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Literature and Nation-Building in Vietnam: The Invisibilization of the Indians

By Chi P. Pham. London: Routledge, 2021. 160 pp. ISBN: 9780367188184 (cloth).

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The literature produced in twentieth-century Vietnam offers poignant material to examine the social and political transitions in Vietnamese society during this era. Scholarship on the colonial period demonstrates how Vietnamese intellectuals navigated the shifting linguistic landscape, and works published on Nhân Văn and Giai Phẩm in the 1950s reveal writers to be grappling with intellectual freedom in a postindependent North Vietnam. Along similar lines, Chi P. Pham looks at the nation-building tendencies in literary productions from the refreshing premise of examining the role and portrayal of the Indian subject in Vietnamese literature. Drawing from an impressive number of materials—from political documents to literary texts spanning all of the twentieth century written inside and outside Vietnam, to ethnographic research—Pham argues that Indian figures in Vietnam, often represented as greedy, bloodsucking capitalists, demonstrate how “Vietnamese nation-makers” fostered ideas of Vietnamese nationalism by harnessing a discursive image of an Other.

In six chapters, the study shows how this othering practice endured throughout the twentieth century in ways that adjusted according to different historical moments and governments. During the French colonial era, representing the Indian subject as a capitalist fostered anticolonial sentiments because it was French colonization that had facilitated the migration of these communities to Vietnam. During the revolutionary era, Indians as “metaphors of feudal landlords” were seen as enemies of national and class struggle. In a postindependent North Vietnam, depictions of Indians referred to a colonial and capitalist past that needed to be done away with, while in South Vietnam, similar images of the money-lending Indian stirred angst that, in turn, rallied nationalism and the importance of Vietnamese homogeneity. Such limited representations of the Indian subject in Vietnamese cultural productions affect how we “see” Indian communities in Vietnam and its history, thus rendering them “invisible.” Furthermore, the actual Indian population in Vietnam has never received the same categorization and recognition as other migrant communities within the country’s fifty-four official ethnic minorities. Through these precise examples, Pham’s study contends with the way their social marginalization puts them on track to be erased in Vietnamese historiography and intellectual history.

As a reader, I would have liked to see Pham dwell longer on the ambivalences in the claim and the materials. In fact, the “invisibilization of Indians” as it is used in this study is an ambivalent expression. What Pham implies is that in representing the Indian community in cultural productions in a limited way, particularly as “bloodsucking vampires,” writers and political figures are actually rendering them despicable, and therefore worthy of being invisibilized. Thus, invisibilization is not at once an eradication of a community in society and in literature, but a play and a process between making hypervisible and invisible that is notably facilitated by language. While Pham does offer a theoretical discussion of metaphor and metonym, and how the portrayal of Indian figures in literature and language represent the actual sentiments of the Vietnamese toward the Indian members of society, there is still much potential and depth to such a claim to be laid out. It is also curious that the prevailing metaphor of Indians

as “bloodsucking” creatures is not met with more contestation. Even leeches, which are often abhorred for the same quality, were believed to have remedial effects that could help blood circulation and remove bad elements in the bloodstream. Were the roles that Indians played in Vietnamese society, notably as money lenders, so inherently bad? How did such circulation of capital affect the economy? Was this not a way for the Vietnamese to circumvent strict lending policies issued by the colonial administration? It seems that continuing to borrow money from the exploiting Sét ty (Chettiar) while still assigning colonial and capitalist characteristics to these same Indian figures were ways that the Vietnamese exploited the Indians as cultural and political scapegoats. Pham is indeed getting at a compelling complication of the colonizer-colonized binary in postcolonial critiques but does not explicitly draw these connections. In approaching the “bloodsucking” and “exploiter” labels with ambivalence, however, the study would more successfully counter the trend in historiography regarding the marginalization of Indians, while also offering a complex illustration of Vietnamese society.

As a result, because the argument that Indians are bloodsucking creatures is presented unequivocally throughout the study, it can at times limit the ways in which the materials are studied and incorporated. When Pham examines diasporic texts that mention imagery of a curry-selling chú bảy chà (Mr. Java Seven) in the last chapter, the analyses serve to support the representation of Indian figures on track to invisibility, as “haunting remains” of a lost nation. This decision to include diasporic materials is extremely important, and it leaves me wondering, are these merely examples of how Indians are unreal, as dead and distant as South Vietnam? In fact, it seems that such endearing references show the Indian figure to be integral to one’s memory of a pre-1975 Vietnam. Are such moments nostalgic, or do they work toward maintaining ideas of the nation abroad? Dwelling longer on these materials might show how diasporic writers complicate the nation-building projects of Vietnamese intellectuals and political figures within the country, and, in turn, counter the marginalization of Indian figures in post-colonial and postwar memory. In summary, Pham’s study plants many important seeds for understanding contemporary Vietnamese history by shining a light on the material effect of literary and metaphoric representations of the Indian subject in Vietnam. While there are qualifications that need to be made, the strength of the study lies in the originality of its topic and the breadth of the materials employed