

A reconciliation of historiographies

In *Allegories of the Vietnamese Past* Wynn Wilcox draws upon a deep knowledge of historiography in Vietnamese, French, and English in order to mount a considerable reshaping of the important questions of Vietnamese History and appeal to a broad audience of readership interested in politics, history, the Vietnam War, literature, and the nature of truth.

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AS SUCH, as it has become clear that it would be inappropriate to make reference about contemporary geopolitics without reference to the Vietnam War, Professor Wilcox demonstrates that it ought to be impossible to make reference to America's engagements in Southeast Asia, without regarding the literature and the intellectual history of Vietnam. In order to accomplish this achievement *Allegories of the Vietnamese Past* centers around the mythic historical voyage of Bui Vien, a nineteenth century diplomat who theoretically voyaged to the United States.¹

The story of Bui Vien, as Wilcox argues, may be more historically important in fiction than in truth. As the evidence is mounted it becomes clear that, although such a figure did exist and was considerably notable as a person of *tu tai* [flourishing talent] (142), the personage by the name of Bui Vien did not in fact voyage to the United States. However, the image of this voyage became important to the Vietnamese and the Americans alike during the period of decolonization, in order to demonstrate that 'South Vietnam' and the United States were "in the same sampan", as Wilcox draws upon the words of author Ann Caddell Crawford.² (134) However, as Wilcox argues, the story of Bui Vien can be applied through allegory to a greater historical context, which not only includes the recent diplomatic relations of the United States and Vietnam after the *doi moi* reforms 1980s and the *mo cua* policy of the 1990s, but can also be traced back through a reprinting of the text during the conflict with the French, to the original narrative of Bui Vien whose life is overlapped in the rise of French colonial power in the nineteenth century.

From the discussion of Bui Vien, Wilcox provides a logical link from the literary figures of the Vietnamese past to more contemporary understandings of these literary figures. For example, the two poets Xuan Huong and Ngoc Han became important not only through their poetry, but also because their stories represented allegories of the Vietnamese nation in the eyes of Vietnamese historiography; both from Ha Noi, and from Saigon. In the eyes of both schools of thought, the image of female poets could be used to construct, as Wilcox argues, "a new and legitimate society in a time of ideological uncertainty" (108). In the same way, Wilcox draws upon the allegories of *The Tale of Kieu*, the French missionary *Pigneaux de Behaine*, and the 'xenophobic' emperor Minh Mang in order to argue that each narrative has been employed by authors of history in order to provide a commentary about their 'contemporary' present, a subjectivity that demonstrates the intent behind authorship. In this way Professor Wilcox makes his writing relevant to a host of authors and theoreticians who have engaged with both the nature of subjectivity and history, since *Allegories of the Vietnamese Past* draws substantial theoretical contributions from the likes of Hayden White, Judith Butler, and Vietnam historian Shawn McHale.

Through his exploration of historical theory and subjectivity *Allegories of the Vietnamese Past* reminds readers, in the concluding words of Wilcox, of "what makes studying history worthwhile in the first place" (156). Thus, although there is ample critical material in Wilcox's work, particularly about history used as a platform for justification during the era of French colonialism, there is also ample material to draw upon for narratives of reconciliation.

References to reconciliation are strung throughout *Allegories of the Vietnamese Past*. In the book we see an articulation of viewpoints that were at one time radicalized through the realities of history. We see evidence presented from the Republic of Vietnam, combined with Marxist interpretations of history. We see the efforts of the American President Lyndon Johnson placed in conversation with the historiography of Vietnamese nationalists. We see the historiography of Vietnamese nationalists placed back into conversation with works that appeared in French. As Wilcox argues, "taken as allegories, these interpretations – mine included – offer greater insights into Vietnam in the eighteenth and nineteenth century." (156) Therefore, *Allegories of the Vietnamese Past* offers a reconciliation of historiographies that were at one point competing, into a more coherent and complex narrative that brings the relevance of eighteenth and nineteenth century Vietnam into a greater exploration about the nature of truth and the construction of history.

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Notes

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2 Ann Caddell Crawford is author of the book *Customs and Culture of Vietnam*, which was popularly read by American forces during their introduction to Vietnamese culture.

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