

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen

Temple of Zong?
Never heard of.

novel

Indochina, 1951. Tonkin and northern Annam have been liberated by the Vietminh. In the south, the French are fighting a vicious battle to keep the corrupt regime in Saigon in power.

We meet Ruben in Nha Trang, an Annamese port town where he debarked from a French ocean liner in search of a monastery that a script said had to be somewhere in the mountains of Annam.

It was not the only reason for his quest: he had inherited a chest with unusual contents: a small skeleton.

Accompanying the chest was a manuscript – played into his hands by an old librarian – from a relative who had not survived the war. In it, he mentioned a monastery, of the unknown order of Zong. A Chinese word, he would later find out, but the order seemed to be Japanese....

He engaged a boy in Nha Trang, who would be his guide.

Not only that: the boy has a grandmother and a mother.

Ruben blends into Annamese life, trekking through forests and mountains with Nguyen and later also with Yen, Nguyen's mother. They travel by smuggling ships, old junks and rattling coasters from North to South and back again, through a war-torn country.

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Clues

Meaningful braids of bamboo fibers, suspended vertically in gently flowing water under carved bamboo floats, glide into a temple. An Asian temple. Monks dedicate their lives to piecing together the stream of floating symbols into meanings that might be understood.

The images and meanings came to Ruben, standing at the railing, as clear as when he had dreamed them. Here, in this land he would enter in a few hours, it would have taken place. Once, or maybe still. For his dream had been confirmed – more or less – by what could be gleaned from the manuscript, which he carried in his backpack; which had been played into his hands shortly after he had the dream. And indeed, by ... no, he dared not think further about that.

He tried to sniff the scent of the land, but as soon as he focused his attention on it, the experience was gone. He smelled mostly sea.

The antique, despite her age comfortable ocean liner Béthune slowly sailed into Nha Trang bay. It felt like something familiar was coming to an end. It felt cheesy to have to say goodbye to the routine and comforts on board. The ship, crew and servants would sail on; he had to disembark here, it was so agreed on his ticket; it was like a birth: from the envelope of ship and servants to an uncertain future.

But what was he actually doing here? He had wanted to go to Saigon, to the university there. Not to this remote port town. But yes, boat missed. By the way, the trip had been pleasant and he had long conversations about the country with an official returning home. Those exchanges of knowledge and opinions in themselves were worth the trip. The erudite man, an Annamese, had received his doctorate in Paris on the periods of Chinese rule over

Indochina and had been able to relate them tastefully. On the last leg from Singapore to Nha Trang over chilled glasses of wine, the man had orated about the many secret societies that had resisted Chinese domination, or for that matter, domination by their own dictatorial dynasties. According to him, there were still monasteries in the jungle in the mountains on the border with Laos where such societies and brotherhoods could still be hidden.

When Ruben asked if he had ever seen one himself, the man had answered in the negative. He had only consulted written sources. Nor could he point them out on a map: monasteries had been mentioned in ancient writings, but no locations were known.

Yet the surviving stories, for that is what they really were, filled him with hope that his quest might be fulfillable.

Ruben gazed at the colorful harbor town, the green farmlands and forests behind it and distant rain showers, with his hand over his eyes, as the ship glided into the harbor basin. In Singapore it had been cloudy, but here the tropical sun shone on the water and windows and roofs in the city.

The pounding and vibration of the steam engine ceased after the ear-piercing rattle of anchor chains. The silence of the engine made way for smells and sounds of people, boats and land.

It was almost like coming home. True, this was a different port than Jakarta - Batavia then - from which he had left in '45, but it was a tropical port with the same humid heat, the same brooding smells of stagnant water, dead fish and garbage, the same light; so very different from cold Holland. The six years he had spent there were as many years that he had suppressed his longing for Java.

The realization of all this hammered at him as he was about to leave the safe cocoon of the ship with its delicious French cuisine. His heart pounded. This country was at war, just as his motherland had been when he had left it. What had he come here to do? Where did he get the nerve to come here to find something that might not

even exist? Science? Now that he was here, that felt like an embarrassment. Even though he was pursuing a scientific education, the reason he was here had little to do with it. Oh, so double. He was here because he thought he belonged here, but did the country he was looking at think so too? And himself, was the feeling of not fitting into that muddy little country by the sea sufficient motivation? The ratio was right, always right if you just kept on thinking.

Enough now. He was entering a strange territory, a land that seemed ostensibly French, but to him, who often watched the reality from a different angle, this land had clearly been trampled underfoot.

His analytical self took over and he studied the social order of passengers.

Most of the passengers were French colonial officials, back from leave, and a few junior officers. The bigwigs were flown in by DC4s from American war surplus, the cannon fodder was brought in by fully packed troopships, one of the officers had smugly remarked after a few glasses of cognac. In the Suez Canal, their ship had had to give way to one of those former passenger ships painted in camouflage colors with hundreds of soldiers on the railings. Many conversations on board since then had been about the mounting violence in French Indochina. Calls for freedom and autonomy led more and more residents of Tonkin and Annam to armed resistance against the French colonial administration and the regime they supported in Saigon, who responded with more soldiers and war materiel, more violence. Tonkin was already in the hands of the Vietminh, who had made Hanoi the capital of a free and independent, but not yet recognized Vietnam.

His head knew all this, but his body was now experiencing it for the first time. The same uncanny tension as then in newly liberated Batavia prevailed here as well. Soldiers and naval vessels indicated that the battle was not yet over. He just arrived to find himself

anew in a country at war! Was he wise?

For a moment, the panicked desire to stay on board and travel back to France passed. He put it aside. The luggage in his backpack compelled him to make this trip; there was no getting away from it. His family name was on it and it was about this country.

Barges, large and small junks, sampans, small vessels and ships whose names he did not know, swarmed out to bring passengers and cargo ashore or just on board, to sell provisions, or for reasons that were unclear. Farther out, a large warship lay at anchor.

Debarkation was still part of the booked trip: the shipping line was responsible for passengers up to customs in the arrival hall.

Diplomats had priority; crewmembers halted civilians and military personnel. The officers were disembarked moments later by Navy sloops.

It gave him time to think strategically. How important was it to travel on to Saigon? How important was it to get colleagues at the university to talk about his quest? What if he started his research in this port city, where he happened to land soon? By what chance that happened? According to his belief, haphazard coincidence did not exist; people were steered in the right direction, provided one could listen to the clues that came to you. That had already begun in the Netherlands. Surely it could only be the hand of the gods that had played the two keys of the chest into his hands in quick succession?

A loudspeaker crackled and made some announcements in French. The sound quality was so poor that he understood almost nothing, but apparently it was now the turn of the civilian passengers to go ashore. They began descending the stairs alongside the ship into the now-retained motor barges.

Most of the passengers were French, and their luggage was not searched, so Ruben was one of the few foreigners to suffer. In

frustration, the customs officers rummaged through his belongings and looked at everything. What was he supposed to do with so many rolls of film? On the advice of a seasoned American traveler, he had put French cigarettes bought on board in his bag and backpack.

‘If they find them, they won’t look any further,’ was the advice.

It happened that way. Ruben did not smoke and protested the seizure only for appearances’ sake. It prevented him from being searched; he had to avoid at all costs finding the gold Krugerrands and silver dollars in his money belt. His inheritance.

He was through. Feeling almost sick with relentless excitement, he lifted the backpack onto his shoulders, grabbed the valise and made his way into the hellish heat of the port town.

Outside the shed were the usual cabs, carriages, rickshaws, mon-eychangers, guides and other locals waiting for a cargo, a job, a change.

He had to make a decision now. Either he moved into a hotel and booked a ship to Saigon, or he stayed. Several hotels had been recommended to him on board, but if he stayed, he wanted to blend in as quickly as possible. Although his Javanese blood made his skin darker than that of most Annamese and he had no eye fold, he would hardly stand out, once without luggage and in local clothing.

The tropical feeling aroused in him an extra alertness that he could still remember from the time of the Japanese occupation. As if he had eyes in his back and extra ears. Danger could lurk everywhere. He had never had that in Holland.

He fended off overly intrusive customer seekers and let his gaze wander. He had managed to pick up his school French quite a bit during the trip, but Vietnamese he did not speak. What would the clue be like?

Right through the intrusive men there was eye contact with a boy

squatting on a low wall. His body shook for a moment: the signal of his intuition that he had learned to trust. He kept looking at the boy, who was perhaps twelve, as he briefly moved his head. It was enough: he jumped to the ground, walked around the crowd and stood behind him. Asked to guide him, he replied in good French that he was at his service.

‘Do you know a comfortable house outside the city where I can stay for a while?’

‘Yes sir, at my grandmother’s, she has a big and cool house, only no electricity. But she has a very good cook.’

‘Do you live there yourself?’

‘Yep.’

‘Do you go to the port every day?’

He grinned. ‘I saw from the hills the ship coming. My uncle brought me on the motorcycle.’

‘Do you do that with every ship that arrives? You speak very good French.’

‘No way. I was just curious who would come with this ship. And French I learned in school.’

‘Why were you curious?’

He shrugged. ‘Don’t know.’ He laughed. ‘Just because.’

‘Nice.’ Ruben thought it was a little strange, but he had come across strange things before and it wouldn’t be the last.

‘What is the most comfortable transportation?’

‘A carriage, sir. Shall I arrange one?’

‘Yes, but a coachman who takes good care of his horse.’

The boy went to a carriage at the back of the line. The coachman was an old man in traditional dress; the horse was also old, but looked well-fed and healthy. That could not be said of all the animals.

No more passengers came out of the terminal and the crowd drooped off as the last stranger made his choice.

A welcoming home

The tour of the port city was a thrill. At his request, in addition to the colonial French quarter, the coachman showed the Chinese quarter, a former palace and several temples. It was like driving through a suburb of pre-war Batavia. Except for some French cars, they had hardly encountered any Europeans and certainly no soldiers.

At a market, Ruben ordered a stop and asked the boy, who turned out to be named Nguyen, to buy three meals. It was not unusual, he recalled, for the horse to have eaten and the coachman not yet.

It was a market in a suburb where local farmers and peasants sold their products. In a field were ox carts with wood, bamboo and palm leaves, where residents bought firewood, construction wood and bamboo for their houses and palm leaves for roofs. A market like the one he knew from Java.

Most of the market vendors, men, women and children, had come walking with their wares on a carrying pole on their shoulders. A few rode an old army motorcycle carrying unlikely loads of bananas, coconuts, pots, bags of rice, chickens, young dogs and more.

The boy returned with three packages of rice, roasted fish and vegetables folded in a piece of banana leaf. For Ruben, he had brought new chopsticks; he and the coachman carried theirs in their conical hats.

It was seasoned slightly differently than was common in Java, but otherwise it was the same food he could buy on the street there. It made him sink even further into the tropics.

The journey took them along roads of sand and dust, the buildings became less dense, the fields larger. The last stretch ran along

a slow-flowing river; here were patches of forest and shrubs between the plots, though without forest giants. Just like in Java.

They turned onto a side road, more of a bumpy cart track, toward the hills that lined the wide river valley. They drove among the first sawah's of bright green rice plants. Villages lay on hilltops. Ruben got tears in his eyes. How he had missed this landscape.

One of the houses along the road was the destination for the day. It lay amid lush vegetable gardens, sawah's, fruit trees and a few tall, old trees for shade. The substructure was of stacked stones, upon which stood a two-story wooden skeleton with a roof of palm leaves rustling in the wind. The walls were of gray weathered bamboo wickerwork; the windows had no glass.

Ruben paid the coachman and met Nguyen's grandmother, who welcomed him in awkward French. Of course he could be her guest, she wanted nothing to know about payment and whether the coachman had already eaten, the horse had to graze and drink water first. The petite woman looked strong and autonomous in her traditional attire. An older relative took care of the coachman and helped him unhitch the horse. His hostess preceded Ruben to the veranda, after whispering instructions to Nguyen.

The veranda overlooked a courtyard between two low wings of the main building. These housed several families, old people, cows, pigs and chickens. The courtyard was paved with round stones from the riverbed with a huge mulberry tree in the middle, under which two waterbuffalo's lay ruminating.

Little by little, all the European habituation faded into the background. This was a house as it was supposed to be. Moments later, a young woman brought them bamboo cups of coconut milk.

'She is Nguyen's mother,' Grandma explained. 'Her husband, my son, was killed against the French, but that's a secret. Nguyen is a sensible boy, he should actually go to the Lyceum in town, but children of rich parents take precedence.'

The second time the woman came she carried a tray of fried refreshments, followed by a sweaty Nguyen, triumphantly holding up several wet bottles of beer.

‘Higher up is a store, they keep their beer in the cold water of a mountain stream. Drink it immediately.’

He asked the boy to take him to the toilet. That was a cement stall with a French squat stool, a barrel of water and water scoop, and a candle.

‘How can I pay your grandmother for lodging and meals?’ he asked on the way. ‘Furthermore, I would like to hire you as my guide for a longer period of time. What is your tariff?’

The paying would do Nguyen, so his grandmother would not lose face. On the second, they quickly agreed.

‘I’ll put some extra money in your school savings jar,’ he promised.

Nguyen laughed. ‘What’s that?’

‘Savings so you can go to the Lyceum later.’

‘Oh,’ muttered the boy. ‘We’ll see.’ But Ruben had seen the lighting up of his eyes.

Over a meal of rice with various side dishes, sauces, fruit, roasted chicken and sweet potatoes, Grandma asked bluntly what a colored Dutchman was looking for in Annam.

Ruben circumstantially recounted that he had been born in Java to a Javanese mother and Dutch father. Because they looked like Javanese and spoke Malay, the Japanese occupiers had not interned his mother and he. His father had perished in a Jap camp. The school where he had just started was after some time confiscated by the Japanese and set on fire during the turbulent days after the capitulation. At the insistence of a teacher, he was sent to Holland at the end of 1945 to finish HBS. Someone had arranged for him to join a British troopship repatriating liberated prisoners of war

to England as a 'boy'.

'What was that like,' the old lady asked, 'to be a supposed native servant of Europeans?'

He had to think about that for a moment. Her compact remark showed an independent spirit and represented a whole set of beliefs that in a colonial setting would be dismissed as rebellious; even punished.

'I don't have many memories of it. There was tight discipline on board, which made working easy. I didn't have to think for myself. The men were dull, many were sick and skin and bones. Only at the end of the trip did they become more cheerful and there was a lot of singing.'

'What were your duties?' Her severity made him better understand why the people of Indochina were so persistent in their struggle for freedom.

'Cleaning up in a dining hall three times a day, bar duty as a helper to clear the glasses. A lot of English beer was drunk. Selling cigarettes and spirits in the kiosk. The men got a pack a day with breakfast, but many smoked at a stretch.'

'Have you ever been treated unfairly?'

Ruben slowly shook his head. 'There were often outbursts, there would be shouting and sometimes fighting, but most of the men acted normally to me. I spoke English, Dutch and Malay, that made an impression. I was quick and polite, some people complimented me on that.'

What he did not want to tell were the many attempts by passengers and crewmembers to have sex with him. He was a beautiful, petite boy then. How many hands he had felt on his 'pretty ass' as they said or between his legs in the wide legs of his shorts.... He still got hot after all these years. For though he had invariably refused, it had also excited him. Even when he slept, he was not safe. Often he had rolled out his sleeping mat in inaccessible places

where it was also a lot cooler. When they passed Gibraltar it got colder and he slept in the kiosk on the ground. It could be locked because of the cigarettes and liquor.

‘I see you don’t want to tell everything. What happened then?’

‘At Southampton the ship moored at a quay and long lines of men walked into the terminal. I was on duty until the next day and signed off with the third mate. I had paid the passage with my work and received no further wages. How was I to get to Holland? The mate advised me to go to the Dutch consul. He came to the rescue and immediately contacted my great-aunt in The Hague by telephone. Once she had verified with some tricky questions that it really was me, the consul provided me with money for the trip and travel papers that were only valid on the specified route.’

‘How old were you then?’ asked Nguyen.

‘Fifteen. From Southampton I traveled by train to Dover, crossed by ferry to France, and continued by train via Brussels to The Hague, where my great-aunt, an aunt of my father, lived and who would take me in. It was quite a journey, everywhere bridges and yards were damaged. We had to get off once and were taken by ferry to the other side of a canal, where we had to wait for a train to take us further. In The Hague, after several months, I received word from the Red Cross that my father had died in a Japanese concentration camp, which I already knew from the Red Cross in Java, and that my mother had been killed by Javanese freedom fighters during the Bersiap.’

Ruben had to swallow a few times before he could continue. The telling evoked all kinds of unprocessed grief and even anger.

‘I had heard enough stories on board about the suffering and death of prisoners of war in Japanese concentration camps, but my mother’s death shocked me. After all, she was a Javanese!’

The old lady put her slender hand on his arm in a comforting gesture.

‘There is much suffering because of the Japanese war. Elsewhere it may be a thing of the past, here in our country there is still fighting, now between the French and freedom fighters.’

Ruben calmed down. He did not want to respond to that, especially in front of Nguyen and his mother.

After an unusually strong cup of coffee - the others drank only tea - he excused himself and let the boy take him to his sleeping quarters, where the luggage was already brought in. He hid his money belt and took a shower bath in the small bathroom, then put the belt back on. A cotton nightshirt was ready and the mosquito netting was closed around the bed, which appeared to contain a hard mattress made of crisp leaves, on which lay a kapok-filled futon. Very comfortable by Vietnamese standards, he would later recall.

His account had flung him back in time and he couldn’t sleep from all the images that came to mind.

At the HBS, he had not been the only brown student. The Hague was the city of Dutch East-Indians and retirees from the Emerald Belt, which from ‘49 was called the Republic of Indonesia. Thousands had fled to the Netherlands, and the more affluent mainly settled in The Hague. 1949 was also the year he passed his final exams with flying colors and was admitted to study mechanical engineering at the Technical University in Delft.

Living with his great-aunt and her second husband was a delight. In the large villa he had two spacious rooms at his disposal; his aunt had a bathroom with toilet and shower installed on the landing. They still used the evening meals together, only for breakfast and lunch he took care of himself. His aunt, not entirely white herself, had a Javanese cook and they rarely had Dutch food.

He had no real friends; there were fellow students with whom he sometimes hung out or did homework, went sailing or went to

the beach. He proved especially attractive to brown girls, which he shamelessly took advantage of thanks to the army condoms he managed to get.

With a sweet face before his eyes, for which he could not remember a name, he fell asleep.

A cryptic but compelling manuscript

It was still dark when he awoke from a dream; the images from his Dutch days were immediately back. How long had he slept? It must be the middle of the night; it was so quiet. A single oil lamp illuminated the room. Beside his bed, Nguyen lay on a mat, fast asleep.

Ruben interrupted his retrospective before he swooned away in nostalgia. For those last two years at the HBS had been quite turbulent. There were pleasant and not-so-pleasant memories, muggy sexual experiments in a time he had found oppressive. Not just with brown girls...

He sat up straight and looked in his backpack for the transcript of the manuscript. It woke up Nguyen. He asked him to look for enough light to read by.

Wandering half-dreaming in his past had brought to mind an insight he had forgotten to verify in The Hague.

The boy came with a five-burner oil lamp that gave more than enough light. 'What are you looking for, sir?'

'I read over something in Holland, Nguyen. I was so focused on something else that I neglected it. Only I don't remember exactly what it was and where it was.'

Reading by the in the draft flickering light of five unstable flames tired him in the end, and he put the papers away. 'I can't find it so soon; let's go to sleep. There will be plenty of time tomorrow.'

Upon falling asleep, there was the sting that he had missed something.

Once again, sleep was short. Being back in the tropics stirred up so many memories. To avoid drowning in them, he structurally recalled his Dutch days.

He spent much time in the extensive library of his late great uncle, who had been Professor of Ethnology at Leiden University. There he felt best and could let his adventurous mind wander by foreign lands, peoples and customs. It was as if he lived in two worlds, not that he found that strange. As a half-Javanese, he had spent his life dealing with two different cultures, both of which were actually foreign to him.

He had talked about it with his great-aunt, who also knew that feeling and had long ago decided to use the best elements of the two to make her own culture. He had tried that, too. At least it had resulted in him no longer feeling torn – which happened mostly when he had had too much to drink. It was the way it was, and though it was incompatible, he took things more and more as they came, believing – hoping? – he would find the same cultural peace as his great-aunt.

To move around freely, he had bought a motorcycle from his parents' inheritance after his eighteenth birthday and obtained his driver's license so that he could go to college on his motorcycle and continue to live with his great-aunt.

However, his fascination with technical things was not fully satisfied by the mainly theoretical study. He also did not get along well with other students. Here, though, he was the only brown boy, albeit with a Dutch surname.

Halfway through the first year, he decided to quit. None of the expected magic of the subject of mechanical engineering had appeared to him. It was all unwaveringly cast in formulas; nothing

was left to chance or a higher order. An engineer must not make mistakes, dikes must not breach, bridges must not collapse and machines must not break down.

In the spring, he decided to take a tour of the Netherlands, on his motorcycle and with an extremely expensive lightweight tent like mountain climbers use.

Halfway through, he returned disappointed. It turned out he had an ineradicable longing for the tropics. The soggy, oppressive Netherlands, still recovering from the war and reeking of burning coal, repelled him. In his great-aunt's villa and library, he felt protected and connected to the whole world. Out there, he didn't. He decided to change his field of study.

To study Ethnology in Leiden, he had to take a colloquium doctum in order to complete missing knowledge, especially Latin and French. He passed with good grades.

He commuted back and forth daily on his motorcycle. He liked the atmosphere in the lecture halls, library and the Ethnographic Museum so much better than the noisy students in Delft. Here were guest students from African and Asian colonies and former colonies. The atmosphere was international and there was as much English and French conversation as Dutch.

'And then came that one day, the day why I am here,' Ruben told the next morning. He didn't feel well and only drank tea – unboiled water he didn't dare drink. Nguyen and his grandmother sat listening.

'I had been studying in the university library for months, but precisely on that day I requested a special book and on that very day an old librarian was sitting at the desk filling in for a sick colleague.

'Hey,' said he when he read my request, 'your name looks familiar. Let me think.' He couldn't figure it out and asked me to come back at the end of the day, then sure he would have found why my

name was so familiar to him.

I did, and when he saw me coming he made a grab under the counter. Surprised, I looked at what he held in his hands: a tattered cardboard folder, bulging with yellowed papers and several large brown envelopes, held together by ribbons. He showed the label: there was my name, with a different first name admittedly, but it seemed like my heart skipped a beat. We are the only family with that particular surname, so it had to be kin.

Ruben suddenly became nauseous and ran to the bathroom.

After emptying his stomach and intestines, he staggered to his bed, shivering and sweating with fever, helped by Nguyen. Moments later, his grandmother arrived with a steaming cup of bamboo, a beneficial drink that he should sip, then he would soon feel better.

Toward evening, he woke briefly to go to the bathroom and slept until the next morning. He had to step over Nguyen, who was lying on a sleeping mat next to his bed.

He got another drink and stayed in bed. The beneficial concoction he drank throughout the day stayed well inside, although he still had the feeling of rolling stones in his stomach.

The afternoon sun shone through the shutters as Nguyen entered, a wooden bowl of rice on a tray in his hand.

‘Grandma says you should eat this, the rice is cooked with spices that will make you better.’

‘Have you been taking care of me all this time?’

‘I am your guide and interpreter even when you sleep.’

Ruben worked the odd-tasting rice down with small tufts between chopsticks, keen on any hint that his stomach disagreed. The opposite happened: he got hungry.

‘What was in that folder you got?’ asked Nguyen when Ruben finished the rice.

‘I’ll tell you that later, so your grandmother can hear it, too.’