

There is a useful glossary, but the sheer number of indigenous terms was at times dizzying, even for this specialist in North Indian music. Many of the examples discussed in the text are accompanied by excellent audio-video resources on the University of Illinois Press website. To facilitate switching between the text and online examples, it would have been helpful to list page numbers on the website and in a table of media examples at the front of the book. On many pages, the multiple agendas and scales of analysis require flipping between the text, appendices, glossary, notes, and online examples. A number of figures discussed in chapters 3 and 4 have inexplicably been included in the notes, requiring frequent flipping of pages to follow the argument.

The Voice in the Drum is a challenging book to read, but it will reward those who make the effort. Despite Wolf's literary talents, the alternation between ethnography and fiction, between diverse geographic settings, and between the voices of Wolf and Ali can feel a bit forced in the early chapters. As the narrative proceeds and the perspective becomes more fused, however, the hybrid approach ultimately proves more engaging and entertaining than a conventional ethnography. Grounded in impeccable scholarship, this book illuminates under-studied performance traditions in Islamate South Asia, with particular attention to embodied ritual practice and the interactions of *naqqarah*, *dhol-tasha*, double-reed, and vocal repertoires (including *soz*, *nauhah*, *kafi*, *marsiyah*, *qasidah*, *salam*, and *qawwali*). It is a must-read for scholars of South Asia and Islam, as well as those with an interest in experimental approaches to ethnography.

STEFAN FIOL

University of Cincinnati
stefan.fiol@uc.edu

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Censorship in Vietnam: Brave New World. By THOMAS A. BASS. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017. ix, 228 pp. ISBN: 9781625342959 (paper, also available in cloth and as e-book).
 doi:10.1017/S0021911818002899

The concept for Thomas Bass's *Censorship in Vietnam: Brave New World* is refreshingly creative. Bass, the author of a well-regarded biography of Phạm Xuân Ẩn, the famous wartime double agent, takes advantage of the pending publication of that book in Vietnamese to travel to Vietnam and interrogate his censors. Through these interactions, Bass promises to dissect how censorship in Vietnam works through the window of a publication that he knows intimately. This is an important mission. Censorship is pervasive in Vietnam, and Bass is correct to argue that it impedes innovation and development. He imaginatively describes his research plan in the preface: "I decided to conduct an experiment. I would wire the book like a literary seismometer. I would mine the publishing contract with trip switches guaranteeing that I was notified at every move of the censor's pen" (p. ix).

Unfortunately, the book disappoints dramatically on its significant promise. While Bass does visit Vietnam to explore censorship, he never actually meets with official

government censors and has little new to offer about the mechanics of government censorship. The story he tells is really about the overwhelming prevalence of self-censorship in the country, caused by fear of the powerful, single-party regime. This is an important topic, but it is far from the “investigative journalism” on censorship promised on the cover. Moreover, the book is marred by repeated and documentable, factual errors.

Censorship in Vietnam is really two books in one. In the first, Bass relates his interviews with the publishers and translators who volunteered to help bring his first book to the market. He describes the tense battles with his interlocutors over whether, for example, to describe an area outside Saigon as Forest of Assassins or Seacoast Shrubs (pp. 26–27), and whether to preserve the spy’s folksy southern expressions (p. 42). These debates are amusing, yet ultimately unsatisfying, because Bass never stops to ask why his publishers were so insistent on publishing his work. As Bass himself notes, previous books on *Ân* had already been published in Vietnamese that adhered more closely to the party line (p. 22). So why would a cautious publisher in this environment risk so much to publish a more antagonistic book, especially with a persnickety author who was prepared to wage war over every dropped comma? In the second book, Bass visits with Vietnam’s most famous dissidents, chronicling their experiences with censorship. These interviews with artistic luminaries like Bảo Ninh, Dương Thu Hương, and Phạm Thị Hoài are fascinating and tragic, and Bass beautifully conveys their stories in ways that will be enlightening to even Vietnamese specialists.

Bass’s main method is in-depth interviews that are embedded in the narrative arc of his own battles with censors and illuminated by historical and cultural details. It is clear that he does not trust his interlocutors in the publishing industry in Vietnam, yet he appears to trust his dissident respondents implicitly. At times, he even involves them in his fact-checking debates, asking Bùi Tín, for instance, to verify whether *Ân* ever served as dean of the postwar military intelligence school in Ho Chi Minh City (p. 49). Bass’s unwillingness to subject his dissident friends to the same skepticism and interrogation as his “censors” generates confusion. When Phạm Thị Hoài declares, “It is mandatory for every official to get training in China once a year, just as it was in the time of the Cold War” (p. 83), Bass presents this astounding statement uncritically. He does not ask her where she learned this information, what she meant by “official,” where this training takes place, or how it would even be possible to shuttle thousands (or hundreds of thousands, depending on the definition of official) across the border without an anti-Chinese public noticing. Other times, Bass’s interlocutors contradict each other, and Bass does not offer any guidance on who is right. The former prime minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng is described by different dissidents as a hardliner restricting internet freedom (p. 165), as the victim of a hardline coup (p. 109), as a corrupt real estate baron (p. 166), and as a pro-Western politician (p. 185). Bass never discusses the contradictions. It is not even clear that he is aware the same person is being referenced (i.e., the index lists Nguyễn Tấn Dũng only once). The key problem with this approach is that readers are left wondering which information is trustworthy. Since many of these details are critical to how we are supposed to understand Vietnam, the lack of a neutral arbiter is disorienting.

A second important methodological concern is that Bass is clearly not a fluent Vietnamese speaker. At one point in the book, he is unable even to direct a taxi to an address in Hanoi without written instructions (p. 119). He is entirely reliant on his translators, dissident friends, and network of overseas Vietnamese for his understanding of the conversations and debates he is having. I am generally reluctant to criticize language ability; important discoveries are possible through translation. However, a great deal of Bass’s battle with his publisher hinges on linguistic issues. Bass, for instance, is insistent that his protagonist be quoted in his folksy southern Vietnamese accent and syntax (pp. 9,

42, 101). But why is this important to Bass? He would not have the language skills to discern the difference anyway. His original book quoted *Ân* in English, presumably because American readers would have trouble understanding quotes in Vietnamese. So why insist that young, northern Vietnamese readers be forced to pick apart a dialect they are not familiar with? Frustratingly in the debate, Bass never asks his publisher who its target market is and whether its readership would be familiar with an older, southern Vietnamese way of speaking. Nearly 70 percent of the Vietnamese population was born after the war and grew up inundated with media in the Hanoi accent. Maybe the publisher simply preferred that the book be comprehensible to a younger generation of readers.

Finally, let me deal with the errors. In a previous review, Peter Zinoman characterized them as “annoying,” but I think they are much more consequential than that.¹ At times, they fundamentally undermine Bass as a credible narrator and expert on Vietnam. Numerous times throughout the book, Bass refers to *Đổi Mới*, Vietnam’s economic renovation policy, as the country’s Perestroika (e.g., p. 24), referring to a period of cultural and literary opening. This is two mistakes embedded in one. First, what Bass is actually thinking of in the Soviet Union was Glasnost. Perestroika was the USSR’s experiment with economic reform.² Second, Vietnam never had anything resembling a policy of Glasnost. *Đổi Mới* was primarily a policy of agricultural liberalization and international economic integration.³ Bass refers to the *Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm* affair as Vietnam’s Cultural Revolution (p. 10) without mentioning that the Vietnamese event, while tragic and painful for those persecuted, involved, at a maximum, the reeducation of 500 artists with zero fatalities,⁴ while the Cultural Revolution led to the persecution and death of millions.⁵ He claims that former prime minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng was removed from office in a “reactionary coup by hard-line party officials” (p. 109), when in fact Dũng served his two full terms as prime minister and was unsuccessful in trying to win the general secretary position at the 2016 Party Congress.⁶ Bass argues that there are no fluent English speakers in the Vietnamese leadership (p. 78), overlooking the fact that Politburo members Phạm Bình Minh, Hoàng Trung Hải, and Nguyễn Thiện Nhân all completed graduate degrees in English-speaking countries and regularly give speeches in English. He claims that the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF)⁷ was simply an “agency” for funneling Saigon’s war debt back into Vietnam to fund the Fulbright University of Vietnam (FUV, p. 146), omitting the fact that the VEF predated the FUV by fifteen years and funded scholarships for 571 Vietnamese students to study in 101 American

¹Peter Zinoman, “State Censor,” *Mekong Review* 11 (May 2018), <https://mekongreview.com/state-censor/> (accessed November 10, 2018).

²John M. Battle, “Uskorenje, Glasnost’ and Perestroika: The Pattern of Reform under Gorbachev,” *Soviet Studies* 40, no. 3 (1988): 367–84.

³Melanie Beresford, “*Doi Moi* in Review: The Challenges of Building Market Socialism in Vietnam,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 2 (2008): 221–43.

⁴Peter Zinoman, “*Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm* on Trial: The Prosecution of Nguyễn Hữu Đang and Thụy An,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2016): 188–215.

⁵Lynn T. White III, *Policies of Chaos: The Organizational Causes of Violence in China’s Cultural Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁶Alexander L. Vuying, “The 2016 Leadership Change in Vietnam and Its Long-Term Implications,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2017): 421–35.

⁷In full disclosure, I was a member of the Governing Board of the VEF from 2013 to 2016.

Universities.⁸ Finally, Bass claims that all Vietnamese students in the United States are Communist Party members or children of elites (p. 92), specifically labeling one who challenged his version of events as a spy (p. 93). This assertion that all 29,000 students are party members is ridiculous and easily belied by the lists of the VEF and Fulbright fellows from Vietnam.⁹ This is just a snippet of the numerous errors I found. After a while, I honestly found myself sympathizing with Bass's editors.

For me, however, the most egregious mistake was his treatment of Đương Trung Quốc, whom Bass considers to be the only actual government censor he met (p. 45). First of all, Quốc is famously not a party member (and one of only twenty-one non-party members in parliament), which is easily verifiable in the list of delegates presented on the National Assembly website. Second and more importantly, Quốc is the most outspoken critic of the government in Vietnam's parliamentary query sessions, who himself has been a victim of censorship. Quốc had spoken out in his dismay at the Vinashin bailouts and opposition to a Chinese bauxite investment in the Central Highlands.¹⁰ Again, transcripts of these query sessions are posted online and Quốc's work is easily verifiable.¹¹ A frustrated fellow delegate even once referred to him as one of the four "great idiots" in the National Assembly and tried to have his speeches curtailed.¹²

That Bass could meet with Quốc and not bother to do the faintest research about him, portraying him as "my censor" (p. 49) rather than a fearless critic of the government is a damning indictment of *Censorship in Vietnam* as a whole. Ultimately, this is a book with a clever premise that is simply too poorly executed to teach us much about Vietnam today. Yet, there is a far more important reason why this book deserves a warning label. Combating censorship is a vital goal, and soldiers in the battle must themselves be standing on firm foundations of verifiable facts. To do otherwise is simply to wage an equally damaging disinformation campaign with truth as the ultimate victim.

EDMUND MALESKY
Duke University
eddy.malesky@duke.edu

⁸See the February 2017 Vietnam Education Foundation overview at <https://home.vef.gov/download/Overview%20as%20of%20February%202017%20-%20FINAL.pdf> (accessed November 10, 2018).

⁹Mark Ashwill, "Vietnamese Student Numbers Growing in the US," *University World News*, January 15, 2016, <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=2016011313585113> (accessed November 10, 2018).

¹⁰Jason Morris-Jung, "The Vietnamese Bauxite Controversy: Towards a More Oppositional Politics," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10, no. 1 (2015): 63–109.

¹¹To make this easy, a Wikipedia page with links to Quốc's most controversial statements can be found at https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C6%B0%C6%A1ng_Trung_Qu%E1%BB%91c (accessed November 10, 2018). For a more comprehensive analysis of speeches see Paul Schuler, "Position Taking or Position Ducking? A Theory of Public Debate in Single-Party Legislatures," *Comparative Political Studies* (2018), doi:10.1177/0010414018758765. Schuler's dataset on parliamentary speeches, which is available in his replication materials, clearly shows that Quốc is far more likely than any other delegate to speak and be critical of the government in query sessions.

¹²Elsewhere I have summarized this discussion. See Edmund J. Malesky, "Understanding the Confidence Vote in Vietnamese National Assembly: An Update on 'Adverse Effects of Sunshine,'" in *Politics in Contemporary Vietnam: Party, State, and Authority Relations*, ed. Jonathan D. London (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 84–99.