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Vietnamese Colonial Republican: The Political Vision of Vu Trong Phung. By Peter Zinoman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. xiv+316 pp.

Peter Zinoman has written a splendid and thought-provoking biography of a profoundly influential Vietnamese novelist, essayist, journalist and satirist. Vũ Trọng Phụng's appeal is manifest: as an expressly anti-Stalinist adept of realism, he has been compared to George Orwell, Emile Zola and Honoré de Balzac. Raised from humble origins, he formulated a critical vision of the society in which he lived, a vision based on tenets of anti-materialism, anti-communism and a fundamental critique of bourgeois society, tastes, sensitivities, injustices and inequalities. Despite the tragic brevity of his life (1912–39), Vũ Trọng Phụng's work opens windows for his readers. Writing from within Vietnam's urban fabric as it was transformed, he offers extraordinary insight onto a changing society.

Zinoman's book avoids the pitfalls of teleology and rises well above the "partisan camps" (p. 13) that rendered Vietnamese politics Manichean in the post-colonial era. Zinoman shows how Vũ Trọng Phụng deftly navigated the waters of the 1930s, thriving in the "fluid ambiguity" (ibid.) of the era. While working as a clerk in a department store, he rubbed shoulders with Ký Con, who was leading a double life as a revolutionary. Early in his journalism career, Vũ Trọng Phụng was accused of obscenity and faced several showdowns with the authorities. He was also gaining insight from a number of sources both at home and abroad, including the reportage genre as it was being honed by the likes of Albert Londres. He was further influenced by a wide range of social scientists and Freudians of different stripes, some of whom reappear as caricatures in his novels and stories.

In a truly fascinating final chapter, Zinoman guides the reader through Vũ Trọng Phụng's complex afterlives. As the novelist's body of work had focused more on prostitutes, servants and con artists than on proletarians per se, he was suspect to some within the Vietnamese Communist Party. His malleability was accentuated by the fact that he perished before the August 1945 revolution and

that his stance on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was therefore open to interpretation. A reformist movement embraced Vũ Trọng Phụng's works in the 1950s, only for a 1958 backlash eventually to blacklist Vũ Trọng Phụng until the 1980s.

On a personal note, I am especially delighted that this biography has appeared, for I regularly teach a course on French Indochina, using English translations of two of Vũ Trọng Phụng's books, *Dumb Luck* (2002) and *Lục Xì* (2011). Students have long asked me for a biography that would explain how a single author could pen these two titles in different genres — one a piece of biting satirical fiction, the other an engaged reportage on Hanoi's main brothel.

I did find some ground on which to differ with this ambitious and lively book. Was Vũ Trọng Phụng as progressive as Zinoman suggests? Does he really fit the category of “late colonial republican” in which Zinoman carefully casts him? Let me begin with the second question and then move on to the first. French republicanism can and did mean many things to many people: in the late nineteenth century, its ideals were embraced by Communards and by their bitter opponents, a story with colonial consequences of its own in the form of overseas political deportations. Although Zinoman is certainly correct to write that ardent anti-communism marked Albert Sarraut's brand of republicanism (p. 22), republicanism's contours nevertheless remained in flux in the era that concerns us. After all in Paris radicals, communists and socialists entered government as part of a vast coalition known as the Popular Front, in power from 1936 to 1938. Indeed, the main menace that propelled them into power was the threat of fascism and Nazism rather than communism. While Zinoman rightly restores the anti-communism of the 1930s, he tends to gloss over the anti-fascism that also permeated the epoch, even when evoking André Malraux. Zinoman does mention Vũ Trọng Phụng's hostility to Japanese militarism. Yet the extreme right in Europe must also have crossed his mind. Indeed, the French *Croix de Feu* movement — whose precise nature has been the subject of much debate, with most historians agreeing that it falls short of fascism and should be described as ultra right-wing populist and authoritarian — comes up in *Dumb Luck* (2002, p. 82).

Moreover, while Zinoman is no doubt correct that ambient republicanism spanned both sides of the independence moment in Vietnam, it must also be stressed that in French Indochina republicanism rang especially hollow. Precious few ever voted; fewer still were naturalized; many colonials questioned why the Marseillaise was even taught in school. Zinoman recognizes as much when he writes, “the ‘colonial’ character of colonial republicanism derived from the failure of the colonial state to implement in practice the republican principles that it proclaimed in public rhetoric” (p. 7). Meanwhile colonial republicanism *was* a reality in places like the four communes in Senegal, Martinique, Réunion, Guyane and Guadeloupe, where democracy based on male suffrage flourished between 1871 and 1940. If republicanism in Indochina was stillborn, then how did it concretely shape Vũ Trọng Phụng’s worldview? Would he have self-identified as republican? Did the explicitly anti-republican and censorship-prone Vichy regime that ruled over Indochina from 1940 to 1945 ban or revile his books? While the idea of republicanism was ubiquitous in French colonies prior to 1940, and while it has been well studied by Alice Conklin (1998) in the West African case, in point of fact Vũ Trọng Phụng would have been prevented from casting a ballot, or from joining a party or a union. His satire and commentary were consistently located on the edge of illegality, even under the Popular Front, and he certainly would have enjoyed greater freedom in a so-called “old colony” like Pondicherry. As Zinoman notes, French Indochina’s public sphere was “embryonic” in the 1930s (p. 10). For all of these reasons, I wonder about the pertinence of the category “late colonial republican”.

At times, one is left thinking of Vũ Trọng Phụng as something of a moderate and a centrist. This seems odd, or a measure of how spectrums have shifted, given how his writings divided and shocked public opinion at the time. On other occasions, Zinoman nudges the reader towards considering Vũ Trọng Phụng a liberal and a progressive. Here I have a harder time agreeing. To be sure, there are universalist and progressive streaks to his writings. However, he also appears as an unrelenting misogynist, taking aim at “unfettered social

relations between men and women [as a] healthy sign of progress” (2002, p. 135). His ridiculing “semi-virgins” and condemning “free marriage, free divorce and free remarriage” were but the tip of the iceberg (*ibid.*, pp. 97–103). In his reportage on Hanoi’s brothel, Vũ Trọng Phụng wrote, “if a young girl wants to be put into the [venereal disease] Dispensary, all she has to do is trifle with passion through thoughts of liberation, free marriage, Europeanization, etc” (2011, p. 81). Such were Vũ Trọng Phụng’s haunting obsessions, his *bêtes noires*. Admittedly Zinoman touches upon all this, when for instance he concedes that his subject was obsessed by “the erosion of sexual morality” (p. 135). Zinoman even implies, rightly, that anti-feminism was not antithetic to early-twentieth-century French republicanism. However, Vũ Trọng Phụng’s loathing of the modern woman and his conviction that East and West had cross-contaminated Vietnamese gender relations (Vũ Trọng Phụng 2011, p. 79, for example) stand out, even for his time. His association of purported sexual decadence and national moral decay is striking.

This brings me to the point that Vũ Trọng Phụng’s work also seems deeply nostalgic, intent on cleansing an urban universe that he clearly deemed uprooted and “degenerate”. A quest for authenticity, coupled with a profound contempt for the “spiritual squalor” (*ibid.*, p. 110) of his era, permeates much of his corpus, and belies or at least challenges both his progressive and his republican credentials. I do not wish to deny for an instant that he “rejected despotism” or “Machiavellic Stalinism” or that he was a “pioneering Vietnamese modernist” (see Zinoman’s introduction in Vũ Trọng Phụng 2002, p. 4). However, it seems to me that among the many strands in Vũ Trọng Phụng’s thinking, one can identify a conservative thread that goes partly ignored in Zinoman’s analysis. That analysis is concerned above all with colonial censorship, realist influences, liberal journalism, agency and post-colonial reinventions.

These two points of disagreement do not temper my enthusiasm for this brilliant book. It breaks new ground in its focus on Vietnam’s urban political culture, in its engagement with the press and literary scene of the 1930s, and in its discussion of the many readings and

uses of Vũ Trọng Phụng's work. It will be of considerable interest to historians of modern Southeast Asia, literature, French colonialism, modernism and Vietnamese politics.

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Vietnam's Socialist Servants: Domesticity, Class, Gender, and Identity. By Minh T.N. Nguyen. London: Routledge, 2015. xxvi+201 pp.

Vietnam's Socialist Servants: Domesticity, Class, Gender, and Identity by Minh T.N. Nguyen is a pioneering and important study that fills a lacuna in our knowledge of the lifeworlds and experiences of domestic workers in contemporary late-socialist Vietnam. Based on carefully conducted ethnographic research, the book presents fresh in-depth data to shed new light on the impact of the rapid market transformations of the Vietnamese labour market on an occupation dominated by women.

In this qualitative study the author competently uses ethnographies, interviews and narratives to illustrate increasing social inequalities and differentiation in today's Vietnam. Four groups of domestic workers, *Ô sin*, all working in the Hanoi metropolitan area, are at the fore of the study. Nguyen tells her story through the eyes of live-in domestic workers (i.e., rural migrants), live-out domestic workers (i.e., urban