

Special Focus

**NEGOTIATING
THE STATE
IN VIETNAM**

Guest Editor

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SOJOURN
Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia

Volume 16, Number 2 (October 2001)

CONTENTS

Editor's Note v

Introduction: Analysing the State in Vietnam
Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet 179

Articles

Rules and Resources: Negotiating
the Household Registration System
in Vietnam under Reform
Andrew Hardy 187

Media Negotiating the State:
In the Name of the Law in Anticipation
Russell Hiang-Khng Heng 213

An Approach for Analysing
State-Society Relations in Vietnam
Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet 238

Negotiating the Socialist State
in Vietnam through Local Administrators:
The Case of *Karaoke* Shops
David Koh 279

Public Spaces/Public Disgraces:
Crowds and the State
in Contemporary Vietnam
Mandy Thomas 306

Book Reviews

Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand.
Edited by Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M.
Cook 331

*White Lotus and Other Events in Philippine
History.* By Vicente L. Rafael 336

Urbane Rationalität, Eine stadthanthropologische Studie zu Ujung Pandang (Makassar), Indonesien.

By Christoph Antweiler Kölner 341

Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia. By

Abidin Kusno 345

Overtured Chariot: The Autobiography of Phan Boi Chau. Translated by Vinh Sinh and

Nicholas Wickenden 348

Editor's Note

Vietnam is an authoritarian regime. This statement is the easiest label one can use to describe the political system in Vietnam. Yet the label is also incomplete, and perhaps misleading. The label of authoritarianism says little about what actual influence and impact the machinery of governance has on the people. It says even less about what the people are able to do in their responses towards authoritarianism.

One of these responses has been negotiation of the state. The contributors to this volume mean two things when they use the word "state". First, it means a regime or a complex of regimes comprising rules about what can or cannot be done by the people living in Vietnam. The second meaning refers to the governing institutions of a bordered territory. In addition, "negotiate" means either to bargain, or to carefully go across a difficult terrain, as Professor Benedict Kerkvliet points out in his article. Thus, "negotiating the state" means seeing people negotiate with the governing institutions collectively called the state as well as negotiate around rules and regulations of the governing institutions.

The articles in this volume do not all take "negotiating the state" as their central theme of writing but they show that "negotiating the state" is an everyday happening in Vietnam. The contributors base their arguments on intensive and extensive research and interviews. All of them have had extensive fieldwork experience in Vietnam. All of them read and understand the Vietnamese language well and are adept at using primary sources in their writings, to varying extent and effect. They are part of a new generation of scholars researching and writing on Vietnam. While by age of profession, Benedict Kerkvliet has been researching on Vietnam for sometime now, he had begun to do so from the early 1990s when he decided to add Vietnam to his basket of interests. The other contributors have obtained their doctoral degrees more recently.

Research and writing on Vietnam has many constraints. One of these

is substantiation by referring to names of persons interviewed. Full revelation could threaten the interviewees' livelihood and adversely affect their lives, if what they have disclosed constitute state secrets. Vietnam has a Marxist-Leninist political system and therefore the familiar constraints on revealing sources of information remain. Thus the reader will find in many places the interviewees' names not disclosed. The frustration is not just that of the readers but also that of the writers. I hope the readers would bear with us. Time will help us to overcome this constraint.

Another difficulty when researching and writing on Vietnam is the lack of standardization in translation. Given the huge number of vernacular language sources referred to, it is impossible to standardize in such a short time the translation of every word, even if the words appear frequently in the articles. One example is the translation of various names of administrative units in Vietnam. *Xa* to Kerkvliet is a sub-district, while to Hardy and Koh it is a commune. Koh translates *phuong* as a "ward" whereas Kerkvliet prefers to call it a "precinct". I decided to leave the translation to the authors, and also to let them decide whether to translate all sources or just the sources they deem to be necessary. I am glad to note, however, that most Vietnamese language terms used in the body of the articles are translated and explained. Readers concerned with issues of translation and sources should consult the authors directly.

The articles, except for Professor Benedict Kerkvliet's Introduction, are arranged in alphabetical order.

On behalf of the Editorial Committee, I thank the referees for the time spent on reviewing the articles and for their valuable comments. I also thank Ms Han Mui Ling for her assistance with the initial copy-editing of some of the articles.

Thanks also go to all the contributors. It was serendipity that most of them happened to be working in Singapore at the time when my colleague at ISEAS, Dr Russell Heng, mooted the idea of this special focus issue. Because of the common themes in our research, Russell suggested we publish a special focus issue in *Sojourn*, with kind permission of the Editorial Committee. For personal reasons some initial partici-

pants opted out and others joined in later, but we are all happy that this special focus issue is substantively strong in its contribution to the literature on state-society relations in Vietnam.

Writing a short and concise article is difficult, more so if it has to summarize and tie together to a common thread what five other contributors are saying. I thank Professor Benedict Kerkvliet for taking on this challenging task at short notice.

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