

has consolidated to bring about a picture of life in the Melaka Straits during a period of great change. The author, by presenting this material in a readable form, has done a great service. This is a work that, despite sometimes getting bogged down in numbers and statistics, deserves to be read and cited by those interested in the transition from Company port-towns to imperial rule in Southeast Asia.

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## Vietnam

*The Vietnamese war: Revolution and social change in the Mekong Delta 1930–1975*

By DAVID W. P. ELLIOTT

Armonk, NY and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2003. 2 v. Pp. 1547. Bibliography, Appendices, Maps, Notes, Index.

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David Elliott's *magnum opus* constitutes the longest and most detailed study of any aspect of the Vietnam War, and it is difficult to imagine that any other work could usurp this position in the foreseeable future. In many respects it is the definitive study of the war from the revolutionary perspective (as opposed to that of the US government and military), hence the choice of 'The Vietnamese War' for the title. Anchoring his study in the corpus of Rand Corporation interviews with National Liberation Front (NLF) defectors from the 1960s and 1970s, Elliott has expanded and integrated these data into a narrative which predominantly covers the 30 years from the August Revolution of 1945 until the fall of Saigon. He has drawn on a wide variety of other published and unpublished sources, notably US military archival documents and Party histories and memoirs published in Vietnam. The result is a highly readable book which is rich in detail, analysis, and insight; and while Elliott focuses almost exclusively on the single province of Định Tường (Mỹ Tho), he does an excellent job of building on his case study to make broader conclusions.

The only real flaw is the book's length, which makes it less accessible to a general readership. Elliott attempts to compensate for this problem by providing helpful suggestions on how to get through the book by reading only portions of each chapter, but even so, trying to navigate one's way through 1,400 pages of narrative is a daunting task. There is a certain amount of repetition within the text, and one could make a case that the overall narrative could have been trimmed and some of the interview segments relegated to appendices to make the length of the main body somewhat less intimidating. Having said that, however, the reader who is willing to plow through the whole book will come out of it exhausted but fascinated and with a much clearer understanding of the Vietnamese revolution at the grassroots.

Elliott's study follows a clear chronological sequence that enables him to provide a solid narrative for the 30-year period, one that is surprisingly seamless considering the diversity of sources that he is using. The periodisation of the book can be roughly divided into (1) the anti-French Resistance; (2) the Ngô Đình Diệm regime; and (3)

the development of the revolution under the successive Saigon governments after Diêm's fall. The frequent reappearance of various key players (many of them referred to by their *noms de guerre*) can be confusing; it would have been a good idea if the list of names found at the end of Volume 2 had been included in the first volume as well, along with the list and definition of Vietnamese terms. (Incidentally, it should have been possible to include diacriticals throughout the text; they only appear in the Appendices.) However, the amount that we learn about these actors (almost exclusively on the revolutionary side), their motivations and their deeds is one of the book's strengths, particularly when it comes to showing the long-term links and continuities between the different stages of the Southern revolution.

No other study has done such an effective job of charting the ups and downs of the Vietnamese revolution at the local level. The rich data from the defectors' interviews allow the author to map out the patterns of victory and defeat experienced by the revolutionaries at the regional, provincial, and village levels, as well as the more complex reactions to these events among the local population. His fundamental argument regarding motivations for peasant participation in – or resistance to – the revolutionary movement directly engages the classic 'moral economy' versus 'rational peasant' debate of James Scott and Samuel Popkin. Elliott argues convincingly that these two value systems did not represent a dichotomy but rather operated in different ways at different points in the struggle on the same group of people. He depicts the wide range of emotions and the frequent collective mood swings experienced by a rural population largely alienated from its government and angry at its enemy yet also exhausted by war, desirous of peace at any price, and often resentful of the demands imposed by the NLF. This perspective is an important counterweight to both revolutionary propaganda and stereotyped concepts of a complacent, neutral peasantry.

Elliott's analysis benefits from nearly 30 years of hindsight on developments following the fall of the Republic of Vietnam and the subsequent reunification of the two Vietnams. In particular, he is able to show how the seeds of the failure of socialism in the post-1975 South were sown during the revolutionary period. He points out, for example, that the presence of North Vietnamese cadres and troops in southern villages had mixed results. On the one hand, the northerners provided much-needed reinforcement for the southern revolutionaries, especially after the decimation of the latter's ranks following the 1968 Tết Offensive. At the same time, however, there are hints of negative reactions to these outsiders, reactions which would be multiplied many times over with the arrival of northern 'carpetbaggers' after the fall of Saigon. The interview data also show that villagers who had only recently received their own land were less than enthused by the northerners' accounts of life under socialism, particularly collectivised agriculture.

The book's main conclusion, though, emphasises the ultimate irony of the revolution in the South: that the changes wrought by land reform (whether implemented by the Party or by the government of Vietnam) eventually sabotaged plans for socialism by dramatically changing the class structure of rural society. Although there remained a critical mass of the 'poor peasants' (as classified by the Party) who constituted much of the revolution's base of support, a sufficient number shifted into the 'middle peasant' category, whose loyalties and interests were more

ambiguous. It has long been recognised, of course, that many South Vietnamese who took up arms against the government and its American allies were not necessarily fighting for ‘socialism’, and the tensions between the broader nationalist objectives of a united front and the class struggle of a Communist party itself have been studied in many contexts. Elliott’s detailed analysis of this problem at the grassroots level illuminates these tensions and contributes significantly to our understanding of what happened not only in a single province, but across the South both during and after the war.

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*Water frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the lower Mekong region, 1750–1880*

Edited by NOLA COOKE and LI TANAN

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‘Water Frontier’ is the term coined by the editors for the lower Mekong region, or more specifically, the area stretching from modern South Vietnam into eastern Cambodia and southwest Thailand. This book is based on contributions from a 1999 workshop on commerce in nineteenth-century Vietnam.

The editors have aspirations for ‘Water Frontier’ to be a ‘nationally neutral concept’ for looking at ‘a fluid transnational and multi-ethnic economic zone’, and arrive at a ‘more historically nuanced understanding of the time and place and of the multiple roles played here by Chinese... in interaction with a kaleidoscope of local peoples’ (Preface).

Conceptually speaking, however, one does not benefit much from the book. Either too many places seem to be a ‘Water Frontier’ – since almost every port-polity in early modern Southeast Asia would fit into the description as ‘transnational’ and ‘multi-ethnic’ (as opposed to present-day state boundaries and ethnic categorisation) – or nowhere is, in the sense of being an exact replica of the Mekong Delta. Thus, ‘Water Frontier’ is apparently conceptualised only to allow the authors ‘to perceive and talk about lower Mekong as a single region’ (p. xii).

On the region’s history, this book does an excellent job, giving very detailed accounts of its politico-economic development, built from ‘newly available primary materials’ in Vietnamese, French, Chinese, Thai, Japanese and Portuguese (p. 2). Part 1 looks at the broader Chinese trade network, setting the context for the Mekong Delta economy; part 2 details the region and its internal and sub-regional politico-economic workings at the turn of the nineteenth century, while part 3 discusses the developments in the late nineteenth century.

By bringing focus to the economic activities of the region and the participation of Mon-Khmer, Malays, Chinese etc., the book more than decentres the ‘narrowly nationalistic’ historical narratives of the modern Vietnamese and Thai states (p. xii). It also gives a wider context to overseas Chinese historical interpretation: if Chen