

For the history of Southeast Asia there are several possible alternatives. Among them is the notion that hierarchy and community are alternative principles of society that have always been co-present in Southeast Asian social life (rather than marking a historical shift). Comparative work in Sumatra suggests that authority and consensus were always in tension as the principles of social relations and kingship.

This study of Pom Mahakan and of Bangkok highlights the lasting importance of ethnographic attention to local detail. The study aims at general issues of heritage, history, urban spaces, modernity, and belonging/eviction. But it is obvious that individuals and historical accidents play important roles. The leaders of the Pom Mahakan community were very skilled at public relations and image management and at the same time they were only concerned with the continuity of a small and rather poor community. The particularities of the Thai and Western supporters of Pom Mahakan are important parts of the story. And the mayor of Bangkok comes to play a key role in a story where the BMA bureaucracy and the local community are the main adversaries. The election of Apirak Kosayodhin as mayor brought to power a conciliatory politician who had none of the arrogance of his predecessors and who was instead interested and invested in the diversity of his city. During his tenure, many of Pom Mahakan's issues took a positive turn, and once his term ended things became more insecure again.

Herzfeld is interested in describing and analysing the intriguing coexistence of protest and of claims to national- or urban belonging that he has found in Pom Mahakan, of the simultaneous assertions of *moeang* and *prathaet* by a rather marginalised people. Cases of political agitation by Karen and Mien highland peoples in 1990s Thailand reveal similar ambiguity, particularly in how a marginalised people insisted on their national credentials in public protest. But Herzfeld is not concerned with such in-country comparisons, or with comparing mainland to island Southeast Asian cases on the tensions between authority and community. His angle instead straddles heritage studies and the particularities of the case material, bringing a fresh angle to a story that polarised Bangkok but had little reach beyond that city. The book will be of considerable interest for students of heritage, culture, anthropology, urbanism, and related fields, and, last but not least, is very engagingly written.

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## Vietnam

*Nothing ever dies: Vietnam and the memory of war*

By VIET THANH NGUYEN

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The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*, literally, 'The discourse on the white lotus of the true doctrine', or *Lotus Sūtra*, is a Buddhist text that was compiled in India in the first

centuries of the common era. It was soon translated from Sanskrit into Chinese characters, and Vietnamese began chanting it possibly as early as the sixth century. The *sūtra* proclaims that it is the final teaching of the Buddha. It teaches that there is one vehicle that will transport all sentient beings to Buddhahood, and that the life of the Buddha is immeasurable. The *sūtra* enjoins followers of the *dharma* to preserve, read, recite, explain, and copy the *sūtra* itself. In pagodas across Vietnam, Buddhists chant the *sūtra* daily. Although few people understand its esoteric references and abstruse theological doctrines, chanting the *sūtra* is a sign of piety and a profound moral act.

The writing of *Nothing ever dies*, 'a book on war, memory, and identity' (p. 4), is best understood, like the recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, as a moral act by its author, Viet Thanh Nguyen. It is both an attempt to understand how the Vietnam War has been remembered in Vietnam, the United States, and beyond; and an act of remembrance itself, as the author left Vietnam as a child in the aftermath of the war. The book discusses diverse remembrances of the war by Vietnamese, Americans, Cambodians, Laotians, Hmongs, and South Koreans in novels, short stories, films, photographs, graveyards, and monuments, among other *lieux de mémoire*. Viet Thanh Nguyen pleads for a 'just memory' of the war, based on an acknowledgement of the 'simultaneous humanity and inhumanity' of those who would remember it; 'equal access to the industries of memory, both within countries and among countries'; and, somewhat more opaquely, 'the ability to imagine a world where no one will be exiled from what we think of as the near and the dear to those distant realms of the far and the feared' (p. 283). Only if there is a 'just memory' of the war, a condition for its 'just forgetting', can the violence of the war avoid being repeated. In a similar way, Vietnamese who recite the *Lotus Sūtra*, who remember the teachings of the Buddha, believe that one day they will be liberated from *samsara*, the painful cycle of rebirth.

Those persuaded by the moral purpose of *Nothing ever dies*, may believe that that purpose eclipses its many flaws. Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, for example, of 'what some call the Vietnam War and others call the American War', with no apparent awareness that 'the American War' is itself an American gloss on the hackneyed expression of the Vietnamese communists: *chiến tranh chống Mỹ* (the war against America) or *chiến tranh chống Mỹ cứu nước* (the war against America to save the country), both of which are chauvinistic and exclude those who fought with, rather than against, America (p. 4). Furthermore, he uncritically accepts the official Vietnamese figure of 3 million war dead, between 1965 and 1975 (p. 8), when recent research by demographers suggests that the number was closer to 1 million; he tentatively insists on referring to the mass killings in Cambodia under the Pol Pot regime as a 'genocide' (p. 84 ff.); and he self-servingly accepts the erroneous and offensive claim by the journalist Nick Turse that 'standard American policy' during the war was to 'kill anything that moves' (p. 70). Although the author aspires to write an inclusive work on memories of the war, he uses astonishingly few sources that were not written in, or translated into, English. He discusses Bao Ninh's *The sorrow of war*; Dương Thu Hương's *Novel without a name*; Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's *The general retires*; Đặng Thùy Trâm's *Last night I dreamed of peace*; Rithy Panh and Christophe Bataille's *The elimination*; Lê Thị Diễm Thúy's *The gangster we are all looking for*; Anh Junghyo's *White badge: A novel of Korea*; and Le-Ly Hayslip's

*When heaven and earth change places*, among other works. But he almost completely ignores the enormous body of material by poets, lyricists, and authors that commemorate the war in the Vietnamese language: verse by Nguyễn Bắc Sơn and Nguyễn Đình Thi; songs by Trịnh Công Sơn, Phạm Duy, and Lưu Hữu Phước; and the writings of Nhã Ca and Nguyễn Quang Lập, among countless others. There is no mention of Huy Đức's revelatory book, *Bên thắng cuộc* [The winning side], which shows how the liberation of the south led to purges of disloyal Communist Party members, the seizure of southern Vietnamese business owners' assets, the persecution of ethnic Chinese, and the misery of millions. This may be because Viet Thanh Nguyen has 'lost his mother tongue, or ... cut it off in favor of his adopted tongue', English (p. 303). These and other problems may not trouble the morally pious, but they will give pause to those who are seeking enlightenment from this book as well.

Those who recite the *Lotus Sūtra* chant the names of important *arhats* and *bodhisattvas*. Similarly, *Nothing ever dies* reverently invokes the names of hallowed figures in the pantheon of cultural theory — Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek, among others. These figures are often quoted but seldom discussed. Their invocation lends rhetorical authority, rather than analytical power, to the text. That their respective theories are not logically compatible does not trouble Viet Thanh Nguyen. In the same way, those who chant the *Lotus Sūtra* are not usually bothered by its recondite language and apparent inconsistencies; it is much more important to chant the *sūtra* than it is to understand it.

And like the *Lotus Sūtra*, the writing in *Nothing ever dies* is often incantatory in style. 'Haunted and haunting, human and inhuman, war remains with us and within us, impossible to forget but difficult to remember', Viet Thanh Nguyen intones (p. 19). Other passages are almost oracular: 'Perhaps some things will never be remembered, and yet also never forgotten. Perhaps some things will remain unspoken, and yet always heard. ... This is the paradox of the past, of trauma, of loss, of war, a true war story where there is no ending but the unknown, no conversation except that which cannot be finished' (p. 304). And yet others are simply opaque: 'Implied in Ricoeur, and more explicit in Levinas, is the idea that these worldly claims to ethics and justice among actual others belong in the realm of what Levinas calls "totality". War, violence, and self-interest rule in totality, which is where we struggle for "freedom" at the expense of the other, whom we wish to turn into the "same"' (p. 78).

Reciting the *Lotus Sūtra* is a salve to many millions of Vietnamese Buddhists as they contend with the pain and suffering that is the very nature of existence. Reading *Nothing ever dies* is likely to bring comfort to those who share its angle of moral vision. But for those who wish to understand better the Vietnam War and its legacy, the book will seem little more than orotund, obscure, and obtuse.

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