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.

William Noseworthy

Rejection and embrace


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 missionaries to the period of decolonization, the oral histories of the Agent-Orange survivors, and recent discourse over the privatization of water (vật liệu), 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 our examination of the field of Medicine, history, and the sciences. In particular the contributions 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, the physician Jean Marie Despiau, who parted with his compatriots Chagnes and Vanier 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 vaccine. 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 (để vơi) 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 scholar-ship: a way towards rethinking binary constructions of reality, input for reworking 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 Lessard’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 T. 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 Nhĩn 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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