

Western colonial powers. The book is highly significant as it provides insights into why and how Chiang Mai became part of Thailand today and offers valuable clues about its potential future trajectory.

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Between War and the State: Civil Society in South Vietnam, 1954–1975. By Van Nguyen-Marshall. Southeast Asia Program Publications, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2023. xvi+223 pp.

Van Nguyen-Marshall's *Between War and the State* exemplifies the Vietnam-centric turn in recent scholarship by treating the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, commonly referred to as South Vietnam) and its citizenry as a serious subject of inquiry in its own right. Rejecting caricatures of the RVN as a mere lackey of American imperialism and its peoples as passive actors, Nguyen-Marshall reconstructs a vibrant associational landscape in which she highlights a diverse cast of Vietnamese actors who shaped public life alongside, and sometimes in defiance of, the state. They include mutual aid associations, cultural clubs, professional societies, charitable organizations, community development groups, women's associations, student organizations and rights movements. Over the past two decades, newly opened archives and a growing recognition of South Vietnam's historiographical blind spots have spurred fresh work on the motivations, aspirations and actions of the people of the RVN. By foregrounding voluntary civic activity, the book extends this literature to an arena largely overlooked by earlier studies, which focused primarily on generals, ministers or the communist insurgency.

Nguyen-Marshall draws on a rich blend of sources, including archival records and textual evidence such as newspapers, official reports and memoirs, and, crucially, oral history interviews with participants. Of necessity, this evidentiary base privileges registered,

urban-based associations that left documentary traces—unrecorded village societies and ad hoc groups hover just beyond the archival horizon. Yet this limitation is also an invitation: Her findings encourage readers to imagine, and future scholars to uncover, the myriad informal networks that operated in smaller towns and rural hamlets across South Vietnam.

Each of the seven succinct chapters spotlights a different sector of civil society; taken together, the book is an exposition of a variety of voluntary associations and their activities in South Vietnam. Chapter 1 traces the origins of the RVN, setting the stage for the Vietnam War and the corresponding challenges of state-building amid a protracted war. Nguyen-Marshall distils a sprawling historiography into a crisp, accessible synthesis: a primer for newcomers and a handy refresher for specialists alike. Chapter 2 turns to mutual aid and “friendly societies” (p. 30), whose deep Vietnamese roots enabled members to weather wartime uncertainty through social solidarity, networking and financial assistance. Chapter 3 pivots outward to altruistic organizations and social-welfare projects of social organizations. These groups filled critical gaps in orphan care and health services and advocated for women’s rights, and some of them are linked to global organizations such as the Lions Club, the Scout Movement and the Red Cross.

In Chapter 4, Nguyen-Marshall examines three development efforts that aspire to more sustained change. The Popular Polytechnic Institute, the School of Youth for Social Service and the New Life Development Project demonstrate how citizens of the republic pursued lasting social change via public education, Buddhist practices and participatory community development. Chapter 5 spotlights the youth scene from the 1960s–70s to show that South Vietnamese students were pivotal nation-builders and dissenters. Student associations, service corps and Scout Movements emerged as laboratories of republican citizenship and dissent, underscoring the RVN’s ideological pluralism. Chapter 6 offers a gripping case study of *Sóng Thẳn* newspaper’s “Highway of Horror” project, in which citizen-journalists mobilized donations and volunteers to recover and bury thousands

of war dead left along Highway 1 during the 1972 Easter Offensive. Finally, chapter 7 charts the rise of rights-oriented activism in the early 1970s to fight for prison reform, human rights, freedom of the press and an end to corruption. This chapter contends that the late-war surge of rights-based discourse further pluralized public life, even as state repression grew, and prefigured the post-1975 diaspora activism.

Clearly written and meticulously sourced, this book will benefit scholars of Vietnam studies, comparative civil societies and wartime state-society relations, while remaining accessible to students and general readers interested in recent Vietnamese social history. It adds texture to the existing literature on South Vietnam that, for the most part, focuses on the South's political establishment, the South Vietnamese military and the communist-led insurgency and its supporters. Although centred on urban elites, the organizations that this book chronicles also in many ways link the rural with the urban through civil work, illustrating how pluralism had the potential to radiate beyond metropolitan Saigon.

In short, *Between War and the State* convincingly recasts South Vietnam as a site of contested but genuine civic vitality, enriching our understanding of a society navigating postcolonial state-building, civil war and foreign intervention all at once. Nguyen-Marshall closes by setting South Vietnam's messy but vibrant associational landscape against two sharp contrasts: the tightly controlled civic sphere of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North, and the severe restrictions imposed after reunification in 1975. The comparison underscores a central insight of the book—that even under the pressures of total war, South Vietnamese citizens carved out meaningful spaces for collective action.

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