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Review by **Shawn McHale**, George Washington University

The field of Vietnamese history can sometimes appear an insular place. At times, one imagines from the scholarship by area specialists that the country is a realm apart, subject to its own logics, understandable only within a Vietnamese frame. It is therefore salutary when a leading scholar of Vietnam’s modern history, in a thoroughly researched article, suggests that situating the controversial Nhan Van Giai Pham [NVGP] literary affair in a broader transnational frame might shed light on both Vietnamese and comparative communist history. This is an excellent article. Its judgments on the writings of the NVGP writers and their significance are sure-footed. Its attempt to come up with “a more sober appreciation” of NVGP is to be welcomed. As I myself wrote in 2002, criticizing many earlier treatments of the affair,

In many senses, the Nhan Van—Giai Pham affair lives on in Vietnamese historical consciousness only as a metaphor and a memory separated from the facticity of the event. To some, it is an antisocialist conspiracy; to others, it is a paradigmatic example of communist repression of freedom. Embedded in predetermined narratives, the Nhan Van Giai Pham affair plays its predetermined roles.¹

It should be clear that I share broad agreement with much of Zinoman’s argument. Knowledgeable readers will realize that Zinoman has gone far beyond earlier writings in systematically exploring the “reform communist” parallels of NVGP with other movements around the world, as well as in exploring in depth a wide range of NVGP texts. Despite this agreement, I take issue with parts of his critique of past scholarship

¹ Shawn McHale, “Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946-1993,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 61:1 (February 2002), 9.

(including, it appears, my own). But first, let me lay out key elements of Zinoman's argument.

Peter Zinoman focuses his case on the Nhan Van – Giai Pham affair of 1956, an affair which is iconic in the modern intellectual history of Vietnam. This affair has many parallels to movements in the rest of the communist world which emerged during and after Stalin's death. At the same time, past scholars have noted key differences between the Vietnamese affair and its obvious communist world analogues, such as China's Hundred Flowers movement. The core of Zinoman's article, and the crux of his dissatisfaction with past scholarship, is conveyed in the following statement, which I will quote at length:

This article calls into question the conventional assessment of NVGP's strength and disputes its characterization as a "dissident" movement. The article suggests that the standard view of NVGP fails to appreciate the "reform Communist" character of its agenda. The movement's reputation for bold dissidence is a product of the intensity with which it was repressed by the party state, on the one hand, and the narrow national frame of reference through which it has tended to be viewed, on the other. Moreover, when examined within a broader transnational context—one marked by the emergence of loosely connected reformist movements throughout the Communist world in the 1950s inspired by de-Stalinization—NVGP comes off as a relatively restrained effort to "save" Vietnamese Communism by transforming it from within. This is not to deny the bravery of the leaders of the movement or the tragedy of their fate at the unforgiving hands of the party state. Rather, the article tries to recapture a measure of perspective about the objectives of NVGP as well as a more sober appreciation of its potential and limitations as a political force (65).

While accepting that recent scholarship on NVGP has been "path breaking in many respects" (62), Zinoman nonetheless notes its shortcomings: its lack of depth, and its excessive focus on dissent and dissidence. "Instead of considering the diverse range of views expressed by members of the movement, existing studies tend to dwell narrowly on their most dramatic statements of opposition" (62). "The new scholarship not only stresses NVGP's dynamism but also insists on the 'dissident' character of its agenda. *Indeed, NVGP is characterized as a "dissident" movement by every recent scholar of the movement*" (62, my emphasis). To illustrate the problem with seeing this movement through the frame of dissidence, Zinoman uses the example of an article by Lê Đạt, which "raises questions about the scope and intensity of NVGP's oppositional project and about the usefulness of 'dissidence' as the central concept for making sense of the movement." Zinoman goes on to add:

Part of the problem lies in the failure of students of NVGP to employ the more rigorous definition of "dissidence" typically employed by historians of Communist politics in other parts of the world. Scholarship on Leninist regimes often draws a distinction between two forms of political opposition: reformism and dissidence.

Reformism (a concept with complex affinities to "revisionism") tends to seek improvements in the workings of the government based on reinterpretations of canonical Marxist-Leninist texts but without challenging the legitimacy or indeed the desirability of a single-party Communist system. Dissent, on the other hand, opposes the normative principles on which the system is based and promotes an alternative political arrangement based on the protection of individual rights and an acceptance of pluralism. (63).

In my reply, I would like to make two major points: 1) the necessity of situating our understanding of NVGP in a discussion of the evolution of the Vietnamese public sphere from colonial to postcolonial times; and 2) Zinoman's take on reform communism, and his lack of discrimination in the use of the terms "dissent" and "dissidence."

1) *On the Vietnamese Public Sphere*: With the exception of an essay of mine and a book by Kim Ninh,² all past scholars have, if I am correct, begun their discussion of NVGP in the 1950s. This is a mistake. NVGP is the only case in the communist world in which contestation developed after colonial rule, anticolonial struggle in the public realm, and an anticolonial war. This past history of the public sphere should inform how we approach NVGP. For some contributors to NVGP (e.g. Dao Duy Anh, Phan Khoi, Truong Tuu, Nguyen Huu Dang), NVGP would simply realize the goals of a decades-long struggle for the right to express freely their critiques, critiques which they had been able to express from 1936-39 in Vietnam's freest public sphere ever. The freedom to express such views was at the core of some intellectuals' participation in the August General Uprising of 1945. For example, in one of the first messages issued by the Viet Minh in August 1945, it called for Vietnamese to realize "the rights of democratic freedom, of assembly, of organization, of religious beliefs, of thought, of free speech, of travel, [and] of universal suffrage."³ Many intellectuals agreed to self-censorship during the war against the French, but it seems clear that once the war was over, they expected a freer public realm.

Seen in this light, NVGP was not a challenge to a long-entrenched authoritarianism in the public realm. For the older generation of NVGP writers, it was a return to the *reality* of the public sphere in the late 1930s, and a call to realize the promise of the revolution articulated in 1945 by communist intellectuals themselves like Nguyen Huu Dang,

² Shawn McHale, "Freedom, Violence, and the Struggle Over the Public Arena in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945-1958," in Christopher Goscha and Benoit de Treglode, eds., *Vietnam Since 1945: States, Margins and Constructions of the Past* (Paris: L'Inde Savante, 2004); Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-65* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

³ Thong cao thu nhat cua Uy ban Giai Phong [First communique of the Liberation Committee [of the Provisional Government], August 1945, in Tran Huy Lieu and Van Tao, compilers, *Tong khoi nghia thang tam* [The August General Uprising], Hanoi, NXB Van Su Dia, 1957, p. 34. This proclamation appears to have been made on 17 August 1945.

H-Diplo Article Review

persons who were both communists and believers in democracy. This context, I would argue, is essential in understanding NVGP. It is ignored by Zinoman.

But the intellectual desire in 1956 to “return” to the public sphere of 1936-39 was naïve, I have also argued. In that earlier public realm, the intelligentsia occupied a privileged and leading place. What NVGP shows us is the structural transformation of the public sphere from the late 1930s onwards. From a realm in which an intelligentsia expected to play a critical and leading role, NVGP marks the point at which the intelligentsia was definitively put in its place, subordinate to the Worker’s Party. If it acted post-1956, it was to articulate the views and concerns of a “mass regarding” party, not the views of a privileged and somewhat autonomous elite class.

Given my argument, it is not surprising that I believe that understanding NVGP in terms of reform communism is only part of the story. The most comprehensive view of NVGP should link the transnational refashioning of communism back to this Vietnamese history of the structural transformation of the public sphere.

2) *On Dissent, Dissidence, and Reform Communism*: Zinoman has three complaints about past scholarship. One is that scholars have not appreciated the diversity of views articulated by NVGP writers. Second, he goes on to claim that “NVGP is characterized as a ‘dissident’ movement by every recent scholar of the movement” (62, my emphasis). Finally, he also believes that the “standard view of NVGP fails to appreciate the ‘reform Communist’ character of its agenda” (65). All of these claims are problematic or overdrawn.

Zinoman’s first claim – that scholars have not appreciated the diversity of views expressed by NVGP writers – puzzles me. My essay on the philosopher Tran Duc Thao clearly goes against the grain of some other scholarship that homogenizes NVGP as “dissident” or even ‘anti-communist.’ But my work aside, what about Georges Boudarel’s book *Cent fleurs écloses dans la nuit du Vietnam: communisme et dissidence, 1954-56* (Paris: Jacques Bertoin, 1993)? It is true that Boudarel spends much time on developments that led up to NVGP, and not on NVGP itself. For example, he argues at length about the importance of “contestation” in the army, and how this contestation later shaped NVGP. But he does not homogenize these authors’ views. Dissent can co-exist with diversity. Another author, Kim Ninh, repeatedly uses the term “dissent,” in her book⁴, and one could argue that she homogenizes all NVGP writing in this way and elides its diversity. But is this a fair reading?

I think the answer to this question is provided by Zinoman himself. Zinoman uses the terms “dissent” and “dissidence” interchangeably, as if the concepts mean the same thing,

⁴ Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-65* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002)

but ignores the way that other scholars distinguish the meanings of these terms. It is safe to say that these terms are often used interchangeably by scholars, but it also seems clear that the two terms have slightly different (if contested) differences. “Dissent” is a broader term, and at its core is the notion of difference of opinion. “Dissidence” is more precise: in studies of communism, it refers to intellectual contestation that takes on a political character, and it often implies that one belongs to a sociological grouping, dissidents.

If we examine the actual way in which past scholars have argued over NVGP, some interesting patterns emerge. Kim Ninh never uses the term “dissident” or “dissidence” alone. She once refers to “dissident voices.”⁵ Overwhelmingly, she uses the term “dissent.” Boudarel uses a range of French and Vietnamese terms. He goes on at length on the affair in terms of the Vietnamese term *thắc mắc*, which is difficult to translate; it can refer to unease, disquiet, and doubts. His favorite seems to be the French term “contestation” (protest, contestation).⁶ His use of “dissidence” is rarer. As for me: I never characterize NVGP as “dissident.” (Indeed, I stated that Tran Duc Thao, a contributor to NVGP, “undoubtedly did not see himself as a dissident against Marxism.”)

Simply looking at Boudarel’s, Ninh’s, and my use of the term “dissent,” it seems clear that we would not agree with Zinoman that dissent would have to, in his words, “oppose the normative principles on which the system is based.” We simply use the term “dissent” differently than does Zinoman, as a term quite distinct from “dissidence.” In my particular case, I would argue that an older generation’s understanding of “dissent” was deeply shaped by the experience under French colonial rule, *not* by reform communism.

In my view, NVGP was emphatically not a dissident movement, despite the Worker’s Party post-1956 attempt to paint it in such terms. Scholars and activists who have portrayed NVGP as anti-socialist or anti-communist are simply wrong. On this Peter Zinoman and I are in complete agreement.

Zinoman’s third beef with other scholars is that they do not appreciate the “reform communism” character of NVGP. On this, I am puzzled. I think it indisputable that some contributors to NVGP, such as Tran Duc Thao, Le Dat, and Nguyen Huu Dang, saw themselves as reformist communists. But what about others? I don’t know enough to

⁵ Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 241.

⁶ Georges Boudarel, *Cent fleurs écloses dans la nuit du Vietnam : communisme et dissidence 1954-56* (Paris: Jacques Bertoin, 1993). *Thắc mắc* is the subtitle of the first chapter, pp. 9-20. A search of Boudarel’s book on Google books shows that the term appears to have been used 20 times in the book (especially in that first chapter). Searches show 15 uses of “contestation” (including pp. 9,20, 143), 5 uses of “dissidents” (see pp. 118 and 251), 4 of dissidence (including p. 118, the front cover, and the back cover. A close reading of my actual copy suggests, in some cases, that Boudarel is talking about how the Workers’ Party saw the upstart writers, not how they perceived themselves. A fair-minded reader could suggest that Boudarel could have been more precise in his use of terms, but that “dissidence” was not the organizing theme of his book.

make a claim, but was Nguyen Manh Tuong ever a member of the communist party? As for Phan Khoi, it seems clear that he was an anticolonial patriot. He became very dispirited with the Party during the long war of Resistance (1945-54). He was never a communist.

In the end, Zinoman's critiques of past scholarship seem to take him in two directions. By emphasizing the diversity of NVGP interventions, and giving a careful and extensive analysis to support this point, he wants to underline that NVGP cannot be simply glossed as "dissident." With this I agree. But in accentuating the "reform communist" character of NVGP, he wants to subsume all this diversity under the banner of a mild reformist communism. Can Zinoman have it both ways? Has Zinoman ended up committing the same error as those he criticizes: homogenizing the character of NVGP interventions?

Shawn McHale (PhD, Cornell, 1995) is Director of the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, George Washington University, where he teaches courses on Vietnam, Southeast Asia, colonialism, and history and memory. His publications include *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: Hawaii, 2004); "Understanding the Fanatic Mind? The Viet Minh and Race Hatred in the First Indochina War (1945-1954)," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* (October 2009): 98-138; "Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946-1993," *Journal of Asian Studies* (February 2002): 7-37. He is currently working on a book on the war in the Mekong delta of Vietnam, 1945-54, in local and transnational perspectives.

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