

ing a confused account of the alleged early Chinese exposure to Christianity. Mostly, it consists of basic descriptions of the two chief 'sects' he sees in Tonkin, namely, Confucianism and Buddhism.

In sum, this volume is a very welcome contribution to the study and teaching of early modern Vietnamese history. While many historians of Vietnam are acquainted with these two accounts at second hand, I would guess that few have read them in their entirety, an opportunity that now presents itself. Furthermore, these are welcome in the classroom as well, for they offer readily accessible texts that enable students to gain insights into some of the more ordinary aspects of seventeenth century Vietnamese life. The editors are to be greatly commended for combining these texts and through their context-setting prefaces and annotations bringing them to life for a new audience.

George Dutton

Virginia Morris with Clive A. Hills, *A History of the Ho Chi Minh Trail: The Road to Freedom*. Bangkok, Orchid Press, 2006, 180 pp., ill.

The book is the outcome of the author's year-long journey along the tortuous Ho Chi Minh Trail, which runs through Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, although she spent much of her time travelling in Laos. It is a well-balanced travelogue intertwined with history and weaves a clever dialogue between the past and the present. One of the main purposes of the book is to give Laos a place in the history of the Vietnam War, or, as the author rightly refers to it, the Indochina War, because 'Laos was written out of its history' (p.26).

The history of the Ho Chi Minh or Truong Son Trail dates back to 1959. The violation of the 1954 Geneva Accord by the United States of America and the South Vietnamese regime by the failure to hold a general election in Vietnam in July 1956 led North Vietnam in 1959 to reinstate Resolution 15, which revived the revolutionary war to unify the North with the South (p.6). This marked the beginning of the history of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which, until the end of the Vietnam War, was known among the North Vietnamese as the Truong Son Trail or Duong 559 (p.11).

In May 1959, the Special Military Action Group, or the 559th Transportation Unit, was formed, with the responsibility to build the road which would transport men and military supplies to

the battlefield in the south. Initially, the route was to be confined to just inside the border of Vietnam, but to avoid the problems of infiltrating the DMZ, it was decided that the route would be built down the western side of the Truong Son mountains in Laos. In the mid-1960s, Lieutenant General Dong Si Nguyen was appointed the commander of the 559th Unit and it was under his command and leadership that the successful construction and expansion of the Trail took place.

The Trail in Laos covered the larger part of southern Laos. The American air raids and the heavy bombing towards the end of the 1960s on the Trail in Laos pressured Hanoi to build more roads in Laos. This was to avoid the risk of one main supply route being completely blocked, as the leadership in Hanoi decided that 'never again would there be only one main road' and the 559th Corps set about opening multiple bypasses in vulnerable locations' (p.39). The Trail's penetration into this already politically destabilised kingdom in the 1960s did not work in its favour. It further divided the locals between those who supported the Pathet Lao communists, the Neutralists and the Royalists. Together with their bitter memories of the colonial period and the American and other Western involvements during the Vietnam War, it is not surprising to find that in many places in Laos where the author and her companions visited, their presence was met with mistrust among the Lao and roused painful memories. This chapter of Lao history and the Vietnam

War is well described:

...Scars were not just physical but mental, and families were torn between love and politics. We were just the reminder of a string of broken promises from all sides.... (p.42)

Her 'epic journey' on the Trail, which led her to travel hundreds of kilometres by various forms of transport through lower Laos, reveals two striking features; i.e., the suffering this small country and its people had to endure during the war and after and its fantastic ethnic diversity. As for the suffering, the author's passage through many villages in order to find the Trail and to see war equipment damaged during battles reveals some of the ugly features of the Vietnam War. Since a major proportion of the Trail ran through Laos, it was heavily targeted by American air raids.

She also reminds us of the damage the war has caused to human beings. The chemical warfare – especially the use Agent Orange or dioxin – caused serious damage, both to humans and to the environment. When Virginia Morris and her team arrived at Ban Lang Khang, they found that the trees there were small because the area had been chemically sprayed and even today women give birth to malformed children and their livestock die (p.37). There is no need to mention the Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) that still kills local people when they farm their land, which will take many years to clear entirely.

Even though her journey reminds us of the pain and suffering the war caused,

there are also pleasurable moments when she touches upon other subjects. Her visits to the villages of many ethnic inhabitants add interesting aspects to the book. This is due to the fact that 'Truong Son boasts an array of linguistic groups, all of which practise their own political and cultural beliefs...' (p.70). Her experiences of cultural variations and differences practised by many different ethnic groups in Laos, such as black magic, animism and supernaturalism, logically led her to conclude that 'I had ceased to resist any seemingly illogical actions. The more at peace I was with them the greater my ability became to identify other cultural phenomena' (p.74).

As the title of the book suggests, it is not just an account of the negative aspects of the Vietnam War. On the contrary, it glorifies the role the Trail played in this chapter of Vietnamese history. Many chapters describe the great achievement the Ho Chi Minh Trail represented and the successes it brought to North Vietnam, culminating in the freedom and unification of the country. Chapter by chapter, the author takes readers back into the history of Vietnam and the Vietnam War from the 1950s. The successful story of the painstaking effort by Hanoi to build the Trail against all odds, as retold to the author by Nguyen Si Dong and other military leaders involved in the Trail project, enables readers to understand clearly why Hanoi won the battle. The North Vietnamese effort to build the Trail demonstrates how this project drew together so many sectors of Vietnamese

society – the army, the youth, students and women, to name but a few – each of whom took responsibility for a particular aspect. Neither the heavy American air raids in Laos or in North Vietnam nor the severe natural environment could deter the determination to build the roads to reach South Vietnam.

One of the most outstanding achievements of the Trail was the building of a pipeline to supply fuel from the North to the South. By 1968, there was a chronic shortage of fuel in the South and 'if the fuel did not go south, nothing else would' (p.99). Brigadier-General (present rank) Phan Tu Quang and Brigadier-General (present rank) Mai Trong Phuoc were given the command to oversee the fuel pipeline project. It was indeed a very daunting task because:

...Apart from the lack of skilled workers, the pipeline had to be carried to position piece by piece, and much of the line had to be hung from trees, laid along mountainsides or buried in shallow trenches. The most pressing affair was that the Soviets did not agree with the project and refused to supply large quantities of pipeline or send experts to advise, on the grounds that it would fail...(p.99)

Against all odds, the pipeline project materialised and 'it had taken the Trail into a new era. They had minimised losses of fuel and human lives, and there was no need to transport bulk fuel by road' (p.99).

Did the Americans know what was going along the Trail, given that they possessed advanced reconnaissance

technology? They surely did, but the question was how effective they were in responding to their enemy's activities.

After the Paris agreement was signed on 27 January 1973 and the American air raids came to an end, the military leadership in Hanoi increased its activities to reach the South. The Truong Son Trail officially became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail and played a vital part to allow the mobile army from the North to reach the South at, as General Vo Nguyen Giap put it, 'lightning speed' (p.135). Only two years after the Paris agreement was signed, Saigon and the southern regime fell into the hands of Hanoi on 30 April 1975. The Vietnam War eventually came to an end and for Hanoi, the Ho Chi Minh Trail had fulfilled its duty as the 'road to freedom'. However, in the author's opinion, the strategic and logical importance of the Trail has not been recognised, and has even been played down by the West.

We certainly cannot ignore the importance and the achievements of the Trail, but the question is whether the freedom and the victory the Trail brought about is for everybody? Tourists now can enjoy some scenic routes of the Trail which were troubled areas in the past and certainly involved trouble for many people involved. The author poignantly observes that:

...We had heard stories, met people and seen the routes, but how much did I really know?...I wondered how many locals had truly contributed their 'eyes and ears' to the People's War, as in Vietnam; how many were mere bystanders;

how many had been French or American supporters? And of those who had, how many were still doing so today? I got the feeling that some locals were pleased to see us and wanted to speak, whereas others I suspected even lied to Mr.Vong [the author's guide in Laos], reluctant to discuss these matters with foreigners! For them, 'The Trail' was still secret and politically their lips were sealed. So sadly these questions might never be answered as this important part of history dies out with the individual. (p.127)

Unlike the tortuous Trail itself, the book is written in a concise and straightforward style and gives readers a multifaceted viewpoint, embracing history, politics, anthropology and a travel diary. The main feature of the book — covering an aspect of the complicated history of the Vietnam War — makes reading it both pleasurable and thought-provoking.

Sud Chonchirdsin
