

To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese Culture

A COUNTRY STAYS ALIVE WHEN ITS CULTURE IS ALIVE.

- SACEI Newsletter updates you on the latest news about Vietnamese-America.
- It serves as a link between SACEI members and those who are interested in the Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American culture.

INSIDE THIS

1330E:	
Legends of Vietnam	1
SACEI Person of the Year	2
Bill Nguyen	2
Ms Kim Oanh Nguyen	3
Nationalist in the Vietnam Wars	3
Triumph Forsaken	3
The Tragedy of the Vietnam War	4

Legends... continue

Book Review: Legends of Vietnam: An Analysis & Retelling of 88 Tales

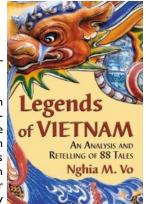
By Nghia M. Vo Reviewed by Tom Glenn.

The Washington Independent Review of Books, p. 1-3, August 20, 2012.

NEWSLETTER # 48

Legends are mirrors. They tell us about the mores, biases, beliefs, and weltanschauung of a people. When viewed over time, they show us how a culture has evolved.

Legends of Vietnam offers the reader masterfully crafted reflections of Vietnam, from its ancient roots up to and including the modern period under Communist domination. The author starts with a primer on the Vietnamese cosmos, shaped by three forces. First was the continuous division of Vietnam into northern and southern segments on and off for some four hundred years. Second and equally potent was China, Vietnam's northern neighbor, which influenced and threatened and even ruled Vietnam for almost a thousand years. But in equal measure the legends mirror the fierce independence of the Vietnamese who so irritated the Chinese that they named the Vietnamese the Yüèh Nán, "troublemakers in the south." That name stuck. Transliterated into Vietnamese, it becomes Viet Nam.



OCTOBER 2012

The third force, as Nghia makes clear, was the characteristic syncretism of Vietnamese religious practice that melds together dogmas from animism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism so that varying views are not seen as conflicting but merely different ways to think about the world. The emphasis, in other words, is less on truth or correctness than on seeing existence, both material and spiritual, from all available perspectives. And the mythology of Vietnam shows the ebb and flow of different religious viewpoints over the centuries.

Nghia's source material for the 486 tales he reviews (he brings the number down to 88 by amalgamating similar tales) is both ancient texts and modern treatises. Most intriguing to me are the *Viet Dien U Linh Tap*, "Compilation of Potent Sprits in the Viet Realm," written in 1329, and *Linh Nam Chich Quai*, "Wonderful Stories of Linh Nam," probably composed between 1370 and 1400. The archaic logic and syntax of both shine through Nghia's work.

One of the pleasures of the book is the appearance of so many names familiar to me from my years in Vietnam—Le Loi, Gia Long, Le Thai To, Le Thanh Tong, Minh Mang, Nguyen Du, Thieu Tri, among others. Legends of Vietnam tells me for the first time their place in history. I had long known the story of the Trung sisters who drove out the Chinese in 39 CE and later gave up their lives defending against a new Chinese invasion, but Nghia provides detail new to me and recounts the many legends about them. Le Van Duyet is another figure I know—I lived on the street named after him and visited his tomb. His mausoleum, as I learned from Nghia, was as important to the mythology of Vietnam as was the man himself. It was razed and rebuilt, enlarged, and refurbished over the years until the Communists shut it down after 1975. Later, locals and Viet Kieu (Vietnamese abroad) worked to restore the tomb. Today, according to Nghia, it is considered the most auspicious site in Saigon.

Nghia divides his retelling of the tales into northern and southern legends, the latter getting the lion's share of attention. We are treated to stories drawn from history and embroidered into folk tales, myths about supernatural animals, and classic sagas that most reflect the Vietnamese culture. Nghia then turns his attention to stories that "paint Vietnamese society as it is," and finally to legends originating among Vietnam's ethnic minorities. Perhaps the greatest treasures in this book are Nghia's appended "Comments," a sort of running meditation on meaning. Besides limning the religious underpinning in the stories, Nghia's interpretations occasionally rise to the level of classic philosophy.

The legends themselves are as variegated as they are entertaining. They never fail to intimate a moral or lesson for living, nearly always stressing virtue, courage, and ingenuity. Among my favorites are "The Celestial Emperor



2012 SACEI Person of the Year: Mike Benge

In 1963, he joined the forerunner of the Peace Corps and served for two years in the Central Highlands in South Viet Nam, working mainly with the Montagnards. In 1965, he joined USAID, the United States Agency for International Development and served as a provincial development officer in the Central Highlands of South Viet Nam. He was captured by the North Vietnamese during the "Tet Offensive" while trying to rescue four Americans housed in a section of town that had been overrun by a North Vietnamese battalion. For this, he received the State Department's highest award for heroism.

Held as a POW in numerous communist camps in South Viet Nam, Cambodia, Laos and North Viet Nam, he spent 27 months in solitary confinement, including one year in a cage in Cambodia and one year in a "black box." He almost died in captivity from malnutrition and malarial fever. He was released during "Operation Homecoming" in 1973.

Today, he continues to fight for Human Rights in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.



Bill Nguyen: Multi-Millionaire Entrepreneur

Growing up in Houston, he constantly disappointed his immigrant parents (both engineers) by getting poor grades in high school. He earned a 1.4 grade point average in his senior year. At 16, he moved out of his parents' house to sell cars.

What Bill Nguyen lacks in size at a wispy 135 pounds he makes up for in energy. It's the kind that drives his wife nuts because he always talks his way out of traffic tickets. It's the kind that in high school won him the

title of president of the Black Student Union, despite not being, well, black...

After 10 months of working for Steve Jobs in Cupertino, Nguyen decided it was time to move on and launch another start-up firm. "As I spent time there, I realized what Apple had done is they'd ushered in this post-PC world," says Nguyen. Since 1998, he has developed seven successful Silicon Valley start-ups, including Onebox (Internet phone messaging) and Seven (universal mobile email). "I've been called a serial entrepreneur," says Nguyen, who recently sold the music-streaming site he co-founded in 2007, Lala, to Apple for around \$80 million (he remains CEO).

His house, built in Hawaii overlooking the sea to escape his hectic dot-com career is composed of three pavilions laid out like little teahouses. It is situated high enough to provide spectacular views, but low enough to blend in with the landscape of pili grass and ironwood trees.



http://magazine.wsj.com/features/a-house-garden/la-la-land/ http://www.olsonkundigarchitects.com/Projects/847/Slaughterhouse-Beach-House



NEWSLETTER # 48 PAGE 3

Ms. Kim Oanh Nguyen: Classical Music Teacher

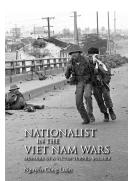
Ms. Nguyen is an accomplished player of Dan Tranh, a 16-string guitar or Zither. A devotee of traditional Vietnamese arts, she has combined her musical training with schooling in the arts. Ms. Nguyen is a graduate of the Saigon Conservatory of Music and Performing Arts as well as the Gia-Dinh National School of Fine Arts in Saigon-Vietnam. She has taught traditional music and dance extensively in Vietnam and the United States, and in the process, trained hundreds of dancers and musicians. Ms. Nguyen has served as artistic advisor to such well-known Vietnamese musical groups. She is noted for her numerous demonstrations at Smithsonian folk festivals and presentations of traditional Vietnamese music at colleges and universities from coast to coast. Ms. Nguyen has taken a leadership role in preserving the rich cultural heritage of Vietnam including its noted repertoires of traditional music. She was responsible for assembling the quartet of musicians to perform all over the world.



Presently she is the advisor of the Vietnamese American youth and the Board of the directors of US public schools.

Nationalist in the Vietnam Wars: Nguyen Luan

This extraordinary memoir tells the story of one man's experience of the wars of Viet Nam from the time he was old enough to be aware of war in the 1940s until his departure for America 15 years after the collapse of South Viet Nam in 1975. Nguyen Cong Luan was born and raised in small villages near Ha Noi. He grew up knowing war at the hands of the Japanese, the French, and the Viet Minh. Living with wars of conquest, colonialism, and revolution led him finally to move south and take up the cause of the Republic of Viet Nam, exchanging a life of victimhood for one of a soldier. His stories of village life in the north are every bit as compelling as his stories of combat and the tragedies of war. This honest and impassioned account is filled with the everyday heroism of the common people of his generation.



Comment: This is the unique experience of a "war protester" (as he characterizes himself) who witnessed firsthand the cruelty of the communists in North Vietnam before 1954. "A barber was chapted up by machete with his death sentence written on a piece of paper binned to his hat." Another

chopped up by machete with his death sentence written on a piece of paper pinned to his hat." Another man was abducted from his house, "then beheaded, eviscerated, and dismembered at a place under a big tree not far from his village." (p. 105)

He was not fond of the French during that period either, but moved south in 1954 and later enrolled into the Dalat Military College. He served in the ARVN for almost two decades followed by almost seven years of internment in various northern communist reeducation camps after the war. "After incarcerating us for long years, Hanoi failed to win our hearts and minds. Its prisons only hardened our anti-communist determination. On the contrary, South Vietnamese prisoners had converted hundred of communist cadres as high as colonels to Catholics, Protestants, and Buddhists..." (p. 513)

He immigrated to the US in 1990 and managed to write a 600-page memoir, which was published by Indiana University Press. He concluded his book by noting his "resentment against the Communist Party leaders who brought communism into Vietnam and waged the political purging campaign leading to the thirty year bloody war that made Vietnam one of the bottom ten developing countries of the last sixty years." (p. 557)

Overall, this is a remarkably detailed and very readable book about the two Vietnam wars, which, I hope, will be a required reading for Vietnamese and Americans who are interested in the Vietnam war.

Available on Amazon

http://www.amazon.com/Nationalist-Viet-Nam-Wars-Memoirs/dp/0253356873

Triumph Forsaken: Mark Moyar

Drawing on a wealth of new evidence from all sides, Triumph Forsaken overturns most of the historical orthodoxy on the Vietnam War. Through the analysis of international perceptions and power, it shows that South Vietnam was a vital interest of the United States. The book provides many new insights into the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 and demonstrates that the coup negated the South Vietnamese government's tremendous, and hitherto unappreciated, military and political gains between 1954 and 1963. After Diem's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson had at his disposal several aggressive policy options that could have enabled South Vietnam to continue the war without a massive US troop infusion, but he ruled out these options because of faulty assumptions and inadequate intelligence, making such an infusion the only means of saving the country.



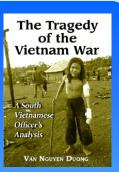


Available on Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/Triumph-Forsaken-Vietnam-War-1954-1965/dp/0521757630

NEWSLETTER # 48 PAGE 4

The Tragedy of the Vietnam War: Van Nguyen Duong

The Vietnam War actually began in December 1946 with a struggle between the communists and the French for possession of the country. Vietnam's strategic position in southeast Asia along with veiled economic concerns and a political agenda led to the involvement of other countries, including the United States. Written by an officer in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, this poignant memoir seeks to clarify the nuances of South Vietnam's defeat. From the age of 12, Van Nguyen Duong watched as the conflict affected his home, family, village and friends. He discusses not only the day-to-day hardships he endured from forced relocation and eventual imprisonment but also the anguish caused by the illusive reality of Vietnamese independence. The various political forces at work in Vietnam, the hardships suffered by RVNAF soldiers after the 1975 U.S. withdrawal from Saigon, and the effect of reunification on the Vietnamese people are also discussed. An appendix contains a summary of the Eleven Point Program Accords of January 1962.



http://www.amazon.com/TRAGEDY-VIETNAM-WAR-Vietnamese-Officers/dp/0786432853

Comment: This is another interesting look at the Vietnam War from the perspective of a South Vietnamese who has spent his adult life as an officer of the South Vietnamese Army only to end up being jailed in various communist reeducation camps for thirteen years after the war.

In this book, he attempts to illustrate the effect of the war on the Vietnamese people who suffered "hardship, agony, and misfortune" (p 9) during this painful two-decade tragedy. He paints a broad view of the war, which was spearheaded by Ho Chi Minh and his communist party and later supported by other nations for one reason or another. For the author, "the 'communist claimed independence' [was] a tragedy, a delusion" for the communists were "the planters of all sees of misfortune, suffering and disaster for the Vietnamese people." (p 5)

Legends of Vietnam...continued

and the Poor Man," a tale of unselfishness rewarded. "The Fairy's Portrait" tells of a sprite's wish to marry a scholar rather than a prince or commoner because scholars have inquisitive minds, try to understand the land of bliss, and know poetry. "The Magic's Crossbow," based partly on real history, recounts the trials and triumphs of the first historically documented Vietnamese king, An Duong. The story includes the intervention of Kim Quy (the genie sea turtle), a magic crossbow that defeats the invading Chinese, and a magic claw. In the end An Duong is defeated because he disregards the warning of the turtle: "[N]ever forget that the ultimate safety of your realm depends on your vigilance."

The author includes at the end of his book nine war and postwar tales, all originating after the 1975 conquest of Vietnam by the Communists. The stories recount misery and suffering, yet a silver lining of hope is hinted at here and there. These legends, like those from the distant past, suggest that hope never dies in the indomitable Vietnamese soul.

Nghia is not a native speaker of English, but he is a scholar to be reckoned with. More than once he sent me to the dictionary to learn the meaning of unfamiliar English words. Yet his narration is often couched in language that surprises because of unexpected connotation. In "Tien Dung and the Marsh Boy," the Marsh Boy offers to show the princess the marshlands and the sea. The princess responds, "That would be great." In "The Lake and the Sword," a wealthy landowner, Le Loi, asks a militiaman where he got a sword. When the militiaman says, "out of the river," Le Loi responds, "You must be kidding." Later a hut is described as "not in great shape;" a toad is characterized as an "alpha toad;" a group goes to a man's house "to check it out;" and a man is too frightened "to show up." Modern colloquial English in this context at first felt out of place to me, but as I proceeded, its incongruous charm grew on me. More serious are the half dozen or so textual errors that a thorough editing by the publisher should have corrected.

The use of Vietnamese orthography, complete with diacritics, is one of the great virtues of the book for anyone interested in the language. The reader is able to distinguish Vietnamese words and names that vary only in their diacritical marks, indicating tone and pronunciation differences. Because Vietnamese is a tonal language, the presence or absence of tone indicators completely changes the meaning of a word. My only criticism is the occasional equation of the dau nga and the dau hoi in words like thuy (water), hai (sea), and cha (pie or roll). Nghia is presumably a southerner. In the southern dialect these two tones are interchangeable, but in the northern dialect, which I learned, they are distinct.

Vo M. Nghia (his name is often rendered as Nghia M. Vo to correspond to the American practice of putting the surname last), is well-endowed to write about Vietnam for American readers. He was one of the founders of the Saigon Arts, Culture, and Education Institute (SACEI; web site www.sacei07.org) and has written many books on Vietnamese culture, among them Saigon: A History, The Vietnamese Boot People, The Viet Kieu in America, and The Bamboo Gulag. His work in the U.S., following the fall of Vietnam, has stressed documenting Vietnamese-American culture through conferences and publications.

Legends of Vietnam, in sum, is a rewarding volume. I found it most valuable because of my intense interest in Vietnam, but any reader fascinated by the human psyche will discover many rewards in its pages. It is a welcome complement to the tradition of comparative mythology begun in 1949 by Joseph Campbell's iconic The Hero with a Thousand Faces.

Writer Tom Glenn spent many years in Vietnam before being evacuated under fire when Saigon fell. Many of his prize-winning stories deal With Vietnam. His web sites are http://tom-tell-tales.org and http://vietnam-tragedy.org.