chinese poetry was quite special. Most of the questions and the questioning/ questioned ones were not obvious. It could be the poet himself (who wondered), or a specific person in an imaginary conversation regardless of space-time limits, or the world, everyone, who was real but indeterminate objects, being everyone but seemingly no one. However, the fact that the questioner hid himself, rarely identified himself, and the questioned objects were mostly implicit made Nguyễn Du's questions tend to change from dialogue to monologue. This was also an aspect that created the introversion of Nguyễn Du's poetry. At the same time, it reflected his unstable spiritual world that contained many turmoils. Many things made the poet from Tiên Điền village worry and think, including issues belonging to the poet's personal life, human life, and world affairs, existing in the present but also possible in the past and future. The questions exposed the losses and revealed the instability and chaos in the reality that Nguyễn Du himself witnessed and engaged in, showing the confusion and anxiety in his spiritual life. To Nguyễn Du, all

existence seemed to be incomplete and unfinished, including history.

Regarding function, questions in Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry did not only aim to ask. Asking and wondering, longing for connection and accepting surrender, worrying and resigning, insecurity and boredom go hand in hand in his poems. Waiting for answers was not always the destination of questions. Instead, hidden behind his questions were doubt, the desire for dialogue, the need to reevaluate values in human life, and the need to release pent-up personal thoughts. His questions were not only concerns but also summaries, assessments, and discussions, not only expressing

doubts but also affirming or negating; not only coming from the need to connect, share, and dialogue, but also exposing the subject's broken soul, loneliness, and disconnection. Questions sometimes revealed a turning away from reality, but sometimes showed bravery and determination to cope with reality. The writer's survey indicates that Nguyễn Du's questions served many functions. Although identifying his intentions is only relative and may be influenced by the subjective thoughts of the writer, who is also a recipient of literary works, the following statistics can help readers observe the multidimensionality of a type of verse in Nguyễn Du's artistic world.

Table 1: Function of questions in Nguyễn Du's Classical Chinese poetry

<b>Function of questions</b>	<b><i>Thanh Hiên thi tập</i></b>	<b><i>Nam trung tạp ngâm</i></b>	<b><i>Bắc hành tạp lục</i></b>
<i>Asking</i>	16	2	16
<i>Affirming</i>	3	2	15
<i>Negating</i>	9	0	18
<i>Acclaiming</i>	5	5	25
<i>Discussing and criticizing</i>	5	0	16

Questions in Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry can be approached from various perspectives, thus illuminating many aspects of his inner life and artistic world. This article views his questions as materials to create a picture of a world with many flaws and uncertainties because regardless of the

purpose, asking is always a journey of searching - with hope, disappointment, or despair, which is associated with the feeling of not understanding reality. Asking was a way for Nguyễn Du to face himself and deeply feel the pain and loss. Asking was also a way for the poet to relieve sadness, express loneliness, and find a connection with the world

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. Questions and the journey to find himself

Born and raised in a volatile social environment, Nguyễn Du lived a life that was not peaceful or flat. The poet not only witnessed history in a state of constant creation and destruction, changing society, human life full of troubles and suffering but also personally experienced the real uncertainties: his family circumstances declined, his siblings and friends were separated, the golden past was fading away, the present was the days when he was wandering everywhere, and his future was unclear and uncertain. The instability of real life was refracted in Nguyễn Du's poetry into unanswered questions, a journey of searching without reaching the destination, and a torn and tormenting compromise. Nguyễn Du was inherently talented and self-confident but introverted and more inclined to think than act. His close brother Nguyễn Đễ once said sadly about him: "[You] have a great ambition to ride the clouds/ Ultimately, you do not have the talent to communicate with people" (*Missing my younger brother Tố Như*, cited in Nguyễn Đễ 1995). History in a storm that overturned all values was not an opportunity for Nguyễn Du to "stir heaven and shake the earth" to assert himself. It exposed the breakdown

and created dangers that left him confused. It let him see the smallness of the individual, the deadlock, the helplessness, and the meaninglessness of things that used to be immutable values. He received the others' pain to fill the suffering in his soul, not destroying it to create new things and choose a new path. The contradiction between aspiration and reality, ambition and practical action, dedicated effort and a sense of helplessness constructed Nguyễn Du's spiritual tragedy. In his poems, he repeatedly talked about his heroic spirit and ambition, but all his great ideals and ambitions belonged to the past, while the present was only decline, regret, and pain. More than once, the poet bitterly exposed his failure: "The former elegant appearance is now as shabby as a phoenix in a cage/ Reputation in the world has slipped away like a snake running into a cave" (*Farewell to Nguyễn Sĩ Hữu Returning to the South*); "The white-haired gentleman sadly looks up at the sky/ Both his great ambition and his livelihood are obscure/ Spring orchids and autumn chrysanthemums become a vain thing/ Winter coldness and summer heat steal my youth" (*A Miscellaneous Poem*); "Dedicating all my life to literature, I know it's useless/ Arranging books and accordions filling the shelves, I make myself a fool" (*Having Feelings*). Nguyễn Du chose for himself a "hidden" lifestyle,



but that choice did not give him the peace of mind. The obsession of losing himself and not being able to adapt to reality was often painfully present in his poems: "In a foreign land, I pretend to be clumsy to prevent profane people/ In troubled times, I want to save my life, so I am always afraid of others" (*In a Quiet Place* 1); "In troubled times, your laugh and tears have to follow everyone/ If you are old and weak, you should be silent to protect yourself" (*A Miscellaneous Poem* 2); "The hero's heart has cooled down, I don't think about traveling/ On the road to fame and fortune, both sad and happy are bound" (*Being Far from Home in a Spring Night*). Real losses were the cause of the journey to find himself that Nguyễn Du could only do in his poetry. Questions were a form of searching for the self where there was confusion, deadlock, fear, despair, and even pride. It revealed so many worries and struggles. Peace was a state that did not seem to exist in the artistic world of Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry.

The events of the times caused Nguyễn Du's large family to suffer and his life deviated from the familiar trajectory (studying, taking exams, passing the exams, becoming a mandarin). Nguyễn Du engages in the world with a passive mind. All of his choices on the challenging path failed: he continued his adoptive father's martial arts career but had no achievements; the attempt to revive the Lê dynasty, the effort to fight the

Tây Sơn, and the attempt to find a way to the South to follow Nguyễn Anh all failed. Nguyễn Du chose to live a life of hiding himself, his dreams, and his desires. However, behind a weakened man, who had a white beard and hair, a tired appearance, and being tormented by worries about food and clothing (as the poet describes himself in *Thanh Hiên thi tập, Nam trung tạp ngâm*) was his consciousness of his values and individual differences in the world in which he existed. The person that historians of the Nguyễn Dynasty once subtly commented on was "arrogant and conceited" but "on the outside appeared respectful [...], afraid as if unable to speak" (*Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện* 1997, 357) had many pent-up feelings. Unlike Nguyễn Công Trứ, Nguyễn Du did not have the arrogance of someone who stands above others and an optimistic attitude even in the most challenging circumstances: "Whether I gain or lose, I'm still like a person in the border area/ Whether I'm praised or criticized, I'm still as cheerful as spring breeze". The upheavals and disruptions he experienced depleted his physical body and made his soul unstable. Uncertain life, hunger, illness, and a hopeless journey to find a way extinguished his will to act, but the concept of self-worth still gnawed in his mind. He asked and asserted himself: "My nature remains unchanged, just like how can one shorten a crane's legs?" (*Lamentation for Myself* 1). In the chapter "Pianmu"

of the book *Chuang Tzu*, one said: "The righteous person maintains the naturalness of his nature (he is as he is born). Therefore, if his toes are connected, it is not called sticking, and if his fingers grow branches, it is not called redundant. Long is not considered excess, and short is not considered lacking. Therefore, although the duck's legs are short, if they are extended, the duck will be painful; although the crane's legs are long, if they are cut short, the crane will suffer" (Nguyễn Hiến Lê 2009, 242]. It means that the essential thing for people and things that exist in this world is to live by the nature that we are endowed with. The contemporary context forced Nguyễn Du to let go of his desires and ambitions, but from the depths of his consciousness, he knew that the existing person was not his true self. Borrowing the image of the "crane's leg" and raising the question "How can one shorten a crane's legs?", the poet both expressed his attitude of resistance and dissatisfaction with the existing arrangements while also implicitly affirming his core, unchangeable values. His deadlocked, miserable situation (work was not complete, reputation was not achieved, but he was old and weak; the road ahead was still uncertain, and he was alone lamenting to himself) did not make him accept the situation and lose

himself. Nguyễn Du compared himself to a pearl, which could not preserve its natural nature when rolling in the dust. He was willing to give up his achievements (according to conventional standards) to return to his true self: "I am like a pearl in a stone that cannot keep its true appearance/ Is a small position in a region worth it?" (*Dedicating to My Friend*). This question is like a denial of fame and fortune, which shows a confident and self-respecting Nguyễn Du and his will. A small position in a region was not a significant thing on the journey of self-affirmation of a "heroic-minded" <sup>1</sup> person, but more importantly, he asked to remind himself to get rid of trivial entanglements and find his "true nature". These confessions to his friend are said to have been written when he had just served the Nguyễn Dynasty and was appointed governor of Phù Dung ward, Khoái Châu district, Sơn Nam town (Hưng Yên nowadays). For someone who only passed the first three exams, this start could be considered favorable. However, Nguyễn Du entered the bureaucracy with insecurity and loss. That was the psychological state of a person knowing that he had to begin to transform into someone else, to live differently from himself. When a rough pearl is polished for use, its shape and nature are no longer the

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1 Nguyễn Du's words in his poem *Being Far from Home in a Spring Night*.



same as before. Similarly, Nguyễn Du, because of the burden of responsibility, the benefits, the pursuit of the glorious dream of his youth, and perhaps his nature of not acting decisively, had to be a mandarin, accept to bend himself to fit the mold, destroy his nature and self-worth. Through his questions, readers can feel the difficult and bitter journey of finding himself. Taoist thoughts permeated many of Nguyễn Du's poems. It not only carried the dream of liberation but was also associated with the obsession of trade-offs and loss. The concept of self created two opposing emotions: bitterness and pride. It reflected the tension between the desire to renounce to "preserve the true nature" as Chuang Tzu said (cited in Nguyễn Hiến Lê 1992) and the defeat of worldly grasping in Nguyễn Du. At the same time, it was the fulcrum that supported and comforted him amid his hopeless days. Although he was a quiet and self-contained wanderer, the poet still believed in his difference from the world around him: "I have never had the thoughts of flies/ From ancient times until now, who has sharing a nest with termites?" (*Miscellaneous humming* 1). An uncertain life could make a strong heart and spirit become ruined, but a pure and noble nature, not accepting the same level as mediocre or useless people is an immutable value. Nguyễn Du's verses make readers remember *Kiều's* sense of conscience during her miserable days in Tú Bà's brothel: "Let people

make passionate love/ I don't know what spring is" (Nguyễn Du 2002, verses 1239-1240). Nguyễn Du was similar to his beloved heroine in how they dealt with reality: accepting but not entering the world, establishing a binary principle in the way of perception and existence: the others' world and their world, the external self and the mental self.

Nguyễn Du's journey to finding himself was also associated with the search for true aspirations and dreams taken away by cruel reality. The dreams he pursued were not great things or the ambition to take charge of the country's affairs, but a desire to stay away from the profane world, to live peacefully and comfortably in a stable society, and without needing to determine right or wrong, gain or loss, high or low. A very noticeable point in Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry is that the "golden dream" and "will to ride the clouds", which means the ideal to act and the desire to enter the world, are rarely mentioned. If available, they were always in a faded state and forever belonged to the old days. After many upheavals and disruptions, it seemed that the poet was no longer interested in talking about his ambition to shoulder responsibilities for the country, his youthful dreams only made him bitter and depressed. While the Confucian spirit of self-responsibility and enthusiasm for the dedication were very faint, absolute freedom became the goal, more

precisely, the ideal that Nguyễn Du sought. Taoism and Buddhism, which advocate eliminating all constraints, and bringing people back to the highest self-autonomy, became his spiritual fulcrums that "comforted, soothed pain, filled the emptiness" when "Nguyễn Du's idea of ego and ideal ego were both seriously damaged" (Đỗ Lai Thúy 2016). Experiencing losses, the poet found his way to his original dreams: "How can I shave my hair and live in the forest/ Lying down and listening to the sound of pine trees in the clouds" (*Lamentation for Myself 2*). The pure space where music was the sound of pine trees, images were white clouds gently drifting, where people could forget worries and sadness, was inviting and urging him to go there. Nguyễn Du knew it was happiness but he was still struggling to find a way to get there, which can be recognized through his question "how." These verses contained both a light feeling of liberation and a heavy sense of worry. It seemed that between Nguyễn Du and his dream, there was still a distance that was not too far but could not be merged. Therefore, the poet's look towards the dream world was still a look of hope and his position was still that of an outsider waiting and hoping.

Questions were a way for Nguyễn Du to express his drastic attitude of rejecting fame and profit: "Living for eighty years is long enough/ Why is there a need to consider a thousand

years? [...] I do not know whether the things before my eyes are good or bad /Is there any need to worry about my obscure reputation after death?" (*A Poem about Living Happily 1*). Different from the expectation of connection and sharing from future generations that Nguyễn Du once expressed ("I do not know in more than three hundred years/ Will anyone in this world cry for Tố Như?" - *Reading Tiểu Thanh's Accounts*), he often chose to give up material desires, only caring about the present and his freedom. Questions were also a form for him to affirm the true ideal of life that he pursued and remind himself to cherish his desires: "On the vast earth, there are beautiful scenes everywhere/ Why are you in such a hurry [instead of stopping to enjoy them]?" (*Admiring the Afternoon Scenery on Hoàng Mai Bridge*); "Illusionary fame and profit will eventually disappear/ How could it be better than following the saints' path?" (*Have Feelings in a Spring Afternoon*); "When you are alive, you do not drink the whole cup of wine/ When you die, who will pour wine on your grave?" (*Drinking Wine*). Questions created a dialogue where the questioner and the asked person were Nguyễn Du. The questioner was the ego that was self-aware of his aspirations, while the asked person was the ego that had not yet separated itself from the chaotic world of others. The wide sea, high mountains, bright moon, blowing wind, singing birds,



flying clouds, a fisherman sleeping soundly, and a child comfortably playing the flute were the peaceful, free world that the poet yearned for. He realized the destination of his journey, but his steps still could not reach there because of the constraints of the human world. He sat alone in the night and sadly thought about the burden of livelihood that made people bound and lose their freedom: "My hair is gray, I only worry about food and clothes/ How can I sing wildly like when I was young?" (*Sitting in the Night*). Looking at the river, the poet still felt tormented: "Seeing seagulls floating along the water, I feel the desire [to be like them]/ When will this hard life end?" (*Đống Lung River*). Responding to a friend, he also mentioned his worries about the livelihood that prevented him from realizing his dream: "You teach students, life is full/ I'm far from home, do I have the heart to return?" (*Using the Original Verse, Sending to Ngô Tú Nguyên in Thanh Oai District*). Nguyễn Du's limitations also came from his obsession with failure. Old age, gray hair, and the constraints of social responsibility prevented him from realizing his desire to give up: "What a pity, my old nature is still extravagant / I want to find new joy, but how can I do that when I'm old?" (*On Từ Châu Road*); "I want to sell my light leather jacket in exchange for being drunk once/ How can I do that when my hair is already white?" (*Recording the Beautiful Scenery in Quảng Tế*); "I've reached the green

mountain / My hair has turned gray, what should I do now?" (*On Hoàng Mai Road*); "This body has become an object locked in a cage or a pot/ Where can I find a free, open play?" (*Impromptu Done when Autumn Has Just Arrived*). The concept of liberation often went hand in hand with the sense of helplessness, therefore, as a counterpart to the person "wearing a mask", living in the right position, Nguyễn Du's ego was also present, but only in his dream world, as he once sadly shared: "My acquaintances wonder why I'm sad/ Who in the world is not in a dream?" (*Impromptu Writing a Poem*). To ask was also to explain, implying both affirmation and negation.

Like people with conflicting behaviors in real life, the individual in Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry was also full of insecurity. The questions revealed the poet's self-portrait with contradictory polarities: pride, self-esteem, an inferiority complex, weakness; fierce, decisive accepting, resigned; strong self-consciousness, and hiding his consciousness and true self. Only the opposition between ego and reality was something Nguyễn Du felt and wanted to share honestly with his readers.

## 2.2. Questions and the journey to find peace

"A lonely, helpless, lost person in a strange, chaotic world" (Nguyễn Thị

Nương 2009, 2015) is an image that readers often encounter in Nguyễn Du's self-portrait in his classical Chinese poetry. Perhaps nowhere else did he feel so much insecurity in the world around him, which did not come from anxiety about lurking dangers but from a sense of guilt about not belonging to the space where he existed. There was a constant search (in torment, in grief, in despair) for space, time, companions, things that belonged to a peaceful, warm world that Nguyễn Du lacked. The dream of connection existed alongside the dream of liberation; they were parallel contradictions in his three poetic collections.

Researchers have examined the types of space, time, and world models in Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry. "It was different from the common background of universal space-time and close to the limited space-time of everyday life in romantic literature: The vast space seemed to move and control, leading people to a smaller, covered space that was grave. And even though time was pushed back thousands of years, it still closed in on people because of its blinking pressure" (Lê Thị Thu Yến 1999, 171). Space and time "both had a gloomy tone, suggesting decay", "the poet tended to find empty, lonely spaces not only in the universe but even on the earth" (ibid., 161, 174). It was a world lacking life, withering,

and fading. However, there was another world, where there was full of uncertainty, where time, space, and human faces were still undetermined, being searched and created. *Thanh Hiên thi tập, Nam trung tạp ngâm, Bắc hành tạp lục* have many questions related to finding space, time, and someone who could understand and share with the poet. Words expressing looking and waiting appear many times in his poems, from the time Nguyễn Du wandered in the world until he found his way back to his homeland, and even when he had a social position: "when," "where," "who." For the poet, all existence seemed to be meaningless, and the things he expected were vague, out of reach, and difficult to grasp. In his eyes, the small room with a flickering light, a closed gate, the flowers blooming in the garden, the green trees in the alley, the cold bright moonlight silhouetted against the trees, the wind blowing through the mountains, the light of fireflies flickering on the wild grass in the deep night, which were familiar images in everyday life, were the embodiment of a strange world to which the poet did not belong, being not supported or protected. Sunset, night, cold wet mornings, and four consecutive seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter did not impress him with the rhythm of joy and life. The encounters and separations deepened the impression of upheaval and instability, making



him more convinced that peace and happiness did not belong to the present. Nguyễn Du embarked on a journey to find a peaceful world. If in the journey to find himself, the questions were also the answers, which showed Nguyễn Du's consciousness and helplessness on the way back to himself, these questions were his unanswered doubts. Undefined space, vague time, and distant and vague soul-mate were hauntings that lingered in questions about peace.

Nguyễn Du always felt like floating, adrift grass in the wind. Therefore, the search for a spatial fulcrum was a constant obsession in his poetry: "This body is like grass torn from its roots by the strong west wind/ I don't know where I will end up drifting to" (*Lamentation for Myself* 1). Lost in reality, the poet could not connect with the things around him. He stood here but kept looking forward to somewhere far away. Right at the moment of saying goodbye to his brothers and friends, he was filled with anxiety with the feeling of eternal separation, confused by the question of where his loved ones were going and where he could meet them again: "No one understands the song about "high mountains, flowing water"/ Where can I find you in this world?" (*Goodbye Mr. Nguyen*); "Since goodbye until now, where have you been?/ Maybe we have to wait until afterlife before we meet again" (*Remembering My Brother*); "Like

cranes flying in the sky, fish swimming in the pond, where can I find you?/ It has been ten years since the day we parted ways in La Thành" (*Dedicating to Thực Đình*). The "where" questions showed the anxious search after each separation, expressing the desire to master the space and the subject's loneliness, smallness, and helplessness. Nguyễn Du's dreams and fantasies were associated with "somewhere," an uncertain space whose boundaries were not recognized. This undefined space was where the poet went to find light to dispel the cold and solitude of the spring night, the fatigue and boredom in the traveler's heart: "Where can one find a bright spring scene in the middle of a dark space/ Through the small window, only the shadow of the willow can be seen" (*Spring Night*); to search for the truly joyful spring: "Where does spring go along the river?/ People who rely on the horizon stagnate because of an official position" (*Impromptuwriting on the wall of the workplace*); to find a ten-year old healing elixir: "I've been sick for ten years, but no one has visited / Where can I find an elixir refined nine times?" (*Lying While Sick*); to find joy in the distant past: "Where is Vân Hòa mountain where parties used to be held? / Hồng Lĩnh mountain in my dream lacks hunting trips" (*Immediately Written in Handan*); to find his hometown, which is his most enduring spiritual support: "I look at Hồng Lĩnh 300 miles away/ Where is it so I can ask about the old

neighborhood" (*Impromptu Writing*); to find connection with the strange world around him: "Looking as far as my eyes could see, I was heartbroken because I didn't know where you were/ The autumn wind blew, the leaves fell as I passed through Nguyễn Trương areas" (*To Xiangtan, Pitying the Mandarin Tam Lu*); to search for the sounds of everyday life: "It's just cold, I'm already miserable because I'm shirtless/ But where is the bustling sound of the maids beating cloth in the afternoon?" (*Autumn Night 2*). During the days when he was lonely and lost in a foreign land, surrounded by darkness and loneliness, Nguyễn Du still watched and waited for a peaceful place for himself. The search and longing made the poet more clearly aware of the bleak reality, but it added strings of hope, which kept him in a world that was only empty and lifeless.

Besides the feeling of confusion of one who has lost his connection to real space, there was the anxious anxiety of one who thought he lost his autonomy and control over time. The concept of time in Nguyễn Du's poetry was associated with melancholy as to how he felt about his life. He lived but always wondered about the end. During ten weeks in prison, worrying about life and death, Nguyễn Du looked forward to the time when all the worries, sadness, and deadlock would end: "When will Bình Chương's hatred end?/ It's hard to have the

sublime style of the Cô Trúc people" (*Rambling Thoughts in Prison*). The "when" questions expressed an indefinite period, containing expectations and expectations. Nguyễn Du felt the bitterness of failure and deadlock thoroughly. He asked to remind himself of the hopeless journey of searching for peaceful times. The losses made the poet from Tiên Điền choose to live without commitment, living only to wait for the end of all sadness and happiness in human life: "When will life with happiness and sadness end?/ There are four walls full of books, as many as fit" (*Miscellaneous Humming 1*). However, that road was still very long. Fatigue and depression lingered on every word. Nguyễn Du asked but did not believe that he could escape the burden of life. What he could do was endure it. The questions revealed another aspect of Nguyễn Du's portrait: a person anxious for time, always waiting endlessly: waiting in the night and wondering when morning will come, waiting on the departure road and wondering about the time to return, waiting in turmoil and wondering when everything will be all right, waiting while living and wondering when to die. Nguyễn Du was not talking or having a dialogue but was helpless before questions about life.

Nguyễn Du's journey to peace was also associated with his search for a soulmate understanding him. Living



quietly and alone, the poet always yearned to listen and share. He was aware of his loneliness and never felt satisfied with it. His intense questions about a soulmate in the large world not only exposed the instability and lack of balance in his personal life but also reflected his desire for connection. Nguyễn Du felt alone and pitiful without a sympathetic person by his side: "The stagnant guest lies forever in the south sea / In the beautiful, quiet night, whom can I share with?" (*The Stagnant Guest*). Therefore, the quiet, romantic night became endless, he was sad and bored. Far from home and relatives, without friends, he always felt lonely and longed for a confidant. In his poems, readers often see the poet's eyes and thoughts looking forward, searching for a soulmate: "With whom do I share my overflowing feelings?/ Even the clear moon and cool wind cannot comprehend it" (*Yellow Crane Tower*). He wished to remove the "melancholy", break the loneliness, and move towards the voices of the same heart. Nguyễn Du looked forward to interaction and sympathy in both the present and the future: "I don't know in more than three hundred years/ Will anyone in this world cry for Tố Như?" (*Reading Tiểu Thanh's Accounts*); "When you're alive, you don't drink the whole cup of wine/ When you die, who will pour wine on your grave?" (*Drinking Wine*). Not only did he seek sympathy and understanding for himself, but he also longed for sympathy and

understanding for the lonely and pitiful people in the world. That was the female singer of La Thành, who was a brilliant flower but had to suffer bad karma and was still known as a flirtatious girl even when she died: "In this world, who loves ill-fated ones?/ Lying down in the grave, you will probably regret your life" (*Pitying the Singer of La Thành*). That was Qu Yuan, a loyal and virtuous Mandarin who encountered many injustices: "Thousands of years ago, who loved the only sane person?/ In the four directions, where can one place his loyalty?" (*To Xiangtan, Pitying the Mandarin Tam Lu 2*). Nguyễn Du looked forward and searched for his soulmate, but perhaps he also foresaw that it would be difficult to find that person in the world. The "who" questions contained his earnest expectations and anxiety on the journey to find his soulmate.

Questions in Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry help readers better understand the losses in the poet's life. In those questions, there was hope, confusion, and despair. Each question was a search, but they gave the impression of confusion and helplessness. Nguyễn Du's journey to peace was therefore full of sadness and resentment.

### **2.3. Questions and journey to re-examine values**

Nguyễn Du had a quiet personal life. When he was young, he longed to

rearrange the situation, but that time was quite short, personal failures and the arrangements of history led him to choose to live like a duckweed drifting along the water. When he took refuge in Thái Bình province, hiding himself in the Hồng Lĩnh area, and even when serving the Nguyễn Dynasty, he maintained a quiet attitude of acceptance. However, deep inside him lay the resistance and desire to struggle, to escape the limits of reality and the dull and meaningless rhythm of everyday life. Nguyễn Du put into his poetry the insecurity of a person who could not live as he wished and was dissatisfied with the present. Questions can be seen as a form for the poet to question the unfinished picture of reality, express his personal views, and reconsider values.

The events in his life left him lacking faith. He was skeptical about values that were considered solid and lasting. Loyalty was not enough to support people when facing storms: "How can we control the big waves and winds?/ Loyalty when facing danger is not reliable enough" (*Sailing on the Ninh Minh River*). Heaven's love for life is not enough to calm the storms and give all things a truly peaceful life: "Heaven inherently has a love for life/ Why does Heaven leave things like this forever?" (*Lam River*).

Nguyễn Du's question was full of sadness and torment as he stood in front of the vast Lam river that was being flooded, "the riverbank burst loudly like thunder, the rising waves look like strange demons", which drowned everything in its fury. The poet felt sorry when he witnessed the unequal confrontation to maintain life, where human strength was too small compared to the destruction of nature. The Lam River was also a metaphor for a life full of dangers and threats that one foresaw but still had to "engage in" and constantly wondered why.

Even literature - the essence of noble values, which once made Nguyễn Du believe in its ability to immortalize life and beauty<sup>1</sup> - also became meaningless amid real-life events. Unlike Nguyễn Trãi ("Poets and ordinary people, who is better?"), Nguyễn Du did not have the pride of a writer who saw himself as richer and happier than others, satisfied in the world he created. The breakdown of values constantly haunted him. He spoke of the inability of literature to deal with reality when its wings to support people were no longer. The interaction between the expectation of great and good things that literature brought and the not-illusory view of reality left painful and bitter echoes. In Nguyễn Du's

poems are composed, the grass and trees will last forever."

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<sup>1</sup> In his poem *Afternoon Sightseeing in Hanyang*, Nguyễn Du wrote: "When 90



disappointment, there was much resentment. It seemed that the poet still could not understand or get used to an obvious but absurd truth: the lives of writers and artists were often miserable, bitter, and deadlocked. The questions came back again and again as a refusal to accept reality. He thought about himself and wondered: "What literature has been of any use to me?/ I cannot imagine that I was hungry and cold, causing others to pity me" (*Begging for Food*). Thinking about his predecessors, especially the "master of literature" Du Fu, he kept wondering: "Literature is great, but what use is it?/ I cannot bear to hear my children' moans" (*Du Shaoling of Leiyang's Tomb 2*); "We live in two different times, but we love and cry for each other/ Are we so miserable because of good poetry?" (*Du Shaoling of Leiyang's Tomb 1*). Outstanding talent, intelligence, and conscience were the root of disasters, making those owning these qualifications sad and suffering. This absurd rule was summarized in the form of unanswered questions, reflecting the melancholy feelings of the questioner. It coalesced and was undissolved.

Viewed from the journey of revaluing values, the questions in Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry reflected his life full of contradictions (Nguyễn Du 1978). There was an almost absolute contrast between his psychological world and the reality in which he lived (Trần Thị Hoa Lê 2015). What the poet denied, even

thoroughly denied, was things that he had to choose to live with. What he believed and expected revealed the pathetic, humiliating reality. Fame and profit were illusory and frivolous values that Nguyễn Du fiercely rejected, but they were the rope that bound him in human life. Until his death, the poet still did not realize his dream of escaping the circle of fame and fortune. Looking around, Nguyễn Du sadly saw many people like him. The picture of reality was full of contradictions: "In human life, power and benefits are truly meaningless/ From ancient times until now, who has broken through that ignorance?" (*Su Qin Temple 1*); "In human life, many people die for the sake of fame / Who would turn back and reflect on their lives?" (*Old Village of Two Shu*). By contrast, values such as literature, ideals, talent, and ambition became powerless before fate. The time-traveling encounter between Nguyễn Du and the defeated hero Prince of Chu State opened with a painful question about the conflict between talent and fate: "You have the power to move mountains, but can you change the fate?/ The endless bitterness is deposited under thin sand" (*Prince of Chu State's Tomb 1*). Asking was not to wait for an answer, but to express anger and dissatisfaction. Because it did not receive sharing, it was filled with fatigue.

The biggest and most constant denial in Nguyễn Du's poetry was probably the denial of the nature of

reality, what was happening around him, and even the existences that seemed to be concluded as wrong or right, being praised or criticized. Like the great poet Qu Yuan, Nguyễn Du had thousands of questions about the universe and human life, but his own experiences made him understand that those questions only fell into nothingness and humans never find clear answers: "I silently recite *Song of Asking Heaven*/ Heaven is above, how can people ask?" (*Sleepless*). Heaven was the supreme truth, the last fulcrum that people turned to when facing a reality that was too unstable and murky. However, where was heaven? The form of the question had almost absolute compatibility with the purpose of denial in the statement. Asking was no longer a search, but an assertion of an unknown reality and a denial of the true value of existence. From awareness and re-evaluation to doubt and denial of names was a familiar journey in Nguyễn Du's poetry. There was often a distance between what was labeled and what he heard, saw, and felt, such as the Chinese pride in appreciating virtues and how they treated the temples of dynasties and the grave of a loyal mandarin who "did not change his heart until he died": "Everyone says the Chinese appreciate virtues/ Why is worship here so simple?" (*Mr. Ju Gebu of Guilin*). Another example is the celebration of the "extraordinary merits" of the famous general Ma

Yuan and the fact that his merits were achieved at the cost of thousands of innocent people's lives: "Since ancient times, cold winds have blown piles of white bones/ What is praiseworthy about the achievements of the general of Han Dynasty?" (*Quỷ Môn Gate*). One can see that distance in the deception of the ruler who took advantage of the sacred meaning of sacred beasts to create his reputation: "Oh unicorn, if you appear for that person/ You are just a monster, what's valuable?" (*Unicorn's Tomb*). In folk beliefs, the unicorn represented humanity because it did not step on living things or break tree branches. The appearance of a unicorn was a sign of peace, prosperity, and the birth of a saint. Nguyễn Du talked about the death of this legendary beast to directly denounce the brutality and insidiousness of the Emperor of Ming Chengzu and his descendants, exposing the false arguments that they used to justify and paint their inhuman and unjust actions. Actually, to Nguyễn Du, history was not fixed, immutable pages. Looking at history to reflect on the present was his way of approaching the past. Besides, reviewing history was also his constant mindset. In this aspect, the need for dialogue through questions was present in Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry.

Nguyễn Du's reflection did not only have a negative dimension. Even though his sense of reality often leaned towards "nothing" (indefinite



space and time, not-yet-found soulmate, decay and lost existence, a subject lost in his journey of searching), he always hoped that good things were cherished and appreciated. He sympathized with those whose values were denied: their loyalty was questioned, their personalities were trampled, their ideals were rejected, their talents were cheapened, and their efforts were denigrated. Along with his indignant acceptance as if it were part of an unjust reality, Nguyễn Du raised his voice of protest. The need to protect values was an inspiration in Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry. The form of question also contributed to expressing that inspiration. Feeling sorry for Jia Yi's short life and unfinished plans, the poet questioned: "When discussing state affairs, you were unable to apply your knowledge/ You fulfilled your duty, what are you afraid of when you let yourself die painfully?" (*Jia Taishi of Changsa*). The poet appreciated Jia Yi's dedication, so he was upset that Jia Yi chose to die at the age of 33 because his ideals could not be fulfilled. Asking was a way for Nguyễn Du to acknowledge Jia Yi's contribution and react to the social oppression at that time. Affirmation and negation went together in his poetry. For example, in his poem *Seventy-two Doubtful Graves*, he affirmed Cao Cao's dishonesty ("Bad reputation is filled in the coffin, why bury it?") to affirm Liu Bei's humanity ("How can it compare to the Boss's

temple in Jincheng/ Until now, the pine and cypress trees still shine"). In the poem *The Stone Castle Where the Prince Liang Zhaoming Divided the Scriptures*, he pointed out the ignorance and blindness of the Prince and his father in "dividing the scriptures, causing more useless trouble" ("Buddhism is inherently empty, not dependent on things/ Its core is not in the scriptures, why divide them?") to affirm that the sacredness of Buddhism is in the mind, not in language or scriptures ("Sacredness is not in language/ What is the Diamond Sutra, what is the Lotus Sutra?"). The tendency to affirm values as a fulcrum alongside denied values partly showed that Nguyễn Du was not indifferent to life but still cared about life.

The questions in Nguyễn Du's classical Chinese poetry can be seen as a code to open the door to his spiritual world, decoding the portrait of a broken and unstable reality. It exposed the poet's insecurity when facing society and himself. Whether questioning, doubting, tormenting, self-questioning, discontent, resentment, fatigue, or resignation, his questions were always associated with anxiety, giving the impression of a person who did not feel content with reality. Questions were not only a part of the "dialogue - debate about the human world" (Nguyễn Hiến Lê 1992), but also a way for Nguyễn Du to find himself, expressing his desire to connect and find an ideal peaceful

world. When reading Nguyễn Du's Chinese poetry, the reader will forever be haunted by the hopeful, desperate, and hopeless searches.

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