



REVIEWS

Wynn Wilcox. 2011. *Allegories of the Vietnamese Past: Unification and the Production of a Modern Historical Identity*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 211 pp.

In his book *Allegories of the Vietnamese Past: Unification and the Production of a Modern Historical Identity*, Wynn Wilcox (2011, 151) lays out an extensive basis for his argument that historical events, some of which were supposed to have occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have been allegorically reconfigured with the objective of rationalizing a regime or supporting prevailing ideas related to Vietnamese nationalism and modernization. Consequently, he asserts that rewriting history to support existing ideologies has allowed historians to reformulate the interpretation of the past and the past itself because the past can only be perceived through the lens of our own subjectivity.

Initially, he narrates the story of Bu Vien, a Vietnamese official who was supposed to have visited (but most likely never did) the United States in 1873 to seek aid against the French. He coins the term “Bu Vien moment” to mean “instances in which a historical event is embellished, given significance, retold, and in certain cases . . . invented.” Each “Bu Vien moment” is interpreted by historians to legitimize a political position and demonstrate that this position would unify the Vietnamese people as it was perceived to have popular support (Wilcox 2011, 1-2).

Wilcox’s discussion on how the allegory is useful in understanding Vietnamese history and in carrying out historical analysis highlights a

specific function of the allegory as a literary form. This form has been used to cocoon texts that elicit and solidify nationalist sentiments and ideals in Latin America, China, and Thailand. For Jameson, national experience is essential to the cognitive formation of the Third World intellectual. When this experience is narrated, it exclusively takes the form of a “national allegory” (cited in Ahmad 1987, 387). While Jameson’s assertion implies that national experience is homogenous and unitary, the “Bu Vien moments” in Vietnamese history demonstrate how intellectuals perceive national experience differently. These different, if not contradictory, perceptions underline diverse political and ideological positions.

It is interesting to note that the word “ideology” is widely used in the book. While Eagleton (1991, 1) believes that no one has come up with an appropriate definition of the word “ideology,” he notes that for Althusser, “[it] is a particular organization of signifying practices which goes to constitute human beings as social subjects, and which produces the lived relations by which subjects are related to the dominant relations of production in a society.” Consequently, the term encompasses the political implications of such relations from the dominant power to the oppositional one (1991, 18).

The author efficiently shows the dominant power and the oppositional power in the French colonization period by analyzing the allegory of Bishop Pierre Pigneaux de Béhaine’s commemoration and by presenting his own interpretation of Emperor Minh Mang’s domestic and foreign policies.

While White (cited in Wilcox 2011, 27) warns of the historian being caught in a circle of revealing new truths that may be used to discredit previous master narratives, Wilcox seems to fall into this trap in the second chapter. He presents Minh Mang as an emperor whose actions were influenced not so much by the desire to cull Catholicism, as by internal conflicts. This is contrary to his image as a merciless xenophobe. Nevertheless, he assuages any doubts on his methodology by including a disclaimer that his interpretation may be a product of his own interests and understanding, which may inevitably produce some insights about the people involved when applied to historical resources (2011, 154–55).

The section on Le Ngoc Han and Ho Xuan Huong, two eighteenth-century women writers from North Vietnam, is systematically presented to cover each individual’s literary work, which has been essentially grasped as a *symbolic act*; how this symbolic act was constituted to form a greater discourse on identity and nationalism; and the positions that each individual’s literary work seeks to legitimize (Jameson 1981, 352–53).

In this discussion, the vigilance of the Marxists in defending Ngoc Han's allegory of love for country through her love for Quang Trung versus the Saigonese proposition that Ngoc Han's loyalty was to the Le dynasty and not to the Tay Son is noticeable. Moreover, Marxist aesthetics marks the analysis of Ho Xuan Huong's poetry, which has been described as "anti-feudal and anti-monastic" (Wilcox 2011, 101).

The vibrant debates and active defense of respective political and ideological positions are characteristic of what Mao Zedong refers to as the Law of the Two-Line Struggle. For Mao (cited in Engel 1995, 4), correct ideas can only result from ideological struggle. Willi Dickhut (cited in Engel, 1995, 21) further explains this as a "tug of war between the proletarian and the petty-bourgeois modes of thinking." The Marxist-Leninist Party, therefore, has to prevent the proliferation of petty-bourgeois thinking by winning over the working class and imbibing the proletarian worldview among comrades from other classes (Engel 1995, 22). Another example of this is the debate between Nguyen Phuong and Van Tan on the idea of unification, which Wilcox easily dismisses by declaring that "their versions of history merely arrange the events and knowledge about the past into a meaningful and truthful order . . ." (Wilcox 2011, 131).

Perhaps, all of these allegories still resonate until today. Among the Vietnamese youth, Bu Vien's allegory seems to have an impact on how US-Vietnam relations are currently received. For Wilcox (2011, 150), Bu Vien's fictitious diplomatic mission to the United States must give a viable metaphor for current Vietnamese-American relations. Emma Nguyen, a young woman from Hanoi, is wary about US-Vietnam relations. Gia Duy Le, from the second district of Ho Chi Minh City, is more enthusiastic. While these opinions may not be representative of the Vietnamese public, it is a glimpse of how these ideological positions rewritten in history find their way into the consciousness of the citizens.

The relevance of this book lies in how the readers are made to appreciate history in a technical, well-researched, and colorful manner "in an age that has forgotten to think historically in the first place" (Jameson 1991, ix). It is a worthy read even for those who are uninitiated in historiography and in Vietnamese history.—**MARIA IMA CARMELA L. ARIATE**, MA ASIAN STUDIES STUDENT, ASIAN CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES DILIMAN.

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Malcolm H. Murfett, ed. 2012. *Cold War Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2012, 376 pp.

The book *Cold War Southeast Asia*, edited by Malcolm H. Murfett of the National University of Singapore, starts with the premise that the role of the Cold War in Southeast Asia needs to be scrutinized. The main foundation of this critique is *not* to deny the influence of the Cold War in Southeast Asia; rather, scrutiny in this context means to establish the limits to which the Cold War analytic can be used in Southeast Asia.

Of course, the mere mention of the Cold War will invariably direct the conversation at some point to the "domino theory" and the Vietnam War. What does that prove? It merely shows that from a strategic standpoint, it was crucial for American policymakers that Southeast Asia did not fall to Communism. Does this mean that Southeast Asian leaders were unaware of this strategic thinking by the Americans? Far from it. In fact, one of the key points in many of the essays in the book is that Southeast Asian leaders sought to exploit this strategic thinking by the Americans to their own and maybe their country's benefit.

To be sure, Southeast Asian leaders also endeavored to exploit to their benefit the strategic entanglements of the Soviet Union and the