



**IMPASSE**



**NGUYEN CONG HOAN**

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**FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE**

***HANOI — 1963***



## NOTES

1. — **Two verses from Kim Van Kieu**, Vietnamese masterpiece by Nguyen Du :

Nguoi dau gap go lam chi,  
Tram nam biet co duyen gi hay khong ?

2. — **Quan Vien** : Assistant officiant at ceremony in honour of the village genie. To perform this function, a man had to pay a certain sum of money.
3. — **Exploitation practised by landlords and village dignitaries** which consisted in lending paddy at pre-harvest time when the price of paddy was generally high because of food shortage, and compelling the borrowers to repay the loan in paddy at the price ruling at harvest time, i.e. at a low price. By this practice the poor peasants had sometimes to pay double the quantity of paddy they had borrowed.
4. — **Temple of Genie Tran** : built in honour of Tran Hung Dao, the national hero who three times defeated the Mongol invaders in the 13th century. Temples dedicated to him were erected in many villages and superstitious people believed that he could grant them all they wished.
5. — **The cholera devil enlisting recruits** : The superstitious peasants believed that cholera was caused by a devil who recruited his army in Hell by killing people living on Earth.  
1 sao equals 360 sq. m.  
1 mau equals 3,600 sq. m.



## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

*Impasse* (Buoc Duong Cung) was first published in 1938 in Hanoi, when the Vietnamese nation was still suffering under the rule of the French colonialists and the quisling Vietnamese kings and mandarins.

At that time, the French Popular Front (1936-1939) advocated more democratic liberties for the colonies. In face of the Vietnamese people's seething and powerful struggle under the leadership of the Indo-Chinese Communist Party (now the Viet Nam Workers' Party), the French ruling colonialists had to "promulgate" a few reforms such as to "declare" to give freedom of opinion and freedom of association, to grant amnesty to a certain number of political prisoners. It was in these conditions that *Impasse* made its appearance.

Nguyen Cong Hoan was a writer who at that time soon took up a progressive view. He dared expose in *Impasse* the injustices in the Vietnamese countryside, but had not yet seen in colonialism the root of all these injustices. He thought that the peasants' ignorance and illiteracy were the causes of their poverty and wretchedness. He still believed that "in the villages run by decent people, only three years after they did away with the backward custom of feasting, they saved enough money to pave their lanes, to build schools and to do a lot of things of public utility..."

Apart from this weakness, *Impasse* has the very great merit of realism. It vehemently denounces the typical means of exploitation and repression of which the peasants were victims under the domination of the French colonialists and their henchmen.

It vividly exposes the backward and miserable life of scores of millions of Vietnamese peasants driven to an abominable and desperate plight... It is this strong accusation which made the French ruling colonialists ban the circulation and concealment of *Impasse* throughout Viet Nam six months after its publication in 1938, though freedom of opinion had been "promulgated" and censorship formally "abrogated".

*Impasse* clearly shows that the Vietnamese peasants had no other way than to rise against the imperialists' rule, wrest back independence and freedom and bring the Vietnamese people's Revolution of August 19, 1945 to success.

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## BIOGRAPHY

of

### NGUYEN CONG HOAN

Nguyen Cong Hoan was born in 1903 at Xuan Cau village, Van Giang district, Hung Yen province. He began his literary career in 1920. His first collection of short stories appeared in 1923.

Most of his works were written between 1928 and 1942, (prior to the August 1945 Revolution). In fifteen years, he wrote about three hundred short stories and twenty novels. In a humorous and satirical style, his works depict the wretchedness of the Vietnamese toiling people under the yoke of the French colonialists, lay bare and ridicule the corruption and vileness and bad and queer customs of the old society.

In 1942 the French colonialists forbade him to write after having banned the circulation of his two novels, **Buoc Duong Cung** (Impasse) in 1938, and **Cai Thu Lon** (The Pig's Head), in 1939.

During the Resistance war (1945-1954) Nguyen Cong Hoan worked in a political organ of the Viet Nam People's Army and temporarily interrupted his literary career.

After the restoration of peace, he again buckled down to writing novels to accuse the imperialists' crimes, using as themes the Vietnamese society under French domination.



In 1957, after the foundation of the Association of Writers, he was elected its chairman. At present he is a member of the Standing Bureau of its Executive Committee.

His masterpieces are : Selected Short Stories (two collections), **La Ngoc Canh Vang** (Jade Leaves and Golden Stems), **Buoc Duong Cung** (Impasse), **Cai Thu Lon** (The Pig's Head), **Tranh Toi Tranh Sang** (In the Twilight), **Dong Rac Cu** (Old Rubbish), etc.

Many of his short stories and novels have been translated into Russian, Chinese, French, English, Albanian, Hindi and Spanish.

**L**YING on the plank bed in the central room, with a forearm across his forehead, Pha struck the mat from time to time with the flat of his arecaspathe fan. He did so, not because he was hot but because he wanted to show that he was still awake.

After a long day of hard work in the field, Pha was dog tired. Usually at this time of day he was sleeping soundly. But today, full of expectation, he tried to keep awake. And his expectation was mixed with anxiety: his wife was in labour.

He could not help worrying. Two years earlier, on the day when his wife gave birth to a still-born baby girl, he had gone through such an ordeal. It was her first time and she had writhed under the pangs of child-birth for hours. When her body was completely twisted with pain, she could bear it no longer and called her husband names for being the cause of her troubles. Ba Trum Sung, a midwife who in thirty years assisted nearly every woman in the canton was also scared stiff that day and superstitiously urged him to climb at once across his roof, and splash across the pond from side to side, in spite of biting cold.

Now, at the mere thought of it, a shudder ran through Pha's body as if he had received orders to go on a deputation to a king.

Since Ba Trum Sung came, whenever he heard her prod his wife to contract her muscles and force the baby out, and his wife panting like a dying person he felt anxious for her and worried about himself. The more he thought, the lonelier he felt.

He was lonely indeed. He had three brothers. Quay was dead, Quoi worked in the Thai Nguyen mine and Hoa had completely vanished since he went away last year in the twelfth month after the famine. Pha thought he had gone to an uncle's, a wealthy merchant in the chief provincial town. But it did not seem to be the case. His elder sister, Chi Sao, was fortunately in easy circumstances but lived rather far away since she had got married. Pha was relatively better-off than his brothers for he had a wife who did some trading with a little capital. Her load of wares worth about thirty piastres had been bringing in enough profit to keep both of them alive and saving them the trouble of running about to raise money. And thanks to the eight sao of land left by his parents they would not starve.

Pha's house was located at the entrance of Chum hamlet, An Dao village, on an odd bit of land of about two hundred square metres, given to the Phas by his in-laws after their marriage. They had saved up since then and built a hut to shelter them and to put an end to the gossip about their being offered hospitality by others while they had a plot of land of their own.

The hut was like most huts in our villages. A grass covered roof which looked rather casual on the top of low thin wattle and daub walls. There were a room in the middle and a room on each side. Meals were cooked on the verandah at one side, over a drain filled with refuse. Plenty of daylight could have come into the hut were the bamboo-lattice which served as the main door not shut from dawn to dusk by the owners who were busy at work in the field and in the market. Neither man nor wife had time to spare to the house.



Although only two years old, it had outlived its usefulness and the owners cared very little for it and had extended the normal duration of its use.

The grass roof from which hung clusters of cobwebs, collected rivers of rain water and let it flow into the hut through its many gaps. Everything in it, the air, the furniture, the clothing, and the provisions smelt fusty. Under the plank bed, there was a nest of mosquitoes which were ready to wage a guerilla war on any human being. The floor was covered with moss, with small mounds of woodworm-dust. Under it mice and rats lived undisturbed in holes where they freely multiplied. The whole inside of the hut was the nest of all sorts of germs. Thousands of gaps and holes in the walls all around let in sunrays. It seemed that thousands of eyes of evil genii tried to stare the germs dumb and keep them in.

But the Phas did not realize that living there for the past two years was a hazardous feat on their part. And once more Chi Pha shut herself in her room, having sent for Ba Trum Sung to assist her.

As soon as the old lady set her foot on the verandah, she shouted to her to contract her muscles and let the baby out. She lifted the gauze eye-veil from her dim eyes and focused.

"Its' so dark here," she said stepping in, "can I have a lamp? Go to it! May Buddha give you a son, to your great joy."

"This air-tight room," she added with satisfaction, "is just the thing for a confined woman."

She groped about but could not find the bed.

"Where are you?" she asked laughing, "I can't see anything. Won't you give me a lamp?"

At that moment Pha had lit the kerosene lamp. He brought it to the door of the room and put it on the sill.

"Here you are, granny," he shouted from outside.

"Nonsense, man!" she scolded. "Don't be so squeamish; it's your wife and nobody else. Come right in!"

Before Pha could answer, his wife said, panting, "My husband brings ill-luck to everyone, you know."

"Come on, try harder, it's coming," Ba Trum spurred. "Hold your breath and send it out."

The smoky lamp moved into the room in the wrinkled hand of Ba Trum.

On his bed, Pha listened intently.

He heard his wife breathe deeply and believed she was gathering all her strength.

"Poor me, Ba Trum," she screamed all of sudden writhing with pain, "it's not out yet ! I'm dying !"

"You're a fool. Don't cry. Go to it! Shut up and try to let it out."

"But I can't help crying. It's very painful. I'm dead tired."

At each of his wife's groans, Pha's face was twisted as if with pain. If only he could suffer for her ! But there was nothing he could do. He sighed, shaking his head.

"What a plague, these mosquitoes!" scolded the midwife clapping her hands, in an attempt to squash one of them, "Won't you give me a fan, Pha?"

Pha sat up, went to the door, put his hand in, and stole a glance into the room.

"Here you are, Ba Trum," he called.

Thinking that her husband was coming in, Chi Pha hurriedly turned to the wall, pulling up her trousers to hide her nakedness.

"Get out," she shouted panting and grinding her teeth, trying hard to be audible. "Shame on you, men!"

"He isn't coming in, my dear," Ba Trum mumbled, "And after all, isn't he your husband?"

Pha paled, believing that his wife was about to abuse him as she had done the first time.

"Why is it so long?" he asked Ba Trum under his breath, when handing her his fan.

Ba Trum whispered something into his ear. He understood better the acid smell of her betel quid than her voice. But he knew what she wanted him to do.

He went at once out into the yard down to a tiny disused pigsty. He grasped one of the planks of its door and pulled with all his strength. One after another, he succeeded in pulling off four.

His job done, he walked back cheerfully to the house, under the belief that his wife would be delivered right away and without pain and thus he would be saved from the great horror. Ba Trum had told him the other day of this wonderful old wives' remedy.

But Chi Pha went on moaning, moaning loudly. At each pain which made her writhe, the midwife scolded, "Contract your muscles instead of screaming. Screaming won't help it out. You're getting on my nerves. Your husband made me come in a hurry and the baby isn't out yet. I could have had a good sleep."

Each time, Pha thought his wife was going to die of exhaustion. He dreaded to hear her call him names.

But after a while, his wife's room became quiet. He pricked up his ears. No more screams and no more prodding. Probably the two women had dropped off to sleep.

At the beginning of the third watch, Pha heard his wife call repeatedly:

"Ba Trum, Ba Trum! Oh dear, it hurts, it hurts terribly!"

"Darling," she called her husband, having got no answer from the midwife. "Wake her up, quick, quick!"

Pha sat up in confusion. "Ba Trum, Ba Trum!" he called. "My wife wants you!"

He guessed the delivery was near. And his worries increased.

"Yes, yes," said Ba Trum in a sleepy voice, "just try harder a little more, Chi Pha!" Then she fanned herself for a short while and sat up.

"It's coming, Ba Trum, it's coming," said Chi Pha.

"I am here."



Chi Pha held her breath and made another effort. Pha's heart was throbbing. Moments later, a baby's cry was heard and filled him with joy.

"A boy!"

Pha was overjoyed to the point of confusion. So, his wife had done very well. And they had a son, a real heavenly reward for an honest couple.

The baby went on crying. The midwife bathed him. One could hear the water fall. He cried harder. Ba Trum did something for a while.

"Give him suck," she advised, "to quieten him a bit."

A little later she announced, "Now, it's time I go."

"It's late," Chi Pha said, exhausted. "You'd better spend the rest of the night here."

"I'd rather not, for fear of missing market tomorrow."

She took the lamp and stepped out of the door.

"Good night," she said.

Pha gave her her walking stick and took the lamp from her hand.

He helped her down into the yard. She stared at Pha with her weak eyes.

"A good piece of luck!" she whispered. "Otherwise we'd have to sit up through the night. When you've a minute, come to see me."

"Let me see you to your place."

"Thank you. I'll manage in this moonlight. It's as bright as day."