

Special Issue: Global Vietnamese Studies

Area studies, Harry Harootunian wrote in 2002, “unwittingly incorporated both the imperial and colonial aspirations of the West, even as it sought to ignore these empowering structures in the effort to envisage a total knowledge of a region.”¹ Over the past two decades, French and American scholars, in particular, have produced a body of “Vietnam-centric” scholarship in a range of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences that has helped to move the study of Vietnam beyond colonial and Cold War paradigms and preoccupations. Trained in Vietnam’s various languages and through more meaningful archival access and ethnographic engagement, these scholars have also worked assiduously, if at times unevenly, to avoid the pitfalls of an “appeal to native knowledge even by those who do not qualify as natives as such,” who thereby “act solely as self-arrogated custodians of what can only be described as the authenticity of native knowledge and native concepts.”² Scholars in Vietnam have, of course, played a central role in burying this conceit; increasingly robust and durable academic connections and engagements between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese scholars have done a great deal to free Vietnamese studies from “the directional tyranny that names as east the place we go to study.”³

But this Vietnam-centric scholarship remains persistently provincial in some respects if not yet decolonized, as Kuan-Hsing Chen has noted of

Asian studies more generally in his pioneering book, *Asia as Method*.⁴ Similarly, Harootunian argues that any meaningful critique of area studies

must now be positioned not inside or outside the “West,” since the West can no longer be thought of as a geographical concept privileged to structure the non-West or to differentiate the place of Asia. But rather it must be located imminently within the temporality of modernity that embraces new cultural forms developing in what used to be called the non-West and which now offer the occasion for dialectical encounter.⁵

For all that Vietnam-centric scholarship in France and the United States has done to provincialize national histories and situate Vietnam and its diasporas in myriad regional and global contexts, it has largely ignored (or, for linguistic reasons, been unable to engage with) scholarship about the country produced in other places grappling with their own imperial histories. This belies the reality that Vietnamese studies outside of Vietnam has never been the sole purview of French or American scholars: the field is global and has been for a long time, as the contributors to this special issue remind us.

In light of the “global turn” in Vietnamese studies, this special issue features five essays about the emergence, evolutions, and contemporary landscapes of Vietnam as method, theory, and object of analysis around the world, including in China (the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), Germany (divided and unified), Japan, Russia (including the former USSR), and Thailand. Reflecting on the dominant methodologies and research trajectories, as well as the spaces in which knowledge has been produced, the essays explore the particular visions and versions of Vietnamese studies that grew out of the shifting political and cultural entanglements between Vietnam and these places from the nineteenth century until the present. Together, they offer fertile possibilities to reframe the forms and sites of authoritative knowledge production about Vietnam by shifting the dominant frames of reference. Christopher Goscha has called for “widening the colonial encounter” to consider inter-Asian connections that intensified during the era of French rule, not unlike the postcolonial imperative that Chen identifies as the turn toward “Asian Studies in Asia.”⁶ In this spirit, these essays reveal the implications of colonial scholarship about Vietnam

for academic life in Republican China, as well as the deep ties between Japanese scholarship about Vietnam and Japan's own imperial ambitions. During the Cold War, Vietnamese studies in the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and East Germany grew out of communist diplomatic and scholarly exchanges and reflected both the aspirations and tensions of shared revolutionary commitments. At the same time, intersections between antiwar politics and scholarly life shaped Vietnamese studies in postwar Japan and West Germany much as they did in the United States, albeit in a manner specific to the intellectual and institutional histories of Asian studies in those countries. And recent developments in the field in these sites of epistemological production—as well as its nascence in places like Thailand—reflect transformations in Vietnam since Đổi Mới. They also reflect new political, intellectual, and scholarly conditions and collaborations in Germany and Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in Japan and China at a time of reorientation and rising tensions in East Asia. This special issue, in sum, offers a glimpse of areas of the Vietnamese studies world that are too rarely reflected in the pages of this journal.

Notes

1. Harry Harootunian, "Postcoloniality's Unconscious/Area Studies' Desire," in *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*, ed. Masao Myoshi and Harry Harootunian (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 164.
2. *Ibid.*, 162.
3. *Ibid.*, 151.
4. Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
5. Harootunian, "Postcoloniality's Unconscious," 164.
6. Christopher Goscha, "Widening the Colonial Encounter: Asian Connections inside French Indochina during the Colonial Period," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 5 (September 2009): 1189–1228; Chen, *Asia as Method*, 3.