

The Xa-nu Jungle

Nguyễn Trung Thành (a.k.a. Nguyen Ngoc)

(Translated from the Vietnamese by Quan Manh Ha)

About the author: *Nguyễn Trung Thành (1932-) is a famous Vietnamese writer, journalist, editor, translator, and educator. He is also considered a military author who often writes about ethnic minority groups' revolutions against the French and the Americans in the Central Highland of Vietnam.*

"The Xa-nu Jungle" was first published in 1964, when the American War in Vietnam was at its most violent. The story focuses on the male protagonist Tnu, a member of an ethnic minority group who joins the Vietnamese Communist Liberation Armed Forces to fight the Americans and the South Vietnamese forces. "The Xa-nu Jungle" treats the themes of heroism and solidarity amid the cruelty of war.

The village was within the cannon-firing range of an American military station. Usually, the Americans fired twice a day: either in the early morning and at dawn, or at twilight and at night, or at midnight and before sunrise. Often times, the missiles hit the xa-nu jungle located next to a river, but not many xa-nu trees were damaged. Some trees were chopped down and fell violently on the ground. Their sap, dripping profusely from the trunks, smelled pleasant and looked quite clear at first on hot summer days. But then it would eventually become dark and thick like big clots of blood.

There were not many trees in the jungle that grew as fast as the xa-nu trees. Next to a newly fallen xa-nu tree, one could see four or five saplings already, with their lush leaves pointed upward. Xa-nu trees needed much sunlight, so they grew very fast to obtain it. Sunlight pierced the jungle and the spilled sap appeared golden. Some young trees about the height of a person's chest were cut in half by the Americans' cannons. Their sap was very clear and kept dripping, and the trees died within a few days. But there were also luxuriant trees, taller than a person, and the missiles couldn't kill them. They recovered quickly if they were hurt, and grew extremely fast to replace the fallen trees. In the last two or three years, the xa-nu jungle functioned as a large shield protecting the villagers. The jungle was so vast that one couldn't see anything else but endless hills of xa-nu trees.

After three years serving in the Liberation Armed Forces, Tnú visited his village for the first time. He met Heng at the river, who led the way. The day Tnú joined the army, Heng was just a little boy, but now he was a grown-up, carrying a rifle as he walked with Tnú. They travelled on the same path, passed terraced corn, manioc, and *pom-chu* hills, and crossed a thick jungle before they reached his village.

Tnú had dinner at Old Met's home—a dinner of taro soup and fish that Old Met reserved for special guests. Tnú opened his dry bag of dry food rations and gave Old Met a spoonful of salt. “I still have half a can of salt, a gift Dit received at a Heroic Soldier meeting,” the old man said. “She gave me some, but I'll save hers for the sick. And I'll use the salt you gave me.”

Old Met didn't put salt in the soup. He gave each villager a tiny amount, and they kept the salt in their mouths without swallowing it in order to slowly enjoy its flavor to the fullest. He held up a bowl of rice mixed with *pom-chu* root and said, “This year, the villagers have enough to eat. However, each household has to save food for the next three years. Your commander must have told you that our revolution against the Americans will last a long time.” Then, Old Met asked, “All of your fingers are gone. Can they grow back?” He put down his rice bowl and became angry, “Do the villagers know about your lost fingers? Okay, you can pull a trigger even if your fingers are nothing but a stub. Did you pass the xa-nu jungle by the river? The trees are thriving; no tree is as strong as the xa-nu trees. When the old ones fall, the young ones grow. The Americans can't kill the jungle. Hey, eat your food! Our rice is the best rice in this region, you know . . .”

After dinner, someone beat a drum three times, and the villagers started to flow into Old Met's home. Young women extinguished their torches at the entrance steps before they came in. Some old women held up their burning torches and walked right into his house and looked directly at Tnú. They looked at him carefully and threw the torches into the huge kitchen fire. Some old men, even before they stepped inside, asked loudly, “Where's Tnú? Did you feed him, Old Met?”

An old woman said, “Hey, gentlemen, please leave some room here for Dit.” Then she called out, “Dit, Dit, sit here.” Tnú looked up, and Dit had already sat in front of him, and she pulled her dress to cover her feet. Tnú suddenly felt a chill running through his body. Dit, who was now a grown-up, looked like Mai [her older sister, who was also Tnú's wife]. Her nose, which had been round when she was younger, had now become small

and straight. Her thick eyebrows seemed to cover her big, clear, and calm eyes. Dit looked at Tnú for a long while. Some children competed with one another to gain a seat right next to Dit. "Do you have a written permit?" Dit then asked Tnú rather coldly.

"What permit?" Tnú asked.

"The official document from your commander that grants you this leave. Without it, we'll have to put you under arrest."

Tnú laughed. He wanted to tease her by saying that he was so homesick that he had to sneak out. But he decided not to when he noticed her serious look and the anxious silence of the villagers. He opened his pocket and handed her a piece of paper.

"I report to you, the village's Political Affairs officer..."

Dit held the document up to the fire. The villagers clustered around, trying to read it. The children tried to spell the words. Dit read it for a while, at least three times. "He has the permit, right?" Old Met asked.

Dit returned the document to Tnú and smiled, "Yes, he does. His commander signed it. Why are you here for only one night, Tnú?" She then continued, "That's OK. At least we can see you again. We keep talking about you." The sounds of chattering and laughter resumed.

"His commander signed the document."

"That's good."

"Only for one night, and he has to leave tomorrow. Too short a visit."

"OK. That's good. That's good," Old Met said loudly.

Old Met pushed the children away, walked toward the fire, and sat down next to Tnú. He picked up a little bamboo stick, cleaned his tobacco pipe with it, and then looked around. Outside, there was a light rain shower. After everyone had taken their seats, he said calmly, "The old folks already know about Tnú. The youngsters, some do, some don't. And the kids don't know much about him." He looked at the children seriously, who listened to Old Met attentively and respectfully. "This is your brother Tnú; he is here now with us." Old Met placed his hand on Tnú's shoulder and continued, "This is the Tnú I have been telling you about. He joined the military to fight the invaders. Tonight, he is visiting us and he has an official permit signed by his commander. Dit has examined the document. Tnú is one of our Stra people; his parents died when he was young, and this Xo-man village raised him up. His life is unfortunate, but his soul and spirit are as pure as our stream water.

Tonight, I'll tell all of you about him, and you should be glad that he is visiting us. The Stra villagers should listen and remember my story so that after I die, you can tell your children and grandchildren about Tnú's story."

(Old Met told the story of Tnú and Mai when they were small children. Despite their young age, they were able to help hide a [communist] cadre in the jungle successfully.)

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The revolutionary cadre back then was Mr. Quyet. Since the Americans and the South Vietnamese soldiers of[Ngo Dinh] Diem's government set foot in this village, they searched for him every night. Their dogs' barking and their shooting disturbed the entire jungle. But the Xo-man people were very proud: in the last five years, no cadre was arrested or killed in the jungle. At first, the youngsters took care of his meals and guarded him. The Americans and the South Vietnamese soldiers found out and arrested these youngsters. They, for example, hung the villager Xut by his neck on a tree and threatened, "If you side with the communists, here's what you will end up with." Then, they forbade the youngsters from going into the jungle. The old people took over the duty and helped the cadre. But the government soldiers found out again and beheaded Mrs. Nhan.

Finally, the children took over the old people's job. Tnú and Mai were the most enthusiastic. When Tnú went to the field to work, Mai helped the cadre. When Mai stayed home to babysit Dit, Tnú performed her duty. Sometimes, they went to the jungle together and stayed there overnight because they didn't want the cadre to be all by himself at night—if the enemies searched for him, who would help him escape.

"Aren't you afraid of getting arrested? They will kill you like Mr. Xut and Mrs. Nhan," Mr. Quyet asked.

Tnú, lying on Mr. Quyet's laps, sat up and replied, "Old Met told me, 'Cadres represent the [Communist] Party. Our country depends upon the Party's leadership.'"

In the jungle, Mr. Quyet taught Tnú and Mai how to read and write. He split bamboos and put the slats together to make small writing boards. Together, they blackened the boards with xa-nu soot and coated them with resin. Tnú walked for three days to the Ngoc Linh Mountain from which he brought back some stone chalk. Mai studied better than Tnú; she was able to read after three months and write down whatever she wanted. After six months, she could do simple additions and subtractions. Tnú was a slower learner and had a bad temper. He often forgot complicated letters in the

alphabet. Once, he couldn't catch up with Mai, and he hit his board so hard that he broke it in front of Mai and Mr. Quyet. Then, he left them and sat by the stream all day. When Mr. Quyet tried to comfort him, Tnú didn't say a word. When Mai comforted him, he wanted to fight with her, but she just sat there with him.

"If you don't go back, I'll stay here with you. Please, Tnú. I've made another board for you," Mai said. Tnú picked up a rock and hit himself in the head; blood ran out profusely. Mr. Quyet had to put a bandage around Tnú's head. That night in a cave, he held Tnú and said, "Should the Americans and the South Vietnamese soldiers kill me, you'll have to replace me. If you don't want to study, how can you become a good cadre?"

Tnú pretended to sleep but he was actually crying, secretly wiping away his tears. The next morning, he called out to Mai and said, "Mai, what do you call the letter that looks like an /o/ with a hook on top? And what's the letter right after it—the one with a big belly?"

Mai turned away and tried not to laugh. She wrote the letter with a big belly on the board she just made for him. She replied nicely, "You've a good memory. It's the letter /b/."

"Oh. The letter /b/. I am so stupid."

Tnú was not book smart, but no one could surpass him for his knowledge of the jungle. He was a good correspondent and never took the regular paths. When the enemies blocked all the major paths, Tnú climbed a tall tree and observed, then he traversed the jungle and avoided them. When he crossed a river, he preferred to choose an aggressive rapid and swam like a whale. He said, "If you choose the slow-moving flow, the enemies are there to catch you."

One day, however, Tnú reached the Dac Nang River. After he folded Mr. Quyet's letter and hid it inside a bunch of big banana leaves and was about to cross the river, an enemy's rifle pointed right at his ear. Tnú hurriedly swallowed the letter.

(Tnú was arrested and tortured inhumanely. Three years later, he escaped and returned to his village. Mr. Quyet was severely wounded in an ambush. Before he died, he wrote a letter motivating the Xo-man villagers to fight against the invaders.)

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The information about the Xo-man people making sharp spears reached the enemies who stationed in Bac Ha. During a rice harvest, they sent a regiment,

led by Duc, to the village. It happened right after the birth of Mai and Tnú's firstborn. Duc wore a red hat and shouted, “Tnú again this time. He is a tiger that must be killed; he has created chaos in the jungle.”

Old Met and Tnú helped the youngsters hide in the jungle. They didn't travel far, only hiding under trees or in small caves near the village in order to be vigilant of the enemies. The enemies occupied in the village for four nights and tortured everyone. People's cries were heard everywhere. “If you dare to leave the village, I'll shoot you right here,” Duc threatened the villagers with his gun.

No one could escape. Only Dit, a small and quick girl, climbed down a gutter to take rice to Old Met, Tnú, and other people hiding in the jungle. In the early morning of the fourth day, they caught her when she was returning from the jungle. They made her stand in the middle of the village square and shoot her. But no bullets hit her; they only stirred up the ground around Dit. Her dress was torn and she cried loudly. After the tenth bullet was shot, she wiped her tears and shut up. She stood quietly amid the enemy soldiers; each time they shot, her thin, small body trembled violently but her eyes kept looking at the enemies with no fear—the same look Dit had displayed earlier in the gathering.

Duc couldn't kill the little girl, so she arrested Mai and said, “I've caught the cub and her mother and will use them to force the father tiger Tnú to come out.” Tnú heard Duc's statement and was hiding by a tree near a gutter. From there, he could see clearly what was going on. He grasped the trees tightly when ten enemy soldiers took Mai to the village square. Mai carried her less-than-a-month-old son on her back. Everyone said he looked like Tnú. Tnú couldn't make a trip to Kontum to buy cloth, so he tore his blanket into half, and Mai used it to hold the baby. The baby slept comfortably on Mai's back.

“Where's your husband, commie bitch?” Duc asked.

Mai opened her eyes wide and looked at Duc, who then shouted, “Are you mute, bitch?” Then he turned to the soldiers, “And what are you guys doing there?”

A fat soldier saw Duc take a long iron bar and walk toward Mai. He licked his lips and slowly held up the iron bar. Mai screamed and hurriedly moved the baby to her front. Duc hit her back with the bar.

“Where's Tnú?” Duc asked.

Then, she switched the baby to her back, and Duc hit her chest. After Duc tortured Mai, no one heard anything but her baby's cries and then

silence. Tnú left his hiding place. He rose up, but Old Met stopped him, "You can't go out there, Tnú. Let me do it."

Tnú pushed Old Met away, and Old Met repeated, "Tnú!" Tnú turned his head back. Old Met could not recognize Tnú, whose eyes had become two big fires. Tnú screamed and rushed toward the soldiers. He didn't remember what he did, but afterward the fat soldier lay on his back, and Duc ran fast into the communal building. He heard the sounds of loading guns. Mai held the baby tightly and embraced Tnú. His arms were like the wings of an eagle protecting Mai and their son.

"You're a bunch of blood-thirsty cannibals," Tnú shouted.

He could not save Mai and their baby's lives.

As Old Met told the story, he clumsily wiped away his tears. Then he spoke louder, "Tnú couldn't save his wife and son's lives. Mai died that night, so did the baby. The fat soldier killed them. Tnú, do you remember it? You couldn't save them, then they tied you up with ropes. I couldn't do anything because I was unarmed like you. So I went into the jungle and looked for the youngsters, who were collecting their sharp spears. Are you all listening to my story? After I die, you must tell the later generation about this. If the enemies have guns, we must fight back with our spears..."

After they tied up Tnú, they threw him into a corner of the communal building. Then they celebrated their victory; they killed Mr. Broi's pig for food.

Tnú lay in the corner in the dark. He was calm and thought, "Both Mai and the baby are dead. I will die soon, too. Who will become the village's cadre? When the Party wants us to fight the enemies, who'll be the leader of the Xo-man village? Old Met can't do it, but we can rely on the youngster. Dit will grow up and become strong and confident. Too bad that I can't live much longer to join everyone in fighting the enemies..."

Duc didn't want to kill Tnú immediately. He burned a huge fire and requested all villagers to show up. He untied Tnú and announced, "I heard that you have already sharpened your weapons, spears and axes. Is that true? OK, if any of you want to rebel, take a look at Tnú's hands."

Duc signaled to his fattest soldier, who took out a rag already soaked in xa-nu oil. He wrapped the rag around Tnú's fingers and held up a fire. Duc said, "Let me do it," and grasped the fire.

Tnú didn't scream. He looked at Duc, who then laughed loudly. Duc held the fire close to Tnú's face and said, "Let me look at this commie

carefully. You weren't born to become an armed fighter. All of you here, forget your damn weapons. Understand?"

Tnú's fingers burned like a torch. He closed his eyes and then opened them wide. He didn't feel the pain on his fingers, but he felt a hot, burning fire within his heart. He bit his lips hard and remained silent. "A communist soldier never begs," Mr. Quyet once had said. Tnú didn't beg; he refused to scream.

Duc laughed loudly. The elderly villagers stood up but were soon pushed away by the soldiers. The villagers shouted, then they heard heavy footsteps around the communal building. Who could that be?

Tnú shouted, and his cry echoed and became many voices. "Kill." Sounds of heavy footsteps became louder, and the enemy soldiers screamed. "Kill them all. Kill them," Old Met ordered. He held a long-handled machete and the first to die under it was Duc. All of the village youngsters were armed with sharp stone axes.

Broi asked Tnú calmly, "Tnú! Tnú! Are you OK? We have killed all the enemies with our own weapons. All ten of them are dead."

Tnú's finger stopped burning, and the huge fire was still on, and the dead bodies of the ten enemy soldiers scattered on the ground. Old Met held up his spear straight on the ground and said, "The war has begun. Burn the fire. Everyone, the old, the young, the children, the men, the women, must have a spear and an axe. If you don't have weapons, you can sharpen bamboo sticks as weapons. Let's burn the fire."

They banged the gongs. All night, the jungle was lit up brightly.

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Tnú had to leave after his visit was over. Old Met and Dit walked with him to the jungle to see him off. Last night's firing damaged five huge xa-nu trees. Their sap glittered under the summer sun. Around the fallen trees were several growing saplings with their pointed leaves.

The three people looked at the vast xa-nu jungle stretching to the horizon. (1964)

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