



Making Vietnamese History: Popular and Scholarly Perspectives

Date: 23 June 2017

**Venue Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity,
Goettingen, Germany Seminar room in the Old Villa
Hermann-Föge-Weg 12, 37073 Goettingen**

Convenor

Ngô Thi Thanh Tâm, Paul Sorrentino, Peter van der Veer
(Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Goettingen)

Panel Abstract

In this workshop, we explore the question of how Vietnam is made into a historical entity by scholars and popular movements, especially in the modern period. The nature of this historical entity has not ceased to interest scholars, political activists, military strategists as well as spiritual activists, inside Vietnam and beyond the country. Obviously, this is not an abstract scholarly issue only but also deeply entangled with political action, armed violence, and the justification for unification and division. It is an issue that frames much of the work of Keith Taylor, one of the most prominent historians of Vietnam. In his book *History of the Vietnamese*, Taylor rejects a linear nationalist narrative of historical continuity and unity of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. According to this narrative, the land that is called Vietnam today is a product of spatial expansion, southward from Red River Delta, by the people who have been unified by common language (Vietnamese) and a powerful spirit to resist foreign invasion and rule. In an attempt to move beyond the propaganda of memory and memorializing yet without falling into a symmetrical narrative of resistance to the state, Taylor proposes to explore instead the possibility of imagining Asian surfaces as something other than already teleologically conceived parts of a nation to be, and by doing that to go beyond both nation and region.

Taking up Taylor's proposal, this workshop is envisaged as a deep conversation and direct engagement between history and anthropology. With the participation of historians (including Taylor himself) and anthropologists, we aim to juxtapose a "Vietnamese history" as preserved in archives with a "Vietnamese history" that lives in oral, social history and popular movements. As a result we hope to come to a better understanding of the role of history and historiography in shaping political actions and cultural discourses in Vietnam today. The main purpose of such an interaction would be to get a more informed understanding what is at stake in the division of North and South Vietnam, of Vietnam in relation to 'China', as well as the place of the Khmer in Vietnam; but also to think about the relation between 'official history' and 'popular history'. We are thinking of short presentations of thoughts related to past or current research and much time for discussion.



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Program

09.30-11.30 **PART I: HISTORY**

KEITH TAYLOR (Cornell University):

Vietnamese historiography between options and the norm

OLGA DROR (Texas University):

The two Vietnams: socializing the new generation in the DRV and the RVN (1965-1975)

PASCAL BOURDEAUX (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes):

Religious history and its quest for autonomy: first comments on the interactions between history and religion in the case of Việt Nam

11.30-12.30 *Lunch*

12.30-14.30 **PART II: ANTHROPOLOGY**

TAM NGO (Max Planck Institute):

Between a rock and a hard place: sacred geography and spiritual warfare against China in Vietnam

PAUL SORRENTINO (Max Planck Institute):

Sinicized bureaucracy and Vietnamese autochthony in the Four Palace worship

PETER VAN DER VEER (Max Planck Institute):

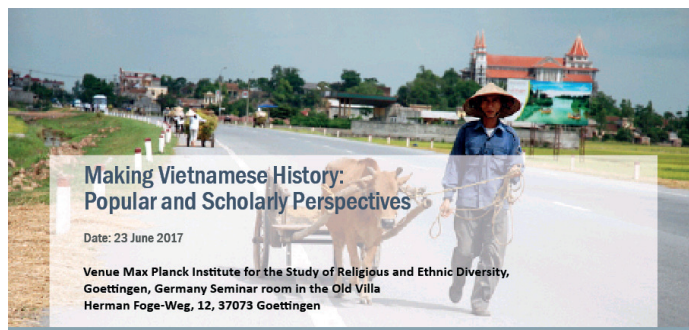
Nation and nationalism from a comparative perspective

14.30-15.00 Short (ten minutes) presentations of the work of
VUONG NGOC THI (on Nung residents of Sino-Vietnamese borderland) and
MAI THANH NGA (on Vietnamese immigrants in Berlin)

15.00-18.00 Podium discussion

18.00-19.00 Dinner

19.00-20.00 Project discussion



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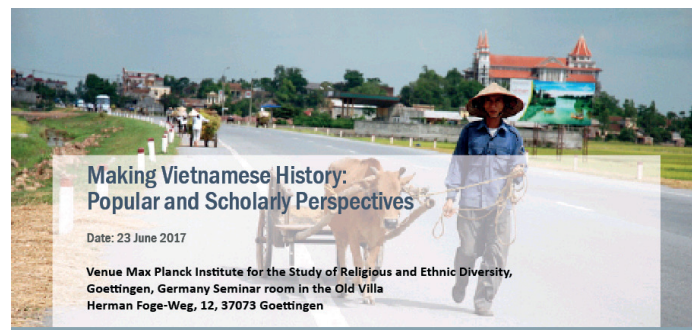


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List of abstracts



Vietnamese historiography between options and the norm

Keith Weller Taylor

Beginning in the 17th century, the increasing number of Vietnamese migrants from the North to the South allowed to be established there a domain separate and different from the North with its own circle of literati, which rivaled those who remained in the land of their origins, in particular on the issue of the nature of the Southern regime and its appropriateness vis-à-vis common ancestors. Northerners claimed to embody loyalty to their ancestors and to view the Southerners as renegades and rebels. Southerners boasted their freedom from Northern warlords, bureaucrats, and tax collectors. Northern rulers sought to maintain control in a confined space. Southern rulers sought to maximize options for contact with the outside world to produce wealth and information. In the 19th century, the unification of the two Vietnams under a regime based in the center of the country proved to be an unsuccessful experiment. The French conquest further developed the two tendencies in the North and the South with the General Government of Indochina at Hanoi with the Protectorate of Annam at Hue representing the disciplined norm, while the Colony of Cochinchina enabled more individual freedom and contact with the outside world.

The Vietnamese response to the French conquest opposed those who violently resisted the colonial state in the name of a national norm and those who wanted peaceful reform as the colonial state weakened opening space for more options. In the 20th century, the Northern claim to speak for the entire nation was appropriated by communist revolutionaries while those who wanted to live in a land of options made their last stand in the South.

The contemporary incarnation of this debate between the norm and a preference for options finds some Vietnamese leaders entertaining the prospect of returning to the safety of the Sinosphere, the norm of pre-colonial Vietnamese government, while others want to build on the sense of membership in the wider world, and the options this makes possible, that is a legacy of the colonial era.

The two Vietnams: socializing the new generation in the DRV and the RVN (1965-1975)

Olga Dror

The war in Vietnam(s) was not only an international conflict, but also an internal battle between communist and anti-communist forces, between different visions of the country's future. As young people are the future, the differences in ideologies translated into and are epitomized in the differences in raising the new generation. Successfully suppressing dissent, communists in the DRV did their utmost to create and maintain a homogenous society, united by a common goal of the unification of the country under their rule. They also expanded this approach to the territories in the RVN that were under the control of the South Vietnamese communist guerillas and infiltrators from the DRV.

On the contrary, the rest of South Vietnam, which constituted the vast majority of the country, lived in relative, in fact enormous comparatively to the DRV, freedom. The absence of totalitarian control in combination with the challenges from the communist forces and from the advent of Western influence created in South Vietnam a cauldron of opinions, goals, and discussions about how to achieve those goals.

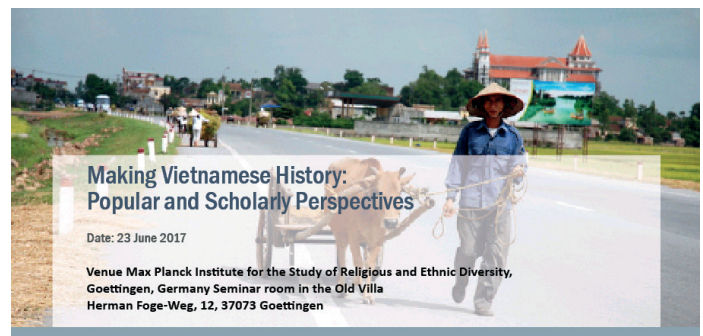
Considering educational systems, youth organizations, and texts, I analyze how the DRV and the RVN socialized their youth and how this reflected their respective agendas and situations, juxtaposing the communist linear determination with the ambiguity and often escapism of their foes in dealing with their youth ones; with one side raising children ready for war, the other ready for peace.



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Religious history and its quest for autonomy: first comments on the interactions between history and religion in the case of Việt Nam

Pascal Bourdeux

The resurgence of interest during these last years and decades for the study of vietnamese religions has certainly 2 main sources. The first one is the large religious diversity of Vietnam as a dual consequence of its multiethnic situation and its complex socio-religious substratum. Internal and external religious pluralities make this country as a perfect place to study distinctively history of religions, world religions, comparative religions so as several “religious productions of modernity” or more precisely, of local modernity. The second is directly linked to the contemporary history of Vietnam as a main actor of the Global History of the 20th century and to the political context of the current Nation-State. The reversal of the secularist paradigm during these last 25 years by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has created a new intellectual environment to produce, on one hand, political and legal analysis of the state regulation in terms of religious activities and, on the other hand, research to describe the recognition process of religious life (“fait religieux”) in the vietnamese society but also as in its long national history, from monarchist until colonial and republican regimes. Rethinking simultaneously the emergence of both “religious studies” and “historical sciences” during the colonial period, then their evolution under a revolutionary and postcolonial context, encourage to question the concept of autonomy. By doing so, we try to define, with the help of historiography and epistemology, what is or what could be the field of Religious History in the case of Vietnam. We also try to distinguish the existence of different “regimes of historicity” in the specific case of religious studies.

Sinicized bureaucracy and Vietnamese autochthony in the Four Palace worship

Paul Sorrentino

This paper questions the recent official recognition of the ‘Mother Goddess Religion’ as the indigenous religion of Vietnam despite the fact that many of its aspects may as well be seen as ‘Chinese.’

Between a rock and a hard place: sacred geography and spiritual warfare in today’s Vietnam

Tam Ngo

The last decade has witnessed a burgeoning popular anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam. As the dispute about the South China Sea escalated, public demonstrations and anti-China protests have taken places but quickly suppressed by the Vietnamese communist authorities. This led many patriotic Vietnamese today employ alternatives to express their sentiments. This paper focuses on one of the anti-Chinese spiritual activities that are becoming popular in different circles of Vietnamese spiritists; *giải yểm* or the undoing of Chinese hexing (*trấn yểm*) of Vietnamese sacred geography. Believing that all problems that Vietnam is facing today can be traced to a long history of China domination of the country, Vietnamese spiritists conduct *giải yểm* rituals in a number of locations, where sacred veins in Vietnam’s Geobody are located. In this paper, I describe a number of *giải yểm* events and analyze a largely secret, spiritual warfare that Vietnamese spiritists are conducting against China, to seek for a better understanding of contemporary perception of Vietnam sacred geography and of the legacy of Chinese domination.



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