

Sarah Whitney Womack, University of Virginia

## Beyond Resistance, Before the Revolution: Towards a History of Failure for the Many Vietnams

When Pham Quynh was killed in 1945, the neo-traditional agenda for Vietnam's future would seem to have died with him, a casualty of the revolution that has removed Quynh and his ambitions even from history. Vietnamese neo-traditionalism, and many other rejected ideologies of the colonial period, is an historical failure, and they are excluded from the narrative of nationhood as from the nation itself. These are not satisfying accounts of heroic resistance and hard-won victories; they are chronicles of compromise, anathema to historians and revolutionaries alike. They are, however, crucial to understanding the development of contemporary Vietnam and enormously valuable artifacts of historical possibility, histories of the might-have-been. This paper calls for the rehabilitation of failed history and its possibilities through an exploration of the development and death of one such narrative, its surprising afterlife, and the lessons it brings to the study of the nation's histories.

The study of Vietnam's history has benefited, as has the discipline more broadly, from two recent trends—the anthropological turn and the emphasis on domination and resistance. In some respects, however, the very appropriateness of these inclinations to Vietnamese history have made them limiting and deadening of it. The undeniable importance to European and American scholars of the Indochina wars and the undeniable importance to Vietnam itself of the August Revolution have coincided with the embrace of “histories of the present” and the valorization of resistance above all else to erase from the narrative of Vietnamese history much of that which makes it so fascinating—the erudition of its intellectuals, the sophistication of its urban environments, the richness of its literatures, and, perhaps most importantly, the diversity of the dreams for countless Vietnams that might have been. The Vietnams imagined by Pham Quynh and hundreds of others—all of these are failed histories, but it does not follow that they are insignificant ones. Part of the intention of this study is to explore the ways in which failed histories shape the present, and how parts of them are salvaged and incorporated into other, more successful ones. The other is to propose an alternative to domination and resistance, a metaphor for historical and contemporary relationships of power that proceeds from the colonial history of Vietnam itself.

Essentially, this paper engages with the themes of the workshop in a couple of ways-- first, it provides a critique of and alternative to the domination-and-resistance narratives that form the bulk of both recent scholarship on colonialism and of nationalist histories. Second, it advocates the rehabilitation of what I call "histories of failure" in the face of the "histories of the present" favored under the anthropological

turn in the discipline. I do this not simply to encourage better context for the dominant narrative, but rather to preserve the notion of historical possibility and the awareness, so important to the colonial period in particular, of the richness and diversity of national imaginings.