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Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thien Uyen Tap Anh. By Cuong Tu Nguyen. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997, 488 pages, ISBN 0-8248-1948-9, US \$55.00

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The study of Vietnamese Buddhism, often neglected in the scholarly research on Buddhism in East Asia and Southeast Asia, has long been plagued by the extreme scarcity of source materials. Among the available historical documents is the *Thien Uyen Tap Anh* (A Collection of Outstanding Figures of the Zen Community), a fourteenth-century Chinese-character text. It was discovered in 1927 by Tran Van Giap, a noted Vietnamese Buddhist scholar, who used it as his main documentary evidence to produce his historical account, written in French and published in 1932, of Vietnamese Buddhism from its beginnings to the thirteenth century. Giap argued that the type of Buddhism that flourished in Vietnam was Zen and that in Vietnam, from the sixth to the thirteenth century, Zen Buddhism was divided into three schools: the Vinitaruci, Vo Ngon Thong, and Thao Duong schools. Since then Giap's historical reconstruction of Vietnamese Buddhism has become the standard view among Buddhist scholars in Vietnamese, Chinese, and Western languages.

Cuong Tu Nguyen, who holds a Ph.D. in comparative religion from Harvard and currently teaches at George Mason University, sets out to challenge this received wisdom. The fundamental error of Giap and his followers, according to the author of *Zen in Medieval Vietnam*, is their uncritical acceptance and use of *Thien Uyen* as a veridical history. The key issue at stake then is to determine the exact literary genre of *Thien Uyen*.

Nguyen structures his book in three parts. Part I contains three chapters. Chapter one discusses the date, authorship, and source materials of *Thien Uyen* and provides a sketch of the history of Vietnamese Buddhism up to the fourteenth century. Chapter two offers a textual and historical analysis of the text, noting the influence of Chinese Zen classic *Jingde chuangdeng lu* (Transmission of the Lamp Composed in the Jingde Era) on the Vietnamese Buddhist understanding of Buddhist history and the use of the "transmission of the lamp" paradigm in Vietnamese Buddhism. Having dismissed a literal reading of *Thien Uyen* as a veridical history of Vietnamese Buddhism, the author in chapter three retrieves its historical value as a rich source of information on medieval Vietnamese Buddhism, especially its relation to literature, to socio-political life, and to popular religion, and its doctrines and practices. On the basis of available evidence, the author concludes that "Zen tradition or school in medieval Vietnam was, more than anything, an imagined community Zen in medieval Vietnam was not an institutionalized entity, but a more diffuse set of attitudes and styles spreading out among its adherents — a blend of life attitude and aesthetic taste and intellectual vocabulary that held considerable appeal for some among the Vietnamese elite, offering a life-style for today and a more abstract romantic visualization of the past of their religion and their country"

(p. 8).

Part II gives an English translation of *Thien Uyen Tap Anh* (pp. 103-205). Part III comprises three appendixes, the first two offering additional supporting data for chapters one and two of Part I, the third biographies of eminent monks from other sources, and reproduction of the original Chinese-character text of *Thien Uyen Tap Anh*.

There is no doubt that *Zen in Vietnam* is a groundbreaking work. No future historian of medieval Vietnamese Buddhism will be able to ignore its provocative thesis regarding the historical value of one of the most important documents of Vietnamese Buddhism and its reconstruction of Vietnamese Zen as an “imagined community” of “philosophical attitudes, styles of ethical behavior, and artistic sentiments” and not “a cohesive system of thought embraced by a recognizable lasting physical community” (p. 99). If Cuong Nguyen is right in affirming that *Thien Uyen* is not a homogenous collection of Zen biographies in the tradition of the “transmission of the lamp texts” such as *Jingde Chuadeng lu* but a “polyphonic pastiche” of biographies of eminent monks from various historical sources which were recast by Vietnamese writers (mainly by Thong Bien in the eleventh century and Thuong Chieu in the thirteenth century) into Zen biographies and then grafted onto the genealogical tree of Chinese Zen (and Nguyen makes his case, persuasively to my mind, with a formidable scholarly battery of 118 pages of dense notes!), then the common view that there were three Zen schools in medieval Vietnam (i.e., Vinitaruci, Vo Ngon Thong, and Thao Duong) must be radically revised.

For Vietnamese scholars of Buddhism, Nguyen’s work has an added importance in that it demonstrates that the historical-critical method must be an indispensable tool of their craft. As shown in *Zen in Medieval Vietnam*, when wielded with competence and intellectual honesty, this tool does not destroy the Buddhist faith but rather strengthens it. For this methodological achievement as well as for its impeccable scholarship, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam* will become a classic among studies on Vietnamese Buddhism.