

*Vietnam. Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam.* By Benoît de Tréglodé; translated by Claire Duiker. Singapore: NUS Press, 2012. Pp. 244, Maps, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

The concept of the “body politic” has its historical origins in Western medieval political theology and it minimized the distinction between the political body (the state) and the physical one (the king). Antoine de Baecque, using an impressive array of textual sources, detailed the role corporeal metaphors played in efforts to decouple these two bodies in eighteenth-century revolutionary France. The political intent behind these metaphors, de Baecque argues, was to delegitimize the old regime and legitimize a new one by representing subjects as citizens, narrating national rather than dynastic histories, and devising rituals to commemorate popular sovereignty (i.e. government created by and subject to the will of the people). Benoît de Tréglodé explores similar issues in his book, but with an importance difference. He documents the extent to which the Vietnamese Communist Party relied upon pre-revolutionary understandings of heroism to mobilize rural populations to build a “new society” in the post-revolutionary one.

In the course of doing so, de Tréglodé provides a nuanced account of the important yet overlooked role “heroic exemplarity” played in the the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Communist Party’s subsequent consolidation of state power (c. 1948-1964). But, unlike de Baecque, he directs sustained attention to the paradox at the center of this process. The Communist Party urgently needed to rupture ties with the past yet retain selected aspects of it to legitimize its growing control over political, economic, and cultural affairs. This tension, as other scholars have noted, takes its clearest form in official discourse, which represents the Communist Party as the leading agent of radical change *and* the latest in a long line of patriots that defended the nation against foreign aggression. The heroic individuals featured in the book, de Tréglodé asserts, embodied both.

The book can be divided into two sections. The first half, which draws extensively on documents held in State Archive No. III in Hanoi, provides a genealogical account of heroism in the Vietnamese context (Chapters 1-4). The second half traces the transfiguration of these exemplary individuals and their post-mortem incorporation into the “national patriotic imaginary” (Chapters 5-7). Brief case-studies are included in each of the the chapters, and the details effectively ground the author’s arguments concerning heroic actions at the local-level and their relationship (or lack thereof) with national-level developments. I summarize the key points made in each half of the book below.

de Tréglodé’s discussion of “heroic exemplarity” initially covers familiar ground, and he rightly emphasizes the importance of neo-Confucian values in defining exemplary models of behavior for others to emulate. But, unlike other studies of this transitional period, he convincingly argues that Sino-Soviet definitions of the communist “hero” did not replace Vietnamese nationalist ones. Instead, he explains, the Communist Party put them into productive conversation with one another out of political necessity in order to maintain the “illusion of a State ‘by and for the people’.” To support his claims, de Tréglodé details the range of political, economic, and cultural factors that shaped the emergence of an elaborate bureaucratic system to: 1) monitor and assess successive

“patriotic emulation” campaigns; 2) identify “emulation fighters,” whose achievements during the campaigns warranted not only official recognition but national dissemination for others to imitate; and 3) the “new heroes,” who fully embodied the Communist Party’s revolutionary ideals.

The second half of the book chronicles this process, which de Tréglodé argues merged pre-revolutionary with post-revolutionary forms of veneration. The first step entailed commemorating the manifold sacrifices the hero made on behalf of the nation. Acknowledgement of their sacrifices was both symbolic (e.g. awards and honorary certificates) and material (e.g. financial assistance to their families) in nature. The second step memorialized their contributions in patriotic time and place. The Communist Party created patriotic calendars to mark the death anniversaries of these figures along with the mythico-historical heroes of the past, for example, and it provided funding to build houses of remembrance, martyr cemeteries, and statuary around the country. The final step, he stresses, was the most difficult one: it required the transformation of the “new hero” from a propaganda tool into the tutelary spirit of the nation.

The author’s discussion of the Communist Party’s efforts to reconfigure the Vietnamese body-politic by synthesizing the “old” with the “new” makes for a compelling read. It also raises more questions than it answers. The shortcomings of the mass emulation campaigns do receive critical attention. But I would welcome more, especially given that policymakers were fully aware that the campaigns routinely created more problems than they solved, which begs the question why the government still continues to use them. Additional details on the bureaucratic struggles shaping the selection process would strengthen this study, as would a clearer sense of how officials decided what aspects of the “new heroes” private lives had to be excised from their public biographies to integrate them into the “patriotic imaginary.” Finally, number of well-known studies explore issues directly relate to those examined in the book. Sustained engagement with some these studies would open up space for cross-disciplinary debate and research. To be clear, these criticisms reflect the book’s strengths. de Tréglodé makes a significant contribution to our understanding of this period and the role people official labelled “heroes” played in shaping it. In doing so, de Tréglodé has laid the foundation for comparative studies of emulation in other revoutionary contexts, especially self-declared socialist ones, both of which are very much still needed.

Ken MacLean