

THE MAN WHO SWEEP UP THE TOMB OF GREAT OLD PHAN

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Five or six scrawny pupils of about 12 or 13 year old, who looked ill-nourished, were hopping like sparrows around the group of tourists; they were watching every visitor as if they expected to find something. Finally, one among them, a boy that looked smartest, shyly asked me:

“Dear uncle, you like to see Mr. Sáu Hấu? Everybody comes here, drops by to visit him, *hah*”.

I turned and looked at the boy inquiringly. Another boy waded in:

“He might be at home now, *hah*.”

The kids were pushing and shoving, and drawing together but none of them attempted to get close to us.

“Sure is,” the first boy asserted. “It’s five already. He usually comes home at four, *hah*.” The way these kids spoke was so lovely. All of a sudden I wanted to know who this man Sáu Hấu was.

“Who is Mr. Sáu Hấu, sons?” I asked them.

“He the man usually sweeps up the tomb of great old Phan, *hah*.”

I felt interested with the kid’s vernacular diction.

“Oh, that sounds interesting,” I said. “Who pays him for that?”

“Nobody pays him a penny, *hah*” replied the boy. “He just does it. Every day. He was dismissed at the outset. Then nobody bothers to hamper him anymore. They leave him alone and he does the job freely and feels at home with it, *hah*.”

I played along asking, “Did the landlord or the grave overseer blame him?”

Suddenly, the kids were jumping around and laughing.

“Ain’t no grave overseers here, *hah*. Or Mr. Tám Chinh, the chairman of the village is.”

It was tired of memorizing these hard-to-remember-names of Sáu Hấu and Tám Chinh. Curiously, I wanted to know who this man Sáu Hấu was.

“How far is it to the man, sons?”

“Just turn behind that banana clump,” came the boy’s reply. “Go ahead for some ten minutes, pass that *nhum* tree and you’ll see the man’s hut under the biggest combretum quadrangulare beside the fish pool.”

A glibbest boy was pointing to the one that had given me the directions:

“That pool used to be a bomb crater where his granddad was shot to death long time ago.”

I heaved a sigh, commented quietly: “The war aftermath lingers this long. Its vestige is seen until now.”

The boy seemed to be bewildered hearing those strange words as “the war aftermath”. He looked at me but said nothing. What a boy! His advice on directions was quite clear but it also made me rather confused since I didn’t know how a *combretum quadrangulare* looked like. I had just learned the name via the title of a novel long time before. And the *nhum* tree was what I was all in the dark about, too.

“We’ll go with you,” a girl who’d kept silent so far raised her voice.

That was such a circumstance that I came to know about Mr. Sáu Hấu four years ago when I set a plan to visit the tombs of famous persons in the country. The tomb of the former high-ranking officer Phan Thanh Giản is located at a small hamlet in Ba Tri District, Bến Tre Province. The first thing that disappointed me was that the tomb lied modestly on a small patch of land bordered around by habitants’ houses and invaded by trees and grass, whereas the Nguyễn Đình Chiểu mausoleum not very far from it was in a very stately area with a shrine and there were too many landing steps leading to the mausoleum⁽¹⁾. At the site there were some courteous and charming girls to be tourist guides, and there were also many caretakers and janitors to serve the place. Visitors were provided with candles and incense sticks at the price which they would pay for at their spontaneous offer.

Mr. Sáu Hấu’s smile looked like as if he was weeping:

“It might be a pleasure for Old Phan that he has a neighbor,” said Sáu Hấu jerking his chin towards the tomb of Teacher Võ Trường Toản⁽²⁾.

“Poet Nguyễn Đình Chiểu,” he continued, “is visited or celebrated only by living people, while Phan Thanh Giản the great officer of the late royal regime always has a friend near him in the other world that they can confide their sorrows and their concerns to each other. Who knows which way could please the deceased the most?”

I just popped out crooning a verse in Chinese words:

Sinh tiền giáo huấn đắc nhân, vô tử nhi hữu tử

(When living you taught many people; your students are like your children - even when you had none of your own)⁽³⁾

Mr. Sáu Hấu surprised me when he appeared to understand the verse:

“That’s right. Teacher Võ didn’t have any children, but he was admired and respected by all his students as if he had been their own father. Mr. Phan has had many offspring but at present they all disperse everywhere due to the force of circumstances. I consider myself his remote descendant in spirit... But isn’t it necessary to be of his flesh and blood? It’s sincere love and respect that count. I love him by reason of his volume of *Luong Khê’s collection of poems*⁽⁴⁾. I admire him in consideration of the fact that he deliberately and calmly took and drank up the cup of poison”.

In the yard, a hen was chirping calling her chicks; there were some ten lovely chicks in yellow-down peeping and running around their mother. Some feeble rays of sunshine lingering on the top of trees gave the sight the touch of desolation.

I blurted out a sullen question as if I were in an interrogation:

“Why didn’t local government take care of the tomb of great old Phan? As a matter of fact he was a very high-ranking official of the last royal court. He used to involve himself in the history and to this land, and he lived in great moral integrity and died bravely for his task. Whereas, Mr. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu was merely a writer who just raised his voice against the invaders, and didn’t have an opportunity to prove his action, albeit his furious statements in his writings when the time was a close call for the country.”

“It beats me, man!” said Sáu Hấu. “They would do if they wanted to; otherwise nobody can account for anything, *hah*.”

I like the expletive Mr. Sáu Hấu uttered to end his sentences, as I also like another one used by one of my female classmates, who was a descendant of some Hanoians, when we were in high school. Generally speaking, I like those words rarely heard in common parlance. Fancying the words I sometimes find myself love the people who speak them. I don’t know why. As a freshman at the college I often hung on to my male classmate Ngâu, who was a repository of vernaculars that I had not had a chance to explore. Loving strange words, I love also those things that bear strange names. I like taking hold of the *ky* (a bamboo plaited dustpan), touching a *chày vồ* (a wooden mallet), fingering the *khạp da bò* (an ox-skinned jar); I like sitting with one side of my bums on the shoulder of the *mái vú* (a huge earthen vase), I like shucking and eating each layer of skin of the *pía* cakes; and I like enjoying *bánh thừng* (muffin cakes), *mè xing* (sesame candy), *bánh còng*, *bánh khọt*, *bánh tai heo* (kinds of popular cakes), and I like looking at multi-colored *pigskin cake*... In a word, I fancy giving ear to the strange and simple terms that usually make themselves learned only via the common parlance of people in the countryside and can’t be found in the literature.

“Hey, Mr. Sáu,” I tried to explain to him in an unnatural way that at the time the country had needed heroes. “He who braved the enemies and their overwhelming forces is a hero. So, a man who rendered the land to the enemies and then drank poison to kill himself is not a hero at all, is he? And it’s not any wrong when such a man should be given the cold shoulder.”

“It’s a matter of life, man,” argued Sáu Hấu. “How can the outsiders get it straight from the horse mouth, *hah*? Which would be better, rendering the land to the enemies to spare the three provinces’ population all sufferings? or letting them all be prey to all kinds of enemy guns? To put it in a nutshell, it’s hard to have your say, Mr. Việt Kiều! Any outsider can easily give their comments, but when things come to pass the situation will turn out to be extremely difficult. However hard you might crack your brain at the time, not an effective tactic could be available then.”

I felt bewildered being addressed as Mr. Việt Kiều. I didn’t know why. But I felt uneasy as if I had done something wrong which other people knew but they didn’t bother to make it clear. I might have felt some inferiority complex since this scrawny old man had been doing such an unselfish good deed while I was healthier than he was but I stood outside as an onlooker. I made some irrelevant remarks for a talk.

Mr. Sáu Hấu was quite unruffled rolling a cigarette. He lit it and was puffing at it.

“And you think,” I told the man, “that getting a fix on the situation to handle it, as the late great old Phan did, is the manner of a hero. By sweeping up his grave, you want to mean that you hold

a special value higher than that of other people, don't you, my friend?" I addressed him friendly as *my friend* to placate him.

Mr. Sáu Hầu looked down onto his sunburned wrists in dark complexion. The wrists were speckled and lumpy with scars and callous skin. He did not respond to my question. Instead, he said softly:

"Just something easy to do. Nothing hard at all, bro. Time elapses and the life will pass even if you keep sitting idly looking around. Time waits for nobody. I just sweep up dried leaves, and remove dogs' dung from the ground hoping to please the deceased. That's all. Do my simple words make any sense, hah?"

He stood up. His pair of old casual shorts was grey and rather wide. His legs were black and like two pieces of decaying wood. He took a broom made of palm leaves in one hand, and with the other hand he picked up a piece of rag and put it into a pail half full with water. His bearing was rather slow. His legs seemed to be shaking. The approach of old age on people in the countryside seems to be quicker than on those in cities.

"Lets go," said the man. "I've to go sweep up late old Phan's grave now. Or the sun will descend a bit lower, and couples of youths will come sitting around spelling difficulty for my job."

I offered taking the bucket of water for him, but Mr. Sáu Hầu slightly pushed my hand off, bespeaking that he was not yet old.

The late afternoon was shading the grave area. The wind turned cool. Some couples of young lovers had been taking their good sitting places; their motorcycles were put around but failed to cover their cuddles.

Mr. Sáu Hầu was concentrating on his job as if those youths weren't there on the earth. He whispered to me:

"Don't look at them, or they may feel shy. Young people at any time are alike. They enjoy living at present time. The morrow will take care of itself." He squinted and his face looked like that of a real man about town: "When you have time, try to recall things that you've experienced in your life. They wouldn't be different from theirs at all, hah."

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After Tết, on the pretext of reading the epitaph on the tombstone which I had promised to copy for a cultural department in the country, I returned to visit the great old Phan grave in order to have a chance to get some chat with Mr. Sáu Hầu.

Seeing some dozen big water-melons lying about in his house, I made a remark that he had celebrated the New Year in a big manner. He explained that:

"Tám Chinh had those melons brought to me as presents for Tết, but I don't accept them. The melons are stolen stuff; receiving them I wouldn't be able to beat a bad reputation. Last week, two vans carrying melons were competing against each other for the road resulting in the crash of one at the parting of the ways. Melons were thrown broken onto the road. The driver of the crashed van was limping out of the site and on the run. People came to make off with the melons for Tết. It was so bad. Nevertheless, Tám Chinh came to observe the scene and allowed his men using delivery tricycles to collect the melons and sold them at the market place. I cried foul and he bought my silence by giving me those melons saying that he offered them to the spirit of great

old Phan. That offering to old Phan obliged me to take the melons, but I just leave them there while trying to conceive a way to solve them. Great old Phan will never tolerate such blatant robbery; how can he accept their offerings?"

I dropped a clanger, very impudently, by telling him:

"Lets cut a melon to eat, and the rest will be sent back to them."

Mr. Sáu Hấu flushed with indignation:

"Why, as a Việt Kiều, why can you say so? If you feel like eating, I'll go to the market and buy a couple of melons and we'll eat to our full. But these melons are stolen stuff. How can we swallow such thing!"

I grinned at him and tried to get it into his head that I was just joking. It took quite long, however, to allay his anger.

Some moments later, in a very friendly way, I inquired him about his family. He was crooning a verse: *It's quite uneasy to run my rhyme on my marriage status*. Then he pulled his shirt over his belly:

"Excuse me, mister Việt Kiều. I didn't think I should show you this, but... well, It's OK. Look, it's because of this big scar that I can't have a wife."

"Why is it so?" I asked.

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"...Our boat arrived in Hong Kong," recalled Sáu Hấu, "after the date when refugees were no longer received, so we all boatmen were taken into custody. Two years or so later, we were forced to be repatriated. Goddamn, we'd risked our lives to flee the country and then were forced to return home just because we'd arrived after the date. Shit. Despite our demonstrations, we were tied and thrown into trucks one after another and sent home in successive stages. I was in a group of nine or ten men who committed suicide by lacerating our bellies open to protest the forcible repatriation. The floor was slimy with blood, but nobody bothered to raise their voice. Some men breathed their last, while the others were dying. I came to and found myself aboard a home-bound plane, with my belly in bandages. The wound still bled at the moment. I've been out of touch with my beloved girlfriend since then."

I heaved a sigh:

"It must be our fate, Mr. Sáu. Since the destiny has been written, wherever we are our fate will find us out. No matter how much effort we made, it's our fortune that counts. It's important that we shall live honestly and righteously. Sweeping up the tomb of great old Phan, my old friend, is a thousand times better a man than being a Việt Kiều that acts up, cheats and steals money from your receiving country.

Sáu Hấu cheered up a little bit. He opened his mind to me:

"In the refugee camp, when it rained at night, the sounds of the raindrops hitting the metal roofs sounded like funeral music; it evoked the dark future of those who had no native country. Moreover, I felt much sadder when the struggle must be kept secret; I could not share it to anyone. I often crooned these verses that had been composed by great old Phan when he was far from home and could not sleep:

*As I can't sleep the night becomes endless
In silence my thoughts reached their ripeness
The year comes to its end but many things unsolved
To legends of the yore they are devolved
Time is passing like a river running
And the moon over a lonely mountain shining
With whom can I share my confidence
In this strange land it racks my conscience.⁽⁵⁾*

“Returning to the home country,” Sáu Hầu continued, “after having spent a period of time toiling away to make a living, I made my way adrift to this prosperous land. I came to see that the area of the tomb of great old Phan had been falling into decadence; chicken scratched for food everywhere; dogs scattered their waste; kids littered all over the place; buffalo keepers broke slates and the edges of the tombstone. I recalled when I had been in the barbed-wire fenced refugee camp, I’d fed my soul with his poem *Not in sleep* which helped keep me from being insane and jumping out of the high floors. At that time I pledged myself...”

I stood up, shook hands with the old friend. I took a loving care of his hand like with a senior member of my family that I hadn’t seen for a long time. We looked at each other’s eyes without saying a word.

For years, every time there was an acquaintance of mine returning to Vietnam I asked him or her to come round and see if the man was OK. Nobody ever kept me posted specifically. They all reported that they hadn’t been able to find the man, and that no ones knew where Sáu Hầu had moved to. The bomb-crater fish pond in front of his house had been filled up as if it had disappeared into nowhere which was like the missing history of his life. At last, someone told me that he had stepped upon a sharp piece of potsherd or shrapnel or a rusty nail and ended up being killed of tetanus. But I think that he has thrown off his earthly body and left this mundane world to return to his world of absolute void. He had reincarnated in this world to teach people loving-kindness and to wake up my own joyful giving attitude which was dormant. It’s probably that his task had been completed and he chose a moving way of leaving the world to mean something to people. His message might imply that: the country is not yet really in safety. People are always at risk as dangers and hazards are always lurking around them; nobody can say what is what, hah. Lessons of life are ubiquitous around us. The difficulty is that we don’t know which to learn.

Living in a foreign country far away, sometimes I sat looking at clouds drifting in the sky and I felt missing my native land. I blamed myself for having failed to figure out, at that time, why he swept up the tomb of great old Phan. Sáu Hầu had conjured up the inkling that: “Between people of the three southern provinces who were unable to defend themselves, on one side, and those French armed invaders on the other side, who are deserving of our esteem? and who should be rated as despicable?”



Victorville, CA, June 1-10, 2011

The author's notes:

Dear Mr. Sáu Hấu,

Generally, a short story comes to its end when all related events have been told. Even the author does not have the right to spell out anything on his work. He must leave it to the readers to fathom it out. Please forget something I have written that may be without your content and some other things that I may have piled them on a little bit. That whether you are dead or alive carries much weight for your own fate, but it does not amount too much to the lessons you have left to the life. That is why I have written this story about you but I am not going to go visit the place where you have come to your last rest. Will you please get it?

¹ The tombs of great old Phan and Teacher Võ are located at Bảo Thạnh Hamlet, Ba Tri District, Bến Tre Province. The tomb of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu is at An Đức Hamlet of the same District.

² Võ Trường Toản, a well-known and very admirable teacher in Gia Định, later would become Saigon City, in 18th century.

³ This verse is of a couplet (duilian) composed in Chinese, carved on the tombstone of Phan Thanh Giản's grave. The other verse reads:

Một hậu thịnh danh tại thế, tuy vong giả bất vong"

(You've passed away but your good reputation stays – You're dead but your spirit is alive)

⁴ *Lương Khê* is a pen-name of Phan Thanh Giản.

⁵ The poem *Bất My* (Not in sleep) composed in Chinese by Phan Thanh Giản, printed in his collection "*Lương Khê Thi Thảo*". Nguyễn Văn Sâm transliterated and translated the poem into Vietnamese.