

NHAT LINH

A DREAM OF TU LAM

TRANSLATED FROM THE VIETNAMESE
BY GREG AND MONIQUE LOCKHART

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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Nhat Linh was the pen name of Nguyen Tuong Tam (1906-1963), known for his important contribution to the development of modern Vietnamese literature. Published in his 1926 *Silk Spinner* anthology, "A Dream of Tu Lam" is a seminal short story, expressing a utopian vision based on a retreat into an ideal construction of the past. While the hypersensitivity of some of its love passages may suggest an affinity for the "mandarin duck and butterfly" literature that was popular in China early this century, the story generally reworks elements of the older "scholar-beauty" genre in both Chinese and Vietnamese fiction. Dating from the seventeenth century, the "scholar-beauty" novels (*tai tu-gial nhan* in Vietnamese) are known for their rambling, if predictable plots. Scholar meets beauty, falls in love, surmounts

difficulties, shines in his examinations, marries beauty, and lives happily ever after. In "A Dream of Tu Lam" the "scholar-beauty" and other elements are placed within a very ancient Confucian vision of utopia.

Originating in China and also inculcated in Vietnamese culture, the Confucian utopia was the *dai dong*, the "universal harmony" in which it was imagined that people would live in egalitarian communities free from adversity and want. Although Nhat Linh does not use the term *dai dong*, he uses various others that reveal this ancient dream. Paradoxically, this headlong retreat into an idealised "primeval" past announces a modern transformation in Vietnamese literary consciousness.

Pre-modern Vietnamese prose was usually written in Chinese characters in the "straight-line narration" style with little punctuation. From at least the thirteenth century demotic Vietnamese characters (*chu nom*) were developed. These were composed of Chinese characters that acted as both semantic and phonetic signs. Long verse narratives, but not long prose ones, were often written in this writing system. The best explanation for this imbalance is that, while only the literati ever mastered Vietnamese characters because of their great complexity, the use of mnemonic devices such as rhyme, metre and parallelism enabled ordinary, non-literate people to memorise verse narratives, even if they could not read them. This contrasts with the case of long, unrhymed prose passages, which most people could neither read nor memorise. While vernacular verse could circulate, prose could not, and this meant that the development of a Vietnamese (as distinct from Chinese) language prose fiction awaited the appearance of a writing script which ordinary people could learn to read.

The cultural transformation involved after Nhat Linh went to a modern Franco-Vietnamese school and sought to break away from the rhythms of his earlier education in Chinese and Vietnamese characters accords with a fundamental feature of "A Dream of Tu Lam": it is a prose fiction which employs a third kind of script. This is the Romanised Vietnamese alphabet, which was developed in the seventeenth century by the Western missionary, Alexandre de Rhodes. However, even though it can be mastered in a few days, this alphabet was not widely used until the colonial era, when the modern education system and the introduction of the printing press began to stimulate the production of prose fictions in Vietnamese. Inherently new, such stories date from the 1880s.

In 1926, readers of Nhat Linh's story would have noticed the still formal tone of his language. Arguably, the sentence structure of the original

text also contains traces of the old-style "straight-line narration". Yet there are many ways in which "A Dream of Tu Lam" may be described as distinctly modern. These include its representation of dialogue, its democratic identification with "the people", and its attempt to depict the moods and psychological states of its characters.

Alongside the classical influences in the story, those of French literature may also be found. Not only does Tran Luu, the wanderer in the story, make an explicit reference to French poetry, but the terms in which he expresses the desolation he felt on the winter days without his girlfriend, are also reminiscent of Lamartine. Tran Luu writes: "In winter, I felt so lonely without her, it seemed that the world was deserted." In "L'isolement", which was widely read in Franco-Vietnamese schools, Lamartine wrote: "Un seul être vous manque et tout est dépeuplé."

Given Nhat Linh's knowledge of Russian literature in French translation—and the Vietnamese translation he also published in his *Silk Spinner* anthology of a short play by Leo Tolstoy, presumably from a French translation of the original Russian—it is worth adding that the construction of Tran Luu's wanderings might also have been partly inspired by a famous event in recent Russian history. I am thinking of the 1872-74 crusade of the Narodniki, the educated youths who went into the countryside to enlighten "the people". But whether or not Nhat Linh knew of this episode, his setting of a similar project in an ancient Confucian utopia did much to foreshadow the future.

In the 1930s and beyond, Nhat Linh and other members of his famous "Self Reliance Literary Group" wrote many popular novels that expanded greatly on the plan for a model society that he first sketched in "A Dream of Tu Lam". Then, on the assumption that literature can transform society—and the Vietnamese term for "culture", *van hoa*, literally means "the change that literature brings about"—there were the serious efforts which members of the Group made to actually go out into the countryside to educate people. As late as the 1950s, the "Light" literary group were still promoting this project.

Around the same time as Nhat Linh was writing "A Dream of Tu Lam", another famous Vietnamese writer was working on a tract, which not only came to play a significant role in modern Vietnamese political history, but also drew on ancient dreams. The author was Ho Chi Minh, and the tract which he published in southern China in 1927—after a period of study in Russia—was his seminal political pamphlet, *The Road to Revolution*. The

pamphlet was of course used to educate early communist cadres. The point to stress here is that it describes "world revolution" as nothing less than "the universal harmony beneath heaven" (*the giol cach mang—ay la thien ha dai dong*).

Although Nhat Linh and Ho Chi Minh worked together briefly in the mid-1940s, their paths soon diverged as Nhat Linh's romantic sense of individualism made it impossible for him to work with "the communists". Yet, towards the end of "A Dream of Tu Lam", Tran Luu explains the material and spiritual attributes of the society he wanted to establish in terms that could easily have been appropriated by utopian revolutionaries. According to Tran Luu, spacious, well-lit houses would be "furnished according to needs", the library would include "Western and Confucian books that have been carefully selected", and "everyone will live in peace and care for each other". As it reflects the "universal harmony" which Nhat Linh and the romantics cherished in modern Vietnamese literature, this list clearly reminds us of how deeply Vietnamese communism has also drawn on ancient dreams.

"A Dream of Tu Lam" is an important story in modern Vietnamese literature, not only because it offers a seminal construction of a future based on a dream of the past, but because, unwittingly as far as Nhat Linh was concerned, the wide dissemination of its social vision in the 1930s and beyond, did a great deal to sensitise a generation of readers to the deepest impulses of the Vietnamese revolution.

COMING HOME FROM THE OFFICE I WAS thinking how miserable my life was. I went to work morning and afternoon and did the same boring job, and the more I did this, the more empty I felt, the more it seemed that life was an insipid waste. I had often thought about retreating into the countryside. Status, itself, would never be enough to make life worthwhile. Having money and a good position is not much use to anyone, as one bows to convention without ever being able to disassociate oneself from it.

While I was fretting about this, I saw someone come in who looked vaguely familiar. I stood and looked carefully at him, and it turned out to be Tran Luu, a former student with me at law school. In those days he had worn Western clothes. But now he looked very different: he wore a dark rough silk tunic, a palm leaf hat, and carried a large pack as though he had come a long way. Seeing me, he smiled and bowed in greeting; he did not shake hands as before.

I had always respected Tran Luu for his intelligence. He had studied with me until the second year of law school when he left because both his parents had died. The day he left he lamented that he did not know what would become of him: "I am now a lonely shadow. I am about to return to my village so that I can visit my parents' tomb. After that I will be a wanderer. I'll climb the mountains and cross the rivers; wherever I find myself will be my home. Even if you remember me you won't know where to find me. I intend to go far and wide, through remote regions, and live and work with the people I meet along the way. At the same time, I will be able to teach them and observe their way of life. Wearing rough peasant clothes, a torn hat, and going bare foot, I'll make my living as I go. What do you think?"

I advised him to go and put up with the hardships. Although no one could be sure that such efforts would come to anything, the experience might yield a good idea one day, offer a new perspective on life. We said goodbye and I had no news of him after that. A year later I was appointed Chief Clerk to the Resident Superior, and I didn't see him again.

His unexpected arrival thus pleased me greatly, and despite the way he was dressed I recognised him straight away. He laughed as he entered and said: "Do you still remember me? Dressing like this, I must look very different from before?"

I told a servant to make some tea and asked Tran Luu to tell me his story: "All I do here is go to work for two boring sessions each day, and so I'm very pleased to see you. I want to hear how life has been for you these last two years and how things are in the country."

My friend told me that he had not been in Hanoi for long, and that he wanted to look around and buy a few books. He

would return that night for a leisurely conversation.

That night when the moon was high we lay in a couple of hammocks which were slung in the courtyard. My friend said: "Before I tell you about what I've been doing these last two years, I must ask you not to take me to task too quickly, as I have done nothing worthy of reproach. Nor do I deserve praise for great ideas that would benefit others. I do not expect that. I am just an ordinary person. However, I am not one who is drawn by the present. I embody the wishes of my forefathers as they have been handed down for generations. I'm simply opening my heart sincerely to you.

"I gave up my studies and took a few days to arrange for my visit to my parents' tomb. After that, I set off wearing rough brown peasant clothes. Within a year I had visited virtually all of the delta area from Hai Duong down to Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh and back up to Ha Dong and Bac Kinh. Sometimes, I wandered along the road, alone with my pack. Sometimes I fell in with a group of artisans or workers and shared their toil. This was so hard you wouldn't believe it if I told you.

"Sometimes I slept in the fields, sometimes I fell ill and had no one to look after me, but these experiences did not shake my will. I learnt a lot and made enough to live on. Despite my hardships, I was free. I didn't depend on anybody. Sometimes on seeing a beautiful landscape, the immense afternoon sky, or grass covered in frost, the lines of a French poem would come naturally to my lips, and I would look around quickly to see if anyone was listening. After that I had to remind myself to stop doing this, because people here would find my behaviour strange.

"Gradually, I avoided desolate regions and only sought those with hills and streams and ordinary people who led a simple life. These were the places where I tarried for a long time.

"By now I had come much closer to nature. I knew that I loved it more than anything and often drew happiness from it. Sometimes I could look at the scenery and forget all the adversity of the world. I felt that I could abandon material success in exchange for the pleasure of nature. The autumn sunlight and cold winds, the times when one season changed into another, such things usually gave me inklings of immense

calm and made me feel I was a different person. It would not be easy to explain the way this change came over me.

"It was in such a mood that I came across a place called Tu Lam. Lying at the foot of a hill, it was a small village with a tranquil air. Far off one could see chains of royal blue mountain peaks that were unbroken in the distance and shrouded each morning and afternoon in veils of cloud and mist. There was a small stream with clear blue water that bubbled over a bed of white sand. This landscape had a deep effect on me, a visitor who was passing through. It was not a famous site, it was not located on a high mountain, and its stream was not deep. Yet it seemed so warm and gently alluring that it easily won me over. At that time, I was neither overawed nor overjoyed. But I soon embraced it as if it were my native village. A wave of nostalgia came over me; I didn't want to leave it. I intended to find some work there, so that I could stay on for a while.

"I wanted to rid myself of all the troubles of this too sophisticated life, and try to cultivate a feeling of peace and happiness there. I had really reached the point where I loved nature with all my soul.

"I observed the people of Tu Lam, and found that their way of life was one of great interest and richness: it was exactly like what I had imagined life should be for so long. As I studied them carefully, I also felt I was learning a great deal that was worth recording in a book. But then I said to myself: yes, the customs of this village are very interesting, but what is the point of recording them at this time? Is it only to make a comparison that will draw praise from the next generation? I had not yet resolved that question. I was uncertain about it. However, since I found myself there by chance, I eventually decided I should continue to observe the customs with an untroubled mind and record them. If we calmly follow the path we want to take, then our lives will have some meaning; if we believe in what we are doing we will lead fuller lives.

"One day I took a walk up the hill from the village. The road went around the side of the hill, and it was from there that I saw some mulberry trees, with a speckled curtain of reddish

petals and green leaves suspended from their sparse branches. In the middle of the trees was a thatched rooftop: I went towards it along a small path and saw a bright, spacious dwelling that looked like the house of a secluded scholar.

"It was a winter day with the sun shining through; the mulberry leaves fluttered in the wind. My spirits were light. How happy I was! My heart overflowed with what seemed to be endless joy.

"When I reached the courtyard, I stood there dumbfounded: a young lady about sixteen or seventeen, who sat spinning silk on the verandah, raised her eyes and looked at me. I had never seen anyone as beautiful as her before, and in my confusion I wondered if I was lost in a fairyland. I don't know why she stood up when she saw me enter. She wore a graceful tunic and stared at me, and then at my clothes, making me remember suddenly that I was dressed like a workman. She looked at me as though she saw through my disguise. As if to confirm her thoughts, I became embarrassed and awkward.

"She suddenly asked: 'Who have you come to see?'

"Trying to look innocent, I said, 'I have been working on the hill, Miss, and I have come down to ask you for a bowl of rain water to quench my thirst.'

"She looked at me for a long moment, questioning me with surprise in her eyes. Then she said: 'In this weather the rain water is freezing cold, let me go inside and see if we have any hot tea.'

"After I finished drinking the tea, I did not want to leave and, seeing that the girl was about to sit down and start spinning again, I said: 'Please go ahead with your spinning, and let me see how you do it.'

"Each of us has something to do. You are a strange person. You have finished your tea, you should go back to your work and not stand around here. There's nothing unusual about spinning silk.'

"She said that to send me off, but I just stood there bewitched. Seeing me behave so strangely, she called out in the direction of the house: 'Father, there is a visitor to see you.'

"An old man over fifty with silver threads in his beard came

out of the house and said: 'Ah, that's Mr Nghi, isn't it? Why are you so late?'

"The girl looked at me again. Seeing me still standing there looking awkwardly at the spinning wheel, she said: 'Father, this person is not Mr Nghi.'

"The old man came up to me and I greeted him with a bow. He did not reply. He stared at me, as though at some strange object. Then, suddenly, he seemed to remember something. He raised his arms and said: 'Teacher Luu.'

"At that moment, the young lady came up to me, and also looked carefully at me. Then, she turned to her father, and the silk thread she held in her hand dropped to the ground.

"I took off my hat and said: 'Yes, Sir, that's me.'

"I recounted my story from the time I stopped teaching and entered law school. I explained how I became a wanderer after my parents passed away and the chance that brought me there. The young lady sat beside her father, listening. Then, she said: 'I now know why when I first saw you, you looked a little familiar.'

"I smiled faintly: 'When I taught in that other village and stayed in your father's house, you were still very small. Later I passed by one day to pay your father a visit, but people said you had moved and gone back to your home region.'

"The old man said: 'This is my home. Almost all the people down in Tu Lam belong to the same family as me. I also have a house down in the village; up here is where I come to enjoy the cool. Now that you're here and like the place, you should stay with me and write books. You no longer have a family, and so anywhere can be your home. We have a new school house down in Tu Lam, but no teacher yet. Let me tell people who you are, and you can teach here and study our way of life to your heart's content.'

"And so, from that day, I went down the hill to teach two sessions every day. The people in Tu Lam were truly kind-hearted, and the longer I stayed the more our mutual affection grew. I had many students. Once the class was over, I usually climbed back up the hill past the tea plantation along the rutted

path. It was a hard climb, but the happiness I felt was inexhaustible. I seemed to be filled all the time with enthusiasm for work that would help others. In nature's place my heart blossomed. From that time I had an interesting idea, that I will come to later.

"I lived in a room in the house, which was fairly spacious, clean, and well lit. When I returned from teaching, I sat down at a table to write. At first there were no books, but later I sent money to Hanoi to buy some, and so now the library is reasonably good. Looking through the window from where I lay on my bed, I could see down into the fields and far off into the distance where the high peaks of the mountain ranges were covered in green and wisps of smoke rose like silk threads from the valleys. The winding stream flowed with crystal clear water. The green rice fields stretched up to the foot of the hill. A girl in a brown tunic and bib climbed the mountain in search of precious wood that contained pigment, a horse ambled down to the stream. I now realised how the brush strokes of the ancient masters really did capture the richness of such scenery.

"The old man lived in an adjacent house, his daughter came up to stay sometimes, and, at others, she lived down in the village with her mother.

"On Sundays and Thursdays, or whenever I had written so much my hand felt tired or I had thought so much my head ached, I usually went up the hill to draw the landscape. There were times when I saw the young lady picking tea, and would go up to her and have a talk; an innocent chat that nevertheless left me bewildered. How could I not feel her incredible beauty, as her tunic flapped gently in the breeze? Sometimes, she figured in my drawings too. She would turn her face and look at me, a little embarrassed. But it seemed she still wanted to let me draw her. When she saw me coming she would straighten her turban and retie her belt neatly. When I finished drawing, she would run over spontaneously, look at my sketch, and say; 'That looks like me, but why am I missing an arm?'

"We laughed on top of the windy hill. From the sky and the mountains to the tips of grass, we were two people in perfect

accord; two people adrift in the harmony of heavenly music.

"Beneath our feet, the field embankments criss-crossed in horizontal and vertical lines that made the ground look like a chessboard. Each part of the maze was different; the work in the fields went on at a leisurely pace; the vague sounds of cocks crowing and dogs barking carried up on the wind and made us forget that we were creatures of our time: we had withdrawn to a primeval era. I explained to her the beauty of heaven and earth, told her that where we stood was the centre of universal harmony, that we should shade our lives in the pastel beauty of the mountains and rivers.

"One day I returned from teaching and saw her standing in front of the drawing I had made of her that day. I came up behind her without her knowing it and said: 'You are very beautiful. There's no need to gaze at that drawing for so long.'

"She turned around blushing. That was when I knew she had fallen in love with me.

"One afternoon I went into the forest for a walk. Many areas had tall grass and dense vegetation, and I lost the path. I continued walking. I came to a stream and had to throw a log to get across. Night was falling, and I was still wandering around without finding a way out. I finally got home about midnight, and saw the young lady waiting for me with the lamp still lit. She seemed to be worried, and when I asked her why she was staying up late she said she wanted to finish mending a tunic. But I knew how she felt, because my feelings were no different from hers. After returning from teaching, I had missed her many times and waited for her to come up from the village. In winter, I felt so lonely without her, it seemed that the world was deserted. Then, when I saw her crossing the mulberry field and walk into the house with a face as fresh as a flower in the morning dew, my heart fluttered like a butterfly on a petal. Sometimes I followed her up the hill, and we played like two happy children, without anyone suspecting our growing attachment.

"Then, one day, I unexpectedly asked the old man to let me leave: 'My sincere thanks to you, Sir, for the time I've spent here. I do not know how I can repay you. But my work is now finished,

and I must leave for another place. Please let me say goodbye, because this time I do not know when we will meet again.'

"She was there too. I looked up when I finished speaking and saw her standing behind her father. Sparkling with love and pain, her eyes met mine with a thousand bewildered reproaches. I talked with the old man for a while longer and then noticed that she had gone. I looked out the window to where the road went down through the village without seeing a shadow. I went up the hill to the place where we usually met and saw her there with her head down, sobbing. I went up to her and said: 'Why are you crying? Let me explain. I must go away for some time. When I return, I will find a go-between to ask for your hand in marriage. While I am away, try not to think of me too much.'

"She now understood and wiped her tears and looked at me as though she was chiding me for making her cry. The evening shadows were darkening. In the distance we could see fires on the high mountains where people were burning off the jungle. The sky and the earth were immense, and as we held hands with deep pleasure, we could not have loved life more.

"The next day I said goodbye to the old man and his daughter and left.

"In the year that followed the countryside I passed through was cold and foreign and unbearably sad. Meanwhile, I was sure she grew ever more beautiful in that garden among the butterflies and flowers. No matter where I went I was unable to recapture the mood of Tu Lam. Everywhere people lived such mean and miserable lives that nothing was able to make me feel happy. I returned to Tu Lam with a yearning for home, and when, in the distance, I saw my beloved village, all my sadness was washed away. My feelings were light and eager, and I no longer had doubts about the path I had chosen. I went again around the hillside until I saw her standing in the courtyard. She saw me, and I swore that even if the sky fell in we would never part again.

"The old man was happy for us to marry and arranged for us to live in the house on the hillside. I taught and wrote and she

wove cloth and spun silk as time flew into an eternity where we could not have wished for anything more complete.

"Yet I have been thinking about my old friends for some time, and I came to see you because there is something more I want to do. I wrote a book, but words are not as effective as actions. As there's no use counting on the government for support, I now intend to raise the money to buy a plantation with a few thousand acres. Of course, to start a plantation is not just a matter of waiting for the harvest then jumping into a car to go and collect the crop. Nor is it simply a matter of watching the coffee trees yield their beans. The essential thing is to teach people how to run new agricultural settlements, and in that way to transform their own lives. Although our work is not on a grand scale, we will see the obvious results of it. Then, when we die, we will be pleased to have helped a few thousand others.

"And so I'm here looking for comrades, some truly dedicated comrades who are ready to come now, or others we can help to free from their responsibilities so that we can establish a small village at the foot of the hill. All the houses will be built with timber. They will be high and dry and well lit and have wide gardens around them planted with fruit trees. The houses will be simply but well furnished in accordance with needs; art objects will be fine and functional; a few old paintings with soft colours, a few vases for flowers. So many troublesome luxuries will be discarded. We will keep birds and bees around the house. Apart from cultivating rice fields, we will grow silkworms, plant several acres of mulberry trees, have weaving looms so that the women can make silk cloth to use in the house. The village will have a meeting house where the affairs of the plantation will be discussed. There will be a library of both Western and Confucian books that have been carefully selected.

"Some people will work on the plantation, some will teach trades, and some teach school. The important thing is that everyone knows how to appreciate nature's bounty and live happily together. I imagine it will be a place where everyone will live in peace and care for each other; where everyone will find fulfilment. People will neither suffer wretchedly for their

wants nor be sated by excessive luxury. Everything will be in harmony, like a piece of music in praise of the god who has filled one's heart with pure and simple feelings, brimming with dreams of love.

"I am not one of the enthusiasts who dreams of 'civilisation'. I want to return to the primeval age and try to achieve the dreams of our ancient sage-philosophers. I knew I would attempt to do this from the time I was very young. Until I was about twenty, all I did was go along with others. But I didn't believe in what I was doing, and became fed up with everything. I was always unhappy, because I didn't fit into this society.

"To measure the entire universe, to penetrate deeply the mysteries of nature, to understanding everything, and, yet, not to be able to live in harmony or attune our minds to the thoughts of others: such is civilisation! We must change it for something better."

My friend finished talking and looked silently at the moon. His face seemed to be glowing with happiness. This made me feel sad.

I said: "You are happy, because you understood early your purpose in life. You don't need the world. Meanwhile, I go to work day after day and am no longer myself. What a miserable life I lead. Later, when you achieve your goal, will you still let me join you? Perhaps my heart is still so attached to fame and fortune that it thirsts for trouble. Perhaps I am not yet ready to respond to nature and would not be a worthy comrade for you. Perhaps I must first refine my soul. I think you can easily help to emancipate me from my material attachments. But what could I do to help you?

"My years of study and work have all been for nothing. The law I have stuffed into my head is very half-baked in a society that has been created by the efforts of our ancestors and is still deeply influenced by their ways. It ought to be discarded to lighten my mind. I also used to have ideas like you. But my ideas were vague and unclear. I could not enunciate them, because I was afraid of others, afraid that they would laugh at me for being stupid and too weak to compete with them. I was afraid they would say that

was why I had such ideas. Everyone seems to accept this is how life is. Who would be brave enough to take a different path?"

The next morning, my friend said he was going back to Tu Lam, and I didn't try to keep him longer. I intended to give him the return fare, but he wouldn't accept it and said: "When you have the time please come and have a break. Even if you can only get away one public holiday, please come and visit me and my family. We had some good silk this year and my wife has been able to spin fine cloth. When you come we'll give you a piece as a gift from the plantation."

My friend returned to Tu Lam, and I walked docilely back to the office, my umbrella over my shoulder. How right it was to say: everyone seems to accept that this is how life is.

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