My father Nguyễn Công Hoan, his children and students

Around 1930, I was still just a child. After graduating from the Hanoi College of Pedagogy, my father began his life as a schoolteacher—what we jokingly call "gõ đầu trẻ"[1]. His first post was at the Hải Dương town elementary school. Later he moved to Nam Sách district in the same province.

To mark the occasion, he even wrote a short story titled GODAUTRE in French style. A few years later, he wrote another story for children, *A Golden Heart (Tấm Lòng Vàng)*. Although written as fiction, it was in fact based on a true incident from those years in Nam Sách—an incident in which my parents themselves were directly involved.

According to the civil service regulations of that time, every government employee had to spend a few years working in the highlands. So after his years in Nam Sách, my father was assigned to Lào Cai, where he taught at the town school. My mother and the children, however, remained in Hải Dương.

Perhaps because he was lonely living by himself, for a time my father brought me up to Lào Cai. During the day, while he was teaching, I would play with Chồ, the son of the school handyman.

Our house stood next to the railway, with only a thin concrete fence. What I loved most was watching, every morning, a few men running alongside a small rail trolley. Once it gathered speed, they would leap onto it and ride a long stretch down the tracks. (Only later did I understand that they worked for the railway service, responsible for inspecting the line and reporting any damage in need of repair.)

When I was in Lào Cai, my father sometimes took me out with him. Years later, when I was grown and read the short stories he published in the column Turbulent Society (Xã Hội Ba Đào Ký) of the journal An Nam, I recognized in them the scenes of the gambling houses in Cốc Lếu– places I had passed by as a child, though at the time I hadn't understood what they were.

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Around 1933, my father was transferred from Lào Cai to teach at the Kiêm Bị school of Kinh Môn district, Hải Dương province. Every Sunday he would return to Hải Dương town to be with the family, since Kinh Môn was only about twenty kilometers away.

When I was still a child living in Hải Dương, my father once took me back with him to Kinh Môn. My grandaunt Đúng, my grandmother's younger sister, also lived there, in a neighborhood along a hillside street lined with small shops. One day my father brought me to visit her by bicycle. Our house stood at the foot of the slope.

On the way back, as we rode downhill, the bicycle brake suddenly snapped. We went hurtling straight ahead and crashed into the wall of a house at the bottom. Both of us were thrown to the ground. I landed face down, unconscious, with my stomach slammed against a big stone, leaving a swollen lump. I was rushed to the district hospital, which stood on a hill near the school.

When I woke, I found myself still lying on the hospital table. My father, too, had been injured: the broken brake lever had cut into his thumb, bleeding heavily until they bandaged it.

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A few years later, my mother and the children all moved to Kinh Môn to live with my father. Besides the three of us siblings, there were also Uncle Bông (later called Thành), Thụ (my cousin's son), and Các (my mother's younger cousin). All of us stayed together and went to the same district school in Kinh Môn.

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[1]Literally "knocking on children's heads," a Vietnamese slang.

The school had only three classrooms. The beginner class, for seven-year-olds, was taught by thầy[2] Khản in the last room. The next class up, the preparatory class for eight-year-olds, was taught by thầy Đản in the middle room. My father taught the three higher grades in the first room. I myself was placed in the preparatory class with thầy Đản, since I had missed the beginner class because of a bout of smallpox when I first started school. As a result, I struggled with my studies. Even so, at the end of the year I was promoted to the next level, Elementary, though I was still behind.

I was worst at mathematics and dreaded it most —who could have guessed that years later, by the time I reached middle school (what would now be high school), I would end up among the best in math!

When I sat for the Sơ học yếu lược exam—the certificate awarded after three years of primary school — my father was away, grading papers elsewhere. During the exam at the Kinh Môn school, I remember people gathering outside the classroom windows, opening their black umbrellas and writing out the solutions in chalk on the fabric for their children and nephews to copy inside.

The proctor in my room, a friend of my father's from another school, went even further: he wrote the full set of answers on a sheet of paper and quietly told me to copy it down onto my exam. That year, I ended up ranking first in the district on the Sơ học yếu lược exam. The whole family laughed about it.

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At the Kinh Môn school, there were many lively moments.

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One time, before we had moved there permanently, my father brought my elder brother and me to the school to play; we even sat in on a class. While we were sitting quietly, my father assigned my brother Tài Khoái (my elder brother, who later died in 1947) to learn by heart the poem *The Charcoal Sellers on the Mountain (Vợ Chồng Người Bán Than Trên Núi)* by Tản Đà. Near the end of class, my father called on Khoái to recite. He stood and delivered the whole poem flawlessly from memory— while many of the pupils, despite repeatedly studying it, still could not.

The school stood on the hillside. In the afternoons, after class, it was time for physical exercise: each group of students followed their thầy up to the hilltop, which was level enough for drills. During recess, or after the exercises, we often took leaves of wild pandan, big enough for several children to sit on, and slid down the grassy slope like a sled. At that time we did not yet know that in cold countries people had real snow sleds.

The hill was high and windy, perfect for flying kites. The only trouble came when a string snapped and we had to chase the kite across one hill to another— down a slope, up another, tiring work, though as children we thought only of the fun, never the effort. The real nuisance was the sharp burrs in the grass, which clung all over our clothes and took ages to pick off at home, making it impossible to hide from our parents.

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At the foot of the school hill grew a tall silk-cotton tree, blazing red when in bloom. When the flowers withered and fell, they gave off a foul smell. Its fluffy white cotton, however, was waterproof; we tossed it from the hillside and watched it drift through the air, a delight for children. During recess, the older pupils often competed to hurl stones at the tree to see who could strike it.

[2]Thầy: Vietnamese term for teacher, used with respect, similar to "master" or "sir."

In Kinh Môn town, there was at that time a half-French customs officer. He carried a hunting rifle on his shoulder as he patrolled for contraband alcohol, often passing by the school. One day, as he walked past, the older pupils were throwing stones at the silk-cotton tree. By chance, one stone missed and struck him instead. Furious, he tried to chase down the culprit. The students taunted him, shouting in broken French and Vietnamese, "Le Français porte le cái bắp cầy!"—"The Frenchman carries a corn cob!"— mocking his rifle by comparing it to a cob of corn, an insult that revealed their resentment toward the French.

This only enraged him further. He soon learned that the stone-thrower was Mạc Văn Chục, a pupil in my father's class. Chục's family lived far from the school, on the road to Phú Thái station, so he cycled back and forth every day. The officer lay in wait for him at a crossroads with his gun, intending to shoot. Poor Chục was so frightened he did not dare return home that evening. Only after my father intervened did the man give up his attempt at revenge.

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When I was a delegate for Hải Hưng province in the Eighth National Assembly, there was one time in 1990 when I returned to meet voters in Kim Môn district (Kim Thành district had by then been merged with Kinh Môn). As a child, I had thought the old three-room school on the hillside was enormous. On that visit, I saw only a small house still standing where the old school had been. I could not tell whether the original building had been torn down and rebuilt, or if that little house was in fact the very same school from 1933 or 1934. That day I asked around, but no one could give me an answer.

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In 1936, my father was transferred to teach in Nam Định city, at the Jules Ferry School—also known as the Cửa Bắc School. He taught the second-year secondary class. There were three such classes: one taught by Vũ Văn Ninh, whom the pupils called "Ninh the Hunchback"; one taught by Nguyễn Tảo, nicknamed "Tảo the Short"; and one by my father.

In our household there were, as before, several cousins and siblings studying together, just as we had in Kinh Môn. But unlike in the district town, Nam Định city had a cinema. My father set a rule: according to each child's monthly class ranking, whoever kept or improved their standing would earn a ticket to the movies; whoever slipped in rank would get no ticket. Looking back, it was a simple way of encouraging competition within the family.

One month, some of the cousins and brothers did not earn tickets. But that month the cinema was showing a Charlie Chaplin film—too good to miss. Knowing how fond my father was of me, everyone conspired and asked me to speak to him, to let all of us go see Chaplin this time. Those who had lost their ticket this month would promise, even if they won one the next month, not to go. My father agreed, and in the end everyone was happy.

One year, during the Easter school holiday, my father took my brother and me to visit the historic sites of Lê Lợi in Thanh Hóa. My brother, who had a gift for drawing, sketched many views of Lam Sơn in pencil. On the way back we stopped in Ninh Bình town to visit Non Nước Pagoda. There we saw the footprint of a mandarin, carved deep into the surface of a stone. My father told us the story of that footprint and cursed roundly the arrogance of the official who had it made.

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When I moved up from the first-year secondary class to the second year, I entered my father's class.

In those days, each school year had several rounds of exams. That day, the test was on memorized lessons. The name of every pupil in the class was written on a small slip of paper, folded into

quarters. Whoever went up to recite would finish, then draw a slip and read aloud the name written on it. The student whose name was called would then step up to the board for their turn. Next, they would draw another slip with the title of a lesson written on it, and had to recite that lesson on the spot.

Schoolchildren, of course, are always mischievous.

That day, I don't recall exactly what encouragement from my friends led me to it. My real name was Nguyễn Tài Đông, but when it came time to write our names on those folded slips, I mischievously wrote it in reverse wordplay, turning it into "Đỗng Tài Nguyên." Then I tossed it in with the rest for the draw.

During class, the exam began. After a few pupils had recited, one drew a slip and called out: "Nguyên!" The whole class froze in confusion—there had never been anyone named Nguyên in our class. I, of course, knew at once. I stood up and started toward the board, giving a wink to the boy who had drawn the slip. But he didn't understand, and kept holding up the paper, calling again and again: "Nguyên! Nguyên!"

That drew my father's attention. He took the slip to have a look. By then I had reached the blackboard and drawn for my lesson. I launched straight into recitation, and the class, hearing me read smoothly from memory, was certain I would be marked highly, as had the others who recited well.

But when it came time to grade, my father gave me a big "egg"—a round zero. The reason: my prank of twisting my name into wordplay.

Hà Nội, June 26, 1996