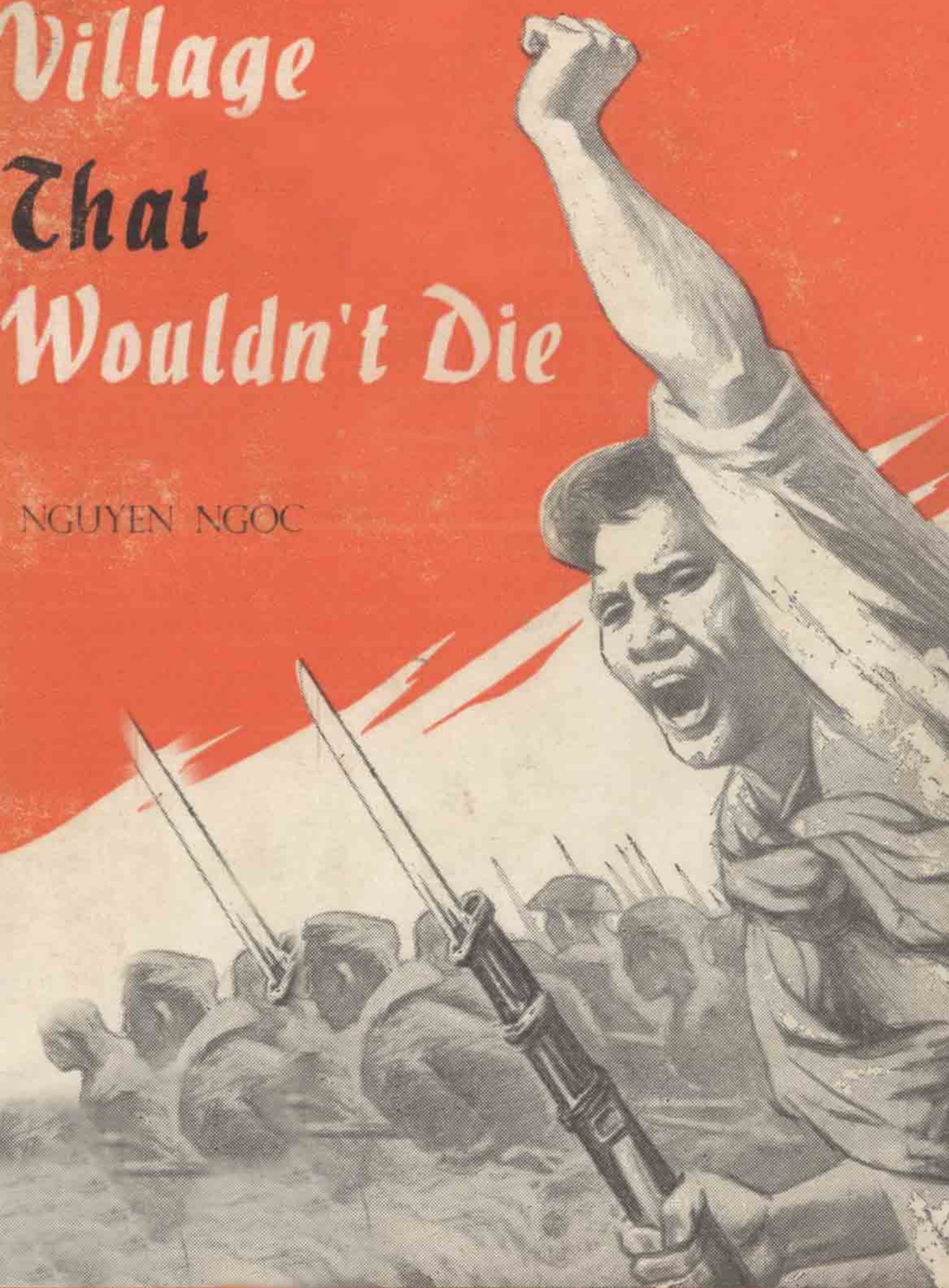


The Village That Wouldn't Die

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ASIAN WRITERS' BUREAU

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AFRO-ASIAN WRITERS' BUREAU
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This book belongs to a set of literary works edited and published by the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau. The aim is to promote unity among African and Asian writers in the cause of fighting imperialism and to strengthen cultural relations between the African and Asian countries. More books of this kind will be published in the future. We hope our work will meet with the support of Afro-Asian writers.

INTRODUCTION

One summer night, when the August Revolution of 1945 was barely six months old, our last army units on Tây Nguyên (Western Highlands) crossed a river and temporarily withdrew to the plain, before the enemy's all-out offensive. These Highlands, in the Southern part of Central Viet Nam, among the most beautiful and richest regions in our country, were then occupied by the enemy.

The Highland people, however, were unconquerable. The war was waged in a thousand ways and gave the enemy not a moment's breathing space. Several villages which obstinately turned a deaf ear to the enemy's inducement to follow him, were blockaded and cut off from their supply of salt and for years had to burn 'gianh' grass and substitute its ashes for salt. As the enemy burnt down villages and crops, many villages moved from place to place, some as many as thirteen times, as in the case of Kong Hoa, the village in this novel. From the valleys to the summits of high mountains, the people built new*

* A grass with long thick blades, used for roofing.

butts and burnt new clearings for their crops while never ceasing their fight against the invader.

The enemy troops advanced in dread. Traps bristling with sharpened bamboo spikes were hidden everywhere. There was death underfoot; but while they concentrated the gaze on the ground, there were also traps overhead. One bamboo tree springing back suddenly was enough to kill a man. There were battles in which they could see no enemy, but rocks were flung from the peaks of high mountains as if by malignant ghosts. No matter which way they ran they could neither escape the deluge of rocks, nor stop it.

Hardly had our troops withdrawn from the area than political cadres arrived. Our organizations were set up one by one. They were sometimes disrupted by the enemy and the cadres had to fly to the deep jungle and, of their own accord, villages split into two — one part pretending to pass over to the enemy and the other moving to the base of the mountains, under the pretext that they were hunting deer but in reality to make contact with the cadres.

In spring 1954, an old man who feared that, left to themselves, our troops would take a very rough track and damage their artillery and so fail to annihilate the enemy, carried rotten phosphorescent bark on his back and endured incredible hardships to guide our men through the mountains to the enemy post. This was eventually stormed and his village liberated.

The author's school-life had not ended when he began his military career. He spent almost all his army life between the mountain-slopes of the South

and the jungle in the North of the Western Highlands. He was at one time an organizing political cadre sharing the hard life of the Highland people.

In spring 1954, he was in one of the units that liberated the Western Highlands, and was wounded in the course of an assault on a fortress. The author saw the heroic history and the valiant spirit of resistance, typified by the people of the beautiful South-West land to which he had had a strong attachment since early youth. These people were hardly known to the outside world because of the natural barriers of rivers and mountains.

*In 1953, the fighter Nup went down the mountains for the first time, to attend the Festival of Model Fighters of the whole Fifth inter-zone.**

For years, under the most difficult circumstances and without the leadership of his superiors, while the enemy unremittingly launched "mopping-up" operations, burnt down villages, drove their inhabitants to concentration camps and destroyed crops, Nup persistently led his fellow-villagers from one place to another, carrying on production and at the same time fighting the enemy. He succeeded in maintaining and expanding the resistance and also in killing a great number of enemy troops.

His hamlet was elected model hamlet of the Fifth inter-zone. While listening to the report of Nup's achievements, the entire audience was spell-bound. As they listened, their enthusiasm grew. It was as if

* Inter-zone: During the war, as the French cut off all the main lines of communication, Viet Nam was divided into many inter-zones, each embracing 5 or 6 provinces.

they were seeing the country rising before their eyes. Nup was awarded a First Class Fighter Medal and a First Class Resistance Medal.

When he first met Nup, the author felt that he had met the hero of the novel he had set his mind on for years. He found that all the finest, noblest and most symbolic features of the Western Highlands were typified in Nup.

The thought of this novel gave him no peace of mind.

His desire to write it became more pressing when he had, for a time, to leave the land and people he would love for ever, to regroup to the North. But happily Nup also went to the North and on September 2, 1955 was given the title of Army Hero and awarded a Third Class Military Medal by President Ho Chi Minh and the Government. Nguyen Ngoc felt his obligation towards the Hero and the Western Highlands all the more urgently.

The Department for Culture of the Army set up a camp for creative work, and, understanding the author's pressing desire, assigned him to the camp with the task of writing the novel he had dreamed of for so long. The other writers in the camp, the management, the hero Nup himself and the Southern comrades who had set up the organizations on the Western Highlands helped him convert his long cherished dream into a reality.

Thus "The village that wouldn't die", his first novel, came into existence. It has been recognized as one of the most cherished blooms of Vietnamese culture. It was awarded First Literary Prize for 1954-1955

by the Association of Vietnamese Writers and Artists. In this work the author makes it clear and, through him, the reader comes to understand that: no force on earth can subdue these people, who are perseveringly struggling for national unification and peace.

Part One

I

“Hello, mai* Du! How are your hands? Sore from working? Look at the sky. The sun is flying with the *phi*** birds. Aren't they beautiful?”

A flock of *phi* had been picking paddy in the *ray****. Nobody had startled them but suddenly they had lifted their tiny heads, looked right and left as if puzzled then taken wing as one, carrying the sunlight on their red-brown wings.

Hearing Lieu call her, Du raised her eyes to the flock of birds while her hands were still pulling grains from the rice stalk. She replied:

“Well, mai Lieu, I haven't really done much yet, and my hands are still all right. But we have to be quick. If we are too slow the French will take away all our paddy when they come and we shall have nothing to eat. Then we would have to go to the jungle and dig yams to fill our empty stomachs.”

The pair sang while carrying on their work:

* *Mai*: sister, friend. Therefore mai Du means sister Du, in the friendly sense only.

** *Phi*: species of sparrow with multi-coloured feathers.

*** *Ray*: a strip of jungle burnt down to fertilize the soil. When the soil is exhausted the jungle is allowed to grow again while another strip is cultivated.

*My paddy is already golden ripe,
Birds, birds, fly away!
Wait till I've made offerings to
Heaven,
Then you can come back and eat
the scattered grains,
They are yours,
But these are mine.
Morning and afternoon, we,
husband and wife, take our
baskets and go to our ray
And get these grains by our
toil. . . .*

The baskets they were carrying on their backs were filled little by little as the day wore on. Lieu turned and glanced at Du two or three times, hesitated, then drew near her and asked:

"Du! This morning did you go to Thi Om spring to draw water?"

"Yes, I've taken three measures and left them in the hut. If you're thirsty, go and have a drink."

Lieu shook her head and with one finger lifted the few hairs falling on her forehead:

"No, I'm not thirsty. . . . Listen Du! When you went to Thi Om spring did you happen to see brother Nup with a basket on his back and a jungle-knife in his hand going down the mountain in the direction of Dat Hoa spring?"

"Yes, I saw him. Brother Nup was going to De Po to buy salt."

Lieu stopped working. She stood stroking the rice ears for a while, then said in a whisper:

"You are wrong, Du. Brother Nup was going to An Khe."

Knitting her brows she went on:

"Our Kong Hoa village does not side with the French. When they sent for corvee,* we did not go. When they sent for taxes, we did not pay. When they attacked us, we left our village and fled to the mountains. Now, if we go to An Khe, would they send us to prison?"

"If they knew, certainly they would send us to prison. . . . But brother Nup was not going to An Khe. His mother told me that he had gone to De Po."

"Brother Nup did not tell the truth to his mother. In his mind he wanted to go to An Khe, his feet were going to An Khe, only his mouth told his mother that he was going to De Po . . . he told me that he was going to An Khe. . . ."

"What for?"

"He wants to have a look at the French."

"Have a look at the French? How does he dare? What would he do if they put him in prison?"

Lieu had put the problem to Du to ease her own mind. But after doing so she was even more worried.

That morning on her way to the field, Lieu had met Nup at the Thi Om spring. He stood on a rock

* Corvee: conscripted labour.

with water running over his feet. The water flowed peacefully; but around the rock it bubbled as if in anger and flung up a silver spray. Using his hands as a cup, Nup was drinking the spring water. He held out to Lieu a very beautiful *chum** and said:

"I give it to you."

Lieu took the *chum*, blushing with pleasure. She fastened it round her waist and dropped her head to hide her shining black eyes:

"Last night, I heard you play the *dinh nam* flute. I liked it very much . . . where are you going now?"

"I'm going to An Khe."

Lieu stared at him in surprise:

"Why are you going to An Khe? Aren't you afraid of the French? Last month, when the Ba Lang villagers refused to go on corvee, the French came and bombed their village and killed thirty people. The day before yesterday, they strafed De Tung villagers who were at a meeting in the communal house and killed seventeen. They hate our Ba Na people so much! What are you going to see them for?"

Nup rubbed some moss off the rock with his toes:

"Lieu! They have killed many of our Ba Na people. I am going to see whether we can fight them. . . . Well, the sun is rather high, I had better be off now."

* *Chum*, a belt for women of the Ba Na minority. It is a token of love, and is woven from very fine strips of bamboo. It takes a young man as long as a month to make a *chum* for his sweetheart.

Lieu was at a loss. She stood there looking after him. She saw his hair blown by the wind. Then he disappeared among the green foliage. She unbound the *chum*, dipped it in the water to soften it, then rolled it up and hid it at the bottom of her basket, climbed up the bank and went to the field.

As she passed by Nup's *ray*, Lieu stopped to look at it. The rice in the *ray* was quite ripe. His mother was pulling off the grain, her back bent. Nup's *ray* was very good, very large, the largest in Kong Hoa village. Its length measured so many spans that when counting one had to go back and start again many times. There seemed to be no end to it. It was also very wide, nearly as wide as it was long. Before Nup went to work, there had been many big trees in this field, so big that three or four men could hardly encircle them with outstretched arms. And plenty of big rocks too, some as big as a pig and some as big as a buffalo. Nup had had no father since he was two years old. He had only his mother and a little brother. But all by himself he cut and hewed and succeeded in felling all the big trees, and removing all the big rocks, clearing a strip of jungle. He planted rice and maize and his family became the best off in the village. Old folk in the village such as Bok* Pa and Bok Sung, were very fond of him and used to praise him when sitting in the communal house, as they tapped their pipes on a wooden-mortar:

* Uncle, respected old man.

"Nup is a fine young fellow and a good worker, too. He is more than a match for any of the youngsters in the village. If someone in the village falls sick, Nup is always the first to go to the jungle to pick leaves to cure him. If someone dies he is the first to go to the mountain to fell a tree and make a coffin. He has clever hands too. He can weave a *gui** as well as a *ro*** He respects his elders. Yes, he's a good lad all right...."

Lieu kept thinking of Nup and stopped her work of gathering grain. When Du looked back she found Lieu standing motionless with a rice ear in her hands and a far-away look in her eyes. Earlier, while rummaging in Lieu's basket, Du had found the *chum* hidden at the bottom. She guessed that it was from Nup and felt a bit disturbed. She had been very quiet ever since. But now that she saw Lieu so upset, she felt sorry for her. She stole up behind Lieu and suddenly shouted. Lieu started and nearly dropped her basket. Then they clung to each other and laughed happily. Du pointed at Lieu's face:

"A ha! You're caught. Your eyes look at the rice ear but your head is thinking of Nup. Am I right?"

Lieu gripped both Du's hands. Her cheeks flushed and her hair falling on her forehead, she shook her head:

"You are wrong! You are wrong!"

* A long carrying basket used by minority people and worn on their backs when going to the jungle or fields.

** A round basket used at home.

Nup waded across the Thi Om spring, walked for a while in the jungle and then arrived at the big Dat Hoa brook. Nup's village, Kong Hoa, was on one side of the brook, and on the other was Ba Lang village. As the two villages were so close, for centuries, at harvest time their people would call on each other and beat gongs together in celebration.

On this day many people from Ba Lang had come to the brook to fish.

Not long before, Ba Lang village had refused to go on corvee or pay taxes to the French, who had sent aircraft to hunt them down. The children, who were unconscious of the danger, ran into the open to look at the planes. The planes dropped bombs which exploded into fire.* The fire ate up trees and people. There were the charred bodies of women who still carried their babies, with hands pointing to the planes. There were the bodies of old men, with no beard, no hair left, and lying coiled on the stones. The survivors hid themselves in caves and did not dare to go out to their *ray*. They lived on wild fruit like animals. The French sent word to them:

"You had better surrender to us. We still have bombs with fire that can eat up even the stones. One of these days we will drop bombs all over the mountains and forests."

* Napalm was frequently used by the French in their war against the Vietnamese.