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**Criticism of Competitive Examinations System
in Ngo Tat To's Novel *The Tent
and the Bamboo Bed*¹**

Introduction

The novel by the Vietnamese writer Ngo Tat To *The Tent and the Bamboo Bed* (*Lều chông*) was first published in the newspaper *Times* (*Thời vụ*) in 1939, and two years later it was printed as a separate publication. The title of the book immediately revealed its subject to Vietnamese readers, inasmuch as for many centuries the tent and the bamboo bed invariably accompanied Confucian scholars going to pass competitive exams, which were held *al fresco* on a fenced-off plot of land or simply in a field.

Relevance of the topic. It is hard to overestimate the significance of the institution of competitive examinations in traditional Vietnam, which existed for eight-and-a-half centuries. In that country, just as in neighboring China, these exams served as a means of selecting officials for government service. Since the aspirants had to know and understand, first and foremost, Confucian teaching and certain ideological dogmas, the institution of competitive examinations and its inseparable educational system forming a definite world outlook and psychology of people, was the main pillar of Confucianism. The abolition of this institution at the beginning of the 20th century marked the end of an entire epoch in the country's history and withdrawal from the Confucian past, which was accompanied with a change of ethical values and orientations.

Ngo Tat To (1894–1954) knew only too well of the competitive exams system. He came from a poor family of Confucian scholars, received a tra-

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ditional education and took part twice in interprovincial examinations, that is, first-grade exams, in 1912 and 1915. After the abolition of the competitive exams system Ngo Tat To, like many other representatives of Vietnamese intellectuals of the first half of the 20th century, began to orient himself to European culture and literature and tried his hand in journalism, having changed, as it is often said in Vietnamese editions, brush to pen. In the late 1930s-early 1940s, he wrote his most popular works, such as the novel *When the Light Is Out*, essays *Rural Affairs* written in the critical realism style, and the historical novel *The Tent and the Bamboo Bed*.

Turning to the subject of competitive exams, the last of which took place in 1918, was somewhat unexpected in 1939, which was said by the author himself in his foreword to the novel¹. Returning to a long-forgotten subject, the writer was striving to better understand the historical past of his country, for competitive examinations, whose symbol was the tent and the bamboo bed, had for many centuries determined the destiny of Vietnam, supplying it with government officials who had sat in the imperial palace and were a pillar of the state. “For Vietnam, the tent and the bamboo bed seemed to have been the creators of a multitude of both useful and good-for-nothing people,” Ngo Tat To wrote. “It was they who had made Vietnam a civilized country, but it was also they who had brought the country to freakish things happening for a long time that cause laughter and tears, horror and confusion” [Ngô Tất Tố 2012: 5]. In these words, one can understand the writer's view that it was competitive examinations that had brought the country to the brink of disaster and the loss of independence. Thus, at the very beginning, in the foreword, the author openly expresses his ambiguous attitude to this institution of traditional Vietnam.

In this connection, the novel *The Tent and the Bamboo Bed* is interesting, because, on the one hand, it is a story told by a witness about the system of competitive exams in the last years of its existence, and on the other, it shows the assessment of this traditional institution in Vietnamese contemporary literature.

In Russia, the criticism of the competitive exams system in the novel *The Tent and the Bamboo Bed* was noted by N. Nikulin in an introduction to his translation of the novel². However, having devoted his article to the biography of Ngo Tat To, the researcher confined himself to a brief review of

¹ Ngo Tat To wrote: “Today, on hearing the words 'tent' and 'bamboo bed' many people will be surprised, because these things left our daily life thirty years ago by now” [Ngô Tất Tố 2012: 5].

² [Nikulin 1982: 7–12].

the main ideological trend of the novel. In the Vietnamese language, this criticism is analysed in several pages of the chapter devoted to the writer's work in the textbook *Vietnamese Literature (1940—1945)* written by the Vietnamese literary critic Phan Cu De¹.

The main part of research

The task of this work is to show as fully as possible the author's attitude to the institution of competitive exams and the Confucian heritage of the past in the novel *The Tent and the Bamboo Bed*, as well as to describe the methods with which the author criticized the examination system of traditional Vietnam.

Research methodology. To tackle this task, we resorted to description and literary analysis of various aspects and levels of this novel.

Research materials. The text of the novel *The Tent and the Bamboo Bed* in Vietnamese² and its translation into Russian³. All quotations are taken from the Russian edition of the novel.

Research procedure. In the course of the work the following points have been analyzed:

- author's descriptions of separate episodes in which comic and bitter notes can be traced;
- images of students and Confucian scholars appearing on the pages of the novel;
- descriptions of the main character's interior life and self-consciousness, his statements and behavior;
- separate statements of secondary personages expressing the author's position;
- the title and objective world of the novel;
- its plot and composition.

The Tent and the Bamboo Bed is a novel about an extremely talented young scholar named Van Hac. All people around predict him great success at the forthcoming exams, but Van Hac fails at interprovincial examinations three times before finally receiving the degree of *cử nhân*⁴. The hero goes to

¹ [Phan Cự Đệ 2010: 392—395].

² [Ngô Tất Tố 2012].

³ [Ngô Tất Tố 1982].

⁴ The highest degree awarded at interprovincial examinations, which, in contrast to the second degree, *tú tài*, allowed aspirants to take part in the examinations of the next, second grade in the capital.

the capital, takes part in second-grade exams there, and emerges with flying colors. After the last, third-grade exam, “the competition at the imperial palace,” Van Hac is arrested for wrongly used characters, but three days later he is released and returns home.

The action of the novel is not clearly determined chronologically and takes place during the Nguyen dynasty rule, somewhere between 1831 (the 12th year of Emperor Minh Mang’s stay in power) and 1884 (the occupation of the country by France)¹. The competitive exams system described by the author indeed causes both laughter and tears.

Ngo Tat To laughs at the absurdities and vices of the examination system of traditional Vietnam, as well as the hopelessly obsolete phenomena, as viewed from his time. Irony permeates the novel’s pages, when a person who has won the highest degree of *tiến sĩ*² appears. Describing his attire: black boots with points curved upward, long blue skirt, blue robe, and cap with earflaps decorated with silver-embroidered flowers, the author says he looks like a toy paper *tiến sĩ* sold on full moon nights of the eighth month. Ngo Tat To compares the opening ceremony of interprovincial examinations with the proceedings on the stage of the classical Vietnamese theater *tuồng*, and he says that the chief examiner with a rod, tall hat with earflaps and a plate on the chest with the drawing of a peacock looks like a personage of a street theater *chèo*, only without a long beard.

The novel mocks the excessive ceremonial procedure of competitive examinations. The thanksgiving ceremony, during which the new laureates of interprovincial examinations express gratitude first to the Emperor for the degree bestowed on them, for caps and robes, as well as for an invitation to a gala reception, and then their tutors and examiners, becomes haphazard and meaningless at the end. “At long last, the ranks of the participants in this tiresome ritual have lost their order, those present began to move from one place to another, and continuing to bow, they ceased to understand whom they thank and what for” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 191].

We also seem to hear the author’s laughter in an episode when guards examine the luggage of students before letting them pass through the gates of the examination grounds. In the luggage of one of them they find a hoo-kah for smoking opium. “I cannot do anything without it,” admitted the aspirant [Ngo Tat To 1982: 83]. Another one brings a dustpan with him and, confused, explains to the guards that he needs it for cleaning purposes be-

¹ [Phan Cự Đê 2010: 392].

² The highest degree of all awarded at the examinations of the final, third grade held in the imperial palace.

cause he is “tummy-sick.” In a jar of water of still another applicant the guards find a waxed paper filled with small written characters for which “he is given it in the neck” and tied tightly. Examining the belongings of another scholar, “a middle-aged man with shifty eyes,” the guards notice a plug on his bed leg under which they discover two *Study aids for writers*. This “male-factor” is also tied for subsequent delivery to the court.

Another comical image appearing in the pages of the novel is that of student Tran Duc Chinh, an “offspring” of a noble family, who not knowing the examination rules and “being at loggerheads” with characters wishes to pass the exams only because of his social position. “If a representative of a good family, when he is over thirty does not take exams, it is considered a shame on the respected relatives” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 130]. An ignoramus, he likes to pretend important and self-confident, as if he were “well versed in examination matters.” Duc Chinh passes on to the third tour of interprovincial exams only because he pays a good sum of money to those aspirants who are willing to write a composition for him. “To think only of this dope, who is spoken of as a person who scored success in two tours,” grieves a friend of the main character [Ngo Tat To 1982: 131].

One more ignorant scholar is described in a story told Van Hac by his father-in-law while drinking tea. The knowledge of that scholar named Mi was so poor that he failed even at screening tests. But the diviner told him that this very year Mi would definitely score success at exams. Thanks to the efforts of his brother who had the *tiến sĩ* degree, he was allowed to take part in the interprovincial examinations. Mi passes on from one tour to another thanks to a very old man who each time emerges in his tent and writes compositions instead of him. As a result, Mi receives the honorable degree of *cử nhân*. And when he goes to find his benefactor, he learns that the old man was an ancestor of one ancient noble family. Further on, Mi who scored success by supernatural means, but not due to his knowledge, “took a bad path” and lost the dignity and honor of a learned scholar. The *cử nhân* had an affair with the wife of the commander of the rural guards, and when the deceived husband caught the couple red-handed, he stripped both of them, tied to the bamboo bed and ordered his subordinates to carry them along the streets for all people to see their shame.

No matter how fantastic the story about the help of supernatural forces at the exams might be, it contains the bitter truth about the fact that the degrees were not always given to the most worthy persons.

Superstitions inherent in students cause an ironic smile of the main character and the author himself, too. Van Hac on seeing clouds of smoke from the neighboring tent at the examination field thinks it's a fire and

jumps out of his tent, but it turns out that his neighbor is simply burning the ritual money. “Apparently, he feared that a haunted soul of someone of his ancestors could pursue him and he decided to propitiate it beforehand,” the hero thinks [Ngo Tat To 1982: 85]. Although he himself, being obedient to his wife and relatives, prays to ancestors and performs the necessary rites and rituals before examinations, his attitude to them is skeptical: “...there is no use in these rites and rituals; you may observe or ignore them, it doesn't matter, you'll fail all the same. No, the souls of ancestors do not help me. Why pray to them?” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 74].

The main character is quite close to the author. Ngo Tat To often attaches to him his own ironic or critical remarks. But it appears that there is more bitterness than irony in the novel.

Attending lessons at the school of his friend Khac Man and hearing how young students retell what they have learnt with great difficulty, Van Hac thinks: “What wrong have these youngsters done for which they are punished by making them cram the words they don't understand. How can an eight- or ten-year-old child know the meaning of the word 'chaos', for example?” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 34].

The weak point of the traditional educational system was that it did not teach to think, but only contributed to the development of memory. Any creative effort and independent thinking were denounced. All aspects of examination compositions, even assessments of some or other historical figures were strictly regimented: “...ancient personages should only be valued positively, and people of later epochs — negatively” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 140]. The main character is criticized by his tutor for his habit of “going against generally accepted rules,” and for the phrases in his works which “stubbornly reject all and sundry rules and regulations. And in examination works ... there can be no heavier mistake than this” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 58].

Van Hac is concerned with the fate of his Motherland, and therefore his bitterness is caused by the fact that answering the examination questions about modern time, which, as one would think, should deal with important events going on in the native land, the aspirants had only to repeat what they had crammed in childhood.

Ngo Tat To also emphasizes excessive strictness of examination rules and disparity between offence and punishment. After the end of each tour of exams two boards appeared on the gates to the examination field: a big board of honor with the names of aspirants allowed to pass on to the next tour, and a small “board of shame.” On it the names of those were listed who “had written too little,” which was considered as a sign of disrespect for the examiners. This lot also awaited those unlucky students who had missed

even one line in a character and those who had made more than ten additions, inserts, gaps, and corrections. For these “one may land in prison,” — Van Hac explains to his friend. “Because someone may think that you did them on purpose in order to give a sign to a certain examiner” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 145].

Apart from that, the names of those who had used the banned characters or even the forbidden combination of characters appeared on the board of shame. According to a decree of the emperors of the Nguyen dynasty, it was forbidden to use the characters denoting the names of the emperors and members of their families, as well as combinations meaning the names of palaces and tombs in the capital and its environs. A partial ban was imposed on the names of grandmothers, mothers, and distant ancestors of emperors: such characters could be used, but they had to be changed.

There was also the “rule of special reverence”: all words with a negative meaning, such as “wicked,” “dark,” “beat,” “kill,” could not be used before the characters meaning the monarch (“emperor,” “ruler,” “governor,” “sovereign”) even if a student wrote a composition about “dissolute” Chinese rulers.

In answers to questions about modernity the words denoting the emperor, words describing his virtues and all other words should be written on three different lines. Whoever has not placed a certain word on the corresponding line, or missed it was charged with disrespect for the emperor. “They beat up heavily for this,” the main character says [Ngo Tat To 1982: 145].

The author imparts his attitude to the examination rules to the owner of the inn where Van Hac and his friends stayed during the interprovincial examinations. “Heavens! Why should these difficulties be introduced? Not to use hundreds of banned characters alone is already a very difficult task” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 164]. And further on: “What luck that from very young years I was too stupid to study and had to abandon school and start work. If I had studied a bit better and decided to score success as an official I would have violated the rules and received punishment all my life!” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 165].

Special emphasis is made on physical hardships through which the aspirants have to pass. The symbols of these hardships are the tent and the bamboo bed, which are in the title of the novel.

Thousands of aspirants who have come to pass the competitive examinations have similar luggage: the bamboo bed and the frame for the tent on one side, a cover of palm leaves and rolled tent canvas or a cane mat on the other side, a pumpkin flask, a round bamboo case for a paper roll, and a

coffret or casket on the neck. "All these things," Ngo Tat To writes, "big and small, long and short, were a heavy burden for the fragile shoulders and necks of students. By God's will, the future learned men, before stepping on the road of honor and glory had to work as carriers" [Ngo Tat To 1982: 81].

It was only sons of noble families who were allowed to use the services of porters on the examination field.

Few people succeeded to reach the last, fourth tour of interprovincial exams and, therefore, the tents and bamboo beds were brought to the examination field in the evening of the preceding day. And although the shoulders of the participants in the last tour were free from luggage, "they still carried on their necks a case for a paper roll, a pumpkin flask with water, and a coffret or a casket, which painfully hit on their chest and stomach when they walked" [Ngo Tat To 1982: 168].

The main character Van Hac passes exams not by his own free will. He does it in order to please his ambitious wife and justify the hopes of his relatives and "uphold family honor." Although he does not dare openly protest against competitive examinations, he throws away all his belongings, except his casket and the case with the paper roll, on the examination field twice after another tour of the exams, which can be considered a hidden form of protest. Van Hac does not want to be in the role of a carrier. "What the devil should I carry all this junk on myself!" he exclaims [Ngo Tat To 1982: 117].

The students' hardships reach their peak during the second tour of the interprovincial exams. In the first tour, they suffered only from cold, but in the second tour, on top of that it began to rain. Ngo Tat To writes that "students from poor families suffered the most. Their shirts and trousers of light fabric could not protect them from piercing cold. Their hands were numb and many scholars could not hold even the light tent frames. People looked like drowned men, with blue faces and grey lips" [Ngo Tat To 1982: 112].

By midday, water began to drip into the tents and under the bamboo beds and the field turned into a bog. "How could this happen?" the author asks. And he answers: "The point is that the place assigned for the examination field a couple of months ago was a paddy field" [Ngo Tat To 1982: 113].

Van Hac, although he was protected from shower by the tent was wet through and chilled as if he stayed in the open. He needed to get a stamp of the midday, for which he had to go out of the tent and stay in the queue in the rain and icy wind; thinking about it the main character falls unto despair, a thought of giving up the whole thing and "become free for the rest of his days" crosses his mind. "Such exams as these today are nothing but humiliation," he thinks. "Even if you get important titles and posts, they are not worth this torture" [Ngo Tat To 1982: 114]. Van Hac wants to tear to

pieces the examination copybook, but stops, remembering that a student who does not give in his copybook will be placed under arrest, and if he returns the copybook with only a few lines, he will be put on the “shame list” and covered with infamy for the rest of his life.

Leaving the tent the main character sees people, who “look like refugees rather than applicants for high titles.” The examination field resembles “a market destroyed by a typhoon.” “It turns out that many tents were overturned by the wind and blown away, and quite a few students, having succumbed to cold and rain and unable to think and concentrate under the impact of the elements were forced to present their empty copybooks” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 115].

But even these trials could not be compared to what was in store for students going to the capital to pass the exams of the second grade. It takes forty days for Van Hac and his friend Doc Cung to get from their native village to the capital city of Hue. They have to cut through the road in the thick jungle with axes and knives, climb over steep cliffs, cross fast-flowing streams, clamber up the stiff slopes, slip down on the knees, and spend nights in trees to protect themselves from cougars, tigers, and snakes. On the way, Van Hac became sick running high temperature. Later he said to his friend: “I thought at the time: to become the emperor himself was not worth of such torture, to say nothing of receiving the degree *tiến sĩ*” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 197].

However, the strictest sentence to the system of competitive examinations Ngo Tat To passes when he describes tragedies which the desire to achieve success in examinations brings to various people.

The writer notes that there are very old men among the participants in examinations. The story of one such person is told in greater detail.

One cloudy morning, on the way to the second tour of the interprovincial examinations, Van Hac and his friends noticed a grey-haired old man, who slipped and fell on the road under the weight of the things he was carrying — a tent, a bamboo bed, and a coffret. “He won't be able to reach the field in such a foul weather,” Van Hac and his friends reasoned. “And if he does, what's the use? Will he be able to write anything? He's half alive” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 110]. They want to take the old man to the nearest house and make him lie down and rest, but he begs them to help him reach the examination field: he has tried to pass the exams six times but each time failed in the very first tour. Now, he was allowed to go over to the second tour at long last. He would agree even to die on the field. Further on in the book, we learn that the old man indeed died in his tent.

Another old man did not hand his copybook to the examiner on time. The old man begged him to take his work, but the man already locked and

sealed his coffret with copybooks. He pitied the old man, but could not help him. “Woe is me!” — weeps the old man. — “It’s the tenth time that I pass the exams. I have sold my house and land for this, and tried my luck for the last time. Now, what’s the use of it.... I’m late!” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 92].

Once, while talking with his brothers and his friend Doc Cung, Van Hac tells them a story about an unhappy student who was famous for his wit and education, but despite his talent was unable to receive the highest degree at the interprovincial exams. The reason for this was the formal nature of the examination rules and the underrated marks given by the examiners. Officials at preliminary assessment gave him good marks, but at the second assessment, they were invariably lowered. As a result, based on the total number of good marks the able student was seventh on the list, having outstripped many of those who gained the highest award, but inasmuch as for admittance to the final tour it was necessary to have at least one good mark put by an official of the second assessment, the lad received only the degree *tú tài*. At the same time his fellow countryman whom he helped in the three first tours was the last *cử nhân* on the list. Such failure had an adverse effect on the entire life of a young lad, he plunged into debauchery, “drank days and nights”, played *tổ tôm*¹ for four months, and then began to spit blood and died.

The main character of the novel Van Hac is unable to score success at the exams for a long time for similar reasons. “The point is that at the imperial court it was decided that although Van Hac was worthy enough to head the list of laureates, he was still too young and his compositions had strong traces of mannerism and haughtiness and, therefore, if he is given a degree he may begin to think too much of himself. This is why the imperial court, wishing to rear the young talent and not let it perish decided to regard Van Hac as one who failed at the exams, in order to give more time for his talent to develop and mature. It will be allowed to award a degree to him at the next examinations” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 179–180].

Having failed at the exams three times Van Hac, a very talented man, has turned from a self-confident and cheerful young lad into a person haunted by doubts and anxiety. “Previously, after each examination tour he went out of the gates fully confident of success, but now he doubted, suffered torments and was not sure that he would be allowed to enter the next tour... Feeling lonely and grim he remembered his examination compositions and praises he received and said to himself: ‘No. I cannot fail again.’ But this confidence vanished quickly, and the feeling of anxiety did not

¹ Vietnamese card game.

leave him either in daytime, or at night.... In short, the lad felt like a bird, which having suffered from the bow and arrows more than once, begins to fear any curved branch” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 181].

The hero becomes disappointed in the justice and objectivity of the system of competitive examinations. “Some time ago he thought that if you study hard, if you are talented, you are sure to receive a deserved award. But after failure at the last exam, he realized that neither persistence nor talent were a guarantee of success, and he began to believe in predestination” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 181].

Now that passing exams has become an ordinary thing for him, he feels ashamed of receiving tokens of respect from his relatives who, according to tradition, gather at his house every time before the beginning of the regular competitive exams. And he loses the taste for entertainment: during his first examinations, while awaiting their result he spent time at brothels and “drank much to the sound of music and songs by beautiful girls”, but after three failures he flatly refuses to turn to debauchery with his friends.

But if some are broken by competitive exams, others are deprived of human dignity.

A friend of the main character, a rather advanced in years teacher of a primary school named Khac Man turns into a miserable person faced by failure at the exams. During the first tour of the interprovincial examinations, when the sound of drums gave the sign to present compositions, he begs his friend who is sitting nearby to help him finish his composition: “Help me, or I’ll commit suicide, I swear! What shall I live for if I fail!” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 91].

When Khac Man does not see his name on the board of honor showing the examinations results and thinks he has failed, he turns from a wagger into an acerbated person. He responds to his friends’ banter with undisguised rudeness and goes to the bank of the river with such a gloomy face that they begin to fear he’s indeed going to commit suicide. Luckily, all ends well: his friends convince him that he has not failed at all, but simply has not noticed his name, though it was written in big letters. “You’re such a miserable man,” Van Hac says to him, “to be friends with you is a disgrace.” But Khac Man does not care a damn what his friends think of him. “Scold me as much as you wish,” he answers rejoicing at his success, “it doesn’t touch me” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 106]. Although at the examination, in which the incident described above happened, Khac Man does not score success, in several years’ time he receives the degree of *tú tài*, and he is on the bottom of the list of the laureates. “This is, perhaps, the most suitable place for him,” Doc Cung says, “he’s the last, yet *tú tài*.” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 189]. For such

an ignorant person as Khac Man this proved to be a big chance, as he entered the following tours only thanks to the help of his friends.

After each tour of exams drunken failed aspirants roam the streets shouting that their compositions are superb, and they themselves are decent people, but the examiners are ignorant. They look for somebody to displace their anger on to. Some of them even sob violently in public.

Ngo Tat To also shows that competitive exams can bring students to the brink of sanity. The novel describes how one of the participants in the inter-provincial exams, having learned of his success, “suddenly began to beat with his fists the hat tied by a cord to his chest, then jumped like a sparrow and shouted: ‘Who got the pig’s head? It’s me, me, me!’” [Ngo Tat To 1982: 189]. Soon this fresh *cử nhân* comes to his senses. “Evidently, this aspirant has failed many times, and that’s why has gone mad from joy,” one of the students says [Ngo Tat To 1982: 190].

Van Hac himself at the very end of the novel does not seem quite sane. After three failures at interprovincial examinations he finally headed the list of laureates and received the degree *cử nhân*. At the examinations in the capital the hero also becomes the first laureate. Other aspirants look at him “with fear and admiration” and predict the first place at the exams of the final degree at the imperial palace. He himself is convinced of victory beforehand. It seems that the coveted high degree *tiến sĩ* of which his wife has been dreaming is already in his pocket. But after the final exams he is arrested. Having returned home, he tells his relatives about his failure “with a satisfied smile”. “With a happy, smiling face” he says that he used four characters incorrectly, for which he was even deprived of the title of the first laureate. Apparently, having decided never to pass examinations again, he feels free and happy at long last. But from the point of view of the orthodox Confucians, his decision is utterly insane.

The idea that success at the competitive examinations is not worthy of ardently striving for it becomes ever stronger because the novel describes the fate of one student who received the high degree *tiến sĩ*, and also because of the compositional structure of the novel. It begins with a discussion in a village of the news about their fellow villager Tran Dan Long who became *tiến sĩ* and ends with the news that the imperial court ordered Long to stand at the head of the army, and when he was defeated he was downgraded to a simple soldier of the vanguard. Thus, the entire many-year-long thorny path traversed by Tran Dan Long in order to reach success at examinations and become government official was a flop. His lot was terrible. Van Hac pities his fellow student: “A young lad who has recently scored success at examinations, who has fagged over canonic books and has never heard a single

rifle shot, is appointed high-ranking military commander and is ordered to defeat pirates. And here's the result...." [Ngo Tat To 1982: 208].

Four lines from the epic poem *The Tale of Kieu* by Nguyen Du¹ cited in the novel become the keynote of the whole work:

“Do I have to give my sword to the imperial power?
Isn't there another choice?
Do I have to become a fleshy wig
To bow my head low dressed in fig?”²

For the sake of justice, it should be noted that there are ideal images of Confucian scholars in the novel. For example, it is the tutor of Van Hac, the second laureate from Tien Kieu³, a man of high moral standards who cited Confucius and enjoyed great respect of everybody. He was a talented teacher and his school was famous in the district. In the year of Van Hac's success at the examinations, of the 25 aspirants who received the degree *cử nhân*, seven were his pupils. It was he who matched Van Hac and, by doing so, he not only took care of his future, but also helped his bride, who was so anxious to become the wife of *tiến sĩ* that even fell ill.

Another ideal image of Confucian scholar is that of the supervisor of educational work in Hanoi province, who is described as a “man of great book wisdom.” “A respectable grey-haired old man” appears on the book pages in a scene when a crowd of students is about to destroy the house of a merchant who has offended one of them. The old man is asked to calm down the mob. He finds out the ring-leader of the conflict, and pronounces his verdict to each participant. Those guilty of disorder are ordered to give their apology and to come next morning to the Confucian temple of literature for an expiatory prayer and punishment (ten drubs). “The supervisor of education settled the argument wisely,” Van Hac and his brothers exclaim after hearing this story [Ngo Tat To 1982: 179].

In this way Ngo Tat To criticizes the system of competitive examinations, yet, he does not reject Confucian values.

Results of the research. As we see, Ngo Tat To laughs and grieves at absurdities and vices of the examination system of traditional Vietnam in his novel *The Tent and the Bamboo Bed*. Along with the educational system the institution of competitive examinations closely connected with it contri-

¹ Nguyen Du (1765—1820) — a celebrated Vietnamese poet who is most known for writing *The Tale of Kieu*.

² Cited from: [Ngo Tat To 1982: 42].

³ A commune in Bac Quang district, Ha Giang province, Vietnam.

buted only to the development of memory, but not the development of thinking. Moreover, it stemmed any creative effort and independence of thought. The examination system was nonobjective and imperfect, inasmuch as, on the one hand, it allowed unworthy aspirants to receive degrees, and on the other, the brightest students could fail due to the fact that examiners lowered their marks on purpose in the belief that early failures would help budding talents “develop and mature.” The system of competitive examinations with its excessively strict and complicated rules and severe punishment for even the smallest violations committed by inadvertence, with all the heavy physical burdens and privations, which accompanied participation in exams, humiliated the human dignity of aspirants and crippled future destinies of many scholars, who devoted their entire life to receiving degrees and official posts, but failed to achieve success.

Practically all elements: the title of the novel, its plot and composition, images of students, author's descriptions of certain episodes, inner evolution of the main character, and straightforward critical remarks that the author puts in the mouth of the main character and secondary personages are aimed at criticizing the competitive examinations system described in the novel *The Tent and the Bamboo Bed*.

Passing his sentence on the system of competitive examinations born by Confucian teaching and indissolubly linked with it, Ngo Tat To, nevertheless, does not fully break with the past; he recreates the images of ideal Confucian scholars, thus bolstering up Confucian values.

Analysis of results. The irreconcilable attitude of Ngo Tat To to the system of competitive examinations can be explained not only by his patriotic feelings, which are expressed in the foreword to the novel, but also by his personal experience in the early years of his life. As we have mentioned, the writer came from a hereditary family of Confucian scholars. His grandfather had passed interprovincial exams seven times, but had received only the second degree *tú tài*, which did not open the way to the exams of the next grade and upper posts. The writer's father had passed exams six times, but was unable to achieve success and worked as a rural teacher all his life. Ngo Tat To was the last Confucian scholar in his family. In an interview to the newspaper *The Bee (Con ong)* given in 1939 he noted that even in his school years he felt no excitement over the exams, yet, he had to pass them [Phan Cự Đệ 2010: 389]. At preliminary local exams in Bac Ninh, his native province, Ngo Tat To took first place, but in interprovincial exams, which he had passed twice, he did not receive a degree. Undoubtedly, personal failure, as well as those of his father and grandfather had an impact on his attitude to the institution of the competitive examinations. On the other hand, the lot

of the writer's father and grandfather had been shared by many Confucian students. By statistical data, on average, of 70—80 thousand men taking part in interprovincial examinations only about 15 received the highest degree *tiến sĩ* at the exams of the final, third grade¹. This fact shows that the novel by Ngo Tat To reflected general sentiments current in the country by the end of the epoch of traditionalism.

As for the idealization by the writer of the images of Confucian scholars, it can also be explained by his Confucian past and the spiritual heritage of his family.

It should be noted that the novel by Ngo Tat To, in which examinations were the object of criticism, was followed by novels by Chu Thien² describing the competitive examinations system as the highest expression of state wisdom in the feudal epoch³. In the view of N. Nikulin, the ideological aspect of his works was connected with an attempt to find support in the heritage of national culture and history during a difficult historical period of the country [Nikulin 2006: 55]. At the end of the 1930s—beginning of the 1940s, the problem of Confucianism was, therefore, lively discussed in Vietnamese literature.

Conclusion

In the novel *The Tent and the Bamboo Bed* Ngo Tat To shows the inefficient and fallacious character of the institution of the competitive examinations in traditional Vietnam. Created as a means of selecting the most talented people in the country for service to the Emperor, these exams not only created loopholes for promoting mediocre and cunning people, but quite often nipped in the bud the talents of the most decent and capable persons and broke their lives. The formal nature of the examination rules and subjectivity of examiners gave birth to heartaches among aspirants, and heavy burdens and privations connected with the competitive exams caused physical torture.

The means of criticism of the examination system in the novel are many and varied. They concern both the content and the composition of the novel.

¹ Hữu Ngọc, Lady Borton (2003). *Thi cử nho giao* [Royal Exams]. Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishers.

² Chu Thien (1913—1992) — Vietnamese writer, author of historical novels, as well as literary critic and researcher of Vietnamese literature.

³ We mean the novels *Writing Brush and China Inkpot* (Bút nghiên) and *Confucian Scholar* (Nhà nho) published in 1942 and 1943 respectively.

However, the author does not break fully with the past. Having created the images of ideal Confucian scholars brought up by the very same system, which the author criticizes, he seems at the same time to say that we have something to learn from the past.

The reason and sources of such harsh criticism of the institution of the competitive examinations in the novel and, at the same time, the author's ambiguous attitude to the Confucian heritage of his country lie in the origin of Ngo Tat To and his early years of life.

Along with the critical assessment of the examination system in traditional Vietnam at the beginning of the 1940s, there was a directly opposite point of view expressed in works by Chu Thien.

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