



Philippe M. F. Peycam. *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. xi + 306 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15850-3.



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Published on Jhistory (October, 2013)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek (Harvard)

Colonialism, Urbanization, Modernization, and Politics in Saigon

In *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*, based on his PhD dissertation, Philippe M. F. Peycam examines the emergence of Vietnamese political journalism, which flourished in Saigon for more than a decade. Peycam does not approach the issue as a mere history of either media or journalism, but incorporates political journalism into the socioeconomic and political developments in colonial Cochinchina, corresponding developments in France, and French colonial policies. The author highlights the emergence of political journalism, the interaction of journalists with Saigon society, the social strata they represented, and the relationship between colonial authorities and the press. To do so, he uses diverse French and Vietnamese material, including archival sources ranging from French security police reports to correspondence between the Ministry of Colonies and the colonial authorities of Indochina; more than thirty periodicals that were published in Saigon during the period he studies; interviews; and a wide range of secondary literature concerning, among others, Saigon and Asia in general, nationalism, colonialism and anticolonialism, the media, and the public sphere.

Peycam mainly draws his theoretical framework from Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991). Despite Peycam's use of theory as a frame rather than a strict guide, I wonder whether a more flexible theoretical framework might have enabled Peycam to acknowledge that colonial authorities initially formulated the very space of political journalism that he places in the epicenter of the public sphere. Here, Peycam might have used Pierre Bourdieu's field theory or Manuel Castells's *Communication Power* (2013) that combines the interrelation between urban space, information and communications, and social movements.[1]

The author notes that the situation in Vietnam was rather complex in comparison to eighteenth-century Europe, which formed the center of Habermas's work. In

Saigon, there were different agents of power that needed to be challenged, from colonial authorities and French settlers to France and its policies toward colonies as well as its internal political changes. This is of great importance since Saigon was under direct colonial administration and thus legislation concerning the press was similar to legislation in France, that is, freedom of press was supposedly secured. That gave Vietnamese journalists the opportunity to act more freely than in other parts of Indochina, which were under a different regime of a protectorate.

Peycam states that the rise of an urban Vietnamese public culture of opposition to colonial rule enabled and enacted through journalism is the focus of this book. A study of the development of a press of contestation and the sociopolitical context of its emergence is of pivotal importance for our understanding not only of modern Vietnamese history but also of the transformation of political culture in societies subjected to Western colonial domination (p. 2). His work provides an original take on how urban space, here Saigon, interacts with the emergence of the political press. There is a dynamic relation between space, politics, and the social transformations of the Vietnamese society, and Peycam succeeds in bringing this to light. He analyzes Saigon in terms of space, education, economy, and the city's interactions with the colonial administration as well as the metropole.

Vietnamese political journalism flourished due to a variety of factors that Peycam examines. One of them was *quá»c ngá»*, the romanized Vietnamese script, standardized by Catholic interpreters in the mid-eighteenth century. Another was the emergence of a Vietnamese elite that was well educated, usually in French institutions; of French nationality; and eager to socially transform society. (On a side note, Peycam's use of the term *bourgeoisie* to describe this elite seems misplaced. These were mainly big landowners so the term *elite* is more appropriate.) Emerging elites who contested colonial rule were divided in two main camps. One camp envisioned the modernized transformation of their country within French rule and the other sought national independence. A number of individuals originating from this elite formed the backbone of political journalism in Saigon; Peycam investigates each thoroughly in terms of background, ideology, politics, and relations to the regime.

Peycam shows how journalists gradually developed a more independent position by distancing themselves from colonial authorities and by attempting to reach a

mass audience, particularly after a series of failed attempts of armed insurgency to overthrow French rule in 1916-17. But to mobilize the masses, journalists had to reach out to them. The first serious attempts of political journalism were through French-language newspapers that limited their target audience to the native, French-speaking elite. Ownership restrictions as well as censorship regarding *quá»c ngá»* press initially prevented the press from more substantial interventions in politics. The economic prosperity of the 1920s led to higher literacy rates and newspaper audiences. At the same time, conflict arose between the native elite and the new governor of Cochinchina. The indigenous elite used the press to expose the administration's economic scandals, while the authorities struck back through censorship and closing down a newspaper. The authorities also used pro-government press to support their plans. This anti-government campaign radicalized existing journalistic voices and gave birth to new, radical ones that became quite popular, mobilizing mass support against the government suppression that would soon follow.

The mid-1920s were characterized by corresponding mobilization of the masses in support of persecuted journalists and anticolonial events. Newspapers also revealed scandals to weaken the governmental side and called upon the Vietnamese to mobilize. But this high point of intervention of political journalism was followed by its gradual decline. The government used repression, and the reformist political stance was progressively replaced by more radical anticolonial positions with a gradual shift of interest to rural areas where the vast majority of the population lived.

In quantitative terms, it is difficult to characterize readership since print runs of some newspapers are the only sources available. As the author notes, without postal records or publishers' business accounts, it is difficult to be precise about the size of newspaper readership (p. 76). Nevertheless, the high price of newspapers and other periodicals, literacy rates, and the French language of many newspapers probably point to a limited readership, mainly the middle and upper classes. This is also indicated by the content of advertisements that, for example in the first political newspaper, *La Tribune Indigé»ne*, were aimed at a wealthy audience. Still, there was almost certainly collective reading and newspapers themselves opened up public reading rooms; readership almost definitely increased, creating more public space for debate.

Peycam's work can be viewed as a micro-historical

approach that examines Vietnam beyond the post-World War II Communist insurgency or the emergence of Vietnamese nationalism that tends to monopolize the historiography.[2] Apart from that, Peycam employs an innovative research methodology using diverse sources in order to reconstruct vividly both Saigon's social framework and the Saigon press. His approach to the subject within the colonial context and Vietnamese society can provide a useful framework for researching the relationship between the press and colonial societies.

Notes

[1]. On Bourdieu's theory, see Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu, eds., *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2005).

[2]. Philippe M. F. Peycam, "From Social to Political: 1920s Colonial Saigon as a Space of Possibilities in Vietnamese Consciousness," http://jasis.washington.edu/seac//file/___Philippe%20Peycam.pdf.

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Citation: Christos Mais. Review of Peycam, Philippe M. F., *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

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