



Kevin Pham: The architects of dignity: Vietnamese visions of decolonization

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In *The Architects of Dignity*, Kevin Pham has given us detailed portraits of six Vietnamese thinkers who offer different models of anticolonial activism and thought. Pham's book is an important intervention into a political theory literature that risks growing stale—how many new indictments of global inequality perpetuated by imperial and colonial powers can the field bear? Pham's work demonstrates how a new generation of anticolonial political theorists might proceed: he challenges concepts *en vogue* in various streams of contemporary political theory, not simply in liberalism but also in anticolonial and decolonial theory. Not one to throw the baby out with the bathwater, Pham challenges and complicates concepts, rather than embarking on a mission to reject them. His is not a 'ruthless criticism of all that exists'—and that is much to his and this book's credit.

The book's cast of thinkers—Phan Bội Châu (chapter 2), Phan Chu Trinh (chapter 3), Nguyễn An Ninh (chapter 4), Phạm Quỳnh (chapter 5), Hồ Chí Minh (chapter 6), and Nguyễn Mạnh Tường (chapter 7)—are treated by Pham as situated political actors, moving in and out of Vietnam (primarily to Japan, China, and France) and absorbing influences while offering heterodox—or perhaps even heretical—reimaginings of liberalism, Marxism, Confucianism, and other doctrines and ideologies. Early in this monograph Pham makes it clear that he has no interest in constructing a 'pure' Confucian political theory, and that the syncretic Confucian reimaginings offered by several of the present thinkers are more intellectually and politically challenging than much of the recent comparative political theory that treats Confucian thought as a rival, non-Western intellectual tradition. In this way, Pham also demonstrates an alternate way of thinking about comparative political theory—rather than recovering a coherent, historical tradition, Pham attends to the ways thinkers move in and out of contexts, and how their ideas are molded by this persistent boundary crossing. While much ink was spilled in the 2010s about what 'comparative' might

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mean for political theorists, Pham sets some of the thornier aspects of such debates aside and simply does the work.

Central to Pham's thesis is that shame has in fact been seen as a politically productive emotion, and that the present thinkers harnessed an argument about the long-standing humiliation of Vietnamese by outside powers (China, Japan, France) to help generate a Vietnamese political identity. More specifically, these thinkers actively cultivated arguments that the Vietnamese people *should* feel shame—not simply by French colonialism, but by (particularly) Chinese cultural dominance of Vietnam, and that the path to overcoming this shame lay in the creation of new, specifically Vietnamese modes of life, culture, and politics. In this way, Pham pits his analysis against both liberal theorists of dignity as well as postcolonial and decolonial theorists who often argue that shame is primarily a colonial imposition, rather than something a subject population may have 'earned.' To be clear, it is not that Pham necessarily agrees with this diagnosis that Vietnamese shame is justified, rather, he is recovering a form of anticolonial thinking overshadowed both by political theory's would-be canon of anticolonial thought as well as postcolonial scholarship.

Perhaps the greatest disciplinary merit of this book is Pham's insistence on recovering the history of China and Japan as imperial powers dominating Vietnam. Studies of colonialism and imperialism in political theory have had precious little to say about non-Western forms of imperial dominance; perhaps, as the political theory of empire and imperialism began as an indictment of western liberalism, this was justified. But singling out western forms of dominance tells us more about the west than the rest—and as Pham ably shows, the shame central to the Vietnamese nation-building project was not solely French in origin. The role of Chinese and Japanese domination over the eastern edge of Asia has been absent from recent comparative political theory that highlights Chinese and Japanese thought; too often, non-western traditions of thought are presented as 'alternatives' to western imperial ways. Following Pham, we can cast a more critical eye on many of these recoveries.

Unlike many recent contributions to anticolonial political theory, Pham's book neither ends at decolonization nor absolves the postcolonial state of responsibility for postcolonial political crises by referencing a neoimperial international structure. Rather, Pham's concluding chapter, on Nguyễn Mạnh Tường, explores the messiness of the party state in a postcolonial context. Also, significantly, Pham recovers Tường's frequent recourse to Montaigne as a resource for critique in this context. Highlighting the ways thinkers in 'the periphery' productively wrestle with (rather than simply reject) and are influenced by non-Marxist European thought is a path generally not taken in the study of 20th-century anticolonial political thought in the discipline of political theory.

The merits of this book are many, but I would like to focus on two aspects that left this reader less than satisfied. Perhaps these are not shortcomings of the book, but avenues for further research. First, this is a book about translators which says very little about translation. Pham highlights that these figures both read works in translation (sometimes reading European thought in Chinese or Japanese, adding another layer of translation) as well as translated Chinese, Japanese, and European works into Vietnamese. Only in the chapter on Hồ Chí Minh is there a significant



meditation on the interpretive choices of the figure as translator and how these reflect innovation on the part of the figure under study. Another important question for translation theorists is that this was the period of the ascendancy of the Romanized Vietnamese alphabet, quốc ngữ, which offered yet more avenues for invention and innovation. Again, apart from a section of the Hồ Chí Minh chapter, there is nothing about the translations themselves. How are ideas and concepts being translated into a language where there are presumably no direct analogs? When European works are translated from Chinese translations into Vietnamese, what might these multiple layers of translation tell us about comparative political theorizing? What is unique about the translator as himself a *producer* of knowledge? Pham says at the beginning of the book that he will not explore translation theory, but because he repeatedly highlights translation without giving attention to translation theory, the translations themselves, or the vocation of the translator, it feels like a missed opportunity.

The other missed opportunity is that Pham writes a ‘periphery of the periphery’ analysis—highlighting Vietnam as dominated by France, China, and Japan, but he does not address international or transnational linkages among similarly situated states in ‘the periphery.’ There is nothing about Vietnamese interaction with Bandung states or other decolonizing territories. Vietnam certainly had a fraught history with Cambodia in the 20th century—running supply lines through Cambodia in the Second Indochina War which resulted in America bombing Cambodia, then later Vietnam intervened in Cambodia over international objections to overthrow Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Was Vietnam also dominating other decolonizing states? Were there intellectual exchanges? A richer story would not have placed Vietnam so consistently on the ‘dominated’ end—yes, that is an important part of the history, but just as with China and Japan there is more to think about! Presenting non-Western actors as complex, and at times riven by contradiction, is necessary for comparative political theory to construct non-western thinkers as more than simply being at the bottom of imperial hierarchies.

A final question that Pham’s book prompts is about the boundaries of Vietnamese political thought today—and, by extension, comparative political thought in general in a globalized world where diasporas sometimes reproduce, and sometimes challenge, inherited home traditions. His emphasis on the boundary crossing experiences of these figures makes the role of diaspora communities very interesting; would the children of Vietnamese refugees in California or France potentially be part of a tradition of ‘Vietnamese political thought’? Would Pham himself—the child of parents who left Vietnam a decade apart—be a ‘Vietnamese anticolonial thinker’? Pham highlights the reception of Nguyễn Mạnh Tường in the Vietnamese community in France toward the end of his life, but in this account the diaspora is an audience with Tường as an expatriate. Similarly, the Hồ Chí Minh chapter begins with an account of a community disturbance after a shopkeeper in California mounted a portrait of Hồ—the southern California Vietnamese community is an audience which reacts, but we do not probe further into their thinking. Do diasporas constitute alternate audiences, but *thought* emerging from such communities would ultimately belong to minoritized discourses in the USA or France? Would thinkers in the diaspora only count as ‘Vietnamese’ if they retained a promise of someday ‘returning’



to Vietnam? And what does that mean for the territoriality of political thought—is thought more territorialized than community? These questions are beyond the scope of Pham’s excellent book, but Pham’s attention to the movement of thinkers in and out of national contexts gives us resources for thinking about the meanings of, and relationship between, diaspora and tradition.

Strongly recommended.

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