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From the City Inside the Red River (Book Review)

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indexes (pp. 421–477; Bog-Do on p. 274 is not Buddha, but the Mongol title *boyda* of the Manchu emperor).

Hopefully the rest of the translation will soon be published. The merit of the interpreter and the wealth of the original cannot be overestimated.

György Kára

Nguyen Dinh-hoa: *From the City Inside the Red River: A Cultural Memoir of Mid-Century Vietnam*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 1999), xii + 217 pp., \$ 29.95. ISBN 0-7864-0498-1.

Nguyen Dinh-hoa, a retired professor of Vietnamese language and culture at Southern Illinois University, has written a memoir recording his life and career as a linguist, teacher and academic administrator both in South Vietnam and the United States. Educated in French schools in Hanoi in the 1930s and 1940s, he demonstrated extraordinary linguistic ability and enrolled at Union College in Schenectady, New York in 1948. After graduating from Union in 1950 he proceeded to New York University where he studied English education until 1957. He returned to Vietnam in 1957 to assume the chairmanship of the English Department of the University of Saigon, and in 1965 he left Vietnam permanently to begin teaching at SIU where he remained until his retirement in 1990.

The book is intentionally apolitical, the author's purpose being to focus upon the private aspects of his life rather than the turmoil that plagued his homeland. To be sure, he is a patriot who is proud of Vietnam's history and whose family was tragically affected by war and revolution. Patriotism ran deeply within his family, and his genealogy includes several individuals who served the court in a military capacity and were associated with resistance to invaders. As a child he was warned to stories of Vietnam's legendary heroes, and he recalls welcoming the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. He did not, however, choose to comment upon the political history of the twentieth century, and when he had opportunities to do so he studiously avoided them.

In fact, throughout the book Hoa appears deliberately passive and non-judgmental, as if he has gone through life willfully ignoring the major events of his age. In part, his rationale for doing so is that his habit of avoiding politics helped him survive, or at least keep his job. He was, he says, a "careerist" who "delivered the goods."¹ Perhaps another reason is that he seems to blame the patriotism of 20th century intellectuals for their willingness to jettison Vietnam's ancestral culture in favor of selective adoption of western ways, a practice with which he appears to have little sympathy. He writes nostalgically about traditional Vietnamese culture – examples abound – and he appears to take great pride in his having devoted his life to its perpetuation through his teaching. Ironically, however, he chose to spend the bulk of his adult life in the West, and he comes across therefore as something of a paradox: a man who sustained a romantic attachment to Vietnamese culture while pursuing a Western education and making it his life's work. He does claim to have bridged the cultural divide

1. p. 166.

between East and West, but he appears to be most interested in defending a traditional culture that he was born too late to have fully experienced, and which he seems to see as incompatible in some ways with the culture within which he has chosen to live his life.

The book is a puzzling one. Events of Hoa's childhood and career are mixed with anecdotes from his 1994 visit to Vietnam, digressions on various aspects of Vietnamese culture, and recollections of former teachers, friends and colleagues. As a result, it is difficult even to locate some of the biographical data necessary to place his life in context.

The book's strength lies in its description of elements of traditional Vietnamese culture to which the author feels particularly attached. Even while proceeding through French schools where it was forbidden to speak Vietnamese, Hoa grew up surrounded by Vietnamese history, literature and art. His father was a lover of Vietnamese traditions who made sure his son was intensely exposed to them. He was, for example, a director of a theatrical support group and he saw that Hoa attended the theater regularly; and as an avid collector of fiction serialized in Vietnamese newspapers, he clipped articles and bound them together to provide for Hoa a rich library with which to pursue his interest in Vietnamese literature. Hoa reviews with relish many of the things he loves: e. g., folk stories and songs, myths, religious practices and food. All of it is described with the passion of someone who has immersed himself in the teaching of Vietnamese language and culture for over thirty years.

Hoa does not seem deeply interested in the ways by which Vietnamese traditions have been affected by the forces of change that ripped through Vietnam during his lifetime. Himself a product of change, he acknowledges it, but he does so without much reflection regarding its impact upon the institutions of his youth. At times he seems only dimly aware that the way of life he cherishes is passing him by. One wonders how many others share his commitment to Vietnamese tradition; from his coverage of the lives of his teachers and friends it does not seem likely that he knows many who do.

On the other hand, he does take note of the fact that he inhabits two separate cultural universes. The man he claims to have been his role model was an elementary school teacher who became the first Minister of Education in North Vietnam. He was, Hoa tells us, a "union of old and new," a man who wore traditional clothes and was well versed in Sino-Vietnamese history and letters yet dedicated his life to bridging East and West. It was a role that Hoa himself could easily adopt, and it is clear from his summary of his international activities that he devoted himself to such a mission. Nevertheless, the impact of his career upon his native land seems hardly to have been noticed, and his painstaking avoidance of the great issues of his day limits the usefulness of his memoir. One may appreciate the passion for his culture that inspired the book, but for a thoughtful expose of the ways by which the tragic history of modern Vietnam affected people's lives one would need to look elsewhere.

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