



Fig. 4.2 An Artist's rendition of Princess Lê Ngọc Hân. (Photo courtesy of Brian Zottoli.)

of one historian, Phan Trần Chúc. But what is most important about these stories is that the far-fetched extremes of the Ngọc Hân allegory are in fact the exception that proves the rule. As Hồ Xuân Hương's case demonstrates, the colligation of a few known facts about an author into a nationalist narrative have the same effect, in general, as when those facts are fancifully constructed. In either case, the purpose of inflating the importance of, and in some cases fabricating, details about these two women was to produce ideological constructions of the past that would legitimate the regime in either North or South Vietnam.

Ngọc Hân as the National Lover: The Northern Allegory

Wives of Vietnamese emperors have rarely become the subject of histories of Vietnam. Though their existence and their names are often noted in major imperial sources such as *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (The Historical Records of Great Viet), *Đại Nam Chính Biên Liệt Truyện* (The Biographies of Notables of the Great South), and—most significantly for this period—the semi-fictional *Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí* (Record of the Unification of the Lê)—their existence rarely warrants more than a passing mention in more recent historical compilations. Why is it, then, that in the twentieth century, literary critics and historians have repeatedly written essays and books on Lê Ngọc Hân's life and work?

Part of the explanation, to be sure, lies in the sheer tabloid-worthy sensationalism of her story. Ngọc Hân's having to become the wife of the man who had overthrown her clan's dynasty is interesting in itself. Little attention is paid, however, to the crucial ideological role that the existence of Ngọc Hân plays. The existence of Ngọc Hân supplied Marxist historians with a narrative device to provide a transition between the Lê and the Tây Sơn. Her supposed love for Quang Trung provides one of the most central techniques in the efforts of Marxist historians of the 1950s to legitimate Quang Trung's regime, and thus (for he has become the central representative figure for the Tây Sơn movement) the Tây Sơn regime as a whole.

These new arguments about the importance of Lê Ngọc Hân as a writer and her relationship with the Quang Trung emperor first appeared in the journal *Tập San Nghiên Cứu Văn Sử Địa* (Journal of Literary, Historical, and Geographical Research) in the mid-1950s among a slew of articles