

a woman, if she is a mother and housewife, can get out of the house, she will not achieve enlightenment. Such an ideology presents a challenge to an egalitarian notion of Burmese women, and Ho with her close reading of the texts outlines how Burmese women negotiate between the two worlds — the world of powerful women as they are often portrayed, and that of doomed, helpless creatures who cannot amass the highest form of merits through *Vawana* or practice in the confines of a house.

Chapter 4, 'The making of a modern Burmese wife', highlights Ho's strength as a writer who can help readers grasp the important cultural symbols of place and lexicon in *Not out of hate*, and how the male protagonist in the novel personifies the twin forces of colonialism and modernity that eventually kill the female protagonist. On the one hand, her feminist framework gives a refreshing, alternative reading of characters most Burmese readers and fans of Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay's works are familiar with. On the other hand, it could be a bit frustrating for a reader not to be able to see the contextualising of her characters in Burmese literature and, in particular, in Ma Ma Lay's fervent nationalism and life trajectory. One wonders if and how the reading of U Saw Han would change if one could assume that this character is in a way a partial reflection of Ma Ma Lay's previous self, i.e. the one who prefers modernity to tradition. Perhaps such a sense of frustration is misplaced if Ho's book only targets audiences who might not be familiar with the untranslated works of Ma Ma Lay.

Ho is critical of the United States' championing of human rights in Burma, and her accounts of the hypocrisies of American politicians are welcome additions to this already rich book. Yet she also provides an honest assessment of Aung San Suu Kyi's recent silence on human rights issues. Overall, this is a thoroughly researched, well-written, and highly accessible book not just for Burma studies but for women's and gender studies as well as Asian, Asian and American studies, and literature in general. The author has laid the foundation for further analyses of Burmese literature. It may be fruitful to juxtapose the study of Burmese novels with those of other Southeast Asian writers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *This earth of mankind* as intertextual references, in addition to works by Western authors. After all, Ma Ma Lay's *Way Way* has a lot in common with Toer's *Anneliese*.

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Vietnam

Politics in contemporary Vietnam: Party, state, and authority relations

Edited by JONATHAN D. LONDON

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As the Vietnamese economy further grows and the country pursues broader international integration, it becomes better known to the outside world, and academic

research on the country's economy has expanded enormously. In contrast, its contemporary politics remains largely under-explored territory. The number of international scholars working on Vietnamese politics also tends to dwindle as the older generation of Vietnam watchers have become less active or diverted their research interests to other areas, while the younger generation have yet to catch up. Inside the country, national politics is deemed a 'sensitive' subject, further discouraging the study of the issue by Vietnamese researchers. *Politics in contemporary Vietnam*, edited by Jonathan D. London, is perhaps the only notable recent book-length examination of Vietnamese politics. That fact alone ensures that the book deserves some serious attention from those interested in the country.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion by the editor, the volume is composed of seven chapters dealing with three major themes, namely the politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the state administrative apparatus, and the representative institutions and mass organisation.

In Chapter 2, Tuong Vu provides a background for the book by examining the evolution of the CPV from its early days into the present. Vu argues that the CPV is currently in decline and describes the Party since 1986 to be in a state of a 'continuing decay'. Vu bases his argument on the perceived large-scale corruption and cronyism within the Party system, as well as the erosion of the Party's rural support base due to the country's shift to an industrial economy. However, Vu posits that the Party still has many tools and measures at its disposal to prolong its survival, including rising nationalism.

In two related chapters, Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet (Chapter 6) and Carlyle A. Thayer (Chapter 7) discuss the nature of the CPV's authoritarian regime. Thayer dissects the country's repressive apparatus, focusing on the role of four state organs: the Ministry of Public Security, People's Armed Security Force, General Directorate II (military intelligence), and the Ministry of Culture and Information (now Ministry of Information and Communication). Thayer's account highlights the repressive nature of the regime and details their various measures to crack down on political dissidents. Meanwhile, Kerkvliet takes issue with some authors' claims that the Vietnamese government 'does not tolerate any challenge to its one-party rule', or that the CPV 'tolerates no dissent or opposition'. While sharing the view that the CPV regime is generally authoritarian and repressive, Kerkvliet also argues that the Party actually tolerates a certain level of dissent as long as the dissidents do not act in an organised manner and directly threaten its rule. Specifically, through an analysis of how the regime treated 62 dissidents, the author concludes that having a history of service to the government or the party, or not being a prominent member of a dissident organisation, may reduce the likelihood of a dissident being arrested and imprisoned.

In their chapters on Vietnam's state apparatus, while Thaveeporn Vasavakul (Chapter 3) analyses the evolving accountability relations within the one-party system, Thomas Jandl (Chapter 4) examines the relationship between the central and local governments as well as between local leaders and the central authorities during the process of decentralisation. Specifically, Vasavakul analyses Vietnam's efforts to introduce accountability mechanisms into the operation of the state system. Accordingly, she finds that intra-state institutional competition and conflict play an

important role in promoting accountability and thus shaping the evolution of Vietnam's one-party system. Meanwhile, Jandl argues that Vietnam's central control over local leaders is less strict than in China. The centre warns local 'fence breakers' about their actions, yet they let the policy experiments go forward. If the experiments are successful, the centre would legalise them, and the 'fence breakers' are normally promoted to top political positions. As such, economic success tends to prevail over obedience to Party doctrine in determining local officials' upward mobility.

The two remaining chapters of the book deal with Vietnam's representative institutions and mass organisation. Specifically, Edmund J. Malesky (Chapter 5) examines the rationale, organisations, results and implications of the confidence vote in the country's National Assembly. The chapter finds a strong correlation between the number of times a particular politician was queried and the share of low confidence votes he or she receives. Meanwhile, Andrew Wells-Dang argues that despite constraints imposed by the CPV, Vietnam's civil society organisations still proliferate and exercise a considerable level of political influence.

As shown by the above summary, the book examines different dynamics of Vietnamese politics, and offers a lot of food for thought to its readers. Vu's argument that the CPV is in decline and decaying, for example, may be controversial as there's no sign that the Party's hold on power is weakening. But as I read the chapter just weeks before the Party's 12th national congress in January 2016, its argument rang in my head. Not only have informal reports about intense political infighting among factions emerged as one would expect ahead of any Party congress, there were also indications of persistent corruption and rising nepotism and cronyism among the ranks of the Party, as well as the deeply entrenched rent-seeking through its system. The decay of the Party therefore seems to run deeper than its appearance may suggest.

Other chapters of the book, such as those of Vasavakul, Jandl and Malesky, shows that the CPV and its government are trying to reverse this trend by improving its political and economic governance, either through enhanced accountability mechanisms, decentralisation, or favouring pragmatism over dogmatism. Nevertheless, the inherent limitations of a one-party system will naturally curtail the positive impacts of such efforts. Ultimately, the Party will have to revert to authoritarian measures and repressive tools to safeguard its rule as shown in the chapters by Thayer and Kerkvliet. The CPV's recent increasing reliance on the army and the police, which have demanded more privileges from the Party in exchange, proves just that.

Authoritarian as it may seem, many scholars and experts concur that the Vietnamese political system is still more 'liberal' and 'pluralistic' than the Chinese one. Vietnamese people tend to enjoy more civil liberty than their Chinese counterparts, and at the systemic level, political power in Vietnam is more diffuse, and Hanoi tends to tolerate a higher level of criticism and dissent than Beijing does. The growth of the country's civil society as observed by Wells-Dang therefore offers a fairly encouraging note for the country's political outlook.

Generally speaking, the book is rather well-organised and coherent, even when it is based on conference papers. The editor has done a good job in linking the chapters together by encouraging the contributing authors to cross-reference each other. The

conclusion, which critically reviews the main chapters and discusses the way forward for Vietnamese politics, is also useful.

The main weakness of the book lies in the uneven quality of the chapters when certain ones prove to be more rigorous than others. The reference list of the book also causes some problems for readers as it doesn't include many works cited, including key ones such as the 'Reverse Effects of Sunshine' article, which forms the foundation of Malesky's discussion in his chapter. Some chapters use outdated, biased or unreliable sources. For example, in his chapter, Kerkvliet cited shocking information from *Điện thư* about former party leaders' corruption, alleging that they amassed billions of dollars in bribes (p. 105). When I traced the source, it turned out to be the electronic newsletter of a dissident organisation, which normally carries unverified rumours and false information disseminated by activists hostile to the CPV. That said, *Politics in contemporary Vietnam* is a timely book that provides fresh insights into Vietnamese politics. Hopefully, the book will inspire more authors to work on this important topic of Vietnam studies.

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Sidewalk city: Remapping public space in Ho Chi Minh City

By ANNETTE MIAE KIM

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Annette Kim's *Sidewalk city* zeroes in on Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's largest metropolis, and with good reason. Not only are sidewalks in that city teeming with activity, but Vietnam is actively renegotiating its 'sidewalk paradigm' through increased clearance enforcement (p. 21). Ho Chi Minh City serves as an in-situ laboratory for understanding sidewalks as contested spaces because both city districts and wards have been experimenting with sidewalk management policies. Through an innovative approach that combines spatial ethnography with a critical cartography, Kim challenges her readers to see sidewalks anew. The result is a lavish book with resplendent full-colour figures that testify to the importance of sidewalks in urban life, especially in the Global South.

The book is composed of seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the major theoretical questions and conceptual tools. Kim asks, for example, how property rights theory may be applied to public space in order to evaluate how claims to space are justified and operationalised in society. Rather than sidewalks in the city as disorderly, she shows why they are better understood as 'mixed-use public spaces', a perspective that may lead to better design and management policies (p. 25). In Chapter 2, she develops three narratives for understanding the importance of sidewalks to urban life. The first narrative is a tale of two cities, or how Ho Chi Minh City emerged out of two distinctive urban environments — Cholon, the bustling