

## **Catherine Earl (ed.): Mythbusting Vietnam: Facts, Fictions, Fantasies**

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### **Review by Friederike Trotier**

The collected volume “Mythbusting Vietnam: Facts, Fictions, Fantasies” aims to discuss problematic axiomatic knowledge and to raise alternative possibilities in knowledge production processes and practices in Vietnam Studies through interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse approaches. The book is based on the idea of “mythbusting”, which derives from a postmodern approach to knowledge production and encourages the reader to actively engage with the processes of knowledge (de-)construction. Following the subtitle of the book “Facts, Fictions, Fantasies”, the volume is organized into three thematic themes. The editor, Catherine Earl, introduces each section with a short discussion to situate it in the context of the themes of mythbusting and knowledge production about Vietnam. Together with the introduction and conclusion, these essays form a thread to link the different chapters with their various themes and disciplinary and methodological approaches.

In this collected volume, each chapter has a value of its own because of the new perspectives or new findings that the authors discuss. What makes this book unique, however, is the overall discussion of Vietnam Studies as a field and the explicit incorporation of the how and why in the expansion of ways of knowing Vietnam. This makes the book a valuable contribution for readers who are interested in Vietnam but also in the discussion of knowledge production and practices more generally.

In the first section, the authors of the three contributions rethink and reread existing “facts” – which are considered as “social facts” – and thus engage in multiplying ideas and knowledges about Vietnam. Marie Gibert reconsiders the use and conceptualization of public space in Ho Chi Minh City in the first chapter. Her focus is on urban interstices, such as alleyways and shopping malls as small-scale but vibrant urban spaces that contrast state-controlled official public spaces. The perspective from Vietnam’s “underside” helps to capture the vibrant urban collective life of Ho Chi Minh City and beyond.

The second and the third chapter both seek to multiply the understanding of gender in the framework of Confucianism. In the second chapter, Minna Hakkarainen critically revisits three of the four Confucian classics to provide alternative interpretations of Confucian doctrine with regard to gender. She identifies a significant gap between later Confucianism, which has shaped the idea of an ideal Vietnamese woman and has influenced academic knowledge on gender in Vietnam, and the focus on men in the early Confucian texts when referring to gendered norms. Hakkarainen’s arguments offer the possibility to challenge state

discourse based on later Confucian doctrine that regulates Vietnamese women. Philipp Martin's field research on young men and their life stories in Hanoi provides new understanding of Vietnamese masculinities. He questions the "myth" that Vietnamese men struggle to cope with changing gender practices in the setting of transition, in particular during Doi Moi. Instead, Martin suggests acknowledging the ambivalence about ideas and practices of masculinity in Vietnam.

Based on empirical research, the three co-authored chapters of Section Two engage in knowledge production while dealing with competing "fictions" – understood as socially constructed reality – surrounding the topics. Vladimir Mazyrin and Adam Fforde challenge myths about Vietnamese pre-Doi Moi dependency on Soviet development assistance that are persistent outside of English academia and provide new insights from interview material with three retired Soviet experts. The authors conclude that in spite of Soviet influence, the Vietnamese followed their own strategies. In the fifth chapter, Nguyen Thi Hong-Xoan and Catherine Earl explore the myths about undocumented labour migrants in Ho Chi Minh City and detail their situation of risks. They address the myth of modernization and industrialization employed by the Vietnamese state to stigmatize and exclude undocumented labour migrants despite their positive impacts on Vietnam's economic development. In the following chapter, Ashley Carruthers and Dang Dinh Trung give voice to usually unheard rural people to challenge the myths about "uncivilized" rural-urban migrants. The rural perspective unmasks knowledge production about village life and rural-urban migration as stereotypical perspective of the urbanite and stresses different views on the village, "social remittances" and returnees.

In Chapter Seven, Adam Fforde critically examines the "fantasies" that shape interests in knowledge production with regard to the process of Doi Moi. He reveals the processes of academic and aid-donor scholarship that lead to the production and repetition of myths instead of encouraging to challenge taken-for-granted knowledge about Doi Moi, in particular, and processes of transition and change, more generally.

The different contributions of this volume underline the value of rethinking and questioning knowledge and knowledge production. The reader feels encouraged to sharpen his or her view on mythmaking and to engage in interdisciplinary research to gain analytical richness. Following Catherine Earls suggestions in the conclusion to increase "interactions ... across languages, disciplines and particularized field contexts" (p. 229), this agenda could enrich research and discussions in other disciplines and fields in Southeast Asia and beyond.

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