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Book Reviews

Asia

Rural capitalists in Asia: A comparative analysis of India, Indonesia and Malaysia
By MARIO RUTTEN
London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series, No. 88. Pp. xii, 269. Maps, Figures, Photographs, Notes, Bibliography, Index.
doi:10.1017/S0022463406580580

In three respects, this work makes an invaluable contribution. Empirically, it describes and contextualizes an unmistakable but poorly analyzed feature of contemporary rural developing Asia. Theoretically, it addresses squarely the poverty of most recent studies of Asian, and above all Southeast Asian, business. Methodologically, it recognizes that overcoming that poverty requires broadening the set of cases considered and placing explicit emphasis on comparative approaches.

The heart of Mario Rutten's book lies in three admirable chapters. These address, in turn, rural industrialists in Central Gujarat, owners of combine harvesters on Malaysia's Muda Plain, and the owners of iron foundries in Klaten, Central Java. Rutten has immersed himself in the extant secondary, not least historical, literature on each of these areas. He has also undertaken sustained and intensive field-work in all three settings. He is thus able to bring to the cases perspective and judgement that one would expect to find only in far longer monographic studies. Mention of just a few of the countless illuminating details of which Rutten makes such skilled use must suffice here.

Among these details is the role of Klaten's foundries in supplying spare parts to Dutch sugar mills during the First World War, when ordering such parts from Europe became impossible. The owners of the district's foundries would find themselves travelling to New Order Jakarta to secure orders 70 years later. In Gujarat, we read of successful local industrialists gradually distancing themselves from the evening-time social life of the village centre, declining to participate in local civic affairs, and sending their children off to school in larger towns. Among the owners of combine-harvesters on the Muda Plain, the participation of some of the more prosperous in evenings of drinking, occasional womanizing, and the willingness of nearly all to deploy their machines to distant work sites, also represent details of the sort from which Rutten builds important arguments about all three of his geographical cases. Specifically, differentiation within groups – whether those groups are marked by ethnicity, caste or religion – and increasing extra-local orientations characterize the subjects of the author's study in all three settings. So, too, do continuities with earlier successful economic undertakings and shifting partnership arrangements.

It is Rutten's focus on patterns of differentiation and physical mobility that epitomize the greatest empirical contribution of *Rural capitalists in Asia*. That contribution is perhaps even more sociological than economic. No observer of the countryside of South or Southeast Asia can have missed the local businessmen whom Rutten has made

the objects of his study. But, since they are neither 'just villagers' (with all the baggage that this term carries) nor clearly the local merchants or classic tycoons of the market-towns or cities, these actors have proved easiest for most analysts to ignore. They simply do not fit the prevailing social categories with which we approach either rural Asia or the booming Asia of national capitals and financial sectors. It is to Rutten's credit that he refuses to duck the need to incorporate these figures into broader analyses of Asian societies and economies. His goal is, indeed, to draw on his research into such figures – on some of whom he presents fascinating, detailed vignettes scattered throughout the text – to offer a fresh theoretical perspective on Asian business.

In that theoretical sphere, Rutten uses these cases to move beyond the conventional, even clichéd, understandings of entrepreneurship in South and Southeast Asia. If work on the former region has focused on such structural factors as caste and political economy, he argues, scholarship on the latter has stressed cultural determinants as they relate to successful merchant minorities and reliance on networks. Announcing his concern with a 'capitalist style of entrepreneurship . . . across the globe' (p. 36), Rutten would 'move towards developing a more adequate analytical framework that will enable the understanding of entrepreneurial behaviour in any socio-cultural context' (p. 37). And, to be sure, his comparative approach and his consideration of dynamic, smaller-scale undertakings serve this purpose admirably, given the depressing lack of sophisticated comparative work in the study of Asian business and the thin set of cases from which so many generalizations have emerged.

Nevertheless, Rutten's ambitions may in some respects outrun the formal methodological rigor to which he proves willing to submit his cases. His superb discussions such as that of the effect of competition on scale of enterprise among the owners of combine-harvesters in Malaysia (pp. 108–9) and that of inter-firm cooperation among the foundries of Central Java set a standard to which most of his analysis does not live up. Similarly, comparisons drawn among the three extended settings remain loose and rather general.

Mystifyingly, rather than a well structured comparative summary, the concluding chapter of *Rural capitalists in Asia* is above all a long detour into revisionist interpretations of Western Europe's Industrial Revolution. Rutten's purpose in composing this extended review seems to be to undermine the stylized understanding of 'Western' capitalism next to which Asian capitalism has often been deemed 'ersatz'. To this end he cites to great effect an unpublished version of Heather Sutherland's article 'Believing is seeing: Perspectives on political power and economic activity in the Malay world 1700–1940' (*Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26,1 (1995): 133–46). But this is a discussion for which earlier sections of the book have only imperfectly prepared the reader; one wonders why Sutherland is only invoked here. And the chapter thus serves as poor substitute for the generation of the rigorous, widely applicable framework that he has declared the goal of his book.

Despite Rutten's early pledge to leave to others the connection between macro-level developments and the enterprises that he studies (p. 37), in turning to the Industrial Revolution he necessarily backtracks on his pledge. The storied industrialists of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, whether accurately understood or not, have assumed importance in subsequent discussions of economic transformation precisely because of their roles as leading agents of such a transformation. Can the same be

said of Rutten's Gujarati industrialists, Malaysian combine-harvester owners, or Javanese foundry operators? At best, and to adopt the wishful stance of Clifford Geertz in identifying possible agents of Indonesia's 'take-off' into Rostovian growth four decades ago in *Peddlers and princes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), the answer must be 'not yet'. In fact, however, while there is no room for doubt that the subjects of Rutten's book and their achievements reflect the ongoing 'capitalist transformation' (p. 240) of South and Southeast Asia, it is a long stretch to consider them key agents of that transformation. In this age of multi-billion-dollar waves of portfolio investment from abroad, of burgeoning middle-class consumerism, and – in short – of 'globalization', it is quaint to think that they could be. If, then, *Rural capitalists in Asia* remains unconvincing with regard to both economic change and methodological approaches to the study of Asian business, its success in offering a vivid understanding of an undeniably important feature of rural Asia's social landscape leaves us very much in its debt.

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Indonesia

Mematahkan pewarisan ingatan: Wacana anti-komunis dan politik rekonsiliasi pasca-Suharto [*Breaking the immortalized past: Anti-communist discourse and politics of reconciliation in post-Suharto Indonesia*]
By BUDIAWAN
Jakarta: ELSAM, 2004. Pp. xxxvii, 291. Bibliography, Index. [In Bahasa Indonesia]
doi:10.1017/S0022463406590587

This book offers a cogent explication of the roots, the 'social practice' and the lingering impact of anti-communist discourse in post-Suharto Indonesia. Departing from the conviction that historically entrenched anti-communist attitudes pose a formidable hindrance to reconciliation, it argues for 'making peace' with the past by confronting it head-on. The author, Budiawan, claims that this is necessary for efforts at reconciliation and democratization to suceed. A translated version of a PhD thesis submitted at the National University of Singapore in 2003, *Mematahkan pewarisan ingatan* breaks ground for being the first serious book-length attempt to address the intricacies of memory-history interface in Indonesia, specifically that which concerns the very critical and tragic events of 1965–66 and 1968. Lucidly written, hopeful in tone, engaging in style and vigorously argued in most parts, the general reading community would be well served if the English version, with some revisions, would be published as well.

One prime contribution of this work lies in its effort to view anti-communist discourse and the issue of reconciliation from the perspective of local communities. In the first of the six chapters, the author correctly notes that existing related works invariably begin from a statist standpoint. That is, the pervasiveness of anti-communist discourse is seen as a consequence of the authoritarian power of the state that produced and nurtured it. Such a view is obviously inadequate in the face of persistent anti-communist discourse that remained long after the Suharto regime departed. An alternative view suggests that this discourse is a clear indication of the success of the New

Order ideological machinery in 'brainwashing' the people. While to a certain degree it is truthful, it is also limited, considering that other 'historical falsehoods', which the regime vigorously promoted, easily fell along with its demise. The 'lies' about the 1965–66 events endures, as the author shows in Chapters Two and Three, because even the common people, not just the elites, deeply believe in them. They have already gained 'social roots', which makes them difficult to eradicate. One important reason for this, Budiawan argues, is that anti-communist sentiment has been framed as a moral or religious issue, something that easily appealed to the sensitivities of the common people.

Synthesizing a wide range of published materials in Chapter Three, Budiawan traces the genesis of the enmity between the PKI and the Muslim groups going back to as early as the 1920s (with the formation of factions within Sarekat Islam) to the 1960s when the PKI's land reform initiatives intensely infuriated those who were threatened, or had in fact been adversely affected, by such policies. He emphasizes that the idea is not to offer an alternative historical reconstruction of what happened, but to uncover the process of discursive formation that framed what he considers as the most vital element in understanding the conflict between the PKI and Muslim groups: the contest for the definition of who or what is a true Muslim (*Muslim sejati*). Such emphasis is organically linked to the need to unsettle the deeply rooted misconception that equates communism to atheism. Towards this end we can appreciate the exposition and analysis in Chapter Four of autobiographies of two *santri* Muslims who are self-confessed communists (a PKI member and a sympathizer). These autobiographies are particularly interesting since they present the idea of a 'Muslim-communist', and explore why and how the synthesis of Islam and Marxism may be achieved. Also useful is the author's unravelling of the silences within these personal accounts as well as the implication that these autobiographies were published by a group (*syarikat*) closely affiliated with NU, a Muslim organization that participated in the mass killings of 1965–68.

Chapter Five, as well as later part of Chapter Four, describes the valiant efforts of young NU activists in carrying-out reconciliation at the grassroots level, focusing on a pilot project in Blitar, East Java, the site of carnage related to the Trisula Operation in 1968. Highlighted in the narration are the ways they succeeded, in the face of almost insurmountable difficulties, in bridging the two communities whose mutual contempt and suspicion were hardened by three decades of non-engagement. Also clearly explicated is the context and the dynamics within the rather loosely organized NU that makes such initiative possible. While appreciative of the initial success of the project, the author argues that small-scale reconciliation can be achieved notwithstanding the failure at the national level. He even claims that the quest for reconciliation should be directed towards grassroots communities through the initiatives of non-politically identifiable civil society groups so as to protect the initiative from the damaging impact of *aliran* politics.

I am struck by the author's downplaying of the class angle in his analysis. This is understandable considering the persistence of 'class' as an analytical category in Indonesian social sciences. However, I wonder if one who aims to 'break the immortalized past' can ever avoid this framework. The strength of the PKI in the 1950s and 1960s drew significantly on gross socio-economic inequalities pervasive during this period. More significantly, the Muslim leaders/land lords' virulent opposition to the PKI was partly predicated on their defence of the socially iniquitous status quo. By reducing the

roots of the conflict to a contest defining who is a true Muslim, which skirts around the issues of class, the author pushes a one-sided explanation for the persistence of anti-communist discourse. Budiawan, however, seems to have mistaken this as indicative of undiluted thrust for religiosity. In short, the immortalized past that needs to be broken covers not just the religious-driven response of Muslims to the PKI, but also the deep-seated socio-economic problems that gave rise to and nurtured the PKI in the first place.

Notwithstanding such limitations, the book is an excellent contribution for Indonesian studies and grassroots politics. An Indonesian reared in the New Order official history will find much in it that is eye-opening. Foreign scholars will immensely benefit from the updates and analysis of what is happening on the ground, particularly with regard to the consumption of history as it interacts with memory. As a text, the book is a very interesting case for exploring how an Indonesian scholar tries to negotiate the long, dark shadow of the evolving and still perilous terrain that is the Indonesian past.

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And the sun pursued the moon: Symbolic knowledge and traditional authority among the Makassar
By THOMAS GIBSON
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005. Pp. xi, 262. Illustrations, Bibliography, Index. doi:10.1017/S0022463406600581

The title of this fascinating book refers to a Makassarese version of an Austronesian dualism in which after a period of devastating conflict the sun and the moon find that the world cannot be sustained unless they share power, each ruling one half of the day. As an indication of how political authority is expressed in myth, it is an apt introduction to Thomas Gibson's work among the Konjo Makassarese inhabitants of the Bira peninsula of South Sulawesi. Gibson combined ethnographic fieldwork with analysis of myths and chronicles translated for him from local languages into Indonesian. The focus of the book is the relationship between forms of symbolic knowledge and political power from approximately 600CE to the present. This connection is critical, he argues, because myths and rituals 'are embedded in and help organize an entire symbolic world that links the everyday experience of gender roles, social hierarchy meaning, and economic activity to wider cosmological schemes' (p. 191).

Gibson's admirable effort to treat such a vast expanse of time is both an advantage and a disadvantage. It enables him to see long-term social and cultural patterns, and nowhere is this clearer than in his methodological concern with the relationship between oral myth and ritual performance. Gibson argues that both can be interpreted as expressing a community's most significant symbolic knowledge. In his model, symbolic knowledge itself mediates between explicit politically-directed ideology and the implicit practical knowledge of everyday life. The heart of *And the sun pursued the moon* reads oral myths and ritual performances as routes to uncovering the shared symbolic knowledge of the Makassarese. The often fascinating sections connecting observations of

agricultural practices, boat-building, and trade with myths containing the same symbols and meanings are the strength of Gibson's work. Over the centuries these have provided Makassarese with a rich fund of legitimating ideas and practices with which they have constructed political authority. In the final chapter Gibson offers a schematic overview of six competing ideal models in Makassarese political life based on his reading of myth and ritual.

Such a wide scope for analysis inevitably means that Gibson's work raises many questions, a fact which is not a weakness but an inevitability of which the author is aware. This is certainly true of Islam. The book contains frequent passing references to the evidently complex relationship between Islam and pre-Islamic myth and ritual. In many cases we hear of Islamic-based criticism of existing beliefs and practices, particularly with the rise of modernist Islam. But it is equally clear that Islam – which of course possesses its own abundance of myth and ritual – has been incorporated in various ways into both the exceptional and everyday mythic and ritual life on the Bira peninsula. This is fertile ground for analysis, and we can hope that Gibson turns his keen eye to the rich possibilities of this historical dynamic in the near future.

A more serious drawback is Gibson's tendency to extract historical conclusions from myths. This is most evident in his claims about Javanese influence over coastal South Sulawesi. Gibson believes that there was sustained, direct and deeply consequential Javanese cultural transfer to South Sulawesi that fundamentally transformed Konjo life, but his argument is unconvincing. Certainly to speak so confidently of Majapahit's 'hegemony' over coastal South Sulawesi is unwarranted. We simply do not have the historical or archaeological evidence to be able to conclude that first Kediri and then Majapahit were directly responsible for the transmission of religious cults, mythic structures or models of kingship to South Sulawesi. A better reading of the scattered archaeological, legendary, and (all too limited) textual evidence is that for many Makassarese 'Java' had the cachet of the distant, exotic and desirable. Incorporating the 'king of Java' into myths and borrowing Javanese place names is evidence of this pattern. It is not convincing evidence that Kediri or Majapahit gained a 'symbolic hegemony over the region' or that 'The imperial court of Majapahit came to exercise an increasingly hegemonic influence over peripheral courts during this period, as local ancestor cults were drawn into an Indic cult centered on the emperor' (p. 229). Nor does use of the not uncommon Makassarese title *Karaeng Lowe* or 'great lord' necessarily refer to Shiva or indicate that 'an entire belt of Shaivite cults along the south coast of South Sulawesi' (p. 147) was planted there by Majapahit.

Yet, if we read this book for its ethnographic fieldwork and symbolic interpretations of ritual practice rather than focus on its dubious historical claims, there is much to prize in this work. Gibson has been engaged with this subject for years, and readers should welcome *And the sun pursued the moon* as a synthesis of his thoughts on a wide range of related topics. No one else has produced this kind of treatment of Makassarese society, and students of the region will be glad to have access to the wealth of data and provocative interpretations this book contains for years to come.

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Thailand

From Isfahan to Ayutthaya: Contacts between Iran and Siam in the 17th century
By M. ISMAIL MARCINKOWSKI
Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 2005. Pp. 121. Maps, Plates, Bibliography, Index.
doi:10.1017/S0022463406610588

In an attempt to provide an outline of early modern Siamese–Iranian relations, M. Ismail Marcinkowski draws upon a collection of his conference and journal contributions to construct a diplomatic and cultural exchange between the two polities. Deconstructing the mythic stereotypes and generalities of 'Arab culture' or 'Arab seafarers in the Indian Ocean,' the author focuses on Persians during the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), which followed the Turkic and Mongol onslaughts of the tenth to thirteenth centuries, and, after Persian (*farci*) became the *lingua franca* in Iran, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

Marcinkowski explores the link between Persian culture and Siamese history by tracing linguistic influences on modern day Thai language, by offering an analysis of *The ship of Sulayman* (an important account of the 1685 embassy to Siam) and by reconstructing Persian prominence in Siamese politics through the office of *shaykh al-Islam* or *Chularajmontri*. He begins by addressing the dissemination of Persian culture to Southeast Asia and illustrates Persia's extensive influence in Siam. This is most discernible through language, stating several words of Persian origins in use in modern Thai. For example, the Thai word *dork kulaap* for 'rose' from the Persian *gulab* meaning 'rosewater' and *angur* for 'grape'. Most notable is the Persian loanword word *farang*, meaning European (p. 5).

Perhaps the most interesting chapter for Thai scholars is on Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim's *The ship of Sulayman*, penned in 1685 as an account of the embassy sent by the Safavid ruler Shah Sulayman to the court of King Narai, which is divided into four chapters, interestingly translated as 'jewels'. It should be noted that Narai enlisted the assistance of Persians in ascending to the throne and always showed favour towards them. Marcinkowski manages to make sense of this polemical account of Ibrahim's description of Siam by focusing on descriptions of the Siamese court and mounting pressures from external powers. There are relatively few Persian sources from this period, and although biased, he aims to illustrate that *The ship of Sulayman* provides a very unique and rare window into the seventeenth-century court of King Narai.

In the final two chapters Marcinkowski shows the continuing Persian influence in modern Thailand. This is demonstrated by chronicling the history of the Persian *Phra Khlang*, or Minister of Foreign Affairs, and by examining a brief history of the influential Bunnag family, who are of Persian descent. The author states that the pinnacle of long-lasting Iranian–Siamese cultural contacts was the seventeenth-century introduction of the office of *shaykh al-Islam* to cater to the religious needs of Siam's Muslim subjects. This office still exists in Thailand and has been renamed *chularajmontri*, or Ministry for Muslim Affairs, with responsibilities including the distribution of subsidies and grants to mosques, the administration of mosques and the publication of Islamic literature (p. 80). As the author points out, Muslims are the largest minority in Thailand.

Despite lacking a central argument and subsequent lucid conclusion, *From Isfahan to Ayutthaya* is chock-full of information in a mere 88 pages. The book reads more like three independent essays rather than a coherent volume. While the material on Persian

presence in Southeast Asia, and cultural and linguistic dissemination from the Safavid court to Siam, is of general interest to the reader, the real 'jewel' here is Marcinkowski's analysis of *The ship of Sulayman*, which could have been expanded into a book itself. In addition to the English translation of the first manuscript from the British Museum, the author claims a second Persian text exists in Iran and has recently been republished. His knowledge of the language gives him a valuable insight into the primary source material. It is unfortunate that this is the sole primary source available for analysis on Persian–Siamese relations. Accolades are to be given to Marcinkowski for his work in dealing with what is by no means an ephemeral Iranian-Siamese relationship.

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Vietnam

Beyond the bronze pillars: Envoy poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese relationship
By LIAM C. KELLEY
Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press and Association for Asian Studies, 2005. Pp. xiii, 267. Notes, Glossary, Works Cited, Index. doi:10.1017/S0022463406620584

Liam Kelley has opened a new topic with his study of poetry written in classical Chinese by Vietnamese envoys to the Ming and Qing courts during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. His book is a good corrective to the nationalist historiography that elides the profound and creative sense of connection that many educated Vietnamese at that time felt to the civilized world we now call East Asia, centred at the imperial court in China. The poems that Kelley has studied were written by the most erudite of Vietnamese literati who were selected to travel to the northern court and to represent the Vietnamese rulers in the ritualized formalities of acknowledging suzerainty, the diplomacy of vassalage that maintained the political architecture of what was believed to be the civilized world. Kelley takes us through the various phases of an envoy's experience, from being selected, to embarking on the journey, to the various stages of the itinerary and the famous sights along the way, to arrival at the imperial court, and to being in the presence of the emperor. He offers a very interesting discussion of an aspect of historical Sino-Vietnamese relations that has until now, for the most part, been ignored. Kelley reminds us of how mastery of a rich treasury of classical references and prosodic forms, and of the literary skills necessary to display them, could give these men a sense of membership and participation in what he calls 'the domain of manifest civility'. He expands upon the genuine pleasure that most of these men apparently felt upon being selected for such a prestigious assignment and that they continued to feel during the course of their travels as they visited places, sometimes even the natal villages of their ancestors, which they had been trained to venerate but had theretofore known only from books. At the same time, he does not neglect the poems that show the loneliness, weariness and sometimes illness that were experienced on the road far from home.

Kelley emphasizes that those selected as envoys were not ordinary men. Citing a late eighteenth-century preface to a collection of envoy poems (pp. 59–60) he shows that, among all educated Vietnamese, who themselves were but a tiny percentage of all Vietnamese, only an extremely small number of men most accomplished in administration,

literature and personal rectitude were ever so honoured; they were 'exceptional' and the 'select few' (p. 64), 'the *crème de la crème* of the Southern [Vietnamese] elite' (p. 70), and the experience of serving as envoy 'forever set these men apart from their colleagues' (p. 71). He shows how some of these men identified themselves sufficiently with the Northern (Chinese) court that they sought to have their poems published and appreciated there (pp. 43–51). It is consequently odd that one of the fundamentals of the author's argument is that the sentiments expressed in these poems can be taken to represent 'the Vietnamese' as a people, culture, society and polity.

Kelley seeks to frame his material from the envoy anthologies against what he sees as 'a strong tendency' in 'English-language scholarship on Vietnamese history . . . to argue for some kind of significant divide between Vietnamese and Chinese cultures' (p. 16). Kelley's position is that Vietnamese and Chinese cultures 'partook in a common cultural tradition' (p. 36). Perhaps because this observation is unremarkable and not controversial, he wants to stress that there is no significant difference between Chinese and Vietnamese culture, and he accordingly strives to distance himself from scholars of an older generation, whom he faults for drawing excessive distinctions between the two. Kelley is articulating an 'East Asian' reaction against the idea that Vietnam 'belongs' in 'Southeast Asia', an idea that has run its course with the heroic age of modern Vietnamese nationalism. I can endorse the general intent of Kelley's argument, but he unfortunately simplifies and homogenizes the writings of others to make his point.

Kelley treats the envoy anthologies as unproblematic documents of what he takes as the true inner thoughts of the authors. He does not address Sino-Vietnamese envoy poetry as a literary genre with a set of conventions driven by the context of diplomatic ritual. Although he mentions that the poems have been rewritten and edited by both authors and anthologists, 'to embellish' them and 'to improve their quality' (p. 181), he takes little account of this in his analysis. He observes that anthologies were prepared with particular audiences in mind, either other literati or even Chinese officials, but he continues to treat the poems as expressing the deepest sensibilities of 'the Vietnamese'. He dismisses any contradiction between the realm of ritualized envoy poetry and the realm in which most Vietnamese lived. Appealing to the imagination of the most erudite of scholar-administrators, and reducing Vietnamese culture to this imagination, his argument is disembodied from any social or political context.

Nevertheless, in drawing attention to a category of poetry that has been previously ignored, Kelley has made a welcome contribution to our knowledge of Vietnamese history and culture. At the same time, his sharp insistence on the primacy of a Sinitic category tends to limit rather than to expand our perception of Vietnam.

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Mandarins et subalternes au Nord du Viet Nam: Une bureaucratie a l'epreuve
By EMMANUEL POISSON
Paris: Maisonneuve and Larose, 2004. Pp. 335. Maps, Plates, Bibliography, Index.
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Emmanuel Poisson opens up for us the elite world in northern Viet Nam (Bac Ky) of a hundred years ago, at the beginning of the twentieth century. His work, a richly detailed

study of the Vietnamese bureaucracy in what the French called Tonkin, is Janus-faced. It both looks back at the imperial administrative system of the Nguyen dynasty through the nineteenth century and forward to the Vietnamese scholarly and administrative elite of the twentieth-century colonial period. For the first time, we can see how the majority of this elite acted in the transition of the North from imperial to colonial rule. For this group, Poisson emphasizes, continuity rather than rupture was the predominant feature. This was especially the case the lower in the administrative system we observe. By detailing this existence of the scholarly elite, heretofore known mainly as ancestors dimly seen of important later figures, Poisson enables us to begin to trace and understand how this elite evolved through the past century.

Another important element, one which Poisson nicely identifies but does not follow up on, is the extent to which the Nguyen rule in Hue kept the Northern literati elite out of power and the estrangement of the latter from the former. This opens the question of whether the sidelined Northern elite might have, to some degree, welcomed the French. The latter appear to have accepted them more readily than had the new dynasty from the South. We need to consider regional dynamics as well as national in discussing the evolution of Viet Nam over the past two centuries. This adds depth to the question: How have such regional feelings interacted with international forces to affect the modern history of the country?

While the title of the book implies a consistent coverage of Vietnamese bureaucracy for about a century, this is not quite the case. Poisson provides a good synchronic look at the administrative system of the Nguyen, especially that from the Minh-mang period on, by selecting specific details to describe the system (approximately one-fifth of the book). It thereby supplements the work of A. B. Woodside, but does not provide a sense of the developing political context, as R. B. Smith has. The major part of the study then examines the system in the first four decades of French rule, with interesting glances back at the imperial period and the continuity Poisson stresses. Making excellent use of more than a thousand richly detailed personnel dossiers from 1896 as a starting point, he takes us through the practices and strategies of bureaucratic life as they continued and changed into the 1920s. Supplemented by regional, local and village level documents, he demonstrates the activities and activism of the indigenous officials through their files. He mainly concentrates on the Northern lowlands, especially along the coast, but adds a look at the problems of governing the mountains of the Viet Bac.

Another very interesting element of Poisson's work is how it provides a rich context for understanding the existence of figures mentioned elsewhere in other memoirs and works and how well he illustrates the nature and varied patterns of the bureaucratic careers. Take, for example, Duong Van Mai Elliott's *Sacred Willow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) where she provides a personal view of her great-grandfather, Duong Lam. Poisson, drawing on Lam's personnel file, places him within the elite and administrative developments of the time. The two works together fill out the historical situation of this individual quite nicely.

This welcome study thus follows Northern Vietnamese officials from the imperial period into the colonial system, but not as mere pawns and victims of the situation. Poisson shows the degree to which the colonial effort depended upon the Vietnamese bureaucracy and its officials in the north, particularly at the local levels. An agency, a space for action, existed for this Vietnamese elite, as we see these Northern scholars

actively working to change their society. The following chapter of this effort would take place in the 1920s as the neo-traditionalist movement identified with Pham Quynh emerged. The great value of Poisson's work, and its extensive detail, provide an exquisite sense of this long neglected topic – the northern Vietnamese scholarly elite and their important role in modern Vietnamese history.

Poisson uses a variety of Sino-Vietnamese (*Han*), Vietnamese (*Quoc-ngu*) and French language documents for this study, especially the many personnel dossiers. From these, he derives a fine and extensive quantification of the data found therein and has drawn up a nice set of charts and maps illustrating his points on the indigenous administrative elite. The book is well produced with good diacritics. I recommend it strongly for all who study late imperial, colonial and twentieth-century Vietnam.

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