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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: Weaving a Realm, Vietnamese clothing from around 1500 AD

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What a pleasure it was when this book landed on my coffee table! The book is bilingual Vietnamese – English, well designed and covers over 200 pages with hundreds of full-colour images. The book is a joint project by several Vietnamese from around the world who wished to add to the awareness of Vietnamese identities around the world. Viet Nam is so much more than what people remember of the Vietnam War. Even a quick peek into Wikipedia highlights the long standing culture of the country and its people.

> Producing a book like this alone is a large enterprise. I am unable to place it in context of other Asian costume reconstruction books, but for a western public it is an eye opener.

The title of the book, *Weaving a Realm*, refers to the custom of self-governing dynasties of Vietnam and to the design characteristic costumes from their national institutions. Identity is very much linked with their clothing. The Vietnamese (mainly expat) group who made this book are not the first to work with ancient costumes of their country, and the book frequently shows its historical and literature sources. The power of this book is that the authors not only have done extensive historical research but have also done their best to reconstruct these, and fit them on. These creations may look like the original, but due to a lack of funds, they were not made with original materials or techniques. For the purpose of this book, that is a defendable choice.

The editorial team mostly consists of young professionals, including dress makers, artists, stylists, photographers, proof readers and editors. Unfortunately, there is a lack of dress historians and archaeologists. However, the extensive list of references and image sources make clear there is a lot of research behind this. The book consists of two parts: basic forms of apparel and costumes of the court.

The Lê Dynasty was the longest-ruling dynasty of Vietnam, from 1428 to 1789. This book focuses on the former half up until 1527, although later sources are used as well. In this early period, clothes were not yet overcomplicated. Chinese influence in Vietnam was predominant over many centuries. Nevertheless, a unique colour was adopted by each locality. Photos and descriptions of the Giao Lĩnh or cross collar tell a beautiful story of how this Eastern Asian dress was adjusted in Vietnam and faded away in later dynasties as being “too Chinese”, while it actually had many local details, making it maybe more Vietnamese than any other dress. The drawings representing men and women in their dress with the Giao Lĩnh cross collar, together with photos of the dressed up people in a “timeless” studio are a feast for the eyes. The first part of the book then continues with the Thường (lower garment), Áo viên lĩnh (round collared dress) and Áo đối khâm (jacket).

Between the two main parts of the book, a short intermission of ten pages discusses hair and black teeth as the standard of Vietnamese beauty. The second part of the book deals with costumes of the court, mostly highly standardised costumes for mandarins, court attendants, handmaidens and the clothing of the emperors and empresses.

Producing a book like this alone is a large enterprise. I am unable to place it in context of other Asian costume reconstruction books, but for a western public it is an eye opener. The book could have done with some background information for those unfamiliar with Vietnam and Vietnamese culture.

The next potential step for this publication could be to produce the costumes in a more authentic way and also to include patterns to allow others to reproduce the work. Right now the photos are a backdrop to a fascinating story, but we can learn so much more about the people and their costumes if we make and use the costumes the same way they may have done. This book is certainly an appetizer for that.

Book information:

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It can be ordered via: https://www.facebook.com/VietnamCentre/
A short trailer for the book is on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0K1MpmZp5E&feature=youtu.be

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