

Nietzschean Buddhism: Continental Philosophy, Saigon Academics, and the Vietnam War

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There is one enduring image of Buddhism's role in the Vietnam War: the photograph of the monk Thích Quảng Đức, sitting in the lotus position in a major intersection in downtown Saigon, lighting a match, and setting himself on fire. This act of self-immolation has inspired a number of political studies of the Vietnamese Buddhist movement of the mid-1960s. What is less well understood, especially in the United States, is the collection of ideas, philosophies, and doctrines that led Buddhists to call for action. This paper will consider one such antecedent: continental philosophy. Through an examination of the influence of Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Marcel, and Jaspers on Buddhist thinkers in the pages of Buddhist-oriented journals such as *Tư Tưởng* [Thought], this paper will suggest that these global influences allowed thinkers in Vietnam to develop a Buddhist philosophy that was relevant to the condition of war in their own country. Using language borrowed from these thinkers in contemporary continental philosophy, they described a world awash in ideological constructions that political parties offered in bad faith, and argued that Buddhist teachings, unlike misleading Cold War political perspectives, allowed for the attainment of authenticity and for the possibility of reasoned action outside of the dictates of ideology.

Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox is Professor in the Department of History and Non-Western Cultures at Western Connecticut State University. He specializes in the intellectual history, literary history, and historiography of Vietnam from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, and has secondary interests in cross-cultural relations, world history, religion, and philosophy. He is the author of *Allegories of the Vietnamese Past: Unification and the Production of a Modern Historical Identity* (Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 2011), *East Asia and the West* (with Xiaobing Li and Yi Sun), and the editor of *Vietnam and the West: New Approaches* (Cornell SEAP, 2010). His journal articles, which cover such diverse subjects as authorship, gender and historiography, Vietnamese theatre, existentialism, and conceptions of world history, have appeared in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, *positions: east asia cultures critique*, *South East Asia Research*, and *World History Connected*, among other journals.

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