

# Rejection and embrace

As scholarship, recently more than ever, has sought to draw in cross-disciplinary approaches, *Vietnam and the West: New Approaches* stands above recent scholarly contributions as a text that not only seeks to re-interpret the traditional boundaries of discipline, but also provide a more nuanced understanding of history.

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*Vietnam and the West: New Approaches*

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INDEED AS SCHOLARS of Gender and Language, Environment and Geography, Medicine and Religion, History and Politics have convened in this volume, the works produced form a synthesis of discourse that neatly problematizes previous conceptions of the neat dichotomies of Vietnamese/non-Vietnamese and Western/non-western; as Wilcox writes, “these essays participate in a reexamination of the long and important interaction between Vietnam, Europe, and North America” (13). It is this (re)examination, which draws on a most impressive array of source material ranging from Vietnamese language texts written in the demotic adaptation of classical Chinese script (*chữ Nôm*), French language documents from the era of *missionnaires* to the period of decolonization, the oral histories of the Agent Orange survivors, and recent discourse over the privatization of water (*nước*), which has driven much of the discourse of recent scholarship on Vietnam, and more broadly Southeast Asia. With the current revolution in the field of Asian studies in mind, this volume not only represents a careful, but also a well sampled chronology.

Our examination of *Vietnam and the West* begins in the field of religious studies. Many of the essays in this volume could be argued to be contributions to the field of religious studies as well as that of history, particularly if scholars adapt the broad conceptions of religion as articulated by Ninian Smart. In his works *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968) and *Dimensions of the Sacred and an Anatomy of World Beliefs* (1998), Smart argued that religion had three para-historical characteristics and four historical characteristics. Doctrine, Mythos, and Ethics were considered para-historical. Ritual, experiential, institutional, and dimensional were considered historical elements.<sup>1</sup> If one adapts Smart’s framework for the study of religion the essays within the first part of this volume, *Precolonial Encounters* (to 1862), therefore offer great contributions to the field of Religious Studies as they explore all seven of Smart’s characteristics. The two essays, by currently independent (Cornell PhD) Brian Ostrowski and Wilcox, additionally offer particularly strong contributions as they take on the dominant historical narrative of the development of Vietnamese Catholicism with both zeal and well-thought out provocation. As Wilcox argues, the standard vision is for Vietnamese historians to see Vietnamese Catholics as they resisted the French, while most English language scholarship has seen Vietnamese Catholics as they supported the French. Therefore, scholars tend to want a more coherent picture, as “surely nineteenth century Vietnamese Christians could not have been rejecting French imperialism and embracing it

at the same time.” (72) However, as Wilcox writes “The flaw in lumping personalities as diverse as Trường Vĩnh Ký, Phan Thanh Giản, Nguyễn Trường Tộ, and Đặng Đức Tuấn together under a mantle of nineteenth-century Vietnamese Christianity is apparent.” (72) While Wilcox chooses to complicate the notions of the simplified historical understanding of Vietnamese society often conceived of by scholars as, in the words of Diane Fox, “the categories that bind our thinking,” (175) Ostrowski’s essay aims to push the boundaries of intellectual contact to a rather earlier period than popular conception (the nineteenth century – or the rise of French high colonialism – for those unfamiliar). As Ostrowski writes, “Contrary to today’s commonly accepted understanding of the origins of Western influence in Vietnamese literature, the large but often ignored corpus of seventeenth-century Christian Nôm writings show that both Western literary content and stylistic concepts found widespread expression in Vietnamese literature long before French colonialism.” (19) As such, Ostrowski’s essay on the Maiorica Texts, which demonstrate localizations such as “the last rice” (*com cuối*, 34), rather than “supper,” reflects much of the nature of this volume, where scholars have sought to ring out the silences of those voices that blur the traditionally understood lines of Vietnamese history.

One of the greatest accomplishments of *Vietnam and the West* is not only in the individual essays that broaden the horizons of scholarly understanding, but also in the form that these essays have taken in adaptations of cross-disciplinary approaches and subject materials to attract scholars from the tradition separated intellectual zones of the humanities and the sciences. In particular the contributions from Michele Thompson, Fox, and Christopher Kukk will be of particular interest to those in the fields of Medicine, History, Environmental Studies, Politics, and Policy. In Thompson’s essay on the physician Jean Marie Despiou, who parted with his compatriots Chagneau and Vannier over the topic of religion in emperor Gia Long’s court, we see not only the blurring of lines of loyalty between the French and the Vietnamese, but also the full development of a political life of a man, who perhaps ought to be remembered more for his independent research in his search for a smallpox *vaccina*. Thompson’s essay, which focuses on the portrayal of a more nuanced understanding of the early colonial encounter contrasts strongly with the work of Diane Fox although both exhibit fascinating moments in the developments of the field of Medicine.

Perhaps *fascinating* is not the most appropriate term that could be used to describe the work of Diane Fox in *Agent Orange*. Perhaps one would be more accurate to use terms such as *tragic*, or on the other hand *inspirational*. However, Fox’s method, the choice to draw on a single narrative thread of “one piece of the mosaic,” (178) is one that, with the

experience of families on both sides of the war in Vietnam (or “the American War” in Vietnamese history), can bridge the gap of humanity to encourage (*đồng viên*) the search for a better future. It is within this context that Fox concludes, “Careful attention to the stories told by people who suffered the long term consequences of war has much to offer scholarship: a way towards rethinking binary constructions of reality, input for reexamining some of the master narratives of our times, and an example of how past divisions might be reworked in order to address present, shared challenges.” (194)

Indeed, it is the work of this volume, presented on a grand scale – from Micheline Lessarged’s essay on the influence of Vietnamese women on the development of anti-colonialism to Marc Jason Gilbert’s essay on the early developments of Vietnamese revolutionary Marxist-Leninism in the search for anti-colonial allies among Indian and African communities, through Edmund F. Wehrle’s case study of the relationships between trade unions in the United States and South Vietnam in the 1950s, and Sophie Quinn Judges selection, presumably taken from her current project *The Elusive Third Way* – that not only gives an entire reconsideration of the war period down to topics that may be addressed at the level of secondary education, but also entirely reshapes the period under most popular consideration in scholarship on Vietnam, with one particular exception, the present. Thus, it is in the present discourse on the public and the private that the volume concludes, with the selection of the lens of water, where Kukk argues, in the words of Nguyễn Đình Ninh et al., for the creation of a local authority to mitigate global concerns, a “Ministry of Water.” (207) In Kukk’s discourse readers see the original central problem of the volume (the presumed dichotomy of “Vietnam” and “West”) recast, into a new problematic: *local and global*. Though scholarship has already been engaged with this new problematic for a decade or more, it is the collected recasting of this volume that truly represents, in the words of the prolific historian of Vietnam Marc Bradley, “A splendid achievement.”

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## Notes

- 1 Smart, Ninian. 1968. *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion*. New York: Humanities Press; Smart, Ninian. 1998. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Picture taken by reviewer, 13 July 2011, Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai Street Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, Việt Nam. Image shows an informal memorial to a Vietnamese Catholic who passed away at or nearby that location in 1950’s; it was written in chalk on the pavement, in French and Latin. Just days later it had been washed away by the rain.