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Southern Son

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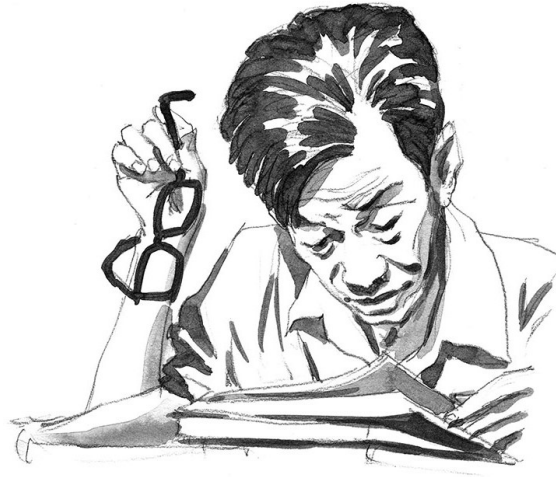


Illustration: Elsie Herberstein

Son Nam (originally Pham Minh Tai) was born on 11 December 1926 in Dong Thai village: a small, mixed Khmer and Vietnamese village, near Rach Gia, nestled on the edge of the Go Quao Forest, abutting the Bay of Thailand on the western shore of the Mekong Delta. Son Nam's sickly mother couldn't produce enough milk, so he was wet nursed by an ethnically Khmer neighbour. She became a close family friend, and Son Nam took the pen name Son, a common Khmer surname, to honour her. The name Nam ("south") pays homage to his southern roots.

In a speech celebrating a fellow Mekong poet's seventieth birthday, Son Nam described their hometown as "a poor, backwards land where the government was non-existent and pirates scoured the coasts ... Our childhoods flickered like tamanu oil lamps. No one dared dream that this place could give birth to laureates and lyricists. To us, great authors only emerged from the far north beyond Hue." Despite the stifling rural poverty of his birthplace, Son Nam was an excellent student. He received a highly competitive colonial-state scholarship to study the Primaire Elementaire at the local provincial school, and after passing the Certificat d'Etudes Primaire Franco-Indigene, he was given a scholarship to study for the Diplome in Can Tho.

The largest city in the Mekong Delta, Can Tho was more than a hundred kilometres away. By the time he attended (1937), it was a bustling and comparatively modern urban centre replete with movie theatres, cafes, radio, large markets and the latest Vietnamese and French language books and newspapers. It was here that Son Nam experienced the terminal decline of Indochinese colonialism, heralded by the outbreak of the Second World War. First, French defeat at the hands

of Nazi Germany in June 1940 gave the resulting Vichy regime a tenuous grasp over the colony. Three months later the French reluctantly submitted to Japanese demands to station forces throughout the colony, highlighting French weakness and further undermining racialist notions of colonial legitimacy. In November a series of rebellions, called Nam Ky Khoi Nghia (“Cochinchina Uprisings”), exploded throughout the delta. Witnessing at first hand the widespread public discontent, the blood-drenched military vehicles and the merciless public execution of suspected subversives left an indelible impression on the teenage author. Although the rebellions were quickly and brutally put down, this period of heightened Vichy-French, Japanese and revolutionary propaganda stimulated the development of his nationalism.

Concluding that school was pointless under the failing colonial system, he returned to Rach Gia, where at nineteen years old he witnessed the May 1945 Japanese coup against the French forces, and the subsequent Japanese surrender later that August. He joined the Viet Minh during the August Revolution, was assigned to illiteracy eradication campaigns and was later promoted to political education cadre tasked with holding lessons in the maquis.

Son Nam moved to Saigon soon after the 1954 Geneva Accords split the territory into the socialist bloc-backed Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north, and the US-backed Republic of Vietnam in the south. In 1960 the Diem government sentenced him to twenty-four months’ re-education for his previous associations with communist insurgents. Though he had published poems, histories, folklore and short stories as early as 1948, he was catapulted to fame soon after his release from prison by his celebrated 1962 short story compendium *Huong rung Ca Mau* (“The scent of the Ca Mau forest”), from which “From sea to mulberry fields” is taken.

After Communist forces conquered Saigon in April 1975, Son Nam remained in the city and participated in the party-led Writers’ Association. His charmingly idiosyncratic character is captured in one obituary, which lamented, “no longer will the streets of Saigon enjoy the familiar sight of the author, the man who enjoyed nothing more than hiking squeezed through the narrow alleys of the city, with his dishevelled clothes, his baseball cap, his backpack, nervously winking through his spectacles, and especially the cigarette always pinched between his nicotine-stained yellow fingers. We artists have long teasingly called him ‘the vagrant author’, a man who not only wandered Saigon, but also wandered among the ‘hollering monkeys and cawing egrets’ of the Southern Plains.” He died of a stroke in 2008. He was eighty-three years old.