

**Nhu Truong & Tuong Vu.** *The Dragon's Underbelly: Dynamics and Dilemmas in Vietnam's Economy and Politics*. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2023. pp. 367. Pb. £26.10. ISBN 9789815011401

This book, which looks at Vietnamese economic development and the changing role of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) since the start of the country's 'reform era' in 1986 makes two main arguments. Firstly, that Vietnam's economy has significant weaknesses which cast doubt on its ability to achieve sustained growth and, secondly, that economic development has "heightened tensions in contemporary state–society relations that directly challenge and erode the power of the party over society" (p. 3). Part I focuses on the Vietnamese economy at a macro level, looking at the historical background to economic liberalization, the "crony capitalist" characteristics of the modern economy, and Vietnam's political and developmental vulnerabilities in Global Value Chains. Part II turns its attention to Vietnamese society, aligning more with Truong and Vu's second argument. Its constituent chapters focus on shifts witnessed in state-run and private businesses, education, media consumption, workers' representation, and labour exports and on the CPV's role in either guiding or resisting change. Finally, Part III is dedicated to comparisons between the CPV and the Communist Party of China (CPC), outlining divergences on matters of accountability reform and anti-corruption campaigns. This section is also more related to Truong and Vu's second argument, showing how the two parties have responded differently to the societal pressures created by economic liberalization.

Truong and Vu's first argument is contended far more effectively than their second. They place it within the context of rival developmental theories – contrasting neoclassical economic development with state-led development (pp. 4–8). Their opening contributions to the book help to illuminate the subsequent chapters written by Vu Quang Viet, Upalat Korwatanasakul, and Truong which make the case that while Vietnam has attracted investment and experienced growth through releasing “repressed capacity,” the state has not taken the initiative to invest in human capital and local enterprises to secure long-term growth (p. 3). By comparison, their second argument feels overly broad and detracts from the coherent structure of the book. The editors initially seem to frame the effects of economic growth on society in terms of modernization theory (pp. 8–10). This could explain why Part II chapters cover education, labour unions, media, and businesses – all forms of political association which, according to theorists like Samuel Huntington,<sup>1</sup> could be bastions of democracy. Yet their focus is not exclusively on modernization. Truong and Vu equally discuss a “[non-]society-centred account” for understanding the effects of economic growth (p. 10). This, they argue, should shift attention towards the CPV's ideological and performance legitimacy, corruption and anticorruption measures, and outward forms of political factionalism (p. 10). However, by introducing multiple themes at once without a structure which explicitly organizes them, the result is confusing.

In the absence of clear signalling – neither emphasizing modernization nor party legitimacy – it is impossible to understand what the editors aimed to achieve with Part II and Part III. If Part II only “focuses on important political developments and changes in state–society relations under the effects of economic growth in contemporary Vietnam” (p. 13), one wonders why university boards of education and trade unions are included as significant but the impacts of marketization on agricultural communities or the development of rural–urban worker migration are not.<sup>2,3</sup> If Part III is meant to place “Vietnam in comparative perspective, specifically with China, by focusing on political accountability, political factions and government responses to protests,” (p. 15) a key question is why this should be deserving of its own section. While it is understandable that authors in an edited collection will write differently and not necessarily articulate a common thesis, editors should still aim to produce an intuitive structure which supports their overall claims. Lacking this, Part II and Part III feel purely descriptive: providing valuable information about Vietnam and the CPV but driving no discernible point. In contrast to the effectiveness with which Truong and Vu's

make their first argument, few readers will be able to summarize the ways that economic growth have affected Vietnamese society.


While the work of individual authors in *The Dragon's Underbelly* is strong and often puts forward compelling arguments, the book's fundamental weakness is its organization. *The Dragon's Underbelly* is probably best utilized as a resource for those with specialized interests related to one of its chapters. It might be insightful for a scholar to read all of Part I and to then choose additional chapters which appear intriguing. However, it is neither necessary nor fulfilling to read *The Dragon's Underbelly* front to back. Truong and Vu successfully establish the vulnerability of the Vietnamese economy in Part I, but the remainder of the book, which should focus on the transformation of Vietnamese society, unfortunately, leaves much to be desired.

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## NOTES

1. Samuel P. Huntington, 'Political Order and Political Decay', Essay. In *Political Order in Changing Societies*. Yale University Press, 1992, pp. 1–92.
2. Hy V. Luong, 'The Changing Configuration of Rural–Urban Migration and Remittance Flows in Vietnam'. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* Vol. 33. Issue 3 (January 14, 2019): 602–646. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=edspmu&AN=edspmu.S1793285818300047&site=eds-live>.
3. Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh and Le Minh Anh, 'Diverse Experiences of Agrarian Change in Ethnic Minority Communities of Vietnam's Northeast Uplands'. *Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 11, Issue 1 (April 2022): 23–47. doi:10.20495/seas.11.1\_23.

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