

VIETNAM

LAM TUYEN TINH, translated and annotated by Honda Mamoru. *LangBiang no jiseki: Betonamu Chūbu shōsūminzoku no kodenshō* ランビアン的事蹟—ベトナム・中部少数民族の古伝承 [Legends from the LangBiang Highlands: Folklores of minority groups in Central Vietnam]. Kawasaki, Japan: Terra Incognita, 2000. 294 pages. Translator's bibliography, color plates. Paper ¥2,600; ISBN 4-925108-24-7. (In Japanese).

First published in Vietnamese in 1986 then translated into Japanese and issued in paperback in 2000, Lam Tuyen Tinh's *Legends from LangBiang Highlands* is a valuable collection of stories told by minority peoples living in mountainous areas around Dalat, a beautiful city well known in Vietnam for its French style and year-round cool weather. This collection contributes to the study of the life, customs, and traditions of ethnic groups living in South Central Vietnam, the neighbors of the formerly famous kingdom of Champa. As Head of the Sector of Arts and Cultures in Lam Dong Province, the author has studied many ethnic groups in the field, and has spent enough time with them to collect legends that can only be told by elders in intimate meetings of the tribe. The book consists of forty stories that can be divided into seven groups: Sixteen stories of the Ma group; eight stories of the Sre branch; four stories of the Chil branch; two stories of the Lat branch; two stories of the Nop branch; three stories of the Churu group; and four stories of the M'ngong group.

To people who do not have their own writing system, legends and fables are not only fantasies but also important means for teaching younger generations about their ancestors, their history of struggling against enemies, or surviving powerful forces of nature. These stories can give hints on daily life, mark some historic events, explain the relationships between branches of the same group, or simply make the recipients laugh. Furthermore, legends and fables such as those in this book provide answers to questions of religion,

thought, and identity of peoples living in the relevant areas. Through these stories, a colorful portrait of minority groups living in the LangBiang Highlands emerges through lively characters with certain names, or simply “a man with his wife,” a tiger, a white hare, or a snake that can talk.

Stories of the Ma group strongly relate to their environment, which has both mountains and rivers. They reveal a good sense of humor through stories about jungles and beasts, which take on the role of expressing the Ma people’s viewpoint about human society. One such story, “The Gray Tiger and the White Hare” (67), is not only humorous but also provides the reader the opportunity to think over worldly affairs as well. Ma people continuously criticize bad habits in their own community in efforts to develop a better society. This is certainly revealed in “The Girl Who Has Fangs and the Mango Man” (96), “The Story about the Shore of the Divine” (115), and in other stories contained in the first part of the book.

The K’hor is another important group that live in a large area that spreads over five other provinces of South Central Vietnam. There are many branches of this group that live close to the Ma people’s land and the former kingdom of Champa. As a result of their living conditions, branches of K’hor people have distinguishable characteristics in their culture. Although the word “K’hor” is not clearly mentioned in the book, stories told by the Sre branch, the Chil branch, the Lat branch, and the Nop branch can be considered as part of the K’hor’s treasury of folklore. From stories of these branches, readers can discern images of the whole group in relation to their spiritual life as well as their highly organized society, including evidence of periods of prosperity. The Snake God who appears in “The Snake God of Mount Vreyang” (141) is believed to be the tutelary of the poor and usually surfaces in other stories as well. Sre people believe in the Village of Heaven where beautiful goddesses live, and intelligent men can defeat the Prince of God to win happy marriages with the most beautiful goddess (197). There is a certain beauty here in that it shows that all the fights with the Prince of God, who symbolizes powerful nature, are simply for the victors to have a happy life and not to gain power over other men or nature. “Mount LangBiang, Mount Elephant, Da Nhim River” (199) told by the Chil branch is a sublime explanation about the creation of their homeland. In the following story, readers come to know the brave “Gold Fish Man” (208) in his battles against the Dragon to get back his beloved wife and win a peaceful life for the whole village. Next to those romantic stories, fables of the Lat branch are full of meaning as they describe animals whose actions and words encapsulate the law of cause and effect. “The Nop’s Orphan and the King of Cham,” told by the Nop branch, is about relations with the kingdom of Champa, and it reveals many clues regarding trade with Cham people, which is believed to have been highly developed in the past.

Characters such as “the clever hare” (254) and the farmer (258), which appear in stories of the Churu group, can be seen as personifications of the Churu people themselves in their struggles to achieve happiness. The clever hare is like an active Churu man who uses his intelligence to defeat the bad symbolized by the wicked tiger. Friendship and the loyalty of animals as told in Churu fables tell how important animals are in the Churu people’s daily life. In other words, the very fact that Churu people know how to tame and use animals effectively in daily life makes animals become part of their stories.

The musical language of the M’nung, which has a unique rhythm of words and phrases, is famous within the study of the folklore of Vietnam. Although stories of the M’nung group appear in the last part of the book and cannot be translated rhythmically as it should be, their good sense of humor is nevertheless well conveyed. Close to the Ma people’s stories, fables told by the M’nung people are witty moral lessons. Coming at the end of the collection, the romance of “Jong Ropa and Mai Da” (280) is an amazing story that consists

of encoded philosophical features in linking the happy and rich society of the M'ngong people with the description of the nobly beautiful Jong Ropa as the Princess of Heaven.

Legends from the LangBiang Highlands is the fruit of hard work, the result of time and energy the author expended to convert oral texts into written ones. This work would not have been completed if the author had not been fuelled with the passion of an authentic scholar. Published in Vietnam as the first volume of two (7), the collection is all the more precious because the final draft of the second one is said "to be lost on the way to the publishing house" (11). The Japanese translation by Honda Mamoru brings alive the original script, which has many ethnic words omitted by the Vietnamese editor and has "just a few footnotes" (289). To complete the Japanese edition, the translator apparently visited the author several times to confirm and fill in the omitted phrases with detailed annotations. Those ethnic words and phrases have made readers feel closer to the original languages and styles of the story-tellers. As a complete translation of the precious original collection, the Japanese version takes readers into an amazing world of first told legends and fables. With two maps, twenty-six colored photos and a sufficient bibliography added, it is an excellent companion to readers who want to learn about the minority groups in Central Vietnam.

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