

REVIEW

Nguyen van Huyen. Le culte des immortels en Annam. 199 pages with illustrations, by M. Hoi Chan Bien, published in Hanoi in 1944.

In his preface to this charming little book, on the Cult of the Immortals, Professor Coedès, Director of the Ecole Française d' Extrême-Orient, Hanoi, of which institution the author is a very distinguished member, writes that in the study of such matters Dr. Nguyen van Huyen being an Annamite himself, coupled with a solid western scientific training received at the University of Paris, possesses, of course, certain and great advantages over any European student. May one hope soon to see the same written about Thai scientists? Dr. Nguyen in his eight preceding books has already shown his deep insight in the religious, spiritual and social life of his rural countrymen, and in the book under review he has been no less successful. The cult of the immortal beings is of Chinese origin but those, whose terrestrial existence and whose temples are described here, are strictly Annamite. They are, says the professor, a kind of national saints, part and parcel of the national patrimony of Annam. This side of the religious life of the Annamites is little known to the Europeans but it will be revealed through this work from which, as a discreet perfume, the subtle poetry of the legends is carried to the reader. The author precedes his book with a verse written by a famous Annamite poet. It says: "The thirty six thousand days, how insignificant they are."

36000 days, are one hundred years! Nothing, of course, still how few have the good fortune to live as long as that! From the highest antiquity down to our times men have been deploring the shortness of human life; it is therefore that the Annamites believe in another life in the land "on those far away shores or on the brightest of the cloud world." It is also for that reason that Taoism promises its most ardent disciples a long and peaceful life. The immortals spending their days on the verdant hillsides in gold and jade palaces standing in beautiful gardens of peach trees enveloped by purple and blue clouds is another poetic rendering of the blissful existence of these fortunate beings. The wish for a long life is one among the four wishes which one presents to one's friends at New Year, also here in Siam, where we say **ขอให้มี อายุ วรรณ สุขะ พละ.** or in English: Long life, beauty, health and good luck.

Long life is represented by the group of the eight Immortals, called Bat tiens, who are of Chinese origin, and who all seem to have been inspired by the Tao. Many of the purely Annamite Immortals are often of rather prosaic origins and their lives would perhaps not be very inspiring to people other than Annamites. The celestial beings worshipped in Annam consist of two kinds namely such as are of a celestial origin and such as originate from human beings who, by their merits have been received in the heavenly abode. Very often such meritorious human beings may be taken up in the celestial regions during their terrestrial existence, to wit the imperial princess and her poor low-born but pure hearted lover. The celestial-beings, who are of celestial origin, may at times be punished by the Emperor of Heaven, their punishment consisting in being incarnated in a human body. If they thereafter redeem their sins by the leading of a righteous life they may be allowed to return to heaven. This belief is also found in ancient Java and in ancient India. Such humanly incarnated beings (always female) may

contract marriages with mortal beings and, on their term of punishment being ended, take their husbands and children with them on the return to their celestial abode (1). In the story of Ha-Giang-Kiur, the belle of the miraculous clouds, we find traits from other fairy tales such as in Dr. R. S. Le May's *Lazybones* (2), in the Siamese tale of the girl in the gourd, and in several European fairy tales. In the Annamite version the heavenly girl resides in a picture. The essentials are, however the same, such as how the fairy sweeps the house and prepares the food while the young man is absent, and how she finally, on being surprised by him, becomes his wife. This and other tales with counterparts in similar or even identical western versions all go to prove the correctness of Lord Raglan's diffusionist theories (3). Sometimes the fairies or heavenly maidens will only pay a short visit, to wit, the one who mounted the imperial chariot of the great Emperor Lê-Thân-Tôn during a promenade only shortly after to ascend and disappear in the air. The tale of Tir Thnic, who after having married a celestial maid, and sojourned for a time in heaven, afterwards, to return to earth, is a striking counterpart to the tale of Rip Van Winkle. Dr. Nguyen says that in this *polygamous country (Annam) the ordinary people accept only with difficulty* the idea that an immortal being, worthy of that name, can be a woman, even in the body of a king's daughter! This again may point to the belief in such female immortals having been imported from abroad from countries with a higher conception of woman's dignity (why not from the Thai?). In the tale called "The perfect man of the Nong-Link" we find the miraculous bag which is often met with in the fairy tales of the Occident. Some of the Annamite fairy tales seem to be based on similar tales borrowed from the Cham whose country they have now completely conquered, and whose ancient Indian civilization has entirely disappeared.

(1) *Vide* "Inao" and in King Vajiravudh's *Narai Sip Pang*.

(2) *Vide* his "An Asian Arcady"

(3) *Vide* Lord Raglan "How Came Civilization"; see also our "Fairy Tales of Common Origin"

apparently without much influencing the Annamite culture. It may be added that among the heroes of these tales are a few jovial characters who love a cup dearly. In the third part of his book the author describes the temples built in Hanoi for worship of the Immortals. They are fine buildings with richly gilt carvings, dedicated inscriptions and poems engraved in honour of the Immortals who are worshipped in Ure. The temples contain a number of statues, representing the Immortals and the gods of the four worlds not to forget images of the Buddha too! These sanctuaries are well kept and are visited by many pious people who go there to seek the help of the supernatural beings. Spirit possession is well-known in Siam but in Annam the medium is always a male who has to undergo a long preparation before the séance commences. To students of Taoism this spirit possession is a clear counterpart though the purest form of Mongol Shamanism seems ethically to be much the superior: Writing through the spirit guiding the hand of the medium is, of course, well known among our Western Spiritualists.

It is curious to learn that there are veritable schools in Annam where magicians are taught and trained even to-day. The emperors of Annam may also still promote tutelary spirits to higher ranks in the hierarchy of the imperial officials. Dr. Nguyen's book contains many interesting vignettes and other illustrations by the gifted artist Hoi Chan Bien and two good plans of the great temple of Bich-Cau-Dao-Guan in Hanoi. Altogether Dr. Nguyen van Huyen's book is a very readable document not without fine poetry and poetic beauty.

Hua Hin, 9th May 1945.

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PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST IN OTHER JOURNALS.

Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient.

Tme XIII, 1942 (issued 1943)

- Dupont, P.: Le Buddha de Grahi et l'école de C'aiya, pp. 105-114. Advocates the further division of a period of art to be called the school of C'aiya, formed under Sinhalese influence about the commencement of the XIIIth century.
- Boudet, P.: La Conquête de la Cochinchine par les Nguyen, pp. 115-132. A useful resumé of the adventurous life of Gialong, more familiar in this country as Ong Chiengsu, and of his successful establishment of the present ruling dynasty of Annam. The "general Chat-Tri" of this article is of course the Chao Phya Chakri who founded the present dynasty of Chakri in Siam.
- Seidenfaden, E.: La ceremonie du rek-na et une ancienne coutume agricole danois, pp. 133-4. Suggests a common origin between the Asiatic ceremonies of the first tillage and a Danish custom dating from pagan times.
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Publication de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient.

Récherches préhistoriques dans la Région de Mhu Prei,
par P. Levy, 1943.

This is the 30th. volume of the series of *Publications* of the French Institution. It is an intensive treatment covering 122 pages of matter, 65 of illustrations and a sheet of 6 maps. Mlu Prei is known in this country as Manoprai and is situated in the north-east corner of the former Cambodian province of Kampong Thom. It was ceded to France in 1904 but recently restored to Siam. Its population is chiefly Kuy, who despite centuries of Khmer domination have retained their language and customs. The conclusion arrived at by the author after detailed comparisons of the finds in the various regions, is that they show archaic relations, more probably continental than maritime, with China and very distant countries of western and central Eurasia. Their date might mount to the middle periods of neolithic Indochina.