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The Idea of the 'Human' in the Modern Vietnamese Vernacular

The question of the “human” remains one of the most contentious issues of our times. It has become central to contemporary critical disputes on a wide range of issues from LGBTQ rights to environmental sustainability. Yet, the meaning of this term in the Vietnamese context has yet to be explored. This lecture considers both the vocabulary and idea of the “human” through an examination of debates among Vietnamese intellectuals in the early twentieth-century. As new concepts emanating from the West were being translated into East and Southeast Asian languages in the early twentieth-century, Vietnamese intellectuals of the time grappled with the new terms and concepts. One such concept is the relationship between humans and society. Through this debate, the lecture gleans something about the conception of the “human” in the Vietnamese context. How did Vietnamese intellectuals of the time understand the “human”? With what is it associated? What is its relationship to the non-human? In examining these questions, the lecture sheds light not only on Vietnam, but also on how the Vietnamese case can help refigure broader contemporary critical disputes.