

Who is Nguyễn Hồng Hưng? Someone who knew Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. I met architect Nguyễn Hồng Hưng at the house of Bảo Khánh, a reputable art collector in Hà Nội. That day, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp told me that he had two “teachers” during the later stages of his career, Nguyễn Hồng Hưng and Nguyễn Bảo Sinh. The Buddha statue in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s garden was created by Nguyễn Hồng Hưng.

During a warm and sincere party held at Bảo Khánh’s house, I was “lucky” to be presented with a portrait of me painted by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and Nguyễn Hồng Hưng. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp painted the portrait masterfully—many people like to collect his paintings done on pottery. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp had asked me if I wanted to sit facing forward or have him study me closely from the side. I asked him to draw me looking straight forward at him, and I was happy with the painting. Talking to him, I realized that the phrase “literature is life” did not hold true for Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, at least in his later years or directly in his style of writing. The writer who pens the fiercest, sharpest, and most distinctive short stories in Vietnamese literature is very quiet and reasonable. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is like a solitary volcano within the village of Vietnamese literature. While no longer erupting violently, his hot lava still simmers, giving off a heat that temporarily warms up the literary atmosphere. It will surely endure much longer . . .

Originally published in *Văn nghệ Quân đội*, March 21, 2021, http://vannghequandoi.com.vn/su-kien/nguyen-huy-thiep-hoa-diem-son-co-doc_11815.html. Thanks to Phạm Xuân Nguyên for obtaining permission from Ông Triệu for the translation and publication of this piece in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*.

VƯƠNG TRÍ NHÀN

Translated by Nguyễn Nguyệt Cầm and Peter Zinoman

We Are Lucky to Still Have Nguyễn Huy Thiệp

In contemporary Vietnamese literature, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp stands alone at a singular height. He wrote because he felt he had to write and because not writing was not an option.

HE WROTE IN AN EXACTING WAY ABOUT CRUELTY TO
 BETTER PAVE THE WAY FOR KINDNESS

When his stories first appeared, readers noticed that they conveyed certain general ideas: “life is ugly and untrustworthy but how do we live without trust?” or “life is sad but very beautiful.” Early stories such as “The General Retires” and “Without a King” suggested that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp grasped the insight that we must continue to live even if there is nothing to live for. Later stories such as “Nguyễn Thị Lộ” and “Crossing the River” revealed a more straightforward belief in the essential generosity and purity of life. He was an uncomplicated thinker, not overly deep or philosophical. But his lack of pretense about the meaning of life signaled that he understood life well. He grappled with ancient questions about kindness and cruelty, about how to be human and about whether life itself is wonderful or contemptible.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s answers to these questions featured dualities: this and that, waves and particles. To him, life was both loveable and nasty; honorable and disgraceful. Even in the short story “Without a King,” in which most characters are scoundrels, readers still remember Ms. Sinh’s call for compassion at the end of the story. Before Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Vietnamese writers and journalists were manipulated by their environment, always looking over their shoulders when deciding how to live and perform their profession. We watched and imitated the older generation’s writing. We could not overcome our circumstances.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp didn’t seem to notice any of his contemporaries. Instead, he engaged with writers from previous generations, like Nguyễn Du, Nguyễn Trãi, Tú Xương, Nam Cao, and Vũ Trọng Phụng. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp dialogued with those writers who brought glory to Vietnamese literature. Most of today’s writers started out as literary soldiers who played the role of bureaucrats necessary for the workings of society. Later, many claimed that they wrote just for fun. But in my view, they did not “make” literature, either now or before.

To be more accurate, they did not produce a literature that continues the tradition created by great Vietnamese writers of the past, the kind of literature that is eternal. Before Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, our literature avoided abstract issues, especially those related to problems of humanity. Nguyễn

Huy Thiệp's talent was to write about eternal issues, such as the cruelty and kindness in human beings.

When Nguyễn Huy Thiệp wrote about cruelty, people screamed that he should stop; that it was not necessary to write about such cruelty; that art should focus only on kindness; that writing about cruelty is a crime. But Nguyễn Huy Thiệp could not write any other way. It seemed he felt the need to write about cruelty in order to drive it away.

Cruelty in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's literature was persistent and encompassing. And writing about cruelty was exactly Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's kindness: a sort of kindness of great men, a kind of kindness which is at odds with contemporary notions of kindness. It is a kindness that dwells deep inside.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp never lost his trust in human beings. His compassion for human beings began with his criticism. He exposed life's scoundrels, the mediocre, the despicable, and the disgusting. But this is precisely why he helped people understand life better, love life more, and become better human beings.

Many people today also write about cruelty, but they lack his heart and hence his achievement.

HE DID NOT CHANGE WITH THE TIMES

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp was very strange. He got along well with his colleagues, and yet seemed to stand outside the circle of contemporary writers. Perhaps that was why Nguyễn Huy Thiệp could endure so many hardships. I have not met anyone in the world of literature who could endure as much as Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. I thought he would collapse many times, but he remained steadfast. Perhaps he overcame the brutality of life thanks to his early understanding that he would have to pay a lot for his fame. A sacred instinct told him that he ought to endure misery and pain, and he did not give up.

Our current society hates bright personalities and eliminates many honest ways of thinking. People compete with one another and constrain one another and hence tend to be similar to one another. But Nguyễn Huy Thiệp did not write to compete with anyone. He did not write for awards.

He remained someone who had experienced a lot and possessed genuine knowledge. We should not forget that he was once a teacher of history.

I often think that I am lucky to have lived at the same time as Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. We are lucky that we still have Nguyễn Huy Thiệp.

Interview with Vương Trí Nhàn by Thiên Điều. Originally published in *Tuổi Trẻ*, March 22, 2021, <https://tuoitre.vn/may-man-chung-ta-con-co-nguyen-huy-thiep-20210322084054517.htm>. Thanks to Phạm Xuân Nguyên for obtaining permission from Thiên Điều for the translation and publication of this piece in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*.

PHẠM THỊ HOÀI

Translated by Nguyễn Nguyệt Cầm and Peter Zinoman

A Lonely Stroke That Slanted the Sky

When I first encountered Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, the winds of Hua Tát had been blowing strongly for some time and the bulwark of socialist realist literature was wobbling.² There he sat, small, wrinkled, old, quiet, and extremely lost in the famous salon of the great teacher Văn Tâm,³ surrounded by books, paintings, antiques, and old photographs revealing the glory of a distinguished family line. The salon also featured fine food served with a tragically out-of-date elegance by Văn Tâm's wife, Cao Thị Xuân Cam,⁴ and a crowd of famous intellectuals who maintained a certain distance (more or less) from the regime. Right after that first meeting, he invited me for a late cup of coffee at a café that he highly praised. "We need to stay in touch with that salon crowd," he told me, "but it will be the end of us if we are taken in by them. We must be cautious."

But I felt no great need for caution. The tic of the Vietnamese character that makes me despair the most is the need to mull over everything carefully, to be better safe than sorry, to examine everything up and down and back and forth. You must always be on guard; curb your tongue five or seven times before speaking, compare wisdom and foolishness. The survival kit for basic living is full of tips for knowing when to move forward and