

Understanding Everyday Science Through Vuong Quan Hoang's "Meandering Sobriety"

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** Note: This is a translation of a book review by Hung-Hiep Pham (Thanh Do University) in Khoa Học & Phát Triển.*

Do you understand anything about the daily life of scientists? What are their daily thoughts and observations about the world like? How do they form their research ideas? What do they think about the practical applications of their research and those of their colleagues in general?

Well, here, the book titled "Meandering Sobriety" by author Vuong Quan Hoang - an interdisciplinary researcher in economics and social sciences - available for sale on Amazon, will somewhat help you answer the above questions.

The book is 126 pages long, consisting of 44 concise notes (about 200-300 words each) by the author on three main themes, corresponding to three chapters: (i) Science Sobriety, (ii) Business Intelligence, and (iii) Meandering Thought.

The first chapter, "Science Sobriety," comprises 16 notes on interesting research the author has encountered in recent years. For example, in the note titled "Masters of Hoaxes," the author summarizes the findings of a study by Backwell and colleagues published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London. Series B: Biological Sciences* in 2000. This research discovered that in the world of fiddler crabs, male crabs with more giant claws are seen as more attractive to female crabs. Interestingly, when a male crab loses its giant claw, it regenerates a new one of the same size but weaker and less robust. The new claw may lose its strength, but it still serves as a "threat" to other male crabs and maintains its sex appeal to female crabs. You might wonder how this biology research is relevant to our daily lives, but the author's insightful commentary at the end of the note will make this clear.

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Sun Tzu famously said, "All warfare is based on deception". But then we also know that "All is fair in love and war". So I guess the fiddler crabs' strategy is well-justified.

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In this chapter, readers also get to read many fascinating science stories with the author's clever insights and deep, often humorous interpretations, such as "Trust no one, not even yourself" and "Human's alcoholic pride damaged."

Chapter 2, “Business Intelligence,” consists of 11 notes about the author’s experiences during his 30 years of research and consulting. Here, you’ll encounter quirky stories related to research, such as “The bittersweet victory of humans over AI” and “Information versus data needs: water, water... but no drop to drink,” as well as the author’s experiences in consulting for businesses and governments.

The note titled “Not everything about academics is ... useless, after all” combines both of these experiences. It tells the story of the author’s consulting project with a large bank in 2005, where the consulting team (the author) and the client (the bank) had many unresolved issues despite the data, methods, and results being presented comprehensively. When both parties couldn’t decide how to ensure that nothing else needed to be discussed, the author suggested involving external experts with relevant knowledge to evaluate the results. This idea was approved, and the author summarized the main content of the consultation in a paper titled “Statistical Method in Development of Credit Scoring System” and eventually published it in the Journal of Applied Mathematics Vietnam. As its title suggests, this note humorously challenges society’s perception of the “uselessness” of academia.

Chapter 3, “Meandering Thought,” consists of 17 notes based on the author’s keen observations of everyday phenomena and events. These notes may seem small and trivial, but they are subtle and even profound, such as “Ageless Data” and “His ideas aren’t worth a penny; mine is.” One of the most impressive notes is “Secret Medicine,” which recounts how a domestic COVID-19 vaccine manufacturer invited monks to bless their product, hoping for government approval. This short story reflects a certain aspect of the Vietnamese psyche: the belief in the power of ritual and the combination of Eastern and Western medicine, even in a highly scientific field like vaccine production.

In the research community, Vuong Quan Hoang has long been known as an author with diverse writing styles and content, ranging from hundreds of empirical research papers published in domestic and international journals (as expected - research is the author’s main profession) to documentary-style works (such as “Kinh tế Việt Nam: Thăng trầm và Đột phá” [“Vietnamese Economy - Fluctuations and Breakthroughs”] co-authored with Pham Minh Chinh), or even modern fables (like “The Kingfisher story,” also published on Amazon). With “Meandering Sobriety,” it can be said that the author has expanded his portfolio with a new writing style and approach: everyday stories that any scientist or even anyone wandering through life can experience or observe. With his imaginative mind and observational skills, Vuong Quan Hoang has turned them into enlightening stories – light-hearted and humorous but filled with layers of meaning that sometimes require prolonged reading to understand fully. Those who have read Phan Cam Thuong’s “Nghệ thuật ngày thường” [“The Art of Everyday Life”] will likely find some similarities between the two authors, even though they work in different fields.

Another notable detail about the book is that the author chose to write it in English instead of Vietnamese. To explain this, one needs to look at the author's entire body of work over time. It can be seen that from around 2018 onwards, the author wrote very few articles in Vietnamese (unlike before when he wrote both in Vietnamese and English). According to my estimation, it's highly likely that from 2018 onwards, Vuong Quan Hoang redefined his writing strategy, wanting to become a bridge between Vietnam and the world. If that's the case, "Meandering Sobriety" - though it may be just a tiny stream - has successfully connected with the larger river of human knowledge.

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