The study of the history of Vietnamese communism has declined markedly since the Cold War ended in 1991 and the battles for Vietnam fade ever further into the past. Setting aside the never-ending biographies of Ho Chi Minh, one would be hard pressed to find in 2011 a new history of Vietnamese communism. Scholarly interest has moved on to new topics. This is a natural tendency in any field and a good one at that. However, one unfortunate result in the case of Vietnamese studies is that our understanding of Vietnamese communism, as well as the wars that shaped it, has remained stuck in something of a time warp — a prisoner of the debates dividing scholars of the “Vietnam generation” over the legitimacy of Western intervention in Indochina.

On the one side are those who supported the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s (DRV) struggle for independence against French and American intervention. For these mainly Western-based writers, the communist core of this government and its links to Beijing and Moscow were less important than the fact that Ho and his entourage were the “authentic” nationalists fighting for the just cause of national liberation. It was vain for the French and the United States governments to intervene against the DRV, for it enjoyed the overwhelming support of the Vietnamese people. On the other side are those who downplayed and even denied the DRV’s nationalism, focusing instead on its expansionist, totalitarian, and internationalist communist character. Ho was not the “father” of the nation, as the orthodox school would have it, but the Comintern’s point man for promoting communism in Southeast Asia. For these revisionists, American intervention to protect Vietnam from communism was thus fully justified. To this day, battles still rage between “orthodox” and “revisionist” scholars who clash

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Daniel Hémery, Pierre Brocheux, William Duiker, Sophie Quinn-Judge, and Martin Grossheim have published the most recent biographies of Ho Chi Minh (Brocheux penned two!).
over the meaning of Western involvement in the Vietnam War and the nature of the Vietnamese communist state.²

Fortunately, new studies inevitably come along to provide a new take on a seemingly worn-out topics. Anthropologists Heonik Kwon and Shaun Malarney have done just this with their landmark studies of the “war after the war”³. Each of these authors published theoretically sophisticated and remarkably insightful socio-cultural studies of the “lives of the dead” left behind by the wars and explored contesting village and party-state efforts to console, commemorate, and legitimate. Neither of these young scholars got bogged down in the stale debates of the past. Instead they take our understanding of Vietnamese communism and the wars that drove it to new analytical and theoretical heights. What is more is that they did it based on impressive fieldwork in Vietnam.

French historian, Benoît de Tréglodé, has done something just as important in this path-breaking study of Vietnamese communism, Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam.⁴ Whereas Heonik Kwon and Shaun Malarney focused on how local communities sought to devise ways to solve major existential questions ignored or manipulated by the Party-State, namely the religious rituals essential to putting to rest the wandering souls of loved ones killed in war, Benoît de Tréglodé focuses instead on how the Party created a pantheon of “new heroes” — among the living and the dead — as part of its wider project to mobilize for war, forge a new bureaucratic elite, and remake the society in the image of the communist creed, between 1948 and 1964. Like his anthropologist colleagues, de Tréglodé’s is no histoire événementielle. This study is theoretically informed, analytically nuanced, and interdisciplinary in its approach.

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⁴ Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam first appeared in French in 2001 (L’Harmattan), the product of Benoît de Tréglodé’s doctoral dissertation at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris under the direction of Yves Chevrier, specialist of communist China. However, the English-language version here is more than a simple reproduction of the earlier French version. De Tréglodé has updated and revised large parts of the original manuscript. He also incorporated new field research which he conducted since the publication of the French version.
In a fine opening chapter, the author provides an insightful account of “heroism” in Sino-Vietnamese culture and in Vietnam before situating his analysis of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s attempt to import the “new hero” (Anh hùng mới) from the communist world starting from 1948. On the one hand, he analyzes expertly how this model borrowed from the communist world was adjusted to a Vietnamese context. On the other hand, he explains how the Party-State sought to use it into the 1960s to mobilize and transform the society along increasingly communist lines pushed by the communist core. If scores of scholars of earlier generations have focused on “nationalism” and “communism”, few if any have truly explored the Party’s use of “emulation campaigns”, “new heroes”, “rectification”, and the mobilization of the “heroes”. Indeed, heroes, coming from the living and the dead, are at the center of de Tréglodé’s story. In so doing, he has opened up a whole new way of studying and understanding communism as a socio-cultural, transformative project. And while it has never been his goal (and he is right in my view), his book helps us move beyond the overused binary debates of the past and rethink Vietnamese communism, and even the wars, in entirely new ways.

It is a fascinating account based like no other account in French and English on primary sources coming from Archives no. III in Hanoi — many have claimed to have used such archival sources; Benoît de Tréglodé actually did it. What makes this book even stronger in methodological terms, again like those penned by Malarney and Kwon, is that de Tréglodé did not remain trapped in the world of the Party-State, holed up in the archives, or a prisoner of trendy discourse and theory. This French scholar got on his motorbike and conducted scores of interviews with local officials, villagers, and with “new heroes” themselves. It is a fascinating read.

We should also thank Claire Duiker for her expert translation of what was a very difficult French text to translate. Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam is an outstanding piece of scholarship — original, very well written, impressively researched — and makes a major contribution to Vietnamese, Southeast Asian, communist, war, and memory studies. For me, this book goes right up there next to the ones recently published by Heonik Kwon and Shaun Malarney.

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