

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Of (Newly) Other Spaces: Urbanization and Ways of Being Modern in Contemporary Vietnam

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Erik Harms. *Luxury and Rubble: Civility and Dispossession in the New Saigon*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016. 304 pp. \$35 (paper); e-book free of charge.

Gisele Bousquet. *Urbanization in Vietnam*. New York: Routledge, 2015. 148 pp. \$139 (cloth); \$38 (e-book).

In a 2006 article, anthropologist Hy Van Luong identified a broad, open set of projects then beginning to take shape in the anthropology of Vietnam under the sign of “local-global-state interaction.” These new works attended to changing notions of culture in official discourse on the nation since the mid-twentieth century, changes rooted in local–state relations and in Vietnam’s relationship to the global system. In that piece, Luong called for in-depth historical and comparative multi-sited ethnographic research on the interplay of state, global, and local forces that pays close attention to the larger politico-economic framework within which these interactions occur (2006). Two recent works by Erik Harms and Gisele Bousquet—skilled ethnographers with long experience in their field sites—have certainly met Luong’s challenge, combining nuanced analysis of a wealth of detailed ethnographic material with insights gleaned from historians of Vietnam who have long paid attention to cities, infrastructure, and urban planning, and scholarship from the interdisciplinary domain of urban studies. These books join a flurry of excellent recent work by social scientists of Vietnam, including Nguyen-vo Thu-Huong’s *Ironies of Freedom* (2008), Christina Schwenkel’s *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam* (2009), Ann Marie Leshkovich’s *Essential Trade* (2014), and Kimberly Hoang’s

Dealing in Desire (2015), which likewise focus on the rapidly changing meanings and values ascribed to persons, sites, history, and memory within the context of urban late-socialist Vietnam. Historian Peter Zinoman's work on the late colonial-era journalist and author Vu Trong Phung has also shown how the bustle and chaos of the rapidly developing colonial city, with all of its destructive and productive frictions, not only formed a stage on which the violence and contradictions of French settler colonialism and imperialist capitalism in Indochina could be seen in unavoidable and sharp relief. His work demonstrated how the city also served as an incubator for an artistic and political vision that was at once the heir of Vietnamese "tradition" and a self-consciously and deliberately global modernity (2002, 2014).

The emergence in Vietnam of what has been termed fiscal or market socialism since the adoption of economic reforms in the late 1980s has produced disruptions and opportunities that have, as in many places, been unevenly distributed over the population. Vietnam's urban centers have been at the forefront of these uneven transformations, first as laboratories of post-1975 flirtation with market-based principles. Political scientists William Turley and Brantly Womack, for instance, describe how the socialist model's failure in economic crisis, the backlash in the Mekong Delta against collectivization, falling outputs, the end of Chinese and Western aid, the economic embargo, and conflicts with China and Cambodia prompted proposals by the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee as early as August 1979 to allow private-sector businesses to obtain materials, to produce goods in which they had a competitive advantage over state enterprises, and to sell those goods on the free market. Local authorities "introduce[d] piece-rate wages, profit and loss accounting, and supply priority for export industries" (1999, 88). With its resources being so vital to national economic development, the center, which still preferred socialist consolidation, allowed its leaders in Ho Chi Minh City to act pragmatically. These local experiments touched off a growth spurt in 1981 and set the stage for the more ambitious and broadly applied national reforms of the mid-1980s, as it became clear that the only way to stabilize and deepen these successful experiments was to adopt them as national policy. City leaders rose to national prominence by opposing discredited conservative policies favored by the center (Turley and Womack 1999).

The social dislocations, economic inequalities, and religio-moral anxieties that followed the expansion of market reforms are well documented. In the domain of education, the state began to move away from providing free or low-cost schooling, placing a heavier burden on

families to provide educational opportunities for their children (Marr and Rosen 1999). In the domain of labor, employment possibilities for youth became more diverse than under the planned economy, with the most-favored jobs no longer in the state sector (Marr and Rosen 1999). Young people traded job security for greater diversity of opportunities and freedom to exercise individual initiative (Marr and Rosen 1999). Finally, the immediate post-reform period was one of deep anxiety, as the revolutionary generations who had experienced hardship in the wars against France and the United States became concerned about foreign influence on Vietnamese youth. This was accompanied by a perceived explosion of crime, violence, and social vices, which resulted in a series of campaigns that mobilized public security forces, mass organizations, and the public to eliminate “social evils” and “poisonous culture” by targeting citizens who had already been displaced in the new socio-moral landscape and made vulnerable in the new economy: sex workers and drug users (Nguyen Vo 2002, 2008; Robert 2005; Montoya 2012). New notions of what was “modern,” “outmoded,” or “backwards,” according to historian David Marr and political scientist Stanley Rosen, characterized a split between those who came of age during the Second Indochina War (1954–1975) and those who did so during the subsequent years of dramatic socioeconomic change (1999).

Erik Harms’s *Luxury and Rubble* is a work of fine-grained thick description that patiently walks readers through the rapid economic, cultural, and socio-spatial shifts that remade Ho Chi Minh City. As an anthropologist for whom Ho Chi Minh City has served as a primary field site for the past decade and a half, I enjoyed engaging with this work on a portion of the city and a slice of its history with which I am not very familiar. Having only visited Phu My Hung a handful of times, I recall being struck not only by its architectural and spatial difference from the rest of the city, but by the similarity of its architecture and layout to other highly planned Southeast Asian metropolises. I remember considering the displacements and the *rubble* left in their wake, a term Harms elevates from simple description to powerful concept in this work, and the seep of tarmac and concrete into the northern edge of a semi-rural mangrove ecosystem once known as the Rung Sat, part of an aggressive neoliberal project by which Ho Chi Minh City sought to transform itself from “Saigon” into an ersatz Singapore.

Harms’s nuanced book prompts us to reconsider this simplistic assessment, calling us to take seriously the aspirations of local residents who have seen and still see the promise of this kind of development, even if they do not personally benefit from it. Harms reminds us,

rightfully, that many people, including those displaced by these large-scale projects, take them as a source of national pride, as evidence that Vietnam is finally emerging from a century of colonialism, war, and failed collectivist experiments, even as they denounce the corruption and insider trading that lubricate this type of “market-oriented socialism” (7). Harms shows how privatization and individualization are here linked to a specific emerging notion of collective social responsibility, as residents of the luxury villas of Phu My Hung speak about and work toward a “new urban consciousness” that contains within it the responsibility to attend to and consider others (14).

Likewise, Harms shows how displaced residents of his fieldsite, Thu Thiem, though rightfully upset at the ridiculously low levels of compensation they received for their homes and land (when compared to the astronomical values of the same land once in the hands of new residents and developers), do not view such master-planned development projects negatively. Instead, they considered “modern master-planned urban developments” as potentially contributing to the improvement of the city, a goal for which they are willing to make sacrifices, but not to be cheated (15). In this way, Harms’s work sets about exploring the inextricable link between luxury and rubble, the destruction and erasures that inevitably undergird production and spectacular visibility, the uses of the “rule by law” (Marangé 2006, 90), and the pursuit of a specific form of “modernity”—at once an object and a project, ever an aspiration, as ambiguous and elusive as Gatsby’s green light.

Instead of providing a long summary of this excellent book, I will touch on three significant points. First, Harms links the contemporary processes of destruction, displacement, production, and retrenchment to a longer history of Vietnamese southern expansion, a nationalist narrative of civilizing the wilderness, or “clearing the wasteland” (35). He shows how the Phu My Hung and Thu Thiem foundation narratives closely mirror the nationalist story of the founding of Saigon itself, presenting a heroic tale of plucky dreamers and hardy pioneers raising a city from an “empty” swamp. Harms notes how such nationalist stories erase the priority and vibrancy of the previous occupants, as these lands have been settled for centuries, most notably by indigenous and Khmer peoples. This narrative also has resonance with the “clearing” of the discursively and later practically “emptied” central highlands in the late 1990s and early 2000s for coffee and cashews. Harms finds a certain irony in the fact that the new “civilizers”—

“Vietnamese urban pioneers” in conjunction with foreign developers—are now displacing these “old civilizers,” mobilizing a similar civilizing rhetoric (36).

Second, Harms identifies a version of this rhetoric within the profoundly aspirational project of developing a new urban consciousness or civilization/civility, notably new ways Vietnamese residents of the city have come to imagine the possibilities of collective existence, “behave[ing in] a cultural and civilized lifestyle” in public (60). Here the author embarks on a remarkable discussion of the history and use of the Vietnamese term *van minh* (“civilized”), and a measured consideration of the term’s “double edge”—the necessary disqualifications, exclusions, and silencing that form the underside of this powerful and compelling concept that at the same time holds out the promise of liberation and inclusion. This second movement of the book allows Harms to delve deep into his rich ethnographic material, presenting the voices and observations of his informants, beside whom he explores the limits and uses of these notions of civility and consciousness: their deployment as elements within a new Vietnamese urban self-imagination, or as weapons of critique within a newly emerging, specifically urban moral economy. Tacking between related scholarship, classic social theory, and ethnographic case material, Harms masterfully provides us with a window onto how residents of Ho Chi Minh City are today renegotiating possible new ways of living together.

Third, Harms does a superb, even-handed job of balancing the general tendency to view these master-planned urban developments as unabashedly capitalist, enabled by new private property relations and a “clear renunciation of socialism” (89), with the strong sense from local residents (even those of rubble-strewn Thu Thiem) that these new urban forms were part of a pioneering and long-desired attempt to finally deliver the well-designed, orderly, efficient urban spaces socialism had promised. To the untrained eye, the rubble fields of Thu Thiem and manicured neo-tropical modernist nowhere-spaces of Phu My Hung can be read as part of the voracious late-capitalist transformations taking place in the peri-urban or suburban sectors of cities throughout the world, cousin to the inner-city gentrification that is pricing out long-time residents closer to home. Harms’s work is a welcome corrective to this vision, unwilling to obscure the corruption, violence, and inequality inherent in these processes, while reminding us, with recourse to the voices and visions of his myriad informants, that such projects are still compelling for both residents and leaders, as they have been since Hausmann. For residents of Ho Chi Minh City, these projects are fuel for dreaming, for the potential fashioning of new forms

of citizenship and collective engagement, and for imagining new futures. Drawing for us evocative scenes—dusk on the Starlight Bridge, chatter at the Rubble Café—Harms reminds us, without recourse to a hermeneutics of suspicion, that the people of Ho Chi Minh City—formerly Saigon, formerly Prey Nokor—support these transformations (albeit in a complicated way), even as they are aware of bearing pain for the sake of others' profits.

Gisele Bousquet's *Urbanizing Vietnam* is a well-researched northern counterpart to Harms's work, centered in Khuong Ha, once an unincorporated rural village that has been engulfed by a rapidly expanding Hanoi. In many ways, this book is *Luxury's* mirror image. Drawing on a wealth of historical information on Hanoi and sixteen years of fieldwork in this community, Bousquet explores the social, spatial, and economic transformation of this "urban village" with special attention to the role of women as "new entrepreneurs" and "gatekeepers of the community's cultural identity" (2). But whereas Phu My Hung and Thu Thiem were razed and reimagined within their respective master plans, Khuong Ha's transformation occurred through a starts-and-fits engulfment, resulting in a somewhat haphazard process of urbanization, what Bousquet calls "a more human approach to urban development" (136). In contrast to the displacements and evictions described by Harms, these transformations have been for the most part peaceful, even enriching. In Khuong Ha, residents have capitalized on an influx of new migrants and developed an informal economy based on housing, feeding, and entertaining the newcomers, by constructing new buildings on former agricultural lands and expanding or renovating existing structures. Bousquet notes that the development of these informal markets has served to boost the position of women in the community, remaking gender relations and norms. This work is in line with recent work by Ann Marie Leshkovich, whose book *Essential Trade* (2014) likewise focuses on the lives of female entrepreneurs, specifically the ways in which they skillfully manage their self-presentation and activate kinship networks to weather profound economic and social shifts. Here, I would like to highlight three points that Bousquet's fine work brings to the fore in unique ways.

First, Bousquet situates the processes that have transformed this urban village in the economic reforms of the late 1980s. In 1988, the government began to allow residents to lease plots of land for a period of five years, plots that locals converted swiftly into private gardens. Initially, produce from these plots was used for household consumption, but it was later harvested for sale in local markets. The state soon after eliminated price controls and scaled back

its management of agricultural output, eventually allowing farmers to take out longer leases on their plots, rent them to others, mortgage them, and pass them along to their heirs. These new policies provided an opportunity for farmers in need of cash to improve their living standards by selling land to new arrivals and speculators. Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, demand for housing increased, contributing to a booming real estate market and driving land values up astronomically. Under these new conditions, and having learned the lessons of those who sold too quickly and for too little, local residents became more inclined to hold on to their land, opting instead to convert garden and field parcels into rental units. This “contributed to the in situ urbanization of Khuong Ha,” with residents setting their minds to “acquiring more space and maximizing the space they already had” (20) and transforming a landscape of fruit tree gardens and family courtyards into an increasingly crowded and isolating concrete maze. Bousquet describes how, with these shifts, residents gained access to new urban amenities like electrification, street lighting, piped water, and garbage collection. However, she also mentions the environmental and social costs of this building boom, such as the poor quality of early construction, increases in heat due to the disappearance of shade and green spaces, increases in traffic and diesel pollution, and overcrowding. As this community expanded to accommodate new arrivals, security and violations of the community norms and moral economy became issues for the first time. But though this new landscape posed new dangers, it also afforded new opportunities, particularly for women. Women with no formal education began to find their niche as landlords, small-scale real estate developers, and local entrepreneurs. Bousquet’s work is strongest in this section, when walking the reader through the bewildering galaxy of colloquial and official terminology for types of land, ownership/use rights, and documents, terms that shift with every new policy change. With her no-frills presentation and straightforward use of ethnographic case material, Bousquet provides strong examples to illuminate these complex terms.

Second, this deployment of rich fieldwork material is most powerful in the middle section of the book, as Bousquet describes the increasing difficulty of making a living as a small farmer in this community. “The transformation of the farmland into a commodity,” she writes, “was the result of population pressure and a shift in land value brought by the intense urbanization of Khuong Ha” (59). The labor-intensive nature of cultivation, coupled with plunging produce prices and the diminishment of cultivable land as it was apportioned and overlaid by housing, all

but eliminated farming as a viable way of life. Bousquet puts her detailed ethnographic material to good use in this section, giving us high-resolution snapshots of these family households and the women who manage them, down to the clothes community members favor when working their plots and the prices paid for bunches of spinach, mint, thyme, or bananas at given times. Bousquet carefully documents how, within a decade, the women in this community “lost their way of life as they slowly gave up farming” (58). With no other skills and little education, they moved into the service industry, an open field where such women could, with few barriers, set up businesses that served the newcomers.

Third, as women in Khuong Ha became significant players and anchors in the economy, gender relations were reconfigured. Over the course of the last two decades, these women, whom Bousquet describes as having “little or no education and no formal business experience” (135), have been instrumental in transforming the local economy, capitalizing on new opportunities opened up because of the rapid urbanization of their village. In Khuong Ha, women work as landlords, manage rental properties, and open shops, restaurants, and cafes. These female entrepreneurs strengthen their enterprises by activating kinship and social networks, solidifying their positions, and eventually forming more permanent businesses. In this milieu, patrilineal and patrilocal traditions that had previously been the norm, as they are elsewhere in Vietnam, have been reshaped. The daughters of Khuong Ha residents reside with their families after marriage, and it is the husbands who move in with their in-laws. Bousquet describes how children are raised by wives’ families, and husbands are dependent on their wives’ families. The young women of the community are better educated than in the past, also entering into the informal economic sector, but benefiting from the economic power of their female predecessors. As women become more economically important to families, they are generally freer to exercise their initiative, both in the private sphere of the household economy and in the public sphere, as maintainers of traditions and cultural and historical memory.

These are two extremely valuable works by experienced field workers that contribute a great deal to the growing corpus of excellent work in the anthropology of Vietnam. I have only two minor quibbles. Bousquet’s work deploys high-powered detail to render bare, in a direct and uncompromising way, the lives of the residents of Khuong Ha as they ride the turbulent waves produced by a series of potentially destabilizing economic and social shifts. Bousquet looks up only rarely from this fine-grained detail to draw on other work in this area, to take advantage of

potentially useful concepts from other scholars' work, or to develop such concepts for use by others. She makes a powerful case for the fact that "in the process of urban transformation, informalization is a transitional economic mode," and a mode whose outcomes are shaped by local conditions, culture, and politics. Beyond this insight, some discussion of the stakes or meanings of these processes outside the confines of this particular urban village would be welcome. For instance, what might this engulfment of the rural mean for the much-cherished concept of, or migration or memorialization practices related to, *que huong*, the ancestral, typically rural, hometown to which one traditionally returns for holidays, special ceremonies, and burials? I look forward to future work by Bousquet that may range more widely to explore these stakes and some of the poignant observations she makes in her excellent concluding chapter.

While Bousquet's work briefly addresses the environmental costs of urbanization, Harms's book is virtually silent on what these kinds of urban expansions into the mangrove marshes south and east of Ho Chi Minh City might mean, in terms of how (or if) residents conceive of the potential benefits of preserving these ecosystems as "lungs," green spaces, carbon sinks, and storm surge barriers for the city. The debate about green spaces, water, flooding, and the long-term ecological costs of urban development is ongoing and will perhaps soon reach a crisis point in Singapore, the ultra-modern metropolitan model to which Phu My Hung bears an eerie, and perhaps not accidental, similarity. It seems at the very least worth noting if such considerations *do not* appear as part of Ho Chi Minh City residents' new "consciousness" or notion of "civility," given how these explicitly seek to encompass how they should or might live together in the future. We may all soon, as many have already, pay a high price for embracing and pursuing all too quickly another version of modernity that does not have room for these kinds of considerations in the time of the Anthropocene.

In 2007, for the first time in the history of the species, more humans resided in cities than in rural areas, and that gap has increased in the intervening decade. We have become an intensely urban species, and the city and its gruesome and increasingly commonplace corollary, the slum, will not only define this century, but for better or worse serve as the platform from which we will attempt to stave off the looming threats posed by climate change, pollution, and global health crises. In a brief, much-cited essay, Foucault cautioned us to remember that "we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things," but rather that we must attend to a space shot through with meanings that acts on us as a kind of machinery, "the space in

which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs,” a space that, for Foucault, “claws and gnaws at us” (1984, 47). In the best tradition of anthropology, Bousquet and Harms have given us two ethnographically grounded and theoretically sophisticated guides with which we may begin to read the palimpsestic texts of the urban built and social spaces of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. They have shown us that in the twenty-first-century city, urban development, driven by shifts in policies and fueled by new visions of modernity, both enables and constrains the life chances of those who are subject to them, conditioning the very possibility of dreams, and remaking the spaces within which those dreams are fulfilled or else dry up.

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