

**“ON TEACHERS AND FRIENDS”: ANNOTATED TRANSLATION
OF CHAPTER FIVE FROM NAM-SƠN TÙNG-THOẠI 南山叢話
(1879) BY NGUYỄN ĐỨC-ĐẠT 阮德達 (1825-1887)**

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Abstract

This annotated translation presents for the first time in English the complete text of “On Teachers and Friends” 師友第五, Chapter Five in Nam-sơn tùng-thoại 南山叢話, a text authored by late Nguyễn scholar-official Nguyễn Đức-Đạt 阮德達 (1825-1887). In this chapter, Nguyễn expounds the different roles which the teacher-figure and friends play as guides and aides to learning and moral cultivation. Although he recognizes the necessity of teachers during the initiatory stages of learning, Nguyễn champions the role of friends in bringing that learning to completion. While Nam-sơn tùng-thoại is thematically and stylistically eclectic, this chapter is not without passages that reveal a fundamentally Neo-Confucian underpinning to Nguyễn’s understanding of human nature, moral cultivation, and interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: *Nam-sơn tùng-thoại, Nguyễn Đức-Đạt, Nguyễn dynasty, Neo-Confucianism, friendship*

**1. BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT
NAM-SƠN TÙNG-THOẠI AND
NGUYỄN ĐỨC-ĐẠT**

Nam-sơn tùng-thoại 南山叢話 [Assorted discussions of Nam-sơn] is an eclectic text compiled by the late Nguyễn scholar-official Nguyễn Đức-Đạt 阮德達 (1825-1887), styled Hoát-Như 豁如, and his disciples. Divided into thirty-two chapters in four

fascicles (*quyển*, 卷), the text was printed in the thirty-third year of the Tự-Đức 嗣德 reign (c.1879). A native of Nghệ-An 乂安 province, Nguyễn Đức-Đạt led a successful official career spanning the final decades of the Tự-Đức era prior to the colonial period. His official biography, recorded in the thirty-eighth fascicle of *Đại-nam chánh-biên liệt-truyện nhị-tập* 大南正

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編列傳二集, details both his varied assignments in the high Nguyễn bureaucracy as well as his prolific scholarly output.

Contemporary scholars have sometimes described Nguyễn Đức-Đạt's work as being written in the so-called "record of sayings" 語錄 [*yulu/ngữ-lục*] genre (Ruan, 2016, p.viii). In fact, the text bears almost no resemblance to *yulu* as typified in "Way Learning" 道學 discourse during the Song-Yuan-Ming *longue durée* of Neo-Confucian intellectuality. Almost entirely devoid from the text are any hints of vernacular register; rather, the greater portion of the text is comprised of anonymous queries 或問 subsequently answered by the rhetorically repetitive formula "The Elder said" 翁曰. This structure immediately recalls *Analects* 論語. Although *Analects* is itself (at least putatively) a "record of sayings," its influence on the development of the Song *yulu* as a standard mode of Way Learning discourse has been a matter of scholarly dispute (Gardner, 1991, p.575). I propose that *Nam-son tùng-thoại* be understood in the same framework as Yang Xiong's *Exemplary Figures* 法言, i.e., an "imitation of the classics" 擬經 – in Nguyễn Đức-Đạt's case, both *Analects* and Yang's *Exemplary Figures*. This framework, of course, is not exclusive; as Robert Hymes has eloquently argued, Song

dynasty *yulu* operated across multiple discursive contexts and likely aimed, at least in part, to establish the authority of Way Learning masters on equal footing with that of the ancient sages (Hymes, 2006, pp.53-55). In this sense, further inquiry into *Nam-son tùng-thoại* as a late-imperial instantiation of Neo-Confucian intellectuality composed in a modally ambiguous style could possibly prove enlightening for broader discussions the *yulu* genre across East Asian contexts as a whole.

Nam-son tùng-thoại is best described as thematically eclectic. Although the greater portion of the text falls well within the umbrella of typically Neo-Confucian discourse, i.e., theories of learning, self-cultivation, preparation for the civil service examination, government service, the art of statecraft, ritual and music, etc., Nguyễn devotes entire chapters to less conventional topics such as "dealing with the world" 涉世 (Chapter Twenty-Six), "destiny" 運數 (Chapter Twenty-Eight), and "good merit" 福德 (Chapter Twenty-Nine). Furthermore, although Nguyễn mentions paragons of Song Confucianism throughout the text – namely, Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤, Zhang Zai 張載, Cheng Yi 程頤, and Zhu Xi 朱熹 – ostensibly Confucian texts are strangely absent from the copious interlinear commentary which meticulously cites the textual sources and inspirations for Nguyễn Đức-Đạt's

discourses. Instead, Nguyễn Đức-Đạt displays a pronounced proclivity towards eclectic texts such as *Huainanzi* 淮南子 and a broadly Daoistic corpus including texts such as *Liezi* 列子, *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子, and *Baopuzi* 抱朴子. Even when more classically Confucian texts are cited by the interlinear commentary, rather than authors and commentaries representative of standard Neo-Confucian discourse, we find an assortment of Han dynasty authors and texts such as Yang Xiong 楊雄, Liu Xiang 劉向, and *The School Sayings of Confucius* 孔子家語, almost none of which played any prominent role in the intellectual culture of the late imperial Sinosphere. At least in part, this recalls the framework of “classical primordialism” coined by Alexander Woodside in his survey of eighteenth-century Annamese literati intellectuality (Woodside, 2002, pp.118-122). It is worth pondering the dynamic of how this classical orientation is balanced by—or, indeed put to the service of—an unambiguously post-classical discourse permeated with specifically Neo-Confucian metaphysical concerns such as the relation between heavenly principle 天理 and human desire 人欲.

Stylistically, Nguyễn Đức-Đạt’s indebtedness to Yang Xiong can be seen in his fondness for obscure syntax of frequently arcane and flamboyant register, largely alien to the

comparatively sober tenor of *Analects*. Nguyễn Đức-Đạt’s archaizing tendencies result in a stilted and bizarrely laconic style, at turns cumbersome and quaint. The main body of the text is often confusingly abbreviated, only to have lacunae amended in what then becomes a ponderously redundant interlinear commentary. Relatively common characters are sometimes given unintuitive glosses in the interlinear commentary. More often, the obscurity of certain constructions, expressions, and allusions forces readers to sift their way through the text with multiple dictionaries and reference books at hand. This deliberately abstruse style is employed, albeit to a lesser extent, in several other works by Nguyễn Đức-Đạt such as *Khảo-cổ ức-thuyết* 考古臆說 and *Việt-sử thặng-bình* 越史剩評. Although atypical in late Nguyễn literary Sinitic writing as a whole, this performative archaism seems to have constituted something of a personal style for Nguyễn Đức-Đạt.

Nguyễn Đức-Đạt is one of the few Nguyễn dynasty scholar-officials to have enjoyed relatively sustained attention from twentieth and twenty-first century Vietnamese academia. Among the first post-Nguyễn scholars to assess Nguyễn Đức-Đạt’s place in Vietnamese intellectual history was the Marxist historian Trần Văn Giàu. In his magnum opus, *On the Development of Vietnamese Thought: From the*

Nineteenth Century Through the August Revolution [Sự Phát Triển Của Tư Tưởng Việt Nam Từ Thế Kỷ XIX Đến Cách Mạng Tháng Tám], Trần mentions Nguyễn Đức-Đạt and translates excerpts of *Nam-son tùng-thoại* throughout his analysis of Nguyễn Confucianism (Trần, 2019, p.112). Although one might point to Nguyễn's prolific corpus of extant works as a contributing factor to sustained scholarly interest in his output, modern scholarship on Nguyễn Đức-Đạt has, almost without exception, focused on *Nam-son tùng-thoại*. Based on this single work, contemporary Vietnamese scholars have portrayed Nguyễn Đức-Đạt as, alternatively, embodiment of late nineteenth century Vietnamese Confucianism, eclectic philosopher, and Neo-Confucian polemicist (Trần, 2020, pp.212-228; Đỗ, 2020, pp.229-248; Lê, 2022, pp.485-494). Curiously, despite stable interest in his work, none of Nguyễn Đức-Đạt's extensive literary Sinitic output is easily accessible in translation. No modern collated editions of his works have been produced in Vietnam. Indeed, only recently have Vietnamese scholars transitioned to working with and including Nguyễn's original Sinitic text in their translations and analyses of his works (Nguyễn, 2023, pp.45-56). There is a sizeable body of secondary literature and translation of Nguyễn's works already available in Vietnamese.

I have found this contemporary scholarship largely inaccessible through my current resources; as such, the present translation reflects my own close reading and interpretation of Nguyễn Đức-Đạt's writing.

2. NOTES ON BASE TEXT AND TRANSLATION CONVENTIONS

The present translation is a complete translation of Chapter Five: "On Teachers and Friends" 師友第五 from *Nam-son tùng-thoại*. It is, to my knowledge, the first annotated translation of Nguyễn Đức-Đạt's writing to appear in the English language. The base text I have used for this translation is a facsimile edition published in 2016 by National Taiwan University Press as part of the *Dongya ruxue ziliao congshu* 東亞儒學資料叢書 series edited by Huang Chun-Chieh 黃俊傑. The contents of Chapter Five can be found on pages sixty-eight through eighty of this edition. This edition is based on two printed editions of the text as held in the Institute of Sino-Nôm Studies, Hanoi, call numbers VHv.246 and VHv.1420. The National Library of Vietnam also holds a woodblock edition of *Nam-son tùng-thoại* under the call number R.70, in which the contents of Chapter Five correspond to pages thirty through thirty-six of fascicle one. At least within the context of Chapter Five, I detected no noticeable discrepancy between

R.70 and the 2016 National Taiwan University Press edition.

I have observed the following conventions in my translation. First, although there is basic *judou* 句讀 punctuation in the printed editions of *Nam-son tùng-thoại*, I have fully punctuated the text according to the conventions of modern punctuation. Second, due to the cumbersome and often repetitive nature of the interlinear commentary, I have elected not to include a full translation of the interlinear commentary in this translation. Where the interlinear commentary merely fills in lacunae in the text (explained above), I have translated the passage according to its intended sense. Where the interlinear commentary gives glosses or citations important for the proper understanding of a given passage or allusion, I have included the relevant information via footnote. Thirdly, archaic variants, taboo avoidances, and characters with minor typographical abnormalities abound throughout the printed text of *Nam-son tùng-thoại*. I have made no effort to preserve or note these occurrences in this translation, replacing them instead with their standard or corrected forms. While of interest to scholars of other disciplines, these typographical accidents are of little consequence to readers primarily

concerned with the content of Nguyễn Đức-Đạt's thought. It is to this audience that the present translation is aimed.

3. TEXT AND TRANSLATION

– 3.1. 或問：「師友孰切？」翁曰：「友哉！友哉！瞽之相也，求師不如求友。適歧塗者，多其趾雖冥不迷也。孤征蹢躅，擿埴索塗，罔曉也夫。風雨相友，草木榮也；日月相友，宵旦明也；靈如龍必有群，尊如帝亦有輔。」

Someone asked: “Teachers or friends, which are more necessary?” The Elder said: “Friends! Friends! [As an] aid for the blind, seeking out teachers is inferior to seeking out friends. When travelling along a byroad, if the number of feet travelling [together] is increased*, even in the darkness [one] would not lose [one’s] way. A solitary traveler destitute of companions is like a [blind man] poking at the ground with his cane† – utterly without light! [When] wind and rain accompany each other, grasses and trees grow luxuriant. [When] the sun and moon accompany each other, night and day are both illuminated. [A creature] as numinous as the dragon still has company; [someone] as exalted as an emperor also has his assistants.”

– 3.2. 或問友。翁曰：「兼五品之用，其惟友乎！規而不怒，君臣之義也；款曲而不解，父子之親也；遜讓而不

* The interlinear commentary glosses this obscure expression as signifying “an abundance of fellow travelers” 同行者多.

† A four-character expression quoted from *Exemplary Figures* 法言 3.14 by Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53-18 B.C.), see (Yang, 2013, pp.44-45). The interlinear commentary cites “Master Yang” 楊子.

爭，長幼之序也；遠不攜而邇不暱，夫婦之別也。是故交道得，則明於五倫矣。」

Someone asked about friends. The Elder said: "Combining the function of the five gradations [of human relationships] – perhaps only friends [can be said to achieve this synthesis].* To provide correction without [inciting] wrath, this is the right-principled obligation between ruler and minister. To cherish heartfelt feelings without dissipation, this is the love between father and son. To be humbly cede without contention, this is the proper order of older and younger persons. When faraway, to not be distant [in spirit]; when nearby, to refrain from [improper] intimacy, this is the distinction between husband and wife. Hence, once the proper way of friendship is achieved, one will have clear insight into the five relations."

* The five gradations 五品, more often referred to as the five cardinal relationships 五倫, were commonly formulated as ruler-subject 君臣, father-son 父子, elder brother-younger brother 兄弟, husband-wife 夫妻, and friend-friend 朋友 pairings.

† The *locus classicus* of the compound "instructive friends" 教友 seems to be *The School Sayings of Confucius* 孔子家語 (see section 19.1 therein), a controversial text the compilation of which is sometimes attributed to Kong Anguo 孔安國 (156-74 B.C.). In context, the "instructive friend" is implied to provide the corrective admonishment and advice necessary to increase one's learning (Chen, 2017, p.140). *The School Sayings of Confucius* is cited elsewhere by Nguyễn Đức-Đạt, see, for example, section 5.11 of this chapter. Alternatively, a similar passage is recorded in *Garden of Illustrative Examples* 說苑, a Former Han anthology compiled by the prolific scholar-official

– 3.3. 翁曰：「士不可以無教友。」或曰：「我甲者，不我即奈何？」曰：「患不好耳。好龍則真龍至，況友朋乎！」

The Elder said: "The scholar cannot be without instructive friends." † Someone said: "If I am already the first [among my companions], apart from myself, who else could offer instruction?" [The Elder] said: "[You should] only be worried that you are not fond [of receiving instruction]. If one is fond of dragons, a true dragon will certainly come.‡ How much more so friends and companions!"

– 3.4. 或問：「文王師鬻子，師其德歟？」翁曰：「師政。文王為聖德之宗，鬻書為聖治之祖。紀綱條例，萬世師也。如語德鬻子師文。」「堯、舜有師乎？」曰：「堯師舜、舜師天，君道與天合也。得師則隆，失師則汙。」

Someone asked: "King Wen took Master Yu as his teacher.§ Was it the

Liu Xiang 劉向 (77-6 B.C.), see section 3.21 therein (Liu, 2021, p.168). Liu Xiang is referenced elsewhere by Nguyễn Đức-Đạt, sometimes, as in this very passage (see footnote 5), without interlinear attribution.

‡ This is an uncited reference to a passage found in Liu Xiang's *New Collation* 新序 regarding a certain Yegong Zigao 葉公子高 who was fond of dragons to the extent that he would obsessively carve and illustrate dragons. Hearing this, a dragon appeared to him in his abode, upon which he lost his senses in terror (Liu, 1997, p.173). The example is given as a critique of those whose fondness is for mere approximation and not reality.

§ Master Yu 鬻子, sometimes identified as Yu Xiong 鬻熊, is associated with *Yuzi* 鬻子, a spurious text written as a series of questions and answers between King Wen of Zhou and Master Yu, identified therein as King Wen's "teacher" 師 (Yu, 1983, pp.1-3).

latter's virtue from which he learned?" The Elder said: "He learned from Yu's [manner of] governance. King Wen is the exemplar of sagely virtue. The writings of Yu [Xiong] are the progenitor of sagely governance. The laws and ordinances [expounded therein] serve as the teacher for ten-thousand generations. * If one were speaking of virtue, Master Yu would have been obliged to learn from King Wen." [Someone asked]: "Did Yao and Shun have teachers?" [The Elder] said: "Yao learned from Shun. Shun learned from Heaven, hence there was a unity of the ways of the ruler and Heaven. [Should one] obtains [one's proper] teacher, [one's way] will prosper. [Should one] lose [one's proper] teacher, [one's way] will degenerate."

– 3.5. 翁曰：「燭暗以燈，燈者見不見也；扶顛以杖，杖者安不安也。心闇於自炤，必燈以炤；身拙於自扶，必杖以扶。書，燈也；友，杖也。案匪書，室匪友，撒燈而拋杖也。書非聖，友非賢，燈不燈，而杖不杖也。燈其燈，黑地不黑；杖其杖，危塗不危。」

The Elder said: "One illuminates darkness with a lamp – a lamp [is that by which] one sees that [which was previously] unseeable. One supports the faltering with a staff – a staff [is that by which] one stabilizes [that which

was previously] unstable. If one's heart-mind is inumbrated in its self-illumination, one must illuminate it with a lamp; if one's person is uncouth in self-support, one must support it with a staff. Books are the lamp. Friends are the staff. If one's desk is without books or one's house without friends, this is to scatter one's lamp and cast aside one's staff. If one's books are not those of the sages or one's friends of unworthy character, then one's lamp is not truly a lamp, one's staff not truly a staff. Illuminate with your lamp, and the land which was in darkness will be dark no more; lean on your staff for support, and the path of peril will pose no danger to you."

– 3.6. 或問取友。翁曰：「友猶山也。」請問山。曰：「山陟半嶺，高矣。仰而視尚，嶢嶢焉山在其上。窗有賢友，吾行高矣。左右而顧，勝已尚多。余修豈不日上哉！」

Someone asked about selecting friends. The Elder said: "Friends are like mountains." [The inquirer] requested to ask about mountains. [The Elder] said: "If you have scaled halfway up a mountain, you have already attained to lofty height. [However], lift up your head and gaze upwards – there is the mountain, still towering above you. If my study is shared with virtuous friends, although my conduct may be lofty indeed, when I look to my right and left – those who have

* The interlinear commentary summarizes these principles of governance with a paraphrase from *Yuzi*: "Humanity and faithfulness, harmony and the Way, these are the implements of the Ruler." [仁與信，和與道，為帝王之器]. A Tang dynasty commentary on this passage of *Yuzi* elucidates that

these four virtues are the "implements by which the Ruler possesses All-Under-Heaven" [此四者，帝王有天下之器] (Yu, 1983, p.15). The importance which Nguyễn Đức-Đạt assigns to *Yuzi* – an obscure text of equally dubious merit – is itself testimony to Nguyễn's eccentricity.

surpassed me are still plenty in number. Can my self-cultivation not ascend day by day?"

– 3.7. 翁曰：「上士無名，其次莫若名。夫士名成敗恒于友朋；名之盛也，知己之慰，媚己者之戚也。火塞於灰，非噓何焰；鏡翳於塵，非拂何瑩。有火則有灰，有鏡則有塵，不相需而相值者也。人生在世，何可無噓拂之力哉！」

The Elder said: "The superior scholar is beyond reputation.* As for those beneath this level, nothing is better than good reputation. The perfection or destruction of a scholar's reputation [depends on its] constant maintenance by his friends and companions. The flourishing of his reputation is a cause for comfort for his intimate friends, a cause for affliction for those who detest him. † Fire is suffocated by ash – if [the ash] is not blown away, how could fire continue to burn? A mirror is darkened by dust – if [the dust] is not wiped away, how could the mirror retain its brilliance? If there is a fire, there is certain to be ash; if there is a mirror, there is certain to be dust. It is not that these things are in mutual need of another – they simply

come in pairs. For us humans in the world, how could we do without the effort of blowing and wiping?"

– 3.8. 或問：「琴碁詩酒，君子友乎？」翁曰：「爨無桐，吾何以琴？澗聲泠泠然，吾以為琴弦。枰無楸，吾何以為棋？樵斧丁丁然，吾以為棋聲。吾無詩，詩無興也；花間鳥為吾詩。吾無酒，酒無錢；竹下露為吾酒。吾友四友乎？四友友吾乎？」

Someone asked: "The zither, chess, ‡ poetry, and wine – are these the friends of a gentleman?" § The Elder said: "If my stove is without paulownia wood, with what would I make a zither? The clear gurgling of a creek will serve as my zither and strings. If I have no catalpa wood to make a chessboard, by what means would I play chess? I will take the crisp echo of the woodcutter's hammer to be the sound of chess. [If] I am without poetry [or if] my poems are without inspiration, birds among the flowers will serve as my poetry. [If] I am without wine, [or] without the money to purchase wine, dew collected from bamboo will serve as my wine. Is it I that befriend these four friends? Is

* The interlinear commentary glosses 無名 (without reputation, without name) as 不可名 (impossible to name, impossible to describe).

† The interlinear commentary glosses 媚 (to be jealous of) as 惡 (to detest).

‡ The meaning of 碁 is often ambiguous in Vietnamese usage; although a more classically inclined reading might favor understanding 碁 as referring to *weiqi* 圍棋 (more commonly known in the Anglosphere as "go"), understanding the board

game in question as *xiangqi* 象棋, i.e., Chinese chess, is equally plausible in a late nineteenth century Vietnamese context.

§ Late nineteenth century Vietnamese vernacular song often celebrated "[the] zither, chess, poetry, and wine" as sources of refined recreation proper to men of learning. See, for example, the vernacular *ca-trù* songs of Nguyễn Trứ 阮著 (1778-1858), a near contemporary of Nguyễn Đức-Đạt (Đỗ & Đỗ, 1962, pp.258, 312).

it these four friends that befriend me?”*

– 3.9. 翁曰：「學於師儒之門，如浴於河；學於志友之室，如浴於井；獨學而寡輔，則潢汙蹄涔及踝而已。」

The Elder said: “Studying in the school of a magisterial scholar is like bathing in a river. Studying in the house of a friend of common purpose is like bathing in a well.† Studying alone with scant assistance [is like standing] in a shallow puddle that only reaches one’s ankles.”‡

– 3.10. 或曰：「君子不友不如己，矜己乎？」翁曰：「勵己也。友不若我，吾何以增？故求益者之居遊也，必近所畏，而遠所易。」

Someone said: “The gentleman does not befriend those who are unequal to him.§ Is this to be flaunting of oneself?” The Elder said: “It is to hone oneself. If my companion is not comparable to me, by what means could I increase? Hence, the dwellings and outings of those who are intent on seeking benefit necessarily approach those whom they hold in reverence and far-removed

from those whom they hold in contempt.”**

– 3.11. 翁曰：「漆之黑也，借硃而赤；絲之素也，借藍而青。色可借也，德不可借乎哉？頑鐵資於礪也，塵鑒資於拂也。器可資也，道不可資乎哉？苗不擇田，不能成嘉穀；樹不擇土，不能成美木也。在孔之門，尚有四輔。矧磚瓦之資，糟粕之學，而不結納大雅之友，豈不陋哉！夫以醒挽醒，可歷四境；以醒挽醉，可以伏其所；兩醉相挽，不蹈坑阱，則入秦棘耳。故君子靜則端己，動則依賢。」

The Elder said: “As for the blackness of lacquer, one can borrow cinnabar to make it red. As for the whiteness of silk, one can borrow indigo to make it green. Colors can be borrowed, is it the case that virtue cannot be borrowed [from another]? Unpolished iron receives its utility from being put to a grindstone. A dusty mirror receives its utility from wiping. Vessels can receive their utility [from outside of themselves], can the Way not be received in a similar manner? If one does not choose [a proper] field in which to sow one’s

* The rhetorical question ending this passage seems to suggest that the gentleman should not go out of his way to obtain for himself means of recreation through the so-called “four friends” 四友. Rather, Nguyễn Đức-Đạt suggests that the “four friends” are broadly representative of legitimate modes of recreation which can be enjoyed even in their absence.

† The compound 志友 (here rendered as “friend of common purpose”) is a somewhat novel usage.

‡ The interlinear commentary cites a passage from *Huainanzi* (2.10) which, in context, deals with themes of cosmic decline and the gradual degeneracy of humanity and human institutions from the “Age of Utmost Potency” [至德之世] to the present age, characterized as being “bereft of nature and destiny” [喪性命] (Major et al., 2010,

pp.98-100). Although the interlinear commentary seems mainly concerned with identify the compound 蹄涔 as an abbreviation of the phrase 牛蹄之涔 found in *Huainanzi* 2.10, it is worth pondering if Nguyễn Đức-Đạt also had in mind the thematic thrust of *Huainanzi* 2.10, in which case a connection can be drawn between the benighted state of latter-day humanity and the inability of solitary humans to access learning without the aid of teachers and friends. Note, also, Nguyễn Đức-Đạt’s comparison of learning to self-purification, i.e., “bathing” 浴.

§ A paraphrased reference to *Analects* 1.8.

** The interlinear commentary glosses 易 (to disrespect, to consider lightly) as 輕 (to scorn, to belittle).

seeds, it will be impossible to have a plentiful harvest. If one does not choose [the proper] soil in which to plant a tree, it will be impossible to produce fine timber. Even within the school of Confucius, there were the four assistants.* How much more so for those whose natural endowment is as fragmented as bricks and tiles, whose learning is mere dross? [If such a person] failed to receive a friend of grand virtue and erudition, how could he be anything but crude? Look, if a sober man were to pull another sober man along, they could traverse everywhere within the four quarters. If a sober man were to pull a drunkard along, he could [at least] lead him back home. If two drunkards were to pull each other along, even if they could avoid falling into a ravine, they would surely lead each other into thorny bushes. Hence, when the gentleman is in a state of repose, he corrects himself; when he is in a state of action, he falls back on men of virtue."

* The interlinear commentary merely cites *The School Sayings of Confucius* without elaborating on a specific passage. In context, this seems to be a reference to section 15.12 in which Zixia 子夏 asks Confucius about four disciples: Yan Hui 顏回, Zigong 子貢, Zilu 子路, and Zizhang 子張, and "what sort of person" [為人奚若] each man could be said to be. Confucius responds by describing aspects in which each disciple is superior to himself, their teacher (Chen, 2017, p.113). This episode enjoyed wide circulation in antiquity; variations can be found in *Garden of Illustrative Examples* 17.22, *Liezi* 列子 4.4., and *Huainanzi* 18.19 to name a few texts cited elsewhere by

– 3.12. 或問勝友。翁曰：「甄之。」佳士。曰：「熏之。」請問甄熏。曰：「瓊瑁之糅也，揀者別諸；蘭麝之郁也，佩者染諸。匪揀匪佩，將以瑁當瓊乎？以蘭麝還蘭麝乎？」

Someone asked about good friends. The Elder said: "Be discriminating in your assessment of them." [Someone asked about] scholars of virtue and learning. [The Elder] said: [Allow their ethos] to permeate your person." [The inquirer] asked for an elucidation of discrimination and permeation. [The Elder] said: "When true gemstones and inferior jade are jumbled together, a collector is able to distinguish them apart. As for the fragrance of orchids and musk, when one wears them on one's person, their fragrance spreads all over one's body. If not for distinguishing and wearing, would one then mistake inferior jade for a true gemstone? Would one simply allow orchids and musk to retain their fragrance?"†

– 3.13. 或問：「管、鮑知交孰難易？」翁曰：「為管仲易，為鮑叔難；為叔

Nguyễn Đức-Đạt (Liu, 2013, p.1004; Yang, 1979, pp.122-123; Major et al., 2010, p.743). Notably, these four disciples are elsewhere called the "Four Friends" 四友 of Confucius.

† While Nguyễn Đức-Đạt's warning against the partiality which attends intimacy with "good friends" 勝友 is unambiguous, who exactly is meant by "scholars of virtue and learning" 佳士 is less certain. In context, the latter seems to refer to persons whose reputation and achievements have already been confirmed by society at large. Hence, in one's dealings with such persons, one need not exercise the same degree of scrutiny proper to one's daily acquaintances.

之知仲於分財易，為叔之知仲於謀事難；為叔之知仲於三仕三逐易，為叔之知仲於怯戰恥死難。何也？憐貧易，而度才難；衡命易，而鑒心難也。」

Someone asked: “Within the intimate friendship of Guan [Zhong] and Bao [Shuya] which of the two was in the more difficult position?” * The Elder said: “It would be easier to be Guan Zhong and harder to be Bao Shu[ya]. It would be easy to be in [Bao] Shu[ya]’s position in understanding [Guan] Zhong when sharing wealth; [however] it would be difficult to be in [Bao] Shu[ya]’s position in understanding [Guan] Zhong when his devising of plans was counterproductive. It would be easy to be in [Bao] Shu[ya]’s position in understanding [Guan] Zhong when he thrice served in court and was thrice dismissed therefrom; [however] it would be difficult to be in [Bao] Shu[ya]’s position in understanding [Guan] Zhong when he seemed to be afraid of battle and ashamed to offer up his life. Why is this? While it is easy to take pity on poverty, it is difficult to assess talent. While it is easy to go against orders, it is difficult to discern another’s heart.”

* The friendship of Guan Zhong 管仲 and Bao Shuya 鮑叔牙 of the Spring and Autumn Period is a well-worn trope of intimate and understanding friendship. Discerning his friend’s predicaments and true intentions, Bao Shuya was able to see beyond the external appearances of greed, failure, and cowardice displayed in various circumstances by Guan Zhong. Although this narrative appears in various ancient sources, the most reputable of

– 3.14. 或曰：「師，模範也。有模範在，器無窳𡵗乎？」翁曰：「器自器也；模範，因也。沙不可埏；鏽壞之鐵不可鎔；木朽石頑如雕何？是故有模而不就模，有範而不受範，非模範之罪也。」

Someone said: “A teacher is like a mold and pattern. As long as the mold and pattern are there, shouldn’t the instruments produced be without careless [flaws]?” The Elder said: “Each instrument has its own capacities. The mold and pattern simply follow in accordance with these. Sand cannot be used to form mud. Rust-ravaged iron cannot be smelted. What use would it be to engrave rotten wood or hard stone?† Hence, if the mold is there but one does not conform to it, or if the pattern is there but one refuses to be refashioned according to it, the blame is not to be laid on either mold or pattern.”

– 3.15. 翁曰：「教有四。高者，抑之；退者，進之；隘者，恢之；浮者，實之。此四者，君子所以教也。學有三。於其文而纂焉；於其行而踐焉；於其才識而企焉。此三者，弟子之所學也。」

The Elder said: “There are four methods of instruction. When teaching the lofty, restrain them. [When

which is the biography of Guan Zhong in the *Shiji* 史記, curiously, the interlinear commentary cites the narrative as it appears in *Liezi* 6.3 (Yang, 1979, pp.196-198).

† Although the other examples have an air of novelty, Nguyễn Đức-Đạt’s mention of the impossibility of carving rotten wood is a reference to *Analects* 5.10.

teaching] those who lag behind, press them to advance. [When teaching] the narrow-minded, expand [their understanding]. [When teaching] those of unsettled and superficial [temperament], force them to be concrete and substantial. These are the four methods by which the gentleman instructs others. There are three methods of study. One should compile the writings of one's teacher,* imitate his doings, and look with expectation to his ability and insight. These three are the methods by which the disciple should study."

– 3.16. 或問：「學者求師，經乎？人乎？」翁曰：「師我。」或人未喻。曰：「性，我師也。聰明學厚則師仁；柔懦學斷則師義；侈恣學慊則師禮；魯鈍學敏則師智；權譎學真則師信。矯其偏，而達其性。由誰而不由我哉！」

Someone asked: "[When] a scholar searches for a teacher, should [he] seek to learn from teachers of the classics or teachers of human conduct?" † The Elder said: "One should learn from

oneself." The inquirer did not understand. [The Elder] said: "[One's own] nature is one's teacher. If someone of innate perspicacity wishes to study full-hearted sincerity, he should take humaneness as his teacher. If someone of weak and timid temperament wishes to study decisiveness, he should take righteousness as his teacher. If someone inclined towards extravagant self-indulgence wishes to study contentment, he should take ritual propriety as his teacher. If someone of crude and dull-witted faculty wishes to study nimbleness, he should take wisdom as his teacher. If someone opportunistic and sly wishes to study authenticity, he should take faithfulness as his teacher. If one rectifies one's immoderation, one will arrive at one's [original] nature. How could one reach this stage through someone else and not through oneself?" ‡

– 3.17. 或問：「琴笛於馬帳，風月于周門，孰樂？」翁曰：「風流先生，

* This detail is perhaps singular in this chapter for its revelation of the internal dynamics of late Nguyễn teacher-disciple relationships. Note that the compilation, editing, and printing of *Nam-son tùng-thoại* was itself a collaborative effort shared between Nguyễn Đức-Đạt and a host of anonymous "disciples who had entered his gate" 及門諸門生.

† The interlinear commentary glosses 經 (classics) as 經師 (a teacher specializing in expounding the classics) and 人 (human) as 人師 (literally, "human teacher"). This passage seems related to 5.22 below.

‡ Learning from one's nature 性 implies the act of recovering 復 the original state of that nature, here

expressed in a basic formulation of the Five Constants 五常, elsewhere called the Five Natures 五性, namely: humanity 仁, righteousness 義, ritual propriety 禮, wisdom 智, and faithfulness 信. The centrality of these terms in Confucian discourse as well as their diverse usages within the same has resulted in endless disagreement over their translation into English. For the sake of readability, within the context of this translation, I have opted for slightly conservative renderings, fully aware, however, of the increasingly nuanced interpretations which exist and are more appropriate for studies requiring in-depth analysis of the grammar of Confucian discourse.

風流者樂焉。道學先生，道學者樂焉。性之所近，味差池也。周樂，其孔顏矣乎？」

Someone asked: “To enjoy the sound of zithers and flutes under the canopy of Ma [Rong],* or the wind and moon in the school of Zhou [Dunyi],† which of these brings [greater] delight?” The Elder said: “Those who are gallant and refined delight in a gallant and refined teacher. Those who follow learning of the Way will delight in a teacher who expounds learning of the Way.‡ [When something] is close to one’s nature, [one’s] taste for it will be mistaken. As for the delight [to be found] in Zhou [Dunyi’s school], was is it not [that in which] Confucius and Yan [Yuan] delighted?”§

– 3.18. 或問：「交道何起？」翁曰：「與天地起。天地交泰，荃宰象焉。國而民，朝而臣，家而昆季，其致一也。是故教莫切於親遜，禁莫峻於邦朋。廉、藺捐忿以安趙；平、勃締歡

而定漢；姜家孝行著名於共被；竇氏文章擅美於聯珠。」

Someone asked: “From whence does the way of friendship arise?” The Elder said: “It arises along with Heaven-and-Earth. ** When the intercourse between Heaven-and-Earth is unimpeded, the schemata of ruler and subject is represented therein. The relation between a state and its subjects, a court and its ministers, a family and the elder and younger brothers therein all share the same principle. Hence, in instruction nothing is more necessary than intimacy and deference; among prohibitions, none are as severe as that against factions. †† Lian [Po] and Lin [Xiangru] abandoned [their mutual] indignation in order to secure the state of Zhao. ‡‡ [Chen] Ping and [Zhou] Bo formed a friendship and ensured the longevity of Han. §§ The filial conduct of the Jiang clan was celebrated due to

* The interlinear commentary describes the Eastern Han classicist Ma Rong 馬融 (79-166) as being “adept at playing the zither and fond of playing the flute” [善鼓琴，好吹笛].

† The interlinear commentary describes the Song philosopher Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085) as accompanying his teacher Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-1073) back from a day of instruction, whereupon Zhou “intoned poems on the wind and moon all the way back home” [吟風弄月以歸]; this is interpreted as revealing Zhou to have the same mind that Confucius expressed with his disciples in *Analects* 11.26 [有吾與點之意].

‡ That the term “teacher who expounds learning of the Way” 道學先生 had slightly pejorative undertones, i.e., satirizing the rigid pedantry of scholars devoted to the Cheng-Zhu school of Way Learning, could not have been lost on Nguyễn Đức-Đạt or his readers. Its usage here is seemingly devoid of these connotations.

§ The rhetorical question regarding “that in which Confucius and Yan [Yuan] delighted” recalls Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) and his early essay “A Discourse on the Learning in Which Master Yan Took delight” 顏子所好何學論 (Cheng & Cheng, 2006, pp.577-578).

** Note how the description of the cosmic origin and dimensions of friendship recalls 5.1.

†† The interlinear commentary cites the *Rites of Zhou* 周禮.

‡‡ Lian Po 廉頗 (327-243 B.C.) was a famous general of Zhao during the Warring States period. Despite initially being opposed to the statesman Lin Xiangru 藺相如, both Lian and Lin eventually put aside their personal enmity in order to cooperate for the welfare of their state.

§§ Chen Ping 陳平 and Zhou Bo 周勃 were esteemed military men and later chancellors under the Former Han.

their sharing of a single blanket.* The beauty of the Dou clan's writing was exclusively manifested in their [Collection] of Stringed Pearls."†

– 3.19. 或問：「四海皆兄弟，樂乎？」翁曰：「孔門，斯樂；否，斯累。天下賢如玉，不賢如石；玉一而石千百矣。擇而交，靡不益；交而不擇，靡不害。」

Someone asked: "All within the four seas are brothers;‡ should this be a cause for delight?" The Elder said: "[If] they belong to the school of Confucius, then it is a cause for delight.§ [If] not, it is a burden. Worthy men in the world are like jade, the unworthy like common stones. For each piece of jade, there are thousands upon thousands of common stones. Be selective in your social intercourse and nothing will be without benefit; engage indiscriminately in social intercourse and nothing will be without detriment."

– 3.20. 或曰：「吾欲從師，善斯從諸？」翁曰：「不善人，善人之師也。省其不善，然後能善。子有庭軒，蓁棘叢焉，如蘭蕙何？」

Someone asked: "I desire to follow a teacher. [If I find] a good teacher, should I then follow him?" The Elder said: "Those who are not good are the teachers of those who are. [One must] realize** how others fail to be good; only then can one attain to the good. You might have a courtyard and pavilion, but if they are overgrown with weeds and brambles, what good will thoroughwort and melilot do you?"††

– 3.21. 或問：「君子師而無友，可乎？」翁曰：「不友，誰策諸？」「友而無師，可乎？」曰：「不師，誰啟諸？譬如登山，智者導之向路，力者挽之登梯，不造其顛，不止矣。夫師，智者也；友，力者也。」

Someone asked: "If the gentleman has teachers but no friends, would this be acceptable?" The Elder said: "If not a friend, who would spur him on?" [The inquirer asked]: "If he has friends but no teachers, would this be acceptable?" [The Elder] said: "If not a teacher, who would give him guidance? Take the example of ascending a mountain – one with knowledge will direct him

* The interlinear commentary notes that Jiang Gong 姜肱 of the Later Han, along with his younger brothers Jiang Zhonghai 姜仲海 and Jiang Jijiang 姜季江 were famous for their filial conduct and brotherly love. The reference to the sharing of blankets is explained by the interlinear commentary as "[the brothers] slept under the same blanket and their brotherly love for each other was to the utmost." [同被臥，甚相親友].

† The interlinear commentary notes that the mid-Tang poet Dou Qun 竇群 (760-814) together with his elder brothers Dou Chang 竇常 and Dou Mou 竇

牟 and his younger brothers Dou Xiang 竇庠 and Dou Gong 竇翬 compiled a collection of poetry entitled *The Dou Clan Collection of Stringed Pearls* 竇氏連珠集.

‡ See *Analects* 12.5.

§ As in 5.17, the emphasis on "delight" 樂 recalls *Analects* 1.1.

** The interlinear commentary glosses 省 (to scrutinize, to reflect) as 悟 (to become awakened to, to realize).

†† This passage is perhaps best understood as an oblique elaboration of *Analects* 7.22.

towards the path, one with strength will support him while climbing up, not ceasing until he has reached the peak. In this case, a teacher is the one with knowledge; friends are those with strength.”*

– 3.22. 翁曰：「俗儒師紙；守儒師禮；通儒師智；碩儒師義；真儒師自然。君子而師紙，口耳之傳，非髓也。章縫之飾，蒙矣哉！」

The Elder said: “The vulgar scholar learns from paper. The fastidious scholar learns from ritual. The penetrating scholar learns from the intellect. The erudite scholar learns from moral rightness. The genuine scholar learns from things-as-they-are.† If the gentleman learns only from paper, the transmission [of knowledge] is limited to the external faculties – it has not penetrated into the very marrow [of his person]. How deceitful, this superficial decoration!”‡

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* As in 5.1, Nguyễn Đức-Dạt seems to champion the role of friends over that of teachers in the acquisition of learning. Whereas the teacher-figure provides the preliminary guidance necessary to initiate a learner onto the correct path, the pursuit of learning is accomplished only through the constant companionship and arduous assistance of friends.

† Unlike 5.16, here Nguyễn Đức-Dạt implies a difference of degree and not of kind. The structure of the opening formulation is heavily reminiscent

of Laozi 老子 25: “People comply with the Earth, Earth complies with Heaven, Heaven complies with the Way, and the Way complies with itself.” [人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然] (Fischer, 2023, pp.122-123). Note that the verbal form of 師 in Nguyễn Đức-Dạt and that of 法 in Laozi 25 can be synonymous, i.e., “to model oneself after,” “to take as one’s model,” etc.

‡ The interlinear commentary glosses 蒙 (to cover, to delude) as 假冒 (to impersonate, to counterfeit).

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