



Giang Nguyen-Thu. *Television in Post-Reform Vietnam: Nation, Media, Market.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019. xii + 150 pp. \$160.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-138-06902-2.

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Giang Nguyen-Thu's deceptively modest but truly important book, *Television in Post-Reform Vietnam*, begins with a polite but rather devastating critique of contemporary scholarship on post-war Vietnam: "When I started reading existing literature on Vietnamese media, I had the bizarre feeling of being alienated from my own experience as part of an ordinary media audience" (p. ix). This point is important to linger on. Here is a scholar who not only came of age in the wake of 1986—generally acknowledged as the start of *đổi mới*, the Reform era—but who is also trained in the most cutting-edge Western political theory and media studies. Nguyen-Thu is deeply versed in Vietnamese studies scholarship, and yet she wonders aloud why so many of the area studies specialists writing about Vietnam have managed to alienate ordinary Vietnamese from the story of their own country. Part of the problem is that non-Vietnamese scholars have been so fixated on censorship and propaganda that they have largely overlooked the most obvious changes that have transformed the country's media landscape. To borrow some of the Foucauldian language that Nguyen-Thu uses with such clarity in this book, the scholars have been so distracted by their own version of the repressive hypothesis that they have either been blinded to, or have willfully ignored, the extraordinary incitement to discourse

that has transformed Vietnam since 1986. Why so much focus on censorship when the mediascape has been exploding with creativity?

"Before 1986," Nguyen-Thu writes, "television was mainly restricted to news and current affairs, with extremely limited broadcast hours. After 1986, television rapidly permeated Vietnamese homes, with a high level of popularity coinciding with greater availability and increasingly diverse content" (p. 2). Rethinking Vietnamese media with this book as a guide is like seeing something which has been hidden in plain sight all along: how could such an obviously important phenomenon not have been studied with such depth before? Anyone who has visited Vietnam regularly over the past several decades can attest to the fact that people have been watching a lot of television, and that with every passing year there has been more and more to watch. Furthermore, it should be obvious to anyone who cares to look that the things everyday Vietnamese most eagerly watch and talk about are not the stodgy news programs or the memorials to the Great Victory. Instead, as the case studies in the book show, everyday Vietnamese people are watching sentimental serials and dramas, game shows, interview shows, reality tv, and a host of other programs. (They are also watching, I should add, a range of other genres not directly addressed in the book but begging for

future study, such as an almost endless amount of music shows, soccer matches, and, surprisingly, despite the anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam, numerous dubbed-over Chinese period pieces like the wildly popular *Tây du ký* [Journey to the West] produced by China's CCTV in 1986 and introduced to Vietnam in the 1990s.)

The topic of popular television has been mostly disregarded by Vietnam studies scholars (although Nguyen-Thu does highlight a few articles by Lisa Drummond, Catherine Earl, and Mandy Thomas and Russell Heng in the book's literature review). This is lamentable because Nguyen-Thu convincingly shows that the "extensive development of popular television is indeed one of the most distinctive cultural achievements of the post-Reform era" (p. 2). Furthermore, as Nguyen-Thu powerfully demonstrates and lucidly argues, this "cultural achievement" has profound implications for understanding Vietnamese nationalism and politics since 1986 as something more complex than a facile dance of state power versus popular resistance. While it is well known that nations are formed through cultural practices, Vietnam studies has tended to focus on the overt and in many ways obvious political aspects—in the process often muddling the important distinction between nation and state. This has led to an inordinate emphasis on Party decrees, policies, and legal documents, which are too often only understood as emanating from "the top" just so they can be resisted from "the bottom." The message from mainstream scholarship, it often seems, is that understanding the period since 1986 simply requires memorizing key "turning points" and depicting a kind of call-and-response between the state and society—the End Product Contract system of 1981, the Sixth Party Congress of 1986, Resolution Number 10 in 1988, the new Constitution and Law on Land issued in 1992 (and implemented in 1993), the end of the US Embargo in 1994, and so on. Even studies purporting to take a more bottom-up perspective seriously, still tend to be framed in relationship to how people react to or force the

Party's hand in bringing such policies into being. While these dates and policies are important, and the focus on state-society dynamics is certainly worth documenting, the focus on them often leaves the impression that little else really matters. It also leads to a flattened kind of history that misses the dynamism of Vietnamese social life and cultural production—the music, the poetry, the style, the food culture, the literature and, as Nguyen-Thu so clearly describes in this book, the increasingly rich television programming that filled the living rooms of Vietnamese families (and, I would add, also often resonated from cafés) over the course of the 1990s and into the 2000s.

The Party-centric history also misses what is perhaps Nguyen-Thu's most important point in the entire book, namely, that understanding the workings of political power in Vietnam requires a concept of "anti-state nationalist" sentiments" (p. 128). In addition to describing some fascinating television shows, Nguyen-Thu offers a window into the ways in which the shows on TV could promote a truly pervasive kind of nationalism at the same time that viewers were allowed to cultivate anti-state sentiments without ever transgressing formal limits of censorship. This perspective helps explain how it is possible for Vietnamese citizens to be so roundly critical of the state even as they remain intensely nationalistic. In tracking several key genres of television from the 1990s into the 2000s, Nguyen-Thu develops this approach into an important central argument, primarily inspired by Foucauldian conceptions of power, but also informed by sophisticated engagements with the scholarship on nationalism.[1] To do this, the book tracks a historical shift in the operation of power, in which nationalism remains a strong thread even as the interpretations of state socialism as allowed to change. Like the work of Nguyen-vo Thu Huong, whose important concept of the "irony of freedom" Nguyen-Thu unfortunately does not engage with, we learn of emergent forms of power that are not so much founded on repression alone but on cultivating neoliberal traits of individual-

ism, notions of selfhood, and affect.[2] Such power is dramatically different from the repressive forms of power so often studied by foreign observers, but actually works to embed nationalism deep into everyday expressions.

In this way, even seemingly bold “anti-state” behavior (so often described too simplistically as “resistance” in the literature) ends up reinforcing deep nationalist sentiment. The evidence Nguyen-Thu uses to support this argument emerges from several in-depth and eye-opening discussions of landmark television programs that she has identified as marking important shifts in the approach to nationalism. The first case, a 1979 Mexican telenovela called the *The Rich Also Cry*, which was first broadcast in Vietnam in 1991, marks the beginning of a national fixation on televised serials, and a turning point away from a socialist style of filmmaking. The telenovela was so popular that the streets of Hanoi experienced less crime during episodes because so many people stayed home to watch them (p. 26), and this and other shows in the genre even “directly altered the ways ordinary people talked about their own life” (p. 38). In one revealing story from the book, Nguyen-Thu recounts the ways her schoolmates on Hanoi playgrounds framed many of their conversations around episodes of another Mexican TV show, *Simply Maria*, which began showing in Hanoi in 1992. Kids even had a schoolyard ditty featuring characters from the show. While the Vietnam studies scholars might fixate on the fact that 1992 was the year of the new Law on Land or that the official curriculum asked kids to sing songs in praise of Ho Chi Minh, Nguyen-Thu’s perspective reminds us that young people were more interested in Maria and the other characters in the show than those things. To be a member of the imagined community of Hanoi schoolkids at that time it’s unlikely that one needed to know the details of the revised Constitution, but one thing that really mattered was knowing that “Maria là nhà tạo mốt, Juan Carlos là đồ bỏ đi” (fashion designer is Maria, Juan Carlos is pathetic).

Given the wild popularity of these shows, Vietnamese television producers in the 1990s and beyond realized they needed to start developing their own dramas, and they also needed to expand the range of programming if they were going to main-

tain audience interest. In subsequent chapters, Nguyen-Thu goes on to describe several more case studies, focusing first on a deeply nostalgic show called *Hanoian (Người Hà Nội)*, which started showing in 1996 and focused on the difficulties of a Hanoi couple, both veterans of the war against the Americans, whose new struggles in the post-war era included maintaining their love for each other (unsuccessfully) while grappling with overwork, the burdens of parenting, and marital infidelity. A later show, *The City Stories (Chuyện Phố Phường)*, released in 2002, emulated the nostalgic tone of *Hanoian* but reconceptualized that nostalgia in an updated mode that rearranged the past in ways that emphasized an older Vietnamese opulence cobbled together out of images from colonial and royal times, all while skipping over the negativity associated with war or socialism. In addition, we learn of *SV '96* (short for “Sinh Viên 1996” [1996 Student]), a television gameshow popular in the 1990s, and a long-running interview talk show called *Contemporaries (Người Dương Thời)*, which ran from 2001 to 2012 and hosted over four hundred guests, the bulk of whom were “talented professionals” and “successful entrepreneurs” (p. 80). Carefully analyzing these shows over time, Nguyen-Thu depicts a cultural shift in which content moved toward celebrating individual selves and success as part of the national achievement. The book’s penultimate chapter really shows the zenith of this historical trend by focusing on the remarkable show *As if We Never Parted (Như Chưa Hề Có Cuộc Chia Ly)*, which began airing in 2007 and focused on finding missing persons and then staging emotional on-air reunions that put family heartbreaks and reconciliations on display for the whole nation to empathize with. Across all these genres, which play with hope and aspiration as well as deep emotion and public expressions of hardship, Nguyen-Thu shows how the idea of the Vietnamese nation persists, and in many ways becomes intensified, even in cases when the triumphalist narrative of socialism is called into question.

The book offers a truly eye-opening account of Vietnam’s transformation after 1986, and Nguyen-Thu’s sophisticated combining of media analysis and critical social theory to outline new ways of thinking about Vietnamese governmentality should make it required reading for any course on postwar Vietnam. While the book does not cover every aspect of Vietnamese television history, one of its great merits is that it makes the reader want to learn even more about the topic. One might hope that it will encourage new scholarship in the field. For example, as a reader, I would have enjoyed learning more about the social dimensions of collective viewing that was so popular in Vietnam of the 1990s and early 2000s but which has since started to disappear. In the 1990s, certainly some television sets were privately owned commodity objects, but just as often they were communal attractions. There were whole streets in Hanoi and Saigon (and indeed in provincial towns) where after dusk the café staff would turn most of the chairs 180 degrees so that instead of facing the street (for people-watching), the patrons could sit looking at the flickering screen of a television, as if they were in small, impromptu movie theaters. These cafés would show popular programs and every conceivable soccer match possible. I suspect an account of such public viewing, and the subsequent shift away from such collective viewing of television in cafés to private viewing in homes, would offer another example supporting the author’s important theoretical points about the ways in which subject matter during this important period shifted toward more affective dimensions. How interesting, it seems, that the content of the television programs became more focused on private desires, personal success, and intimate domains of the self precisely at the same time that viewing practices were becoming more private. In addition, I expect that this book will inspire future writing on the wide range of programming that the author did not discuss in the book. For example, while I appreciated the author’s decision not to focus on more “propagand-

istic” content, it would have been interesting to know more about the persistence of certain genres of programming—such as the annual April 30th commemorations, ubiquitous documentaries about Vietnamese history, or the programs about Ho Chi Minh, Dien Bien Phu, and so on that so often appear on Vietnamese television. Do everyday people watch these programs? Are television stations required to show a certain percentage of such programming? I also wanted to learn more about serialized programs from China dubbed into Vietnamese, many of which represent the stories of historic Chinese dynasties, or fantastic creatures. Of particular interest would be an explanation of the popularity of the Chinese TV series *Tây du ký* (Journey to the West). I have always wondered how the obvious love everyday Vietnamese have for these shows might be reconciled theoretically with what we know about the rampant anti-Chinese sentiment so prevalent in Vietnam today. While the author does not address these topics, the theoretical and methodological framework presented in the book offers a clear model for how one might go about doing so. Perhaps in a classroom context, students could be asked to read this book, and then apply its methods and approach to further analysis of the vast media landscape in contemporary Vietnam, not just to other TV shows but to the internet, Facebook, memes, and more. As with the best books, Giang Nguyen-Thu has set forth a new agenda and approach, shown us the path, and ignited a desire to go forth and do likewise.

Notes

[1]. It is worth mentioning that Giang Nguyen-Thu is also the lead translator of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, which was published in Vietnamese in 2019 as *Những cộng đồng tưởng tượng: Suy nghĩ về nguồn gốc và sự lan truyền của chủ nghĩa dân tộc* (Hanoi: University of Education Press, 2019). <https://www.sachkhaiminh.com/nhung-cong-dong-tuong-tuong-suy-nghi-ve-nguon-goc-va-su-lan-truyen-cua-chu-nghia-dan-toc>.

[2]. Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

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