

# Sources of Vietnamese Tradition

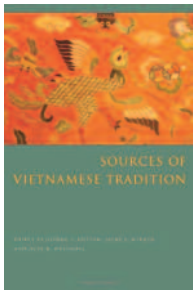
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Reviewed by Shelton Woods



For more than half a century students and academicians have greatly profited from the Columbia series on *Sources* of various Asian traditions. These include edited volumes on Japan, India, China, and Korea as well as newer editions and abridged volumes. *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, is a welcome addition to the series. In this volume, the editors masterfully created a book that is indispensable for any serious student or teacher of Việt Nam. The book includes more than 200 texts that

span the years 297 CE to 1998. Almost all of the selected texts are translated from their original languages rather than being translations of translations. Comprising over 600 pages, this volume's strengths are too many to enumerate in a brief review. Still, there are three particular aspects of the book that make it an essential text for students, teachers, and libraries

One immediately notices the difference between the previous *Sources* and *Vietnam* due to its organization. The editors of the *Vietnam* book divide the texts into three periods; "Premodern Vietnam," "Early Modern Vietnam," and "Modern Vietnam." While the other *Sources* books are also arranged chronologically—some encompassing two volumes—what is particularly helpful in the *Vietnam Sources* is that the editors judiciously divided the texts of each period into themed categories that include politics, economics, culture, and society. A surprising twist with the themed divisions is the rather unconventional heading of "Land." In fact, Land is the first section of each era (there are seven eras that make up the three chronological divisions in this volume). The Land category is quite helpful for the reader because of the country's varied political past. For example, within four decades (1936-1976), Việt Nam's name and boundaries included the Indochina Union, Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, Democratic Republic of Việt Nam, Republic of Việt Nam, and the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam. By beginning each era section with texts on Land, readers quickly find a context for the following pages and are reminded that the Vietnamese enjoy a profound bond with their place on the earth.

A second helpful aspect to this volume is the diverse nature of the texts. Not only is there a significant range of genres represented in each section, there are also a wide array of perspectives presented by the authors. Despite this literary diversity, the editors acknowledge that their intention in bringing forth this anthology was not to create "... a canon of any kind, and we are not suggesting that the readings assembled here are the only significant ones or even that all of them are of equal importance. Instead, they may be viewed as representative of certain

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literary genres, ideas, or views" (2). The editors also warn the reader that the texts are disproportionately representative of the worldview of literati and educated Vietnamese. Since most of the Vietnamese were often illiterate, it is difficult—if not impossible—to hear their voices in written documents. Still, the editors' inclusion of diverse material includes original texts with titles such as: "Buddhism In The South," "Life In Jail," "A Cosmic View Of The Land," "Elephants," "Marriage And Mourning," "Customs Of Gia Dinh," and "Returning To My Home Village."

Finally, this book is helpful because it does bring us to the turn of the twenty-first century. Within the classroom, this text will illuminate both Việt Nam's ancient and more recent days. It is truly up-to-date. Indeed, one of its most poignant segments is entitled "Letter To The Communist Party Urging Democratic Reform." This document was penned by General Tran Do (1924-2002)—a highly accomplished and decorated official who fought against the French at Dien Bien Phu and was second-in-command for the Communist forces in South Việt Nam during the American War. Nevertheless, his frank assessment of the state of Việt Nam in 1998 led to his expulsion from the party a year later. One of Tran Do's many stunning statements in his letter is as follows: "In both theory and practice, the market economy—which we must adopt in order to develop the economy—cannot coexist with the socialist path. Eventually, one or the other must be eliminated; otherwise, economic chaos will result, in which neither is recognizable". This short statement provides a small window into the important ideas contained in each text of this volume of *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*. ■

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