

TUONG VU AND SEAN FEAR, EDS.

The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation Building.

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. 210 pages. \$125.00 (hardcover), \$27.95 (paperback), \$18.99 (e-book).

The Republic of Vietnam (RVN; 1955–1975) may be gone, but memories of it remain an important touchstone for notions of Vietnamese identity and belonging. In the first decades after the 1975 collapse and defeat of the RVN, memorialization of South Vietnam was centered in diasporic Vietnamese communities in the United States, Europe, and Australia. In recent years, this overseas memory-making has intersected with growing popular interest in the RVN period within Vietnam. Meanwhile, scholars have challenged long-standing—and deeply patronizing—portrayals of the RVN state and its supporters as mere American puppets. Without denying the significance of US power in South Vietnamese affairs before 1975, many historians now position the RVN among “the many different Vietnams” that have emerged and coexisted throughout the country’s modern history (*Vietnam: A New History*, by Christopher Goscha, Basic Books, 2016: 1–11).

The complex interplay between memories and history is evident in *The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975*, a fine collection of essays edited by Tuong Vu and Sean Fear. Fourteen of the sixteen chapters are written by Vietnamese who came of age during the republican era and affiliated themselves with the “distinctly anticommunist national identity” of the RVN state (2). The first seven essays present the testimony of former RVN government officials, each of whom uses his own experience (all seven are men) to examine state policies in particular areas. The next seven chapters are contributed by leading South Vietnamese cultural and intellectual figures, including five

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women. These narratives provide fascinating glimpses of South Vietnam's education system, its literary and music communities, its raucous print journalism scene, and its flourishing cinema industry.

Like other writers who revisit the lost causes for which they once fought, these essayists sometimes strive to cast themselves and their fellow RVN supporters in the best possible light. The former RVN officials highlight what they see as South Vietnam's unsung achievements in economic development, fiscal policy, and land reform. They also stress the Sài Gòn government's determination to keep its own counsel and its willingness to reject US advice. Vũ Quốc Thúc recalls the unexpected success of the RVN's efforts to decolonize the Vietnamese banking system following independence from France in the 1950s (chapter 2). Cao Văn Thân shows that "Land to the Tiller" agricultural reforms during the later years of the republic were implemented despite opposition from US officials. He argues that the program was a "tremendous accomplishment" that redistributed wealth and returned South Vietnam to self-sufficiency in rice production (54–55). These important perspectives deserve to be taken seriously.

Not all claims about the RVN's interim successes and lost triumphs are equally convincing. Nguyễn Đức Cường celebrates the Sài Gòn government's stabilization of currency exchange rates during the early 1970s, but does not mention the massive currency manipulation schemes that senior leaders used to enrich themselves (19–20). Ex-police official Trần Minh Công's description of the Strategic Hamlet Program as a "quite effective" (75) counterinsurgency initiative is belied by Lieutenant Colonel Bùi Quyền, who calls it a "costly failure" (86). Trần Minh Công also asserts that the RVN police were dedicated to the idea that "the rule of law must always be upheld for the sake of fairness" (74). Yet he ardently defends RVN National Police Chief Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, who infamously executed a communist prisoner in what Trần Minh Công admits was a revenge killing (78–79).

A somewhat different set of narratives emerges in the chapters on culture, media, and education. While leaving no doubt about their anticommunist convictions, these South Vietnamese intellectuals depict themselves as advocates for peace, democracy, and freedom of expression. For decorated war correspondent Vũ Thanh Thủy, opposition to communism was a form of truth-telling. "We had no need of propaganda," she declares—even as she

proudly recounts her participation in a program that beamed pro-RVN radio broadcasts into North Vietnam (131, 137). Other essayists emphasize the dangers of speaking out in South Vietnam. After she published about the atrocities committed by both communist and anticommunist forces during the 1968 Tết Offensive, the writer Nhã Ca received death threats. Newspaper editor Trùng Dương led efforts to memorialize hundreds of South Vietnamese civilians killed by communist mortars on the “Highway of Horror” in 1972 (143). Yet she also waged a high-profile campaign for press freedom against President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu that forced the government to drop its defamation lawsuit against her paper—only to lose her publication license shortly afterward (151–152).

The testimony in the volume demonstrates that in spite of violence, instability, and corruption, the republican era saw the emergence of a remarkably vibrant civil society in South Vietnam. Teachers Nguyễn Hữu Phước and Võ Kim Sơn document the impressive growth and transformation of the RVN education system: “Vietnamizing” curricula, overhauling the primary and secondary systems, and building community colleges and polytechnic universities (chapters 8 and 9). Nhã Ca shows that visual arts, literature, music, and film all flourished in South Vietnam—a cultural legacy that survived post-1975 official eradication attempts and remains popular and influential in Vietnam today (chapter 13). In a thoughtful concluding chapter, historian Tuan Hoang suggests that a shared commitment to “bourgeois values” was the foundation upon which this thriving civil society was built. Hoang’s observations help explain the enduring appeal of the RVN era, as well as the nostalgic qualities of Vietnamese collective memories of the period (182–184).

The evocative testimony presented in this volume begs the question: what analytical frameworks might scholars use to understand and interpret the politics, society, history, and culture of the RVN era? In their introduction, Vu and Fear mention in passing that the RVN and its partisans can be positioned within the history of Vietnamese republicanism, a tradition that emerged during the latter decades of French colonial rule. We should be wary, however, of viewing South Vietnamese history mainly or exclusively through the lens of what the editors call the “communist/republican schism” (10). Another major theme in the study of modern Vietnam may be more

useful: globalization. Frank Dikötter (*The Age of Openness: China before Mao*, University of California Press, 2008) employs such a framework to argue that the Republic of China (1911–1949) was in fact an “age of openness” characterized by growing cosmopolitanism and constant exchanges between China and the outside world. The material in *The Republic of Vietnam* similarly provides significant evidence of globalization in South Vietnamese history: the influx of American consumer products (Nguyễn Đức Cường, chapter 1) and American popular culture that South Vietnamese authors and artists “quickly adapted, developed, and evolved” (Nhà Ca, chapter 13, 158); the global film career of actress Kiều Chinh (chapter 14); South Vietnam’s borrowing of development models and expertise from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Iran, and Japan (Nguyễn Đức Cường, chapter 1); the “miracle rice” that was central to RVN pacification strategies and land reform policies (chapter 4); and the pedagogical practices adapted from the United States, France, and Taiwan (chapters 8 and 9).

To call attention to the RVN’s globalized qualities is not to argue that South Vietnam was unique or even unusual in this regard. The Vietnamese Communist Party and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam were also deeply shaped by global circulations of ideas, people, and practices. More generally, globalization may provide a useful way to think about the RVN’s place in twentieth-century Vietnamese history, as well as its endurance in twenty-first-century memories. As the testimony in this volume demonstrates, the Republic of Vietnam is as intriguing and as worthy of scholarly attention as any of “the many different Vietnams” of the modern era.

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