

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Vietnam: Rethinking the State. By MARTIN GAINSBOROUGH. London: Zed Books, 2010. xiv, 224 pp. \$34.95 (paper).

Saigon's Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City. By ERIK HARMS. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. xiv, 294 pp. \$75.00 (cloth); \$25.00 (paper).

Vietnam: Rising Dragon. By BILL HAYTON. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010. xv, 254 pp. \$22.00 (paper).

The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrances and Representation. By CHRISTINA SCHWENKEL. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. x, 264 pp. \$65.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).
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The past several years have seen a flowering of volumes on Vietnam's contemporary conditions and recent past. This new wave in Vietnamese studies has brought important new insights to many aspects of contemporary Vietnam and is exemplified by four recent books—Martin Gainsborough's retheorization of the Vietnamese state; Erik Harms's anthropology of the margins of Ho Chi Minh City and the complexities of Vietnam's urbanization; Bill Hayton's analysis of the changes in the modern Vietnamese polity, civil society, the rise of capitalism, and the stagnation of human rights; and Christina Schwenkel's interpretation of memory and its institutions and patterns in contemporary Vietnam.

"There are no karaoke songs about Hoc Mon" (p. 18), the gritty and fascinating outskirts district of Ho Chi Minh City that Erik Harms writes of in *Saigon's Edge*. Other authors have written about contemporary Saigon, and most of the academic and financial attention is downtown. Not Harms. He focuses on the world between center and rural, between *noi* (inside) and *ngoai* (outside), the margins, what might one day—a day far away, it appears from reading this fascinating volume—become the "suburbs," exploring "the nitty-gritty realities of 'renovation'" (p. ix) as it plays out in Vietnam's urbanizing and expanding cities. His descriptions of life on the "*ngoai thanh*," "outside of the city," will be illuminating even to those who know Vietnam well, and will resonate with those who have studied and experienced the border zones of major urbanizing areas throughout Asia. For Harms, the life of Hoc Mon translates more broadly into "social edginess," a sense of marginality but also empowerment for its residents. This powerful integration of intensive detail and theory about lives lived on the margins of Ho Chi Minh City's new rich, yet not part of the rural life further away, puts Harms's work at the leading edge of the very best of the new Vietnam studies.

By now it is not a revelation that economic development brings as many issues to Asia's cities as it solves, but Harms brings two lasting contributions to the question of urbanization and development. First, his work extends the dilemma of urbanization analysis to Vietnam, on which there has been relatively little deeply analytical discussion of the impact of development upon cities. And, even more so, he gives us the margins of the city in ways that should be analyzed and compared to other major cities around the world.

We have too few volumes that provide analytical yet broad-gauged discussions of contemporary Vietnam in the reform era. For an earlier era, when *doi moi* was just taking hold, there is Michael Williams's *Vietnam at the Crossroads* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1992). And, a bit later, there are important books about the conflicts of the early transition in Vietnam, notably Murray Hiebert's *Chasing the Tigers: A Portrait of the New Vietnam* (New York: Kodansha International, 1996) and Robert Templar's *Shadows and Wind: A View of Modern Vietnam* (London: Little, Brown, 1998).

But Vietnam is now in mid-transition, having had a decade of growth since the late 1990s and largely discarded socialist ideology (except for the important elements of state economic entities, and authoritarian controls of politics and human rights that some in Vietnam and beyond might have called anti-socialist from the state). And this middle period of transition—a time that will determine in large part Vietnam's economic and political future—deserves a fine, analytical, well-written, deeply reported, and yet broadly angled book like Bill Hayton's *Vietnam: Rising Dragon*. It is packed with description and analysis that makes it highly useful for those with a serious interest in Vietnam's economic, political, social, cultural, and foreign policy shifts, while gracefully written and fast paced, making it highly useful for undergraduates and other students, and for visitors to Vietnam.

Hayton seeks both to evoke and to analyze this “Communist capitalist playground” (p. 1), and he does it very well. In chapters on land (“selling the fields”); migration, destruction, construction, and consumption in Vietnam's rapidly growing cities; the persistence of Party-directed social campaigns and the slow, painful emergence of a small nongovernmental community; the roles, static and changing, of the Communist Party and the National Assembly; the fate of political dissidents, with a focus on the Bloc 8406 group that was crushed in 2006, and of a dissident community that can never be completely crushed; the struggle between growing media autonomy and Party insistence on continued media controls; the tragedy of environmental exploitation in Vietnam and the complicity of the state (“[t]he prevailing attitude to land, trees and animals in Vietnam is that they are sources to be exploited as profitably as possible” [p. 170]); Vietnam's careful, if originally conflicted, shifts in foreign policy; divisions between north and south, and Kinh and minorities; the state and religion; and other points of contention. In doing this, Hayton mixes discussions of policy with the experiences of ordinary people—narrative with serious analysis—in a way that merges exceptionally well.

What emerges is a measured portrait of the conflicting sides of modern Vietnam: dynamism and exploitation, increasing freedom and the persistence

of a repressive state, kindness and corruption—an effective picture of mid-transition Vietnam. Hayton's message is clear: If Vietnam is to escape the trap of middle-income stasis, of the long-term rule of a corrupt, mediocre oligarchy like some other states, reforms, and particularly rights-based reform—but reforms with protection for the poor and unprotected—will need to be accelerated.

Christina Schwenkel's fascinating and important ethnography and analysis of memory and remembrance in Vietnam—particularly memory of the war with the United States—draws on multiple sites for investigating remembrance and its meanings. Her timing was superb, and perhaps fortuitous: The war has been over long enough for the production of knowledge and memory to change over time, but it is recent enough that it is a major concern for the managers of and visitors to memory sites. President Clinton's 2000 visit to Vietnam; memorial projects; veterans' visits; reconciliation projects that are artistic, cultural, social, and economic; Vietnamese war sites, such as the Cu Chi tunnels, with their multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings; public monuments and museums—all these are sites for a fascinating journey into the meanings of memory on both sides, often focused on the complex nexus of return, sorrow, remembering, and humanitarian giving, and the multiple meanings of reconciliation.

If Hayton has the goal of bringing the complexities of Vietnam to a fairly wide audience, Schwenkel's target is the academic audience, but her canvas is the breadth of the Vietnamese and American experiences with each other since the war. All of the ethnography is engrossing, and some of it is disturbing (such as the commodification of the war, at times, in Vietnam), and Schwenkel helps us understand how the events, displays, and projects she describes embody Vietnamese understanding—and often the government's attempts to mold understanding—of the underlying historical events.

Schwenkel's work is Vietnam-focused, of course, and this is a complex volume. But, like earlier work, such as *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* edited by Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), its focus on remembrance and meaning makes it important for scholars far beyond the Vietnam field. The chapters that focus on transitions—transitions in monuments and the physical forms of memorializing, shifts in museums and museum culture, and the shifts in what Schwenkel calls the Vietnamese “landscape of memory” (pp. 8ff.)—work particularly well. Scholars of monuments, of museums, of photography and remembrance, and in other fields will find much of value here, including scholars and fields far removed from the Vietnamese context.

Martin Gainsborough's important *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* shifts ground yet again, but like the other books reviewed here represents among the best of the new Vietnam studies in its field. If Schwenkel's preoccupation is the meanings and uses of remembrance, Gainsborough's focus is on the state and the political in Vietnam. The academic literature on Vietnamese politics has grown more sophisticated in recent years, as evidenced by the work of Tuong Vu, Benedict Kerkvliet, and others. But in the wake of *Vietnam: Rethinking the*

State, and in addition to that earlier work, future study on Vietnamese politics must engage with this exceptional and leading volume.

Gainsborough turns back from earlier notions of the Vietnamese (or other states) to ask a more “deceptively complex” question: How do people “act politically” in Vietnam? Having explored that question in some detail, he is in a stronger position to try to identify the roles of the state within that complex polity. And what he finds is a state that functions as multiple entities generally not in sync with each other, “the persistent blurring of the relationship between public and private,” and “the importance of uncertainty as a principle of rule” (p. 181). The state that emerges is “little more than a disparate group of actors with a weak notion of ‘the public good,’ using uncertainty, not impartial rules, as the basis of order” (p. 182), yet capable of acting in concert when common interests are threatened. Gainsborough’s book shows these principles in action in a variety of settings, including the role of the Party, corruption, state business interests, local politics, and other themes.

Each of these volumes complicates our understanding of contemporary Vietnam in important ways. The subjects are different—urbanization and its margins, a broad view of modern Vietnam, the issues of memory, and the structures and roles of the state—but in each case nuance wins out. As we learn more about Vietnam, and as fine academics and writers such as these have the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in a variety of settings there, it is inevitable that our understandings of the nation will become more fine-grained and the level of analysis more sophisticated. That the field has made such great strides in a relatively short period owes much to these books and others like them.

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Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society. By JULIANE SCHOBEL. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. xi, 207 pp. \$49.00 (cloth).

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In her book *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar*, anthropologist Juliane Schober explores the complex and often fraught relationship between Buddhism and politics in Burma. Starting with the precolonial situation in the nineteenth century and moving up to the present day, the work shows the multivalent position of Buddhist thought and practice in Burma, serving often as a prop to those in power, even as it offers others a resource for resistance. While Schober’s book appeared before the dramatic political changes that began late last year, including Aung San Suu Kyi’s election to a newly formed parliament, recent events only underscore the book’s valuable mapping of the long and