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## **State censor**

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### **Censorship in Vietnam: Brave New World**

Thomas A. Bass

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In terms of protecting free expression and political speech, Vietnam remains something of a global basket case. In its World Press Freedom Index for 2017, Reporters Without Borders ranks Vietnam 175th out of 180 countries, ahead of only China, Syria, Turkmenistan, Eritrea and North Korea. According to Freedom House's 2018 assessment of the quality of civil liberties and political rights in 210 countries, Vietnam ranks 177th, right between theocratic Iran and deeply authoritarian Belarus. Not exactly the finest of company.

While human rights organisations have been grouching about the dismal state of freedom of expression in Vietnam for some time, two obstacles have partially obscured the country's abysmal record in this area from the purview of outside observers. First is the persistence of a dated understanding of the Vietnamese Communist Party-state derived from its role in the country's major twentieth-century wars. Owing to the superiority in wealth and firepower of its French, US and Chinese adversaries, the party-state has long been portrayed as a plucky, anti-imperialist "David" poised against a slew of lumbering, hegemonic "Goliaths". This view has engendered an enduring reservoir of sympathy for the party-state (especially among older Vietnam-watchers who began their careers during the Vietnam War), which has discouraged investigations into its chronic human rights abuses, including its relentless persecution of domestic actors who dare to criticise it publicly.

A second obstacle to grasping Vietnam's poor record on freedom of expression today is the complex and elusive character of the infrastructure of state repression. From the outside, Vietnam's internet appears much less controlled than China's, with in-country users enjoying easy access to Facebook and Twitter as well as prominent foreign-language publications like the *New York Times*. Newsstands feature scores of locally produced newspapers and magazines, while the work of many allegedly "sensitive" writers can be found for sale in city bookshops.

Given this apparently freewheeling environment, what explains Vietnam's dismal global rankings on freedom of expression and the protection of political speech?

Thomas A. Bass's *Censorship in Vietnam: Brave New World* tries to answer this question through a thick description of the landscape of Vietnamese censorship. The author of several well-researched non-fiction books on Vietnam, including a biography of the US-trained South Vietnamese spy for the Communists, Pham Xuan An, Bass has cultivated a broad range of

contacts in the country which he exploits to prepare a two-part ethnology of Vietnamese censorship. The first part is Bass's own story of his exhausting, slightly comical efforts to publish in Hanoi a Vietnamese translation of his Pham Xuan An biography. Since Pham Xuan An's life touches many sensitive areas of communist history, Bass's Vietnamese editors confront him repeatedly during the translation process, pressuring him to make changes and cuts. What follows is one of the most fascinating sections of the book, in which Bass and eventually his readers learn what topics Vietnam's censors fear most: "All criticism of China has been removed," Bass reports. "So, too have any references to reeducation camps, graft, corruption, and mistakes made by the Communist Party." Several paragraphs later, Bass gives more details:

Pham Xuan An is not allowed to "love" America or the time he spent studying journalism in California. He is only allowed to "understand" America. His quip that he never wanted to be a spy and considered it the "work of hunting dogs" is gone. His claim that he was born at a tragic time in Vietnamese history, with betrayal in the air, is cut. The Gold Campaign organised by Ho Chi Minh in 1946, when he solicited contributions for a bribe large enough to induce the Chinese army to withdraw from northern Vietnam, is erased. Pham Xuan An's family is not allowed to have "migrated from north Vietnam to the south ..." Praise for French literature is gone. An is not allowed to say that France created the map of modern Vietnam. His description of communism as a utopian ideal, unattainable in real life — cut. His praise of Edward Lansdale, as the great spy from whom he learned his tradecraft — cut. Throughout the text, north Vietnamese aggression is played down, south Vietnamese barbarism played up. The communists are always in the vanguard, the people always happily following. Pham Xuan An's attempt to distinguish between fighting for Vietnamese independence and fighting for communism — cut.

Two aspects of this episode, which goes on for several additional pages, are especially worthy of note. First is the exhaustive range of issues on which the party prohibits free discussion and demands the final word. They include scores of episodes in the country's modern history, anything concerning the father of the party-state, Ho Chi Minh, all questions regarding the country's political system and many topics related to its foreign relations, especially with China and the United States. Bass's experience here with the state censors indexes the enormous number of historical and political topics that remain either totally off-limits or extremely difficult to discuss openly in works published inside the country.

A second significant aspect of this story is the fact that the critical agents of censorship that Bass encounters are editors and other publishing professionals; he never deals with the police. This oddity reflects the decentralised, professionalised and ultimately panoptic nature of censorship in the country. Bass's deadpan account of his (largely failed) struggles with members of the publishing-house staff who censor his book captures something of the Kafkaesque environment in which all Vietnamese intellectual discourse inside the country is policed. To the extent that the book has an overarching and critical "take-away", it may be found in the odd style of widely dispersed repressive power that Bass observes and describes in this section of his book.

The second part of Bass's study is a narrative account of over a dozen interviews that he conducts with Vietnamese writers and journalists who have clashed with government censors since the onset of reforms in the late 1980s. They include figures from three groupings: first, the famous quartet of northern writers — two men and two women — widely seen to have pioneered *doi moi* (renovation) literature in the late 1980s: Nguyen Huy Thiep, Duong Thu Huong, Bao Ninh and Pham Thi Hoai; second, members of a small band of irreverent southern poets who have spearheaded a local samizdat culture during the last decade and are loosely known as the Open Mouth (*Mo Mieng*) Group: Ly Doi, Bui Chat and Nguyen Quoc Chanh; and third, a larger and more diffuse group of dissident activists, bloggers and citizen journalists, including several high-profile figures within the global human rights community: Nguyen Quang Lap, Pham Doan Trang, Pham Huy Son, Nguyen Cong Khe, Huynh Ngoc Chanh and Pham Chi Dung.

While Bass does not recreate these interviews using Q&A transcripts, he presents much of them in the form of long block quotes, and they come across as a lively, interesting and relatively unprocessed swathe of oral history. They exhibit an informal, easy-to-digest style and feature important material on the tragic impact of state censorship (and more general forms of persecution) on the lives and livelihoods of some of the country's most talented writers and journalists. Most of these stories have been circulating informally within Vietnamese intellectual circles for decades, but Bass performs a service by documenting them in print, enhancing the likelihood that they will end up in the broader historical record. Some episodes, like the effort by the police to silence the female journalist Pham Doan Trang by threatening to release on the internet intimate pictures seized from her personal laptop computer are genuinely shocking in their viciousness.

It is significant that many victims of censorship interviewed in this section of the book are singled out and punished for their writings on Facebook and other online forums that fall outside the jurisdiction of state publishers. Here, we see how an older censorship strategy based on deep control over the publishing industry has been supplemented by a new strategy that employs the spectacular persecution of select dissident voices online to intimidate others who may be tempted to follow in their footsteps. Bass's account implies that the machinery of censorship in Vietnam today is dominated by the sinister co-presence of these two strategies.

The overall power of Bass's account is not really diminished by numerous errors of fact that mar the text, but they are annoying nonetheless and deserve some attention. The repression of Nhan Van Giai Pham involving the non-capital punishment of scores of Vietnamese intellectuals was nothing like Mao's Cultural Revolution, in which millions perished. Van Cao's national anthem lyrics were sung before 1986. Vietnamese do not generally "fudge" their birth dates. More soldiers were not involved in the Battle of Saigon (1955) than the Tet Offensive (1968). Bao Ninh may not have been one in ten survivors of his unit (that would be Kien, the hero of his novel). No one in 1976 thought of unified Vietnam as an emerging Asian tiger. Nguyen Huy Thiep did not first visit the US in 1986, prior to renovation taking effect (his first visit happened a decade later). Bao Ninh had a column for *Van Nghe Tre* (Youth Literature) not *Van Nghe* (Literature). Truyen Kieu is not about a girl sold into

prostitution in China (the whole story takes place in China). Huy Duc's book *Ben Thang Cuoc* (The Winning Side) is not a history of the Vietnam War (it covers the postwar era).

Despite these errors, *Censorship in Vietnam* provides a fascinating glimpse into a critically important but poorly understood dimension of contemporary Vietnamese life.