

Vietnam and the West: New Approaches, ed. by WYNN WILCOX. Studies on Southeast Asia 52 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2010). ISBN 978 087727 782 8 (hard), 978 087727 752 1 (soft)

It is stated in the introduction that this edited volume sets out to accomplish two main goals. Firstly, it aims to demonstrate that Vietnamese history should not be viewed as ‘autonomous’ and ‘meaningful in itself without reference to other histories’. The authors in this book have tried to examine how Western values, ideas and practices have been imported, adopted and redefined in a Vietnamese context. Secondly, the book claims to focus on the ‘intellectual and cultural exchange of various people with different motivations rather than political conflict’. The volume thus tries to go beyond the conflicts during French colonialism and the Vietnam War to explore Vietnam’s and the West’s relationship from different research areas. Although not the first attempt to explore the interaction between Vietnam and the West, this book, *Vietnam and the West: New Approaches*, edited by Wynn Wilcox, is an important addition to the field of Vietnamese Studies and fulfills its main objectives.

The book consists of an introduction and 9 articles that are chronologically divided into three main parts. The first part, *Precolonial Encounters (1862)*, contains three chapters. In this reviewer’s opinion, this is the main contribution of this volume. However, one must regret that the editor has not

found it necessary clearly to explain the demarcation of the year 1862. In this part, Brian Ostrowski studies the rise of Christian Nôm literature in the 17th century and introduces texts which are not included in the canon of Vietnamese literature. The author proposes that the Nôm prose writings portray a faith in Christianity, in local language and expression. The Vietnamese literary scene of the 17th century, as portrayed in this article, is also an important contribution to our knowledge of Vietnamese cultural contact with the West. In this part, C. Michele Thompson provides a similarly interesting account of French physician, Jean Marie Despiou and his relationship with the Nguyễn court. The fact that he was criticized by his compatriots for supporting the Vietnamese court and not being a proper French Christian can be seen as a good example to demonstrate that not all Western people or Christians supported French colonialism in Vietnam. The first part of the volume ends with Wynn Wilcox’s presentation of father Đấng Đức Tuấn (1806-74) described as a ‘cleric, poet, diplomat, writer and historian’. The author’s introduction and analysis of Đấng Đức Tuấn’s work, *An Account of Events in Vietnam* [Thuật tích việc nước Nam] is an enjoyable read. The poem reveals how Christian notions and the Confucian concept of filial piety interacted in the 19th century.

Part II, *French and American Encounters (1862-1975)*, starts with Micheline Lessard’s essay on the participation of Vietnamese women in the anti-French political activism of

1858-1945. In this essay, the author reveals that Vietnamese women took part in the anti-colonial movement long before the campaign launched by the Communist party. The author makes the striking comment that it is “crucial for historians to separate Vietnamese women’s history from the general path of Vietnam’s history”. However, it is still not clear how this can be achieved or whether or not it is possible to disengage Vietnamese women from their national history. The similar question of whether an individual can be totally separated from his or her social context especially in a collective society like Vietnam is suggested. The next chapter in this part is Marc Jason Gilbert’s paper discussing the Vietminh’s appeal to the non-white forces of occupation between 1945 and 1975. These include Indians in the British army, Algerians in the French armed forces and African-Americans among the American troops. This essay is followed by Edmund F. Wehrle’s study of the history and failure of the Vietnamese confederation of Labor (CVT) and the final chapter is Sophie Quinn-Judge’s discussion of the missed opportunities for a peaceful and neutral solution to the conflict in Vietnam and the concept of the ‘Third Force’.

Two articles in the volume’s last section, *Recent Encounters (1975-present)*, examine Vietnamese contact with the West since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 to the present. Diane Niblack Fox’s field research and observation provides a moving account of the lingering effect of the war in Vietnamese society. In this

chapter, through the conversations, readers can hear the voices of survivors of Agent Orange exposure as well as their dreams, concerns and hopes and witness their determination to live. This chapter shows how the author skillfully establishes a link between the historical events and her dialogues with the informants on her fieldwork. It is easy for readers to recognize the author’s objectivity in her representation of the stories in this chapter, a result of her attempt to stay neutral, not making any comment and simply reporting what she found during the fieldwork. The last chapter makes the connection between the process of globalization, economic development and questions over water resources in Vietnam. Christopher Kukk’s study gives an alarming warning of environmental problems and water pollution in Vietnam that have been the price that Vietnamese people have had to pay for economic and industrial development post 1986, since the announcement of the Renovation policy.

Towards the end of the book, the reviewer finds that the essays in this collection respond to the theme of the Vietnam and the West relationship in differing degrees and from the perspective of varying disciplinary studies. These essays allow readers to follow the West’s involvement in Vietnam historically and, overall, the volume shows that the interaction between Vietnam and the West has involved many areas apart from politics and international relations. The existence of the West in Vietnam is presented in different contexts and from various

perspectives. This edited volume also gives us a hint of topics and approaches for further study and shows that in the subject of the interaction between Vietnam and the West there remains much more to investigate. There is no doubt that, for either those specifically seeking to explore the diverse aspects of Vietnamese encounters with the West or for anyone with an interest in Vietnam in general, this book, *Vietnam and the West: New Approaches*, is essential reading.

Montira Rato

Fiery Dragons: Banks, Moneylenders and Microfinance in Burma by SEAN TURNELL. NIAS Monographs #114, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009). ISBN 978 87 7694 041 6 (hard), 978 87 7694 040 9 (soft)

Sean Turnell is Associate Professor of Economics at Macquarie University in Australia, a former senior analyst at the Reserve Bank of Australia, and one of the co-founders of Burma Economic Watch. With feet firmly placed in two arenas, global economics and monetary institutions, on the one hand, and the colonial and modern political economy of Burma on the other, Turnell has demonstrated an ability to utilize both in effective analyses of Burma's colonial and postcolonial history. The current book is no exception and will certainly serve as an important landmark in our understanding of the country's economic history.

The book consists of eleven chapters, including the introduction, and the text is divided roughly evenly between the colonial and post-independence periods, with roughly 130 pages devoted to the post-1962 period of military rule and domination in the country. As such, the book impacts two historiographies, one colonial-focused and the other focused on the more difficult political ground of contemporary scholars, making more uncomfortable the separation of these two scholarships.

As with many non-Western countries that surged out of colonialism in the twentieth century, historiography on