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Vietnamese Traditional Medicine: A Social History (History of Medicine in Southeast Asia)

C. Michele Thompson

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Medical manuscripts in Chinese and in Nom (vernacular Vietnamese) capture various aspects of the historical interaction between Chinese and Vietnamese thought. In Vietnamese Traditional Medicine: A Social History, Michele Thompson argues that indigenous Vietnamese concepts regarding health and the human body helped shape Vietnam's reception of foreign medical ideas and practices, first from China and then from the West. To illustrate this theme, she presents a detailed analysis of the Vietnamese response to a Chinese medical technique for preventing smallpox, and to the medical concepts associated with it, looking at Vietnamese healers from a variety of social classes.

Thompson's account brings together colorful historical vignettes, contemporary observations and interviews, and textual analysis. One particularly instructive episode was Jean Marie Despiau's 1820?21 journey from Vietnam to Macau to secure doses of smallpox vaccine to vaccinate the royal children of the Nguyen Dynasty. The documentation associated with Despiau's effort provides insight into the Vietnamese receptiveness to one foreign medical technique and the concepts of the body associated with it.

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