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Citation:

Dewald, E (2013) Patronage, Passion, and the Power of Networks. *Cross-Currents : East Asian History and Culture Review* (7). pp. 118-124. ISSN 2158-9666

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Patronage, Passion, and the Power of Networks

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Philippe M. F. Peycam. *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916–1930*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 320 pp. \$50 (cloth).

Hue-Tam Ho Tai. *Passion, Betrayal, and Revolution in Colonial Saigon: The Memoirs of Bao Luong*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. 216 pp. \$50 (cloth), \$25 (paper/ebook).

Beyond the rhetoric of patriotism and the persuasions of propaganda, what compelled so many Vietnamese to oppose French, communist, and American hegemony? The existing literature tells us much about the norms, habits, policies, and organizations that existed during the late colonial period, when dynamic, modern voices of dissent and resistance began to be heard. Students of political rule and resistance in twentieth-century Vietnam have rich resources available to them, including histories of official rhetoric, studies of grassroots political mobilization, and intellectual biographies of leading figures and institutions. Nonetheless, this scholarship, with a number of notable exceptions, generally identifies great men, basic economic factors and efficient organizations as the main historical agents in modern Vietnam. It is encouraging to see two recent books move, however cautiously, in a compellingly different direction. In various ways, both *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism* and *Passion, Betrayal, and Revolution in Colonial Saigon* seek to understand the worlds inhabited by Vietnamese with a keen—even zealous—interest in political and social change. Though Philippe Peycam and Hue-Tam Ho Tai might not necessarily describe their books as such, both are significant for their efforts to chart the untidy but vital personal and professional connections that drew Vietnamese into modern politics and, in many cases, revolution.

Both books are about roads not taken, about what might be called “constitutive failures.” Tai’s study examines the revolutionary road of her aunt, Nguyễn Trung Nguyệt (a.k.a. Bảo Lương), whose passionate convictions found her embroiled in the infamous murder in Barbier Street in Saigon in 1929. The murder was the fumbled assassination of a communist rival by members of the communist Revolutionary Youth League (RYL), and the subsequent arrest of the vast majority of communist agitators in Saigon decimated the movement in the south in the same year that the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) came into being. Peycam briefly mentions the Barbier Street murder that features so prominently in Tai’s story, but his interests lie elsewhere. Less concerned with explicitly political agitation, *Birth* charts the early years of Vietnamese publishing of a political nature. Where Tai seeks to reveal the mysterious and intimate reasons for her aunt’s youthful involvement in the communist movement and her subsequent retreat from politics and public life, Peycam attempts to expose the world in which individuals not unlike Trung Nguyệt came to practice a decidedly Vietnamese style of political journalism. Drawing on work from the European experience, Peycam—like Tai—hopes to establish how the nexus of colonial rule and the colonial city shaped the particular form and efficacy of Vietnamese journalism. In this way his work bridges the divide between the colonial and postcolonial. Indeed, it is refreshing to see a historian of early twentieth-century Vietnam doing so. A great deal of our knowledge of Vietnam in the years after 1945 remains confined in the simplistic and troubled language of the war years.

What remains to be done, though, is to consider more rigorously the stories Tai and Peycam have brought forward. While provocative and productive, both books embark too cautiously on their intimate histories of revolution. This is true of both books in quite different ways, and it is worth examining each book in its approach to the question of the personal and intimate, on the one hand, and its connection with political networks (not to mention organizations and ideologies), on the other. It is in broaching these questions that these two books signal the current possibilities of Vietnamese history and the work that needs to be done.

A revised version of his Ph.D. thesis, Peycam’s *Birth* differs accordingly from Tai’s *Passion*, showing the signs of being a dissertation edited for publication. Peycam ambitiously attempts to narrate the rise of a Saigonese public sphere seen through its world of print journalism, concluding that “Vietnamese journalism in the 1920s created a contested field in which the colonized’s reinterpretation of imposed foreign ideas led to their appropriation for nationalization purposes” (35). The illiberal repression of the colonial state and the

difficulties of Vietnamese existence in a hybrid city, both French colonial and increasingly Vietnamese nationalist, led to the emergence of a professional “press of communal mobilization among identified social groups and a press of political mobilization through confrontation with the ruling power” (194). This divided press, for Peycam, had analogues in French and English professional journalism, but its differences are more significant than these bare similarities.

The growth of this fractured “journalism village” (*lang bao chi*) (217) and the city that enclosed it occurred, according to Peycam, because of the relative economic prosperity of south Vietnam in the late 1920s (114), the growth of a privately employed professional class (97), and the consequent growth in a readers’ market (157). These changes signaled Saigon’s emergence as Indochina’s metropole, where by the late 1920s ambitious young writers and *engagés* such as Diệp Văn Kỳ were moving to reach a national audience (168). Saigon’s increasing national significance *contra* Hanoi, as well as the diversification of the former’s growing market for news and commentary, played no small part in the fracturing of an ostensible national public sphere and the journalism village into separate arenas for information and for political opposition (174, 217). This, in turn, contributed to the broad spectrum of political viewpoints on nationalism and patriotic duty.

The originality of Peycam’s research is clear, as are the benefits to the field of his detailed consideration of the affairs of pivotal figures in Saigon’s journalism village. What is frustrating, though, is that Peycam fails to reconsider thoroughly the assumptions that ground his own work and the notions he draws upon of print capitalism as developed in the liberal public spheres of modern Western Europe. This can be most clearly seen in his insistence on professional journalism as a quintessentially urban phenomenon. He makes this assertion based on his reading of various scholars (including an uncited reference to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini’s textbook *Comparing Media Systems* [72n1]). These scholars’ theories and Peycam’s own reading of the evidence lead him to conclude that “the press is a by-product of the colonial city” (73).

Yet much of what Peycam presents suggests a different argument, one that undermines the theoretical basis of his argument. The inhabitants of the journalism village were not autonomous individuals who migrated to improve their own status and position. Instead, they were an assorted lot of seekers after fame, influence, wealth, and camaraderie in turns. In seeking their futures they relied on networks of kin and fealty to establish themselves and bring their writings into print. This is clear, for example, in Peycam’s recounting of Nguyễn An Ninh’s traveling the southern delta to rustle up subscribers to his

La Cloche Fêlée (131). The success of Nguyễn's metropolitan venture depended on parochial participation in the urban public sphere.

Similarly, efforts on the part of colonial authorities to cut Saigon off from its hinterland in the aftermath of the uprisings of 1930 and 1931 (214) failed precisely because of the tenacity and vitality of these communal networks across the town–country divide. Peycam rightly calls for a revision of the “often-stated assertions by historians that French manipulations and disruptions, especially censorship, were mainly responsible for confining the Vietnamese-language press to the role of a harmless literary genre” (111). What Peycam does not quite explain, however, is the means by which the journalism village grew in the face of colonial-state efforts to contain it to an unrepresentative anomaly.

The village's growth surely did not happen without a more dialogic relationship between city and country than Peycam acknowledges. Individuals drawn to the “space of possibilities” (13) offered by colonial cities continued to rely on networks of friends and families, and these networks continued to strongly affect individuals' identities. People continued to move across the border between colonial city and native countryside. In fact, that threshold is in many ways a specious construct. The market for news and opinion was no more contained by the city than the people who supplied and demanded it.

Given the importance of the trade in information in *Birth*, it is somewhat surprising that so little attention is trained on consumers of news and opinion. This is especially relevant given the book's presumption that the colonial city fostered the journalism village. Advertising and editorial content often evinced a conspicuously modern and urban character, but, bald assertion aside, there is little evidence in Peycam's book to suggest that journalism was “urban-focused” rather than merely urban-based (157). A more detailed examination of advertising and readers' responses is certainly possible. As with the world of print in central Vietnam at the same time, readers often wrote to newspapers to express their views on everything from editorial content to the quality of goods and services featured between the covers. There is little need, and little utility, in using advertisements to intimate the readership of particular titles, as Peycam does (95, 104). There is little certainty, in any event, that the advertising trade in Indochina was mature enough for marketing targeted to specific market segments.

If *Birth* makes great strides in considering how forms of subjectivity and social agency emerge through colonial politics, Tai's *Passion* seeks to understand the shifting motivations of a young woman who embarked on an abortive life in violent opposition to colonial rule. Peycam's story is one of a national public sphere unified for political

opposition and foreclosed in the late-colonial period; *Passion* charts the personal as seen through the political.

The novelty of Tai's book lies in its effort to weave the weft of her aunt's involvement in revolutionary Communism against the warp of "the rapidly changing political scene of the late 1920s" (7). The dénouement of Nguyễn Trung Nguyệt's revolutionary career was the murder of a certain "Lang" (real name, Lê Văn Phát), the investigation of which allowed French colonial police (the Sûreté) to infiltrate and undermine Saigon's communist underground. Present when the assassination was carried out, Trung Nguyệt's statements under interrogation and testimony in court furnished sufficient proof for the court to find her and her accomplices guilty of murder. The prosecution contended that the act had been an assassination of a political adversary. Trung Nguyệt alone asserted, however, that Phát had been killed in retribution for attempting to rape her friend, Trần Thu Thủy, alias "Lê Oanh" (75). This claim was not raised in any forum other than Trung Nguyệt's memoir.

As Tai states, the details in the memoir concerning the personal animosities that existed between various communist adherents and groupings in southern Vietnam offer a rare glimpse into the inner workings of the still quite shadowy communist underworld of Indochina. More concretely, Trung Nguyệt's eyewitness account "ties [the RYL's] dissolution firmly and exclusively to the murder on Barbier Street" (101). In this way, Tai's intimate political biography of her aunt attempts to explain "how a murder that involved only a few men and one woman led to the arrest of sixty-one individuals" central to communist organization in the south (7) and thus set the stage for the transformation of incipient revolutionary Marxism into a more robust, experienced, and effective Communist Party.

Yet, as Tai herself acknowledges, the memoir does not go very far in explaining or interpreting these events (7). This is because Trung Nguyệt wrote "most vividly" of the "importance of female friendship" (8). Her language may be that of friendship and camaraderie, but it implicitly speaks of her own awareness of the primacy of her connections and the ties that bound her to cause and country. In brief, hers is a story of networks old and new.

The familial and patriotic networks Trung Nguyệt used were built on patronage and trust, and it was women she appeared to trust most. Setting out from her home, she evinced an ingenious ability to use old connections to establish new ones. There was tremendous opportunity for her in this; there were restraints, too. In fact, her involvement is scarcely conceivable without the connections she had because of her well-regarded background. Her ability to move around the country and beyond was possible because of her status as a

virtuous woman from a good, patriotic family. At the same time, being a woman ultimately limited her taking a more active role. Association was gendered, as were networks. Concentrating on the details of her connections might allow us to understand not just how Trung Nguyệt moved from Bến Tre to Guangzhou and, ultimately, to Barbier Street and back to Bến Tre but also how she herself came to see her duty as that of a dutiful woman. She had established new associations that brought new ideas and a new womanhood, but, in the end, it was the cleavages of older networks that came to bear more heavily on her decision to return to the countryside after the Barbier Street affair.

Nonetheless, the very existence of overlapping possibilities for association itself speaks to the novelty of the period both Tai and Peycam draw upon. Initially, Trung Nguyệt struggled against the constraints of her family and lineage: “For a while Trung Nguyệt tried to persuade her parents to let her leave home to engage in anticolonial politics. They resisted, fearing she would lose her reputation if she ventured forth on her own” (21). She ultimately left home without her parents’ consent, but she did so by relying on trusted family connections, coming eventually to play an ambivalent role in sustaining new revolutionary associations—in fact, the backbone of the Guangzhou-based Vietnamese Communist movement—by providing “a mother’s touch” (46). Her position as a good woman, affirmed by the reputation disseminated along her kin network, fostered these new connections. Trung Nguyệt is a figure at a crossroads, and her story reveals the countervailing trends of the old and new politics of solution, as well as the particular and still unresolved character of Vietnamese modernity. Like her friend Thủy, Trung Nguyệt “had valued their freedom to choose whom and when to marry; they had been drawn into revolutionary activities as much by the promise of gender equality and women’s emancipation as by the hope of national independence” (179). These were related and sympathetic causes, but they pushed and pulled Trung Nguyệt in different directions.

In and of itself, an examination of the networks used by Trung Nguyệt does not explain her role in events or, indeed, how events came to pass as they did. Similarly, a greater emphasis on the networks that fostered Peycam’s “journalism village” does not thoroughly explain how political comment and dissent came to bear a particularly Vietnamese state–society formation. What both do allow, though, is a more compelling understanding of how one “village”—Saigon—and one remarkable individual—Trung Nguyệt—fit into a larger story. Neither existed discretely. They lived during an exhilarating time when new bonds and new social networks were possible in ways that, arguably, they had not been before. Considering the actual and lived connections that brought these two experiences about

permits greater comparison between this one woman and this one city and other Vietnamese, Southeast Asian, and global events and people. What enabled their ostensible exception?

These iterations of Vietnamese modernity bear reflection. The professionalizing political journalism and the clandestine mobilization of interwar Saigon were decidedly modern in their “ruthless execution,” to pilfer Tai’s phrase (180). Their success, however, was founded on the most stable bedrock: networks of familial patronage. Alexander Woodside once made a similar observation: that traditional cleavages interrupted the formation of modern organizations in late-colonial Indochina. The two works discussed here do a great service to the study of modern Vietnam by suggesting that personal, emotional bonds fostered markets and politics and undid them. These bonds were not anachronistic traces of an antiquated, rural Vietnam; they were the lifeblood of a twentieth-century nation-state in the making—whether in the newspaper village, the communist movement, or beyond.

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