

STATE AND SOCIETY IN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY VIETNAM: THE QUEST FOR A NEW HISTORY

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Abstract

Forty-one years ago, historian Alexander Woodside published the groundbreaking work on early Nguyen state (*Vietnam and the Chinese model*, Cambridge: 1971). Despite of many criticisms on its approach, the book, remains one of the only works on the topic in English, is still an indispensable source for understanding this period of Vietnamese history. Since then, there have been more materials come out, and new researches on the field prevail, enrich the body of knowledge on early 19th century Vietnam's statecraft, institutions, court factionalism, regional conflict, and the project of centralization and imperialism. It is thus the time for a new history of the Nguyen that written in the 21st century.

This talk attempts to present a holistic survey of a significant period of Vietnamese historical transition. For the first time "Vietnam" as a state and a territory took the shape as seen today, where early modern "national identity" was generated, where state's centralization defined the country's political culture, and imperial expansion fashioned the multiethnic discourse of the society. Last but not least were Vietnam's bitter experience of regional expansion in Cambodia (1830s) and unsuccessful "modernization" – the two had cost the country a huge price, including nearly a century of western colonialism, and haunted the social collective memory about the dynasty. In modern historical discourse, the Nguyen counted nothing but a failed state.

By taking them all into consideration, this presentation will challenge both conventional Vietnamese historiography which portrayed a reactionary and declined feudal state, based on their nationalist and Marxist approaches; and Western scholarship which overemphasized political model, whether of Chinese, indigenous, or Southeast Asian (Alexander B. Woodside, John K. Whitmore, Nola Cooke...). Instead, this is a reflection of my journey in searching for a new Nguyen history which started several years ago. I have found it useful to gather new materials and take a broader approach to the topic of early 19th century Vietnam's state and society, not only to collate with Chinese experiences, but also to connect with those of Southeast Asia, and locate Vietnam in the global perspective. Liberated from a terminological and ideological limitation, this history is hoped to provide an alternative story of a more diverse, inclusive, and sophisticated sociopolitical transformation under which the first phrase of early modern Vietnam was in the making.

The suggestion is to shift image of the Nguyen from a failed dynasty to an early modern state with centralized state-building, and efforts of empire-making. In many aspects, their legacies had prepared Vietnam to enter "modernity". In fact, the Nguyen's contribution to governance and influence on society are more profound than what have been projected by contemporary scholarship.

Major discussed subjects in the talk are included:

1. New sources of the Nguyen history, comprising Vermilion records (阮朝硃本), land records (地簿), imperial writings (御製詩, 御製文)...
2. Factionalism, interest group, and power network of the Nguyen court.
3. Minh Menh's project of state-centralization and empire-building.
4. Vietnam as an empire (大國): the making of early modern political and social identity.
5. Nguyen's failure of "modernization": regionalizing and internationalizing early 19th century Vietnam

Keywords: Nguyen dynasty, early modern Vietnam, political history, modernization, Minh Menh

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Vu Duc Liem. "Vietnam at the Khmer Frontier: Boundary Politics, 1802–1847," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 5, no. 2 (2016): 534–64, doi:10.1353/ach.2016.0018.

Vu Duc Liem. "The Age of Sea Falcons: Naval Warfare in Vietnam, 1771-1802." In *Warring Societies of Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia: Local Cultures of Conflict Within a Regional Context*, edited by Kathryn Wellen and Michael Charney, 103–29 (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2017).

Vu Duc Liem. Village rebellion and social violence in early nineteenth century Vietnam, in *A Global History of Early Modern Violence*, eds., Peter H. Wilson, Marie Houlemare and Erica Charters (Manchester: Manchester University Press, *forthcoming*).