

Thomas A. Bass

Censorship in Vietnam. Brave New World

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Changing the traditional alphabet to a new writing system was enough to block access to millennia of history. Chữ nôm characters were forbidden by Indochina's colonial powers in 1920, as "part of a strategy to reset Vietnamese history to year zero." (Thomas Bass, *The Spy Who Loved Us*, New York: Public Affairs, 2009, p. 17). Few Vietnamese can now get a full grasp of their rich history for a different reason: many texts never make it to print, or are destroyed. Dissident writer Pham Thi Hoai lives in exile, dodging cyber-attacks from Vietnam that attempt to block her online publications. The destruction of her work is an action taken by the Vietnamese government's censors, says investigative journalist Thomas Bass, who followed her suggestion to initiate this project. The resulting book, *Censorship in Vietnam*, examines the publishing industry in a country where the Ministry of Information and Communication controls all publications and has hundreds of censors in all levels of government. There is no freedom of speech, as the two or three hundred imprisoned bloggers know well. Censorship of novels and poems is alarming, says the author. A press card is only useful to avoid traffic fines, says a local journalist. The book is born as an experiment to put Vietnam's censorship system to the test and document its methods. Thomas Bass uses one of his earlier works as bait: the translation into Vietnamese of *The Spy Who Loved Us*. The American reporter's biography of secret agent Pham Xuan An, informed by his personal interviews with the double agent, does not have the "correct" orientation for Vietnamese officials. It took five years to complete a translation that obtained the government's approval and to get the book on the shelves. Said "translation", once finalised, evidenced around four hundred edits cut from the original, and it was padded with "corrections" and translator's notes that pointed out "mistakes" in the biographer's original text. More frustrating for Bass was the twisting of Pham Xuan An's ideological leanings, and even his accent, distorting his own voice. Some of the people involved in publishing the local adaptation of the biography dropped out en route, though these types of retractions are not always voluntary. This wouldn't be the first time that a translator was persuaded to abandon and withdraw their work. The experiment articulated in *Censorship in Vietnam* does everything the author intended, but the book is much more than a description of his personal experiences. Interviews with writers, editors, activists and even censors, confirm with example after example, that Vietnam's censorship system is voluble, multifaceted, and can get nasty. The suspense built by the dramatic accounts of the interviewees is eased by the vivid and clean prose Bass writes. The people cited speak with even more eloquence, their snippets of wisdom showing what admirable writing skills the country is wasting. "They can arrest you for reading my poems in Vietnam" (p. 193), warns the outspoken wordsmith whose texts rarely get published anymore. Authors of international fame, their works translated in twenty countries, live in house arrest in Vietnam, or have been forced to quit publishing. One activist has paid with years in prison his crusade to translate, by his own initiative, articles on democracy. Stories narrated directly by those who overstep the censor's comfort zone include suspicious traffic accidents or recurring police intimidation. An unmarried journalist is subject to psychological mortification, when the police threaten to show her mother photographs of the dissident daughter's sexual activity. A former director of a popular newspaper was shamed in a perpendicular move: he was axed from the newspaper he himself had founded, then put in charge of an insipid magazine. Those even less fortunate were sacked, and no one will ever hire them again, as their friends, supporters or family members can be harmed by collateral damage. Scattered comments throughout the book shape a solid argument for the practice of censorship, more than as a mechanism to curb unrest, as a means to facilitate corruption. Corruption is untouchable because it cannot be investigated, denounced publicly or even documented: it leaves no paper trail. Various authors, especially the novelists, despise the censors for their lack of educated knowledge and for their clumsiness cutting and dismembering crafted pieces of writing. Censorship so ubiquitous and persistent, they feel, has generated widespread ignorance. "Our education system has brainwashed us. It takes more than a decade to get over this brainwashing." (p. 202). Up to this point, *Censorship in Vietnam* has been faithful to the first part of its title. The second part of its name, *Brave New World*, suggests the courage of those trying

to change the system. The admirable personalities presented to us by Bass have in common a brave spirit, though individually they protect themselves with a whole range mechanisms that go from a sense of humour, acceptance of the status quo, unbreakable willpower, a clandestine double life, exile, or, alas, a passivity distilled in bitterness. Hundreds of people have ceased to write, compose or create, the author asserts. Self-censorship is a reliable form of protection against the dangerous effects of external censorship. In Vietnam only eighty daring members of an association of independent journalists demand a multiparty state, with civil society and respect of human rights. That Brave New World that the title suggests, however, is not intended to pay homage to brave dissidents and passionate creatives. It is a fitting literary reference to a dystopia which the author sees coming. Bass predicts that what is happening in Vietnam is not going to improve, and furthermore, it may become more frequent in other parts of the world. He is not resurrecting that old domino theory that caused panic among North Americans convinced of the contagious proclivity of communism. Rather, the author considers that the cultural destruction happening in Vietnam is a warning for all of us, which he explains by drawing a parallel between censorship and mass surveillance, in connection with rising commercial interests over other values. This proposition is, regrettably, not fully fleshed out, and can appear overdramatic. Immersing oneself in reading this book is as easy as going with the flow of an avalanche. It's also easy to brush off the severity of its content as a distant problem, one of the many that the West pins onto the inefficient, "underdeveloped" world. We know the unwritten rules of the Western sport of brandishing the trophy of democracy. This book, however, is not in that dirty race to win the self-arrogated first prize of cultural superiority. Objectively, the argument that Bass leaves blurred is an idea outside of the book's remit. The author's claim that Vietnam's censorship is a red flag to the world needs to be unpicked and expanded. This claim may become the content of a future book by Thomas Bass, the reader hopes, one written with the same sharp observational skills and clear-cut, alluring prose found in this one. After all, it goes beyond the intended purpose of Censorship in Vietnam to discuss global surveillance and the perils of the internet. Something that is missing from this book, however, is a picture of censorship in the visual arts. In Vietnam, films are banned, dance shows are cancelled, and art exhibitions are denied licence to open to the public. Visual artists and galleries are closely monitored, even sabotaged. Granted, this topic deserves another riveting book, but Bass devotes a chapter to poet Nguyen Quoc Chanh's prickly opinions, managing only a swift mention of Chanh's creative output as a sculptor and ceramic artist. The author should have seized this detail, at the very least to share the views of one of Chanh's friends in the art world, Dinh Q Le, whose efforts to keep alive an alternative art space are matched by the censor's drive to make it implode. Naturally, one would wish never to hear of assaults by the cultural police on the altruistic corners of the arts industry, but since it is happening, it merits telling.

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