

ABOVE THE OCEAN (Hải Thượng Tân Thư)

Series of letters from Master Phan-Hoang

Letter FIVE

(continued) THE SOUL OF VIETNAMESE SWORD

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To: CHI-KIEM disciples

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This is LETTER FOUR of the Series "ABOVE THE OCEAN"

(DRAFT)

(continued from Letter Four)

A decade later, in the province of Son-Tay (now Ha-Tay), in the area of Mountains Ba-Vi (about 45 km from Ha-Noi) appeared a mysterious master of sword who lived a solitary existence. He surrounded himself with only a few disciples. The local people called him “Thầy Núi”, meaning “The Master Living at the Mountain”. According to historians, at the last years of the 18th century, a new dynasty emerged in Vietnam, the NGUYEN dynasty. The new king Gia Long, although being victorious, was not a very virtuous man, and many valiant swordsmen, who refused to serve the new regime, withdrew to the countryside. Who was this master “Thầy Núi”? He was the nephew of master Bao (Hoàng-Đình-Bảo), and more precisely he was the young man who finally acquired the precious sword of General Chinh at the contest that I mentioned in the previous letter. His uncle, master Bao, was the venerated teacher of General Chinh, and was the one who defeated master Lê-Duy in a combat of sword against spear, on horseback riding. This extraordinary and memorable combat still exists in a *chieu* (sequence) of the sword form *Tam-nguyen-kiem* of the CHI-KIEM. Few people know about the life of master Bao because this was his name at birth. From many books of Vietnamese History, he is known as the famous duke Quận-Huy or Hoàng Tổ-Lý, the one who commanded the Royal Guard to defend the King in troubled times, the one who did not fear to face thousands of military rebels at once. The great master HAI-THUONG in his important book ‘*Travel to the Capital*’ (ca 1781, Thuong Kinh Ky-Su), had respectfully referred master Bao by his title: Quan Chanh-Duong, the Highest Chief. It is very likely that the precious sword of General NGUYEN Huu-Chinh came from his venerated teacher, master Bao. Although no evidence could be found to ascertain its source, the fact that the precious sword had finally returned to master Bao’s nephew, “Thầy Núi”, might raise some clues about its origin. In 1948, this sword was seen to belong to a gentleman aged about 30 years old, who lived in a small hamlet not far from the foot of the Mountains Ba-Vi.

Hanoi summer 1954. I recall. This is a very painful period of my life. Since the 20th July 1954 Vietnam was partitioned into two mutual unfriendly countries, the North and the South, both did not understand each other for a long time. Within a limited time, people had to make quick decision to choose which country to go. I was then eighteen, an age that young people are searching for their way and own identity and need advice from the elders. Before deciding to join those who leave Hanoi, my fatherland, to come to Saigon, the capital of the South, I paid visit to a few people who were my *huynh-truong* (mentors) in different fields, one of them I respected the most was a school teacher, Le Bang. He was a typical modern Trang-Si, from whom I have learned many things on Vietnamese art of sword, folk stories, history of swords, and the “soul” of Vietnamese Knighthood, *Hon Trang-Si-Viet*. His house was built at the end of a small garden and was furnished and decorated with many things made from bamboo. That afternoon, I was offered a bowl of *che-tuoi*, a special green tea which was prepared with fresh tea leaves harvested from a field of Bac-Ninh, a province close to Hanoi. This was an unforgettable moment; since then I have been going around the world and enjoying many kinds of good teas but could never find something

similar. He was planning to stay in Hanoi, but quietly advised me to go South. When I was about to leave he told me: ***“Em nên vào Nam đi. Lúc nào cũng giữ trong lòng tâm hồn người Tráng-Sĩ: chính trực, dũng cảm và hữu ích.”*** *Go South my little brother; always keep the spirit of Trang-Si in your soul; be honest, be strong, and be helpful to others.* I left Hanoi forever, but I bring the soul of my fatherland with me going around the world and keeping the advice of my mentor in my heart.

Phan-Hoang (November 2009)