

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nicholas Nugent. *Vietnam: The Second Revolution*. Brighton, UK: In Print Publishing, 1996. 208 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-873047-66-8.

Reviewed by Steven A. Leibo (International Studies, The Sage Colleges)
Published on H-Asia (February, 1999)



Vietnam: The Second Revolution

Far too much of the scholarship and writings on modern Vietnam have focused on the war itself. That is not surprising, of course, given that for many people the word "Vietnam" does not refer to a country but to a war. Nevertheless, Vietnam has moved on since the war and though developments there no longer capture the world's headlines its journey toward the end of the century has been a remarkable and ironic one. For an excellent overview of Vietnam since the "fall" or "liberation" of Saigon (depending on your perspective) readers have no farther to go than to Nicholas Nugent's *Vietnam: the Second Revolution*.

Nugent is well qualified to write the book. He has spent a quarter of a century covering Asia for the BBC and has written a well received biography of Rajiv Gandhi. Nugent's Vietnam book begins with a particularly blunt assessment of developments in Vietnam since the war. In fact, his assessment is quite startling for those most sensitive to the sacrifices and horrors of the American anti-communist war in Vietnam: "Only for the final quarter-century has Vietnam been united as one country, free of foreign domination and outwardly at peace. But for the first half of that quarter-century, unity and freedom were qualified by an intense struggle for survival: a war against poverty had superseded the previous military conflict. This is the story of how Vietnam overcame that poverty by overthrowing much for which it had previously fought."

Avoiding the more chronological approach favored by traditional historians, Nugent divided his book into

eleven thematic chapters. The first two, "three decades of Conflict" and "Big Brothers," deal respectively with the needed historical background to Vietnam's postwar history and her relationship with the many larger powers that have so often involved themselves in Vietnam's history. After this necessary background the following chapters cover specific themes dealing with the role of "American Generals" which ironically follows "Generals" from Westmoreland to "General" Motors and "General" Mills. This chapter offers a fine overview of American Vietnamese relations from the war and subsequent economic embargo to those American tourists, Vietnam veterans and others, who have involved themselves in the country's affairs in the years since.

The chapter on Ho Chi Minh is particularly interesting as it deals not only with the on-going cult of Ho but discusses the important question of whether Ho would himself have approved of the country's decision to back away from much of its socialist tradition in favor of the more open free market activities.

The most important chapter directly deals with "Doi Moi," Vietnam's version of "Perestroika." Nugent emphasizes not only the revolutionary nature of these changes but their evolution over many years. In fact, as early as 1979 decision makers allowed a retreat from agricultural collectivization. Nugent again puts it bluntly when he says that "Doi Moi represented a belated recognition by the party that collectivization of the land and state ownership of enterprise had failed Vietnam."

In the years since, as anyone who had recently vis-

ited Vietnam can attest, a plethora of private businesses has emerged, especially in the south, where experience with command economies had been so much briefer than that of their northern countrymen. Perhaps the most poignant comment Nugent makes, especially significant coming from a British employee of the BBC, is when he notes that education and health services in Vietnam are now more privatized than in Great Britain!

Amusingly, for those interested in the complicated history of Sino-Chinese relations, Nugent reports that the Vietnamese are quite proud to point out that they began their economic changes before Gorbachev began his. Less discussed or even mentioned is that so much of the Vietnamese experience resembles that of China—Vietnam's enemy for so long. The final chapters deal with

important topics from the obvious differences between North and South Vietnam, the new emerging middle and wealthy classes, and the Vietnamese diaspora around the world.

That Nicholas Nugent has covered the above, and in so very readable fashion in slightly under two hundred pages, is truly impressive. Clearly *Vietnam: The Second Revolution* would make an excellent supplement for upper division courses on either South East Asia or Vietnam. I recommend it very strongly.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Steven A. Leibo. Review of Nugent, Nicholas, *Vietnam: The Second Revolution*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2776>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.