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Someone patted me on the shoulder. I turned around and saw two totally strange faces; one was a young man and the other quite advanced in years. They were both fixating their eyes on me. “Excuse me,” the young man ventured in English (wow!) and asked me something that has now slipped from my memory. After a short dialog, I found out that they were father and son, both Japanese, who had been in town for one or two days and were now staying at Hương Giang Hotel, only half a mile from Hue University’s College of Education. They seemed to have been delightedly taking a walk along Lê Lợi Street when they casually swerved into the school. A young instructor at this institution, I did not have anything to read at home in the evening and therefore had no choice but ride my bicycle over here to read the *Nhân dân*, a mouthpiece of the Vietnamese Communist Party, which was most available: at the stair landing on the first floor, a copy of the *Nhân dân* was always pasted to a wooden board hanging on the wall. The pat on my shoulder came while my eyes were still glued to the newspaper.

In the meantime, at a quick glance, I barely caught sight of a person who was a few classes senior to me at this college and currently the secretary of the school’s unit of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. It seemed as if a shadow was passing by accidentally. Yet, a few minutes later, I heard an English phrase in a polite tone, “Excuse me,” perhaps directed toward the two foreigners, followed by a stern order in Vietnamese, evidently directed toward me this time: “You must escort them out of here, right now!” The bilingual speaker was Professor Trương Quang Đệ, head of the Foreign Languages Department. I was quickly aware of the delicate situation I was in at the time, and I accompanied the Japanese, father and son, out of the building.

At the gate, the two persons lingered on, as if not wanting to go right away. The father was quiet, his eyes constantly on me, with a look of inquiry and concern. But the son could not help saying it out loud: “Are you sure you won’t be in trouble?” Reluctantly, I replied: “My country is not as gloomy as you might think, gentlemen.”

Then I headed back to the building. A tall handsome man, who had been waiting for me at the doorsteps, introduced himself as an Internal Protection cadre – i.e., a public security agent. I was asked to write a report explaining the encounter between me and the strangers. How did I meet the two Japanese? What did they say? What did I say? The report had to be specific, with as many details as possible.

A week later, I was summoned hurriedly to the school's personnel office. Again, a public security agent was waiting, but he was a different guy. The same old inquiries that consisted of the same old questions were repeated, yet a little less intimidating: "We have in our hands proofs that you have met these foreigners many times. I hope you're wise enough to tell the truth, as truthful as possible."

I was ordered back to the school's personnel office a few more times. Finally, they probably found nothing wrong with me, so they decided to leave me alone.

I taught at from Hue University's College of Education for more than ten years and met Professor Đê again and again many times, but he never mentioned the old story. What I really knew was that he was on duty that night (as a rule, members of the school's leadership took turns staying overnight at school during those days); someone must have reported something abnormal to him, and he had to show up to deal with what was happening. Honestly, I did not actually understand the reason why he behaved that way.

Thirty years later, I happened to meet him again in a seminar on Vietnam's educational system, organized by a magazine in Saigon. I remember saying with fervor that facing the specter of a nationwide starvation, "they" could not afford to maintain a barrack socialism and therefore were forced to allow "household contracts," and then "the five sectors of the economy". I pointed it out that the national educational system, however, remained the last bastion of that barrack socialism; that changes in education after decades of "reform" were basically a move caused by economic factors: as a result, the operations of "people-founded" schools and "private" schools were allowed; that the ways "they" managed the nation's educational system remained unchanged; that all liberating initiatives had been thwarted by official vigilance or condemned as being "lax". Spurred on by my own enthusiasm, I began to relate how I had been interrogated by public security agents decades ago just because I simply traded a few phrases with foreigners. I completely forgot that Professor Đê was also present and listening in the conference room.

At the end of the seminar, Professor Đê came close to me and said in a gentle voice: "In those days, if I hadn't done as I did concerning the trouble you'd run into, you'd certainly have been arrested right away."

How grateful I feel to you, Professor Đê! And how lucky I have been to be friends with those who came of age under "the North's socialist system", learned every zigzag of its operations and silently tried to help out a guy like me, who grew up in the South – the entire society was going through a radical transformation, and yet I remained too naive.

The image of the amiable professor seems to be rushing back to my memory from a distant evening in the past. In the dusky atmosphere surrounding us that evening, we were occasionally distracted by the whining whistle of a passing train. The professor had just come back from France and was visiting his friend, who was in charge of the department of literature at the Teachers

College, and I happened to be with them. In a dramatical and yet painful manner, he retold the massacre of students at the Tienanmen Square that he had seen on French television.

True, Viet Nam was fortunately spared a Tienanmen-styled bloodshed that killed thousands of people in one fell swoop. But, in our country, victims of quiet arrests and unjust imprisonments with or without court trials may have manyfold outnumbered the Tienanmen death toll.

If it had not been for Professor Đê, I might have been one of the unfortunate.