

for (linguistic-) anthropologists interested in the interplay between language, politics and identity.

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REFERENCE

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2004. “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation”. *Tipiti* 2, no. 1: 3–22.

DOI: 10.1355/sj36-3k

*The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation Building*. Edited by Tuong Vu and Sean Fear. New York: Cornell University Press, 2019. vi+198pp.

This edited volume is a unique collection of memoirs by an unlikely ensemble of historical characters. It brings together the voices and memories of senior officials in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) government alongside those of teachers, soldiers, journalists and artists of South Vietnam, all of whom resided outside Vietnam at the time of publication. The volume sets out to promote a deeper understanding of the RVN by creating an opportunity for these important figures to record their memories and viewpoints in writing. With a view to addressing what the volume editors observe to be a tendency to “dismiss non-communist Vietnamese perspectives” (p. 2) in English-language scholarship on the Vietnam War, the volume presents—with minimum editing for clarity and length—personal accounts of life in the RVN by an important generation of South Vietnamese.

The gravity of the first fourteen chapters rests in no small part on the fact that had these accounts not been recorded now they would be lost to time in the near future. As such, the volume is both a valuable archive for historians of the period and of the Vietnam War

more specifically and an important and timely read for the post-war generation in Vietnam and across the diaspora.

The collection follows five main themes: banking, finance and economic development (chapters 1–4); politics and security (chapters 5–7); education (chapters 8–9); journalism and the media (chapters 10–13); and literature and the arts (chapters 14–15). Each chapter is a testimony on specific aspects of life in the RVN by those most informed on each topic selected; among them, a minister of trade and industry, a governor of the National Bank of Vietnam, a deputy minister for economics, a chief of staff and a private secretary to President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, a police chief, a lieutenant colonel, a college dean, a university lecturer, a journalist, a Silver-Star-awarded war correspondent, two influential women writers, and a prominent actress whose name is synonymous with South Vietnamese cinema before 1975 (p. 7).

The cacophony of these voices paints a complex landscape of South Vietnam imagined as a nation. While these voices remain multiple throughout the volume, they are not fragmented into discordant noise: themes of loss, nostalgia and a yearning for past glories bind these voices together. As a collection of memories, reflections and analyses, the individual chapters may be read in any order. Tales of conflict and scandal, such as that of the Banknote Exchange Scandal (chapter 2), the 1969 Austerity Tax (chapter 3) or the negotiation of the Paris Accords (chapter 5), are told candidly by those who were caught at the centre of these historical events. The reflections of ARVN lieutenant colonel Bùi Quyên on the role of American advisors (chapter 7), many of whom were perceived to have frequently misinterpreted their role and overstepped their authority, highlight the complex dynamics of the partnership between South Vietnam and the United States—one in which South Vietnam is described as simultaneously resisting American condescension while overly relying on its ultimately failed commitment in the war. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in Bùi Quyên's characterization of the secretary of defence, Robert McNamara, as “inept” (p. 89)

when criticizing American reliance on data and statistical analyses, which he saw as suitable for business activities but not military affairs.

Reflections on education in South Vietnam in chapters 8 and 9 paint a nuanced and introspective picture of the reforms carried out by the young republic as it sought ways to undo French colonial hangovers in the education system during the late 1950s, most notably through the teaching of nationalism at school and the “Vietnamization” project through to the early 1970s (pp. 106–7). Reflections on press freedom and war reporting by journalists and writers in chapters 10 through 12 give rare insights into a tumultuous period of history where “it was difficult at times to distinguish who was who and who was fighting for what” (p. 136). Lamenting what she saw as the South Vietnam government’s failure to facilitate an honest dialogue with the South Vietnam press, Trùng Dương, residing in Sacramento, California, at the time she wrote her account, offered a solemn yet optimistic reflection on Donald Trump’s antagonization of US media while emphasizing the vital role of checks and balances in functioning democracies. Nu-Anh Tran and Tuan Hoang conclude the volume with chapters on the absence of the RVN in American historical memory and a review of important memoirs written by South Vietnamese figures, providing a handy guide for readers to chart their own journey into learning about and, perhaps more importantly, remembering the RVN.

This volume is a unique contribution to Vietnamese studies scholarship and an excellent resource for students and researchers of Vietnamese history. On a more sentimental level, future generations of Vietnamese will come to appreciate that the memories of those displaced by the political turbulence of the twentieth century have been recorded and curated in such an accessible fashion.

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