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Review by An Thuy Nguyen, University of Maine

Trinh Luu and Tuong Vu’s edited volume, Republican Vietnam, 1963–1975: War, Society, Diaspora is among the most recent contributions to the proliferation of scholarship that explores the agency, diversity, and importance of South Vietnamese historical actors over the past decade.¹ The collection can be divided into two parts: the first eight chapters discuss different aspects of the Second Republic of Vietnam’s wartime experience, while the last four capture the ways in which such experience shaped the postwar musical, literary, and ideological creations of the Vietnamese diaspora. Like Vu’s previous edited compilations, this collection attempts to highlight the diversity, agency, and “republican ideals” (3-4) that distinguished South Vietnam from its northern, Communist counterpart.²

One particular instance in which such ideals triumphed, according to the editors, was “between 1964 and 1967,” when republicanism “scored a major achievement in the establishment of a liberal constitution and elections for a bicameral assembly” (3-4).³ Heading this new government was Lieutenant General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, who became the Second Republic’s President by winning a third of the popular vote in the 1967 Election. The first two chapters of the volume pay significant attention to President Thiệu’s political and diplomatic initiatives, while casting him as an independent-minded, flexible, and reliably anti-communist leader (21-40).

In the first chapter, David Prentice illuminates Thiệu’s independence from his US patrons by examining the president’s eager support for Vietnamization, a strategy to “change the color of the corpses,” in the

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words of US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. As Prentice asserts, Thiệu was among Vietnamization’s “earliest and most ardent advocates” (21). As such, Thiệu incurred tension in his communication with President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, both of whom preferred a more aggressive alternative known as Duck Hook. Significantly, Thiệu remained “vocal on the need for the US to reduce its forces in Vietnam” not because such reductions would bring about peace, but because they would “stave off American demands for a precipitate withdrawal and justify continued (and hopefully expanded) military and financial aid to South Vietnam” (28). Prentice thus reaffirms Vietnamization as a strategy not to win “peace with honor,” as President Nixon proudly declared, but to sustain—if not escalate—the ongoing war.

As it turned out, Vietnamization might have been a “long-haul” effort, but it was by no means a “low-cost” program (30). Prentice could have said more about the devastating economic effects of the government’s attempts to accommodate Vietnamization with a series of deeply unpopular taxes and fiscal reforms. Dovetailing with these reforms were steps taken by President Thiệu and his allies in the National Assembly to further extend the power of the executive branch. To this end, Prentice recognizes Thiệu’s agency in taking “illiberal actions to do what he thought was necessary to stabilize the Republic,” and, more importantly, the fact that such actions “undermined the republican ideals [the President] claimed to be protecting” (52).

However, because Thiệu’s support for Vietnamization as a move toward “autonomy” or “self-sufficiency” was conditioned upon constant and significant inflows of US aid, a more cautious interpretation of Thiệu’s action is needed. To illustrate, when asked in July 1970 about Vietnamization and whether Saigon would be able to withstand the fight following US complete withdrawal, Thiệu responded:

Yes, under the circumstances that the US significantly increase military aid for [South Vietnam] to reach one million soldiers in the army and 1.5 million members in the People’s Self-Defense Forces, and provide very abundant aid [phải viện trợ kinh tế… thất đố đó] so that we could build a very strong nation on many fronts […] I told the Americans that from May 1971 onward, supply us with abundant economic and military aid and then the US can hurry out of here.

In his chapter, George Veith sketches a favorable image of Thiệu, only briefly mentioning the one-man presidential race of 1971 that made a mockery of the state’s republicanism and Washington’s democracy promotion in Indochina. Not only did Thiệu appear valiant in his persistent efforts to “Vietnamize” the

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peace talks, by (unsuccessfully) demanding to negotiate directly with Hanoi, but he was also “no super-hawk” (52), a reasonable leader (52) with open desires for peace via a political solution. For example, Veith contends that in mid-1969, Thiệu agreed to allow the National Liberation Front (NLF) to “form their own political party and run candidates for elections” if North Vietnamese troops withdrew, and the NLF “renounced violence and terrorism and did not call themselves communists” (54). One may find this last condition curious, given that the NLF had always identified as a Communist-led coalition of nationalist elements, and that it was the Saigon government who had always insisted on the ideological homogeneity of its enemy.

After the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA) in 1973, Thiệu proposed that the state would “permit complete freedom for the Communists to wage their electoral campaigns,” followed by an internationally supervised election (58). According to Veith, like previous overtures for peace, this “far-reaching proposal” failed to materialize due to Hanoi’s “determination to win victory” (58). However, one may argue that such reconciliatory moves might have lacked legitimacy because they contradicted Thiệu’s other—much more emphatically and frequently made—rhetoric and policies. As evidenced in Veith’s account, on at least one occasion, Thiệu relayed to the military officers his belief that the “war can be ended only by a complete victory, both military and political” (47). For Thiệu, even “if the communists accepted peace negotiations, it was simply a tactic to wear down the US” (47).

Indeed, from 1969 through 1974, the president consistently reaffirmed his “Four No’s” policy—no territorial concessions, no coalition government with the communist, no neutrality, and no political freedom for communists in South Vietnam.9 Thiệu further ignored the PPA’s stipulation for the releases of political prisoners by systematically re-registering many of them as criminals. In a speech given on 14 April 1974, he reasserted that “the 19.5 million South Vietnamese people should be welded into a monolithic bloc, motivated by a single anti-Communist ideal.”10 Given such rhetoric, the one-man presidential race, and Saigon’s refusal to heed calls for negotiations from well-known non-Communists, such as the bonze Thích Thiện Minh (53), it is perplexing that Thiệu would have expected the other side to uncritically accept his aforementioned “overtures” as genuine.

It is unfortunate that Veith’s essay does not reconcile the above contradictions in Nguyễn Văn Thiệu’s rhetoric and his actions, as it highlights Saigon’s peace demands and their rejection by the Communists. Similarly, the portrayals of Thiệu as a pro-peace leader (who opposed, rather than encouraged, US bombings of North Vietnam, for example) in the book’s first two chapters seem forced. In a March 1970 interview with the pro-government newspaper Chính Luận, Thiệu recalled repeatedly urging US Defense Secretary Melvin Laird to push President Nixon to step up his anti-Communist commitment in Indochina: “If I were President Nixon, I would not disregard any method, even resuming the bombing of North Vietnam,” he said. “The grave mistake of the Americans was that they did not build for South Vietnam a

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11 “Bonze” was historically used to denote “advanced” Buddhist monks in Vietnam during this period.
powerful military to deal with an invasion by North Vietnam when French forces withdrew from Indochina in 1954."

Providing a more balanced and illuminating look into Saigon’s policies is Phạm Thị Hồng Hà’s chapter on the scarcely-examined Commercial Import Program (CIP) (83-103). Phạm contends that the CIP was both a “key component in the US anticommunist strategy in Asia during the Cold War” and a “complex aid-giving mechanism” that was influenced by the South Vietnamese government, banks, and importers (84). Phạm describes, with admirable clarity, the functions, mechanism, goals, and results of this bidirectional process of aid giving (and receiving) from the perspectives of both the US and South Vietnam between 1954 and 1975. Particularly interesting is her discussion on the creative strategies of Vietnamese importers to profit from the CIP, and the ways in which the “banking system in South Vietnam depended [so] heavily on import operations” that they became known as “foreign trade banks” (93). One wonders whether such over-reliance on large trade deficits might have been an unsustainable strategy for South Vietnam to pursue from the start. Nevertheless, Phạm successfully demonstrates the importance of economic determinants in motivating neocolonial policies. Her comparison between the US funding in South Vietnam and South Korea is brief yet insightful. It constitutes an important reminder for scholars of neocolonialism to “focus not only on how global powers use aid to pursue political aims […], but also on the sophisticated strategies that aid providers use to maximize the cost-effectiveness of their aid” (84).

Another chapter that addresses the issue of aid-giving and state-building in this volume is Trương Thị Dung’s study of South Vietnam’s public universities (104-123). While Trương’s description of the higher education system dovetails with existing works on this topic, the chapter’s analysis of US investment in that system presents as over-simplified and, at times, problematic argument. For instance, Trương claims that as the US became increasingly involved in its conflict in Vietnam, “military allies unintentionally became educational allies” (117). As Jessica Elkind and others have shown, revamping and expanding the country’s educational system had always been an intentional, integral component of the US state-building project in Vietnam. To this end, Trương’s article also over-generalizes the intentions and experiences of Western educators in South Vietnam. While those like the medical doctor Erich Wulff indeed carried “humanitarian

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goals,” other educators and scholars arrived in Southeast Asia to help fulfill US military and political objectives there (120).

The remainder of the first eight chapters analyze different aspects of South Vietnam’s civil society. Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê’s and Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox’s respective chapters on Buddhism stand out for their engaging discussions about the two influential bonzes of the Án Quang Unified Buddhist Church (UBC). Through exploring both the plight and the contributions of Thích Nhất Hạnh and his School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS) to rural development, Lê affirms that Buddhist youth organizations, including SYSS, remain among the most long-lasting legacies of the UBC (124-144). Similarly, Gadkar-Wilcox provides an understanding of the Rector of Văn Hạnh Buddhist University, Thích Minh Châu (145-167). There is not much new material in this analysis for those who are familiar with Thích Minh Châu’s writings and emphasis on the importance of language, education, and the “inner revolution.” One can, however, appreciate Gadkar-Wilcox’s candid exploration of where these concepts fit into both the Buddhist leader’s political worldview and the UBC’s varying (and often contentious) approaches to war, peace, and ideology.

In their co-authored chapter, Thanh Hoang and Tuong Vu convincingly illustrate the role of the printed press as a “useful window for a perspective into South Vietnam’s social development and political system during wartime” (61-82). Their discussion on the collaborative and valiant fight for press freedom by journalists, editors, and others from late 1969 on, and especially after the implementation of the anti-democratic 007-TT/SLU press law in 1972 (74-76), is especially useful and engaging. Less convincing is their contention that “the press’s relationship with the government further challenges the common depiction in scholarship of [South Vietnam] as a repressive regime” (62). While the vibrant press scene unquestionably attested to a greater degree of press freedom in South Vietnam compared to North Vietnam, the government continued to silence dissenting opinion through stringent press laws, censorship, and confiscation. For example, the newspaper Tin Sáng of the journalist and opposition politician Ngô

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See, for example, Thích Minh Châu, Truyện Sự Nói Lễ Của Con Nguyệt: Con Đường Thử Thách Của Văn Hoa Việt Nam, 2nd ed., (Sài Gòn: Đại học Văn Hạnh, 1970).

Công Đức was confiscated 150 times, while newspapers reporting cases of birth deformities—allegedly caused by exposure to Agent Orange—were confiscated for having “interfered with the war effort.”

Jason Gibbs’s chapter provides an insightful look into the thriving and diverse music market in South Vietnam (168–188). In observing this relative freedom of musical expression as a point of distinguishing between North and South Vietnam, Gibbs might have referenced Saigon’s treatment of antiwar musicians, such as Trịnh Công Sơn and the student composer Miên Đức Thắng, the latter of whom was sentenced to five years of hard labor for his composition. Nevertheless, the chapter is refreshing in its portrait of the evolution of music and musical genres in South Vietnam and, more importantly, of the dynamic use of this universal language in Washington’s and Saigon’s “psy-ops.”

Of the volume’s final four chapters, Tuan Hoang’s and Vinh Phu Pham’s respective chapters constitute the clearest attempts to connect wartime ideas and politics in South Vietnam to postwar cultural development among the Vietnamese diasporas. Hoang offers an informative look into the origin and evolution of associational culture—an imbedded, influential component of modern Vietnamese Catholicism (189-202). Pham explores the transformation of “nhạc vàng,” which can be translated as either “golden” or “yellow” music, and the ways in which this genre reflects the prevailing “republicanism” among overseas communities (203-223).

Finally, Phạm Vũ Lan Anh’s and Trinh Luu’s respective chapters examine the complexity of the Vietnamese diasporic identity by reviewing the works of overseas writers and thinkers. Pham peruses the ways in which Vietnamese Australian authors Hoa Pham and Chi Vu convey ideas about diasporic experiences, anti-Communism, and womanhood through Buddhist images, themes, and narratives in their novels (224-244). Luu explores the “doctrine of Vietism” as formulated by anti-Communist Vietnamese intellectuals, such as Kim Định and Trần Văn Án (245-272). These men envisioned “a kind of higher-man, charged with heroic energy and a readiness to sacrifice himself for his people” and argued that it was this “New Vietnamese”—rather than the emerging cause of human rights activism—that would ultimately defend the Vietnamese people “against the communist threat” in the decades following the war’s end (252).

Luu’s article is more effective in describing the philosophy of Vietism than in critiquing it and the Confucian, often sexist, principles that guided it. If one were to read this chapter alone, it might not be easy

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22 Quinn-Judge, Third Force, 153.
to appreciate the supposedly far-reaching impact Vietism had in the overseas community. Nor is it apparent from Luu’s analysis whether these particular exiled intellectuals’ vision was in fact effective in exposing and resisting “the communist threat” (252).

Ultimately, Luu is correct that charges of “human rights abuse” against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam were swiftly “explained away as part and parcel of building an eventual utopia” (266). Yet, a similar observation could be made about the republican regime under Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, which often justified its violations of democratic and constitutional promises with the need to maintain an anti-Communist haven. In a presentation given by Trần Văn Ân—President Thiệu’s trusted aide—to the Pax Romana Conference in Saigon on 16 March 1970, Ân urged the attendees to support Thiệu’s unpopular responses to ongoing public protests: “Under the current circumstances, we must be dictatorial, and I [would] accept a wise dictatorship.” When a Catholic medical doctor asked Ân what happened if the government was not “wise,” Ân responded: “In this wartorn situation, it would be very illogical to talk about democracy. For now, [the people] must have faith in the authorities and adamantly trust that the Communists are not Vietnamese, that we are human, and the Communists are demons.”

In sum, Republican Vietnam offers a multi-faceted interpretation of the Second Republic of Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, its legacies for the postwar Vietnamese diasporas. While some chapters are more balanced, informative, and convincing than others, the volume as a whole showcases the cultural and political vibrancy of South Vietnam, the agency of its leaders and inhabitants, and the fact that the state’s legacies outlived—and in many ways illuminated—its transient existence.

Like Vu’s previous volumes, the book largely portrays the war as a civil war and a Cold War proxy struggle. It downplays, if not ignores, the profound and disastrous impact that American imperialism and neo-colonialist policies exerted upon the people of South Vietnam. In the introduction, for example, readers get the impression that US intervention was merely an inevitable result of North Vietnamese aggression, and that “[m]illions became refugees or moved to the cities to avoid being caught in the crossfire” (6). In reality, forced relocation and urbanization was an official US pacification program, while routine search-and-destroy operations and the defoliation campaign caused massive destruction to the South Vietnamese countryside, its population, and economy. For a volume that seeks to “uncover just how war and outside intervention transformed the Second Republic,” Republican Vietnam says surprisingly little about the most powerful and destructive force that helped drive the war and shape its conclusion (2).

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