

Critical Notes

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Fourth Uncle in the Mountain: A Memoir of a Barefoot Doctor in Vietnam

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Fourth Uncle in the Mountain: A Memoir of a Barefoot Doctor in Vietnam By Marjorie Pivar and Quang Van Nguyen. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004, xiv + 368 pages, ISBN: 0312314302 (hardcover), \$25.95

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A magical book, literally and figuratively, the autobiography of a "monk" in the tradition of Buu Son Ky Huong, a millenarian folk-Buddhist-Daoist tradition from Southwest Vietnam. Spanning decades of what we in America call the "Vietnam War," the memoir tells a rich, first-person tale of a vanishing lifeway in a vanishing culture. We follow Dr. Van Nguyen as he grows into adulthood and develops his skills through encounters and apprenticeships with a bewildering cast of shamans, monks, healers, meditation masters, martial artists, sorcerers, and priests. The reader is often at a loss trying to decide which of these titles to assign to the book's important characters — even to the protagonist and his father. Yet in a way this is a virtue: we are plunged into a world that does not correspond to our preconceptions of "Buddhism," "Daoism," or even shamanism. Not until p. 124 does anything resembling the Buddhism scholars tend to valorize (if not fetishize) appear in the narrative. Even then, it is a particularly South Vietnamese form, in contrast to models commonly taught in academia.

A pleasure to read, the book brings back a culture now distant in time, as well as space, with both specificity and sensuality. Vietnamese American readers may be particularly moved and enriched by the book's evocation of their historical and cultural legacy. The accessible style makes the book appropriate for undergraduate as well as graduate courses. It would fit naturally in courses on indigenous religions and on religion and healing. In Buddhist studies, it would be valuable in courses on Buddhism in practice as well as, of course, Buddhism and healing. Additionally, I can imagine excerpting chapters as bracing additions and antidotes to the usual fare in Buddhist survey courses.