



*The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon 1916–1930*

PHILIPPE M. F. PEYCAM

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The early 1920s in Saigon saw a florescence of newspaper publishing in the lively tradition of Parisian canards of the 1890s. French and Vietnamese language papers sprang up, took forthright positions, debated their peers eagerly, and tested the tolerance of colonial rulers. The French language press was largely free of censorship in Cochinchina, but circulation per day amounted to only several thousand copies total. Vietnamese papers were censored and sometimes shut down, yet daily circulation rose to 22,000 by 1924. This was a time when educated Vietnamese believed that it was feasible to secure more political space from the authorities by means of rational argument and mobilization of public opinion.

Philippe Peycam brings this story alive for today's readers, introducing us to a range of Vietnamese, French and métis actors, explaining press operations, and outlining the key issues of contention. A “newspaper village” (làng báo chí) emerged, composed of editors, donor/investors, writers, printers, vendors, and teenagers using the various offices as meeting place and library. A surprising number of French and Vietnamese participants belonged to the Masonic Order. I would have liked to know more about press finances, but recognize that sources are hard to find. A few wealthy landowners were willing to subsidize some papers until the government showed its displeasure at content. Editors pleaded with readers to pay their overdue subscriptions, while acknowledging that the post office sometimes chose to “lose” newspaper copies en route.

March–July 1926 saw a dramatic shift to the left in Saigon. The new socialist governor general, Alexandre Varenne, proved a distinct disappointment. The leader of the moderate Constitutionalist Party, Bùi Quang Chiêu, refused to call for the release from jail of Nguyễn An Ninh, the most charismatic writer and speaker of the time. Crowds cheered when Ninh's comrades insisted that the colonial regime be confronted fearlessly. Following the unprecedented national funeral for Phan Châu Trinh and resulting expulsion of students from school, membership in clandestine patriotic groups proliferated. While these momentous months have been canvassed by earlier scholars, Peycam is the first to examine vigorously the emergence of what he styles “opposition journalism.”

He also offers sensitive portraits of half-a-dozen key journalists beyond Ninh and Chiêu.

It's a pity that Peycam focuses solely on periodicals, when the 1920s also saw a parallel explosion of books and booklets, often published by the same groups. The monograph format gave authors more room to develop their arguments, even when only 16 or 32 pages in length. Peycam also says nothing about the way in which all these publications expanded the vocabulary and enriched the syntax of the Vietnamese language. However, I was delighted to see all the Vietnamese words in *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism* carrying full diacritics.

Peycam posits the arrival of a new public sphere in 1920s Cochinchina, akin to what Jürgen Habermas famously depicted for eighteenth century Europe. Suddenly Vietnam possesses a "public political culture," and even "mass media politics" (p. 34). I question these characterizations on three fronts. First, the audience for Saigon newspapers remained small, even if one assumes that three or four persons perused each copy, and groups sometimes listened to articles being read aloud. Secondly, collaboration between Vietnamese and French or métis activist-journalists fell off during the late 1920s, partly due to Surete divide-and-rule tactics, partly the secrecy demanded by some organizations. Finally, Saigon's effervescent print media failed to trigger similar activity in Annam and Tonkin, at least in the short-term. Rather, scores of young men facing harsher colonial restrictions in Hanoi, Nam Định, and Huế headed south to exciting Saigon. Without comparable press developments in northern and central Vietnam, a national public sphere was impossible.

Newspapers in 1920s Saigon aimed to attract readers from the nascent Vietnamese bourgeoisie and the petit bourgeois stratum composed of clerks, interpreters, primary school teachers, technicians, managers, shopkeepers, and small traders. Peycam endows Saigon with a "powerful native bourgeoisie," composed of big landowners, office-holders, and entrepreneurs. Some of these men deftly combined all three callings, and added money-lending for good measure. Peycam describes well the press-related activities of a few members of this native bourgeoisie, yet fails to demonstrate that they were politically powerful. At best they tried to convince France to foster Vietnamese modernization. A cursory comparison of Bùi Quang Chiêu's Constitutionalist Party with the Congress Party of India would point up the extreme fragility of Vietnam's bourgeoisie. Rather, it was young members of the petit bourgeoisie (what Peycam calls the middle class) who provided most of the cultural, political, and military leaders of following decades.

From 1928–29, the colonial authorities tightened censorship in Saigon to such a degree that *journaux d'opinion* disappeared. Many participants went underground, found themselves in jail, or were forced to flee overseas. *Journaux d'information* persisted, however, and became more professional, with increased international news coverage, advertising, serialized fiction, and photographs. During the Popular Front period (1936–39) *journaux d'opinion* reemerged with a vengeance and Hanoi became as important a publishing venue as Saigon. Then the Surete descended once again.

Peycam seems uncertain as to whether Saigon's newspaper village in the 1920s represents a short, unique episode in Vietnam's long history, or the nascence of a modern public sphere throughout the country. At one point he says mournfully, "In the years that followed mass mobilization was to become more important than political agency grounded in autonomous critical judgment exercised by individuals reached in their private depths by the journalists' arguments" (p. 215). Later, however, he insists that the legacy of Saigon's newspaper village lives on.

I favor the second interpretation. After the late 1930s Popular Front resurgence and colonial crackdown, mentioned above, Vietnam enjoyed another flowering of the press between April 1945 and November 1946. Despite subsequent wartime tribulations, Saigon journalists continued to spar with returned colonial censors and police for another seven years. From 1955 to 1963, Ngô Đình Diệm ran a tight ship, but the Saigon press from 1964 to early 1975 was remarkably alive and sometimes confrontational. Since the late 1980s, Vietnamese journalists have been testing the envelope imposed by the Communist Party, with mixed results. In short, the twentieth century history of Vietnam possesses an intriguing newspaper thread that still weaves its way through events today.

But it is not necessary to accept this interpretation to be able to appreciate *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*. Philippe Peycam takes us back to a place and time different from our own, sets the scene skillfully, introduces us to key participants, and then pursues a variety of paths taken and not taken. He challenges reader complacency and questions established verities. One doesn't have to agree with the Habermas model to affirm that something exciting was happening in Saigon in the 1920s.

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### ***The Institutional Imperative: The Politics of Equitable Development in Southeast Asia***

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*The Institutional Imperative* provides an argument for equitable development, that is, economic growth with income equality. The research is conducted through a comparative-historical approach with Thailand and Malaysia as the major case studies, and the Philippines and Vietnam supplementary instances. Kuhonta rules out alternative explanations that rest on structural factors like democracy, class, and ethnicity, and makes an institutionalist argument: "Institutionalized, pragmatic parties and cohesive, interventionist states create organizational power that is necessary to