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The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam

TÂM T. T. NGÔ

Critical Dialogues in Southeast Asian Studies. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2016.

Ever since the release of James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), academic research on the peoples of "Zomia"—upland Southeast Asia and Southwest China—has been gaining popularity. Scott's controversial thesis has been critiqued nearly as much as it has been quoted, but the debate has opened more space for scholars of this vast highlands region to explore and expose its unique socio-political dynamics and demonstrate its influence on contestations of power across states, regions, and beyond. If Scott overemphasizes the historical role of state evasion in highland-lowland dynamics, he also underestimates its ongoing significance to understanding contemporary Southeast Asian society by claiming that his analysis "ceases to be useful" after 1945 (Scott 2009, vii). Tâm Ngô's book about the growing influence of Protestant Christianity among the Hmong in Vietnam is a timely and important case in point, using rich ethnographic data to reveal how recent religious change is still profoundly influenced by highland-lowland, state-periphery, and transnational relationships.

The book's title, *The New Way*, is a literal translation of the Hmong name for Protestant Christianity, implying a radical break with the "old way" of traditional Hmong culture and religious practice toward modernity. Over the past 30 years Vietnam's northern highlands have witnessed phenomenal mass conversions among the Hmong, an impoverished and marginalized ethnic minority group, with perhaps up to a third of the one million Hmong population in Vietnam now identifying as Christian. In this context, Ngô's ethnography attempts to give both in-depth insights about the complex factors involved in individual conversion narratives as well as a broad overview of Hmong religious change across Vietnam and beyond. Indeed, although this book is ostensibly about Hmong Christians in Vietnam, in fact Ngô devotes a significant proportion of the text to the US Hmong diaspora and maintains that transnational ethnic and Christian relationships are crucial to understanding how faith is articulated in the Vietnamese highlands.

Ngô opens and closes the book with Karl Marx's famous thesis that "men make their own

history, but they do not make it just as they please” (p. 170), yet her emphasis of Hmong agency throughout the book challenges this thesis to some extent. Instead, she argues that Hmong people make different and unexpected decisions based on their cultural resources and are not ultimately determined by the “weight of their traditions” or external forces. In the first chapter, Ngô sets the scene for her fieldwork site before giving a historical synopsis of Hmong marginality to the Vietnamese state, starting from the colonial legacy of French Catholicism and decolonial conflict, moving on to various state assimilation and development initiatives. Here Ngô makes a unique contribution to understanding Vietnam’s ethnic politics by exposing the 1950–78 “eliminating the bandits” (*tiêu phi*) policy program, which, along with land reform and other campaigns, had a destructive impact on Hmong social structure and further alienated Hmong communities from national government agendas.

In Chapter 2 Ngô relates the remarkable story of Christian conversion via Hmong-language radio broadcasts from the US-based Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC). While Ngô situates this religious change within the wider context of ethnic minority conversion to world religions, this case is unique in that no missionaries were physically present to evangelize to the Hmong of Vietnam in the late 1980s. Instead, highlands communities accidentally stumbled across the FEBC radio channel to hear a diasporic Hmong pastor sharing an indigenized gospel message, before rapidly spreading the message from village to village. Chapter 3 then explores the complex transnational relations formed between Vietnamese and US diaspora Hmong Christians who are recently making more contact as Vietnam opens its borders and highland regions to tourism. This nuanced study reveals how it is not only Hmong in Vietnam who receive “remittances” of faith and modernity, but also how the Hmong diaspora—who are themselves a marginalized minority in the United States—are impacted, regaining a new sense of ethnic identity as they encounter more “authentic” Hmong in the Asian homeland.

Chapter 4 deals with the millenarian tradition embedded within Hmong culture, opening with a fascinating account of some reactions to apocalyptic rumors of the imminent return of the mythical Hmong King Vang Tsu, whose name is also used to refer to the Christian God. Conceptualizing Communism and Christianity as competing paths to modernity and noting their similarities, Ngô claims that neither has managed to quench Hmong millenarianism, but rather the latter continues to activate it. However, her account of the most well-known recent millenarian event at Mưòng Nhé in 2011 tends to replicate “official” discourses—either from the FEBC or the government—but does not give voice to the full range of interpretations by other actors, such as Hmong participants themselves. In Chapter 5 Ngô digs deeper into conversion testimonies to draw out the different material and spiritual motivations at play, being careful not to reduce the actors to “rice-bowl Christians.” The importance attached to socioeconomic and political forces, as well as the pragmatic responses and aspirations for modernity, is largely consistent with this reviewer’s fieldwork among Hmong Christians in Vietnam.

Ironically, by undermining the traditional Hmong religious structure, the government's "anti-superstition" campaigns have paved the way for Hmong Christian conversion, which is now considered a threat to national security. This theme is picked up in Chapter 6, where we get a glimpse into the state perceptions of Hmong "backwardness" as well as "illegal" religion and its heavy-handed attempts to "persuade" Christians to abandon their faith. Moreover, religious change has opened fault lines *within* communities as non-Christian Hmong perceive conversion as an act of betrayal, while Christian teaching demonizes some aspects of traditional culture. Finally, Chapter 7 brings a Foucauldian analysis to the new morality adopted by Christians, especially with regard to sin, subjectivity, and sexuality. Ngô argues that strict Protestant teachings against premarital sex and polygyny constitute a new "technology of the self" and cause further social conflict by discouraging interfaith marriage, but regrettably she does not reconcile this with an earlier claim about conversion being seen as empowering for Hmong women (p. 109).

This book represents a great achievement as the summation of extensive independent fieldwork on a topic that is essentially the convergence of three "politically sensitive" topics in Vietnam: religious change, ethnic politics, and transnational groups. Ngô has become the first academic to publish English-language research about this topic based on ethnographic methods, which is no mean feat given the government restrictions placed on academic research in upland Vietnam (Turner 2013). Being a Vietnamese national was surely an advantage, helping Ngô to both secure research access and give detailed linguistic insights on the Vietnamese discourse about the Hmong—although peculiarly she omits reference to the Vietnamese-language academia related to Hmong Christianity. On the other hand, her positionality as a member of the ethnic Kinh (Vietnamese majority) in the context of ethnic and religious discrimination is potentially problematic. Ngô is very reflexive about engrained racism and shows no trace of the Kinh chauvinism that is present in some related research coming from Vietnam. Nevertheless, by limiting the account of religious persecution to the official documents rather than the numerous harrowing testimonies of human rights abuses to Hmong Christians (see Reimer 2011), perhaps Ngô underemphasizes the brutality of the Vietnamese authorities' response to mass conversions.

Other questions left unanswered by the book include which denominations and variants of Protestantism are active among the Hmong, and how Ngô arrives at the figure of 300,000 Hmong Christians—a contested figure that other sources (based on equally scant evidence) estimate to be much lower, or sometimes higher. In spite of a few oversights, however, this book remains a deeply impressive, well-written work that combines compelling personal narratives with erudite and useful theoretical analysis. Themes about religion as a "way" or "medium"; transnational identities; the competition (and overlap) between Christianity, Communism, and millenarianism will certainly be useful not only for Hmong scholars but also for those researching religious change in other parts of the world. Hopefully Ngô's ethnography will inspire other scholars from Southeast Asia to challenge stereotypes regarding supposedly "backward" ethnic minority groups and move

toward a deeper understanding of social transformation in Zomia.

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The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network

JULIA MARTÍNEZ and ADRIAN VICKERS

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015.

Transnational histories from below are notoriously difficult to access through conventional archives. *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network* rises to this challenge by tracing the economic and social worlds of the waterways framed by the islands of Eastern Indonesia and Northern Australia. Labor—its movement and agency—is at the center of this inquiry. The monograph seeks to track the submerged history of indenture in the pearling industry that lies at the geographical fringes of two colonies, and later, nation-states. The historical experiences of “pearling indents,” as these workers became known, are a means for Julia Martínez and Adrian Vickers to discuss issues of race and the “color line” in Australia. Such themes remain pertinent today as Australia grapples with its refugee policy and the attendant questions of who gets to become Australian and why. In a study that spanned the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, the authors of this book clearly demonstrate that this dilemma is not new. The spotlight here is on migrants from Eastern Indonesia who were accepted as temporary casual labor at Australia's frontiers but repeatedly barred from accessing the mainland during this period.

This interest in movement between borders distinguishes this monograph from extant histories of Eastern Indonesia, many of which are focused either on the spice trade from European sources or nationalist, anticolonial figures that are of interest to the history of the Indonesian state.¹⁾ The first three chapters of *The Pearl Frontier* establish that the pearling zone “joined the areas of

1) See Hägerdal (2015, 75–98) for a historiographical overview of Eastern Indonesia.