

A request to eat fish

Speaking of Sài Gòn, my mother often recalled one story.

In 1936 our family was living in Nam Định. My father was teaching at Cửa Bắc School (Jules Ferry), and also writing. His book *Kép Tư Bền* had sparked a lively literary debate at the time.

When the school had a three-month summer vacation, friends in the South invited him to visit. My father made a trip through the provinces of Central and Southern Vietnam. Wherever he went, he sent letters or photographs home.

Passing through Huế, he had to set aside nearly half a day to sign his books as keepsakes for readers there.

After visiting many provinces in Cochinchina¹ (as it was then called), my father went over to Cambodia—then called “Cao Miên”—to see an old friend, Đào Trọng Đủ. In his letters home from that leg of the trip, he wrote that after touring the palaces of Angkor, he went on an excursion to Koh Kong², a small island on the border of Cambodia and Siam. He also wrote ahead to say he would return to Nam Định by the express train from Saigon.

One day, the “wire-house”³ delivered a telegram from my father: It gave the exact date he would arrive back in Nam Định, and—most unusually—asked my mother to have fish ready for him the day he returned.

My mother couldn’t make sense of it. Had he gone so long without eating fish that he had to telegraph about it? Or was some friend from the South coming back with him who especially liked fish?

Still, knowing my father loved *Canh nấu dấm*⁴, she went to Ròng Market in front of our house, bought a big fish, fried part of it, and with the rest made a delicious pot of sour soup.

By noon, my father knocked at the door. Before he even put down his luggage or washed his face, he asked: “Where’s the fish?”

My mother was puzzled—no friends had come home with him. “What fish dish is this for?” she asked.

My father held out his hand. In it was a small bamboo cage, and inside, an adorable kitten.

“For this Siamese cat!” he said. “A genuine Siamese.⁵ It was brought back from Koh Kong!”

The whole family burst out laughing, delighted by my father’s playful, mischievous streak.

Hà Nội, August 23, 1996

¹Name used under French colonial administration for southern Vietnam.

²Cambodian island that used to belong to Thailand.

³Old Vietnamese phrase for the Post & Telegraph office.

⁴*Canh cá nấu dấm*: a Vietnamese fish soup with vinegar or souring agents.

⁵*Mèo Xiêm*: Siamese cat breed, historically associated with Siam (Thailand).