

Book Review

Spiritual Culture of the Hmong in Vietnam: Tradition and Present

Vuong Duy Quang

Information and Culture Publishing House and
The Institute of Cultural Studies, Hanoi, 2005

The author is an ethnologist who was born and grown up in the border area of Dong Van highland, Ha Giang province. Vuong Duy Quang writes about his own ethnic which has a long history and experienced rise and fall during the process of being and developing. He reveals that he writes the book because of it was his late father who oriented him to become an ethnologist in order to make other people understand more clearly about his ethnic.

And now his father's dream has come true. All over 300 pages of the *Spiritual Culture of the Hmong in Vietnam – Tradition and Present* constitute a rich material about the Hmong. Vuong Duy Quang must have thought about the book for many years since he first attended the History faculty at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Hanoi National University, or carried out field works as working the Institute of Ethnological Studies and finished researches at the Institute of Religious Studies under the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences. Before this book, all of his 17 researches which all focussed on the Hmong have been published. Using the ethnological – religious approach, the author shows new viewpoints as looking at spiritual culture of Hmong's ethnic, especially changes in the context of regional and international integration.

The book consists of four chapters with two major themes exactly suggested by its title. The chapter 1 represents briefly about the Hmong in Vietnam with their history of migration, the resident location, names of different Hmong groups along with their economic activities and social relationship. The author focusses on Hmong spiritual culture in chapter 2 with worship for ancestors and for in-door gods; religious rituals relating to blood line such as funerals, "ghost of cows" or "ghost of pigs"; and Shamanism – a Hmong's traditional faith that can also be found in other peoples all over the world.

In these pages, Vuong Duy Quang offers interesting comments on each genre of traditional and spiritual culture then shows their role in the formation, existence and

development of the Hmong. He argues that worship for ancestors and gods in Hmong's traditional belief is very important because it is the foundation for the long and continuous development of spiritual and material culture of the Hmong. The faith in blood line constitutes social foundation and acts as a catalysis for the unity of the Hmong.

The author presents precisely about Hmong's Shamanism, from Shaman's altar, the ritual to find the Shaman – the sacred specialist - to the making of the worship place, ritual to mobilize the troop, finding ghosts and ritual to relieve some one from bad luck. Vuong Duy Quang affirms that there is no social life and no traditional spiritual life of the Hmong without Shamanism. This Shamanism's role has now, however, become less meaningful due to some subjective and objective reasons and this is what social researchers should pay attention to.

Before going to the second theme of the book, the author spends the chapter 3 to present the movement of "proclaiming to be an emperor" in the Hmong and related problems to their response. What he introduces here helps explain changes in spiritual culture of the Hmong in contemporary Vietnam: the appearance of Vang Tru which Vuong Duy Quang names a "new religious phenomenon"; extraordinary cult by Duong Van Minh"; and the Hmong's conversion movement to Christianity in the past. These are hot, sensitive and extremely complicated issues of the spiritual life of the Hmong at the present. About Vang Tru, Vuong Duy Quang figures out that "factors of indigenous characteristics, reality, superstition and Christianity have been strongly mixed during the process of formation and development of this religion in Vietnam, especially at its beginning. The author also reminds us about the trend of this religion's changes before the significant impact of the external factors, especially from several Protestant denominations coming into Vietnam.

Vuong Duy Quang emphasizes in chapter 4 that it is the Hmong themselves who should be aware of - and decide to change or preserve - their own cultural identities. He then summarizes his book via four big issues: 1. The relationship between the endurance of traditional spiritual culture and the task of preserving and developing ethnic-cultural identities of the Hmong; 2. Changes in Hmong's spiritual culture in Vietnam always go with changes of that ethnic's spiritual culture in the whole region; 3. Phenomena of Vang Tru and "extraordinary cult of Duong Van Minh" represent for significant changes in Hmong's spiritual and cultural life in Vietnam; and 4. Religious phenomenon relates to reactions of a part of the Hmong in Vietnam in particular and in the whole area of Southeast Asia in general is a feature that needs special attention regarding this ethnic's spiritual culture.

Nguyen Van Dung