
Reviewed by Joe Buckley

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Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet’s *Speaking Out in Vietnam: Public Political Criticism in a Communist Party–Ruled Nation*, written in lively and engaging prose, is the first to bring together an analysis of different types of political criticism and public protest in Vietnam. The book contains four chapters outlining various kinds of civil society activism: chapter 1 focuses on labor militancy; chapter 2 looks at protests over land, such as opposing land grabbing; chapter 3 examines nationalism, especially anti-China sentiment, and claims that the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) is acting at the behest of the Chinese government; and chapter 4 looks at activists who are campaigning for regime change and democratization. Chapter 5 then addresses how authorities have treated regime critics, while a concluding chapter 6 looks at the prospects for political criticism and activism.

Kerkvliet’s main argument is that “public political criticism since the mid-1990s has evolved into a prominent feature of Vietnam’s political landscape, and state authorities have dealt with it with a combination of responsiveness, toleration, and repression” (p. 3). He certainly succeeds in proving this. The argument is not, however, particularly new. Many researchers, including Kerkvliet himself, have previously demonstrated that state-society relations in Vietnam are dynamic and that the actions of citizens can have significant influence on the state, the government, and policy.[1] The position that the Vietnamese state dictates and society follows is no longer tenable. Kerkvliet also makes the contentious suggestion that because of the dynamism of state-society relations and because the Vietnamese state reacts to public criticism in various ways ranging from responsiveness to repression, the term “authoritarian” may be inappropriate to describe the country. This is not entirely convincing; authoritarian does not, or at least should not, imply a monolithic state that attempts to control every aspect of people’s lives. Complex state-society relations are found in all authoritarian states. Nevertheless, Kerkvliet’s discussion of the term serves as a useful reminder that societies in authoritarian states are often at least as dynamic and complicated as they are in democratic countries.

What makes this book especially interesting and valuable is how Kerkvliet concretely demonstrates dramatic variations in the ways state authorities have dealt with activists of the same type (labor, land, nationalism, or democratization). Regarding democratization activists, for example, Kerkvliet notes that while some have been harassed, beaten, arrested, and jailed, at other times
authorities have engaged with them. He provides a remarkable example from February 2013, when “some members of the National Assembly committee responsible for revising the nation’s 1992 constitution met with a delegation advocating democratization” and had a civilized discussion and exchange of views (p. 123).

Another key strength of the book is the detail Kerkvliet provides for each type of activism. Drawing on hundreds of written online sources—newspapers, magazines, blogs, social media posts, reports, and other documents—complemented by interviews and other sources found at the National Library of Vietnam, Kerkvliet is able to provide substantial information about various episodes of protest and criticism, and an analysis of gradations within each form of activism. He argues, for example, that protests over land had two patterns. In the predominant pattern, “people in the same community peacefully used legal methods to oppose authorities’ decisions and actions ... and to beseech national officials to help them.” In the minority pattern, “people from different communities protested together and sometimes resorted to violent methods to press their claims” (p. 35). In the democratization chapter, Kerkvliet presents a typology of four different approaches taken by democratization activists: asking the VCP to lead Vietnam to democracy; using a confrontational approach that stresses the need to confront and dismantle the VCP; engaging all levels of the party-state to press for socioeconomic development, from which democratization will follow; and democratizing society from the grassroots by building independent civil society organizations.

Despite the significant contributions of the book, it has its limitations. As mentioned, this is the first book-length contribution that analyzes different types of public criticism and protest. While Kerkvliet’s analysis of variation within each form of activism is strong, he regretfully treats each type of protest as separate, neglecting to explore the links between different kinds of action. Indeed, Kerkvliet claims that there are few connections between different protestors; oddly, he makes these claims at the exact same time as he is pointing out the connections. For example, comparing labor protests with struggles against land grabbing, he writes: “Although the political actions and justifications of villagers and workers had similarities, the two groups operated separately. Aggrieved workers and villagers did not join together nor reinforce or help each other. Many factory workers were from farming villages; several probably had relatives or friends who participated in protests against land-use rights being abrogated. Some workers possibly had even joined such protests when they were in their home villages. Beyond that, however, striking workers and protesting villagers scarcely overlapped” (pp. 58-59). The middle of this paragraph seems to wholly contradict the first and last sentences. The fact that many striking workers are migrants from rural areas that have contentious politics over land rights and that some have taken part in both kinds of protest is surely a significant connection and overlap, itself deserving of detailed study. Yet it is dismissed in favor of siloing out each type of resistance and attempting to analyze them in isolation from each other. This is disappointing and a missed opportunity.

Drawing out the connections between each type of protest could have been made easier by seeing all of them, along the lines suggested by Jeffery R. Webber, as constituent parts of the social relations of Vietnam’s contemporary political economy; a situation where capital, backed by a non-democratic state (to avoid Kerkvliet’s dislike of “authoritarian”), relies for its continued profit on gaining access to both cheap precarious labor and land.[2] Much of the labor comes from rural areas, from communities that previously had the stability of land rights. Such land rights are now being undermined in order to take land from villagers for use by capital. The state itself, for its own legitimacy, relies on this continued capitalist growth and expansion. The party-state therefore
accepts criticism, which it is able to deal with within this paradigm while attempting to silence broader calls for regime change, dismissing such calls as reactionary and often using force against the people making them. From this incredibly brief sketch alone, we can already begin to see the links between some of the types of activism dealt with in Kerkvliet’s book. We could also add the environmental degradation caused by such development: directly, in the case of the Formosa steel plant pumping untreated waste straight into the ocean and destroying fishermen’s livelihoods; through the state, in the case of authorities chopping down trees; or through the impact of global capitalism, in the case of climate breakdown forcing people in the Mekong Delta off their land and into cities to try and find other ways to make a living. Doing this would then bring environmental activism and protest into the picture.[3]

Those of us who work on labor and social movements in Vietnam should begin to explore ways of understanding varied and seemingly disparate strands of activism holistically, in order to start to construct an integrated picture of contemporary protest and development from the bottom up. It is unfortunate that Kerkvliet’s book does not do this. Notwithstanding this limitation, though, the work is very welcome and can be strongly recommended. It is filled with fascinating details and will appeal to all who are interested in Vietnamese labor and social movements, and activism in authoritarian, one-party states.

Notes


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