

VIETNAM

NGUYEN VAN HUY and LAUREL KENDALL, Editors. *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. x + 294 pages. Map, photographs, index. Cloth US\$65.00, £45.00; ISBN 0-520-23871-0. Paper US\$39.95, £27.95; ISBN 0-520-23872-9. (In Association with the American Museum of Natural History and the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology)

This book is the first result of a collaboration between a museum of the United States and one of Socialist Vietnam after 1975, coming after the end of a war and a long period of hostilities, and a strict embargo. The authors can both draw on rich experiences of field-work and museum work. The chapters introduce a broad range of topics such as ethnicity, ceremonial occasions, handicrafts, popular beliefs, and wedding and funeral ceremonies. Therefore, rather than simply being a museum catalogue, this book is a veritable guide book to Vietnamese life.

In their introduction, the two editors, Laurel Kendall and Nguyen Van Huy, state that the term “journey” in this book carries several meanings. One is that of journeys that are “taking place on roads, some on highways, some on railways, rivers, and footpaths as family members come home for the new year, hunters travel into the forest, traders carry goods precariously balanced on bicycles or on their back”(3).

A second meaning is “metaphorical: life is a journey marked by significant rituals, and the year is a journey mapped by a calendar, with holidays as significant milestones along the way. Souls travel to the netherworld, while gods and ancestors return to the human world during the celebrations in their honor. A shaman journeys to other realms to restore a patient’s soul”(3).

The editors consider this book to be “a bridge between two points” (3). Their intention with this “collaboration between a Vietnamese museum and an American museum [is] to present Vietnamese culture, a journey that moves both nations beyond [their] troubled wartime history to an understanding of how Vietnamese...live at the start of the twenty-first century”(5).

Concerning the war, there are plenty of Vietnamese novels and films to draw on, such as “The Lover” (1992) and “Indochine” (1992). But the editors point out that “[w]hile these feature films were well received in American theaters, none of them captures the texture and substance of Vietnamese life in the present tense”(5).

Each one of the chapters is richly illustrated with beautiful photographs and pictures of Vietnamese everyday life, of fascinating rituals, costumes, and handicrafts of many ethnic groups. They help the readers to understand Vietnamese culture and society today. With this book as guide readers can easily go on their own journey to the bodies, minds, and spirits of the Vietnamese people.

Although I agree with the editors’ interpretation of the meaning of “journey,” I know that people in Vietnam conceive of still other types of journey. One is the journey from now to the past, to the war time. Many war widows and families of Vietnamese MIA still go in search for the bodies of their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons (several thousands of them remain missing on the battlefields) at the places where they lie in simple graves without epitaph. The families sometimes hire shamans or mediums in order to find the resting places of their dead relatives. It is, perhaps, surprising that sometimes they also do this in order to search for American GIs.

It is important to know that in Vietnam at least four kinds of journeys—real, metaphorical, to the past, and to the present—are still closely entangled with one another. The last one, a journey to the present, is the most popular. On this journey, people may visit a number of pagodas and shrines in order to pray for business or financial success, for their ancestors to grant them a boy, or for a girl to become Miss Vietnam. Careful attention to this kind of journey can further deepen our understanding of Vietnam.

In the process of editing this book, two scholars from former enemy nations have come to understand one another. I believe this to be the special significance of this book. Nevertheless, the fact remains that some of the topics taken up in the present volume do not address certain problems that still need to be solved.

One, and perhaps the most serious, problem is the ethnic and religious conflict that is still going on in the central highland where many ethnic minorities live. After the Doi Moi period, many Viet as well as Tay and Nung, who had lived on the Chinese side of the border, immigrated and occupied the lands left fallow by the local population, thus creating serious problems concerning the right to use resources. In addition, some ethnic minorities adopted “Dega Protestantism,” which was the subject of severe governmental restrictions. Because of such pressures, thousands of minority peoples rose up in 2001 and 2004 to request the restoration of their lands, freedom of religion, and the right to local autonomy. American scholars, I believe, cannot ignore this situation because during the time of the war the US military supported and played on the feelings of hatred some of the minorities harbored against the dominant Viet population.

After the end of uprisings in 2001, some of the leaders fled to Cambodia and from there went into exile in the United States. The same thing happened with some of the H’mong people in Laos. In that country, fighting between the Lao Army and H’mong guerrillas, formerly backed up by the US Army, are still going on. Many H’mong soldiers went into exile in the US after 1975, but they cannot easily adapt to American society, and their young men cannot find jobs. Consequently, some of them became soldiers in the US Army. This is still another kind of a long and bitter “journey” of the people of Vietnam.

The present volume does not address these kinds of problems. The “ethnic mosaic” it presents is therefore not dynamic. I believe that in order to present a picture of the ethnic minority peoples, it is not sufficient to simply show them in “traditional” costume in the milieu of a museum.

Knowledge provided by anthropologists has often been used to benefit political or military ends. As a fellow anthropologist I believe that we must reflect on this. At the same time I hope that the knowledge presented in this book goes a long way toward establishing a better understanding between the two nations directly involved in the project and of Vietnam in general. This would then be the final type of journey, the one undertaken by the readers to the body, mind, and spirit of Vietnam.

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CENTRAL ASIA

HARVILAHTI, LAURI in collaboration with Zoja Sergeevna KAZAGAČEVA.
The Holy Mountain. Studies in Upper Altay Oral Poetry. FF
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