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Subjects and Sojourners: A History of Indochinese in France

Charles Keith

Oakland: University of California Press, 2024.

In *Subjects and Sojourners: A History of Indochinese in France*, Charles Keith offers a sweeping, detailed history of Indochinese colonial subjects who sojourned in France from the 1850s to the 1950s. The book sheds light on how their travel experiences transformed them and, consequently, their own societies upon their return. As the title suggests, the book indeed discusses "Indochinese" (Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao) sojourners, but it is mostly about Vietnamese men. This is because, as Keith acknowledges, most Indochinese sojourners in France came from (and returned to) the Vietnamese regions of Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin rather than the Khmer and Lao regions and were also overwhelmingly male.

The book's central argument is that the presence of these colonial subjects in France meant that "colonial society" also existed in France: "The extension of the French imperial nation-state into Indochina, in turn, extended Indochina's colonial society into France" (p. 6). In other words, the Indochinese who sojourned in France did not leave colonial society but were "one of colonial society's core structural features: they are best conceived of and studied as a form of human circulation within colonial society, rather than outside of it" (p. 6). This book's argument therefore departs from those of scholars who confine "colonial society" to Indochina's borders.

Keith also positions *Subjects and Sojourners* as a corrective to what he thinks is the problematic tendency in global and transnational histories of colonial subjects in Europe to overemphasize, and sometimes fetishize, connections and commonalities between colonial subjects from Asia, Africa, and Latin America (p. 7). These studies may help explain political projects like Black Internationalism or various forms of anticolonialism. However, these historians, Keith argues, tend to inadequately contend with pluralisms and divisions among colonial subjects. They also tend to have weak area knowledge of their case studies and neglect archival collections outside of Europe as well as sources in "non-European" languages. In contrast, *Subjects and Sojourners* is

authored by a historian of modern Vietnam and seeks to be more attentive to pluralisms and divisions by studying the history of Indochinese sojourns in France in the context of Indochina's history itself and by drawing on Vietnamese-language colonial-era materials in archives in the former Indochina. It engages memoirs, travelogues, newspapers, fiction, and more.

It is a delightful book. Reading it is like peering into a kaleidoscope through which one sees a cornucopia of characters across social classes along with their varying motivations and experiences. The diversity is often juxtaposed, with a single page displaying the voices of eight or more individuals. We hear directly from "monarchs, imperial officials, students, journalists, writers, actors, painters, musicians, entrepreneurs, sailors, soldiers, domestics, artisans, factory workers, and others" (p. 9).

The monograph is structured as a round-trip journey from Indochina to France and back, in which the reader is invited to be a participant-observer. It begins by showing the forces bringing around two hundred thousand colonial subjects to the docks where ships wait to carry them to the French metropole. Such forces include having to fight in the two World Wars, the need to study public administration and economic development, being cooks and domestic workers for French families, and more. In the next chapter, we join the colonial subjects on the ship and observe their weeks-long experiences as they cross the ocean. We see how life on board "not only mirrored colonial society's diversity and divisions, but the ship's structures, rules, and routines often magnified them" (p. 43). And once we arrive in France, we get a sense of the sojourners' daily lives, the food they ate, the clothes they wore, what they did for leisure, the relationships they had, and their ties to home. Some were cultural sojourners, some were labor sojourners, and some were political sojourners. And we hear from them directly about how their experiences affected their worldviews and identities. And finally—and this is what makes *Subjects and Sojourners* especially distinct from other studies of the sojourns of colonial subjects to imperial metropoles—we return to Indochina with them to see how "their time abroad profoundly marked colonial and postcolonial societies in Indochina after their returns" (p. 4). The sojourners' travels to France transformed Southeast Asia. Consider how, in the summer of 1945, the three key figures who helped lead seizures of power in what would become the nations of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos—Hồ Chí Minh, Sơn Ngọc Thành, and Phetsarath Ratanavongsa, respectively—had all lived in France (p. 277). In the case of Vietnam, consider how in October 1945, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam "named a commission to guide its education system along 'democratic, national, and scientific' principles; about 80 percent held degrees from France" (p. 280).

The book abounds with details, anecdotes, and quotations, all of which are inherently interesting. Given this abundance, the book would best serve as a kind of reference encyclopedia helpful for someone interested in any kind of migration experience of Indochinese in France. But for this same reason, the book also felt sprawling, and I would have appreciated more guidance on how to make sense of the vast amount of variegated material. As someone interested in Vietnamese

anticolonialism, I wanted to know: how did Vietnamese people's sojourns affect their responses to colonialism? Keith puts on display hundreds of quotations that might support an argument, but he refrains from offering arguments or generalizable answers. This could be a virtue as it leaves the reader confronted with the complexity of how being in France shaped Vietnamese responses to colonialism. But I still would have appreciated some more inductive theorizing from the examples. In the rest of this review, I will discuss two potential answers that I noticed from the book to the question of how being in France influenced Vietnamese anticolonialism.

First, being in France generated within Vietnamese sojourners empowering feelings of freedom and equality that they never would have experienced if they had not traveled abroad. And such feelings were often directed toward "strengthening" Vietnam. If freedom means having options and being aware of possibilities to choose from, then being in France made the Vietnamese freer as they engaged with "new" people, texts, and ideas that expanded their political, philosophical, and cultural horizons and imaginations. Nguyễn Tường Tam (who became Nhất Linh) "inhaled France's newspapers and novels, 'pondering their craft and how to incorporate it into and transform Vietnamese literature.'" According to his brother, it was only by coming to France that he "had seen the face of a progressive and democratic civilization, and he now knew what freedom and equality was" (p. 2). Sometimes, being mistaken for Japanese or Chinese allowed Vietnamese to dodge their status as colonial subjects (p. 3). Vietnamese students were exposed to diverse political ideologies such as anarchism, republicanism, various Marxisms, and even right-wing ideologies such as Nazism (p. 218). They were freer to study, debate, and discuss these ideas in France than back home, and their differences led to conflicts in the 1930s. They opened each other's mail and destroyed newspapers and posters they did not like (p. 2). And it was not just new literature and political ideas that students encountered. One Vietnamese medical student requested financial help to ship back three hundred kilos of medical books he had acquired in France. "In Tonkin," Lê Văn Chinh wrote, "there is no library in this field; these books will help preserve the learned instruction and good advice of the masters of French medicine" (p. 97).

In France, Vietnamese sojourners found opportunities to exercise their freedom despite the French government's clear attempts to control them for colonial purposes. These Vietnamese had their own motivations which they acted on, and this may have had subversive effects. For example, Phạm Quỳnh and Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh were sent to France to "tout the administration's reform agenda in speeches and meetings with politicians and journalists," but the two men went off on their own and "embarked on a dizzying program of museums, libraries, historic sights, theaters, and restaurants," "dabbled in politics," attended a lecture by a French Communist, and had meals with radicals such as the future Hồ Chí Minh (p. 22). And while the French had their own motivations for creating a "colonial exhibition" and showcasing Indochinese Buddhist monks carrying out rituals "under the gaze of curious onlookers," these monks had come to Europe to proselytize their own religion, feeling that Europeans had been coming to spread their religion in Indochina so now

they had a right to spread Buddhism in Europe (p. 74).

With these new feelings of freedom, some Vietnamese reveled in new sensations of anticolonial power. For example, Phạm Chí Phụng encountered French men who tried to intimidate him by saying they had served as secret police back in Indochina, but, he said, "on their own soil, they are just starving dogs . . . I terrified them during our conversations, for here we have a freedom of opinion that bears no resemblance to politics in our country" (p. 65). Even encounters with European prostitutes took on an anticolonial character, such as when some Indochinese men described their encounters with prostitutes and their acts of sexual domination of French women as a kind of racialized and political revenge against the colonizer (p. 175).

The second thing I noticed is that, although Vietnamese sojourners experienced new feelings of being powerful, they also experienced new feelings of powerlessness. Of course, many would have felt powerless in certain ways back in Indochina, but being in France allowed them to see more clearly the stark contrast between French strength and Vietnamese weakness in the realms of science, art, philosophy, administration, and governance. And yet, these negative feelings also motivated national "self-strengthening." For example, earlier Indochinese sojourners to France, such as the men sent by Emperor Tự Đức to France in 1867 to buy books (p. 18), saw their sojourn in terms of figuring out what they could do for Indochina. One official said: "thanks to reading European works translated into Chinese as well as my trip to Paris, I had come to understand France's morals and its administrative system. Indochina must imitate Europe" (p. 18). And Đào Trinh Nhất could not help but compare the differences between metropole and colony: "it is impossible to guess how many bookstores there are in Paris, much like it is impossible to guess how many opium dens or Fontaine liquor stores there are in Saigon and Cholon" (p. 165). We do not know whether Đào Trinh Nhất saw such differences as primarily a result of colonial oppression or due to a lack of Vietnamese efforts. Regardless, the ability of Vietnamese to make such comparisons inspired new desires for self-cultivation. Consider how Tạ Quang Bửu, after appreciating the *Mona Lisa* and reading Edmond Rostand and Paul Valéry, realized these works of genius and "by extension his own 'inferiority, impotence, and infirmity'" (p. 165). Such realizations may have inspired young Vietnamese to turn inward to be self-critical in order to cultivate themselves. Some students, as Trịnh Hưng Ngẫu put it, "crazily waste their parents' money, dress in the latest fashions, have nothing at all in their minds, understand nothing of what they see, and eventually return home empty-handed. At this rate, how will our nation advance on the path of progress?" (p. 167). In short, some people experienced new feelings of powerfulness and also powerlessness through their travels, and both often appeared to motivate these individuals to think about how to construct Vietnamese dignity.

There is much more to say about this rich book that space does not permit. I will end by saying that if anyone wants to understand modern Vietnam, and if we consider how the Vietnamese who shaped modern Vietnam were shaped by their experiences in France, then this book becomes

enormously valuable, even essential.

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The Dragon's Underbelly: Dynamics and Dilemmas in Vietnam's Economy and Politics

Nhu Truong and Tuong Vu, eds.
Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023.

Since the mid-1990s, Vietnam has topped the list of countries expected to become Asia's next economic miracle. The social, cultural, and geographical parallels between Vietnam and the "Asian tigers"—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore—and the "Asian dragon"—China—are too many and too striking for this temptation to be avoided. All these societies place education and hard work extremely high in their value systems. Vietnam is often seen as a little China in terms of its social and cultural institutions as well as its political and economic system. Like other high-growth Asian economies, Vietnam is located along the busiest trade route connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. And yet, the expectation remains just that—an expectation—even after three decades. Why has Vietnam defied this persistent belief? Why has Vietnam not become an Asian tiger even though it has often been labeled an Asian dragon? Answering this question could also debunk two other powerful myths about Vietnam. The first is related to the nature of the state in Vietnam and claims that it is a developmental state, a kind of government that actively intervenes in the economy to help boost its competitiveness. The second is related to the strategic trajectory of Vietnam and maintains that the country is in transition from a state-directed to a market economy or from totalitarianism to democracy.

The Dragon's Underbelly addresses these issues by examining several aspects of Vietnam's politics and economy and the interplay between the two. In Part 1, Chapter 1, by Nhu Truong and Tuong Vu and Thuy Nguyen, and Chapter 2, by Vu Quang Viet, offer historical perspectives on Vietnam's development path since the launch of *Doi Moi* ("reform," literally "renovation") in 1986. Chapter 3, by Upalat Korwatanasakul, and Chapter 4, by Truong Quang Hoan, explore the dynamic pattern of Vietnam's position in the global value chains, which is key to understanding the nature of Vietnam's economic growth in the last decades. Chapter 5, by Yoon Ah Oh, is unique as it focuses on Vietnam's economic dependence on China, an important factor that both informs and shapes Vietnam's development path.

Part 2 of the volume looks at various issues in state-society relations in contemporary