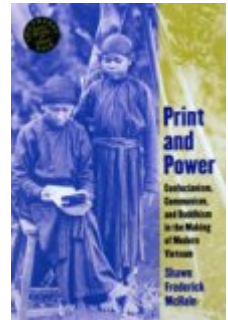


Shawn Frederick McHale. *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004. viii + 256 pp. \$49.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-2655-0.



Reviewed by David Marr

Published on H-Buddhism (May, 2005)

This book argues that the historiography of twentieth-century Vietnam has vastly overrated the significance of communism while slighting Confucianism and Buddhism. No one can dispute this when it comes to historians inside Vietnam, who must run a gauntlet of Communist Party censors to be able to publish. But McHale is targeting western historians who, in his opinion, have displayed a heavy teleological bias towards the revolutionary forces that took power in 1945. Focusing on the 1920-1945 era, McHale asserts that "communism only fitfully influenced public life" (p. xii). More generally, "modern ideologies were nowhere near as successful as they often claimed to be in displacing so-called traditional ones" (p. 64).

To make his case, McHale assiduously mines the large collection of 1920-1945 publications to be found at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. Because books on morals and religion far outnumber those on politics, he declares them to be more important. If we took this quantitative analysis further, I suspect that morals and religion would be trumped by pulp fiction, detective sto-

ries, how-to manuals, theatrical reprints, and sheet music. Given the realities of colonial censorship, the surprising thing is how many books of political interest were published, not how few.

Setting aside title counts, print culture certainly did explode in Vietnam during the 1920s and 1930s, with newspapers far more popular than books, and literacy doubling or tripling, to encompass perhaps 20 percent of the population. The sheer diversity of content is what stands out, not attempts by Confucians, Communists, Buddhists or any other contingent (including the colonial state) to gain the upper hand. Curious teenagers of the 1930s could explore ten times as far and wide as any prior generation of readers.

McHale's chapter on Confucianism compares three writers: a conservative colonial school inspector; a radical non-communist; and a romantic idealist. The post-modernist epithet of "essentialism" is deployed repeatedly. Since the author is convinced that Confucianism's overall impact on Vietnam has been greatly exaggerated when compared to Buddhism, one is left wondering why he devoted thirty pages to the topic.

The same question arises with the chapter on communism. McHale seems more interested in demonstrating that prior historians have exaggerated the importance of the Indochinese Communist Party than delving into the content of relevant newspapers, books, broadsides and banners. To be fair, he does grant that the party had learned some communication skills by 1941, which would come in handy a few years later. More importantly, however, by choosing to concentrate almost entirely on the Communist Party, McHale misses the opportunity to discuss a wealth of 1926-1939 publications written by influential Trotskyists, non-party Marxists and socialists.

It is in the chapter on Buddhism where the author makes an original contribution to the historiography of 1920-1945 in Vietnam. For students of Buddhism, this chapter offers a rare insight into southern Vietnamese perceptions, which can then be usefully compared with developments in other late colonial societies, for example Burma or Korea. McHale begins by postulating that Buddhism shaped Vietnamese society more profoundly than Confucianism. To substantiate this generalization would require a scholarly journey back to pre-colonial times. Instead, the author proceeds to argue that "Vietnamese Buddhism began a major transformation between 1920 and 1945, forming an autonomous realm of discourse in which printed matter played a key role" (p. 144). He then traces two different developments: the "Buddhist Revival" push for textual orthodoxy; and the increased circulation of poetry, tales and songs promoting popular Buddhist devotionism.

The highly literate monks who led the Buddhist Revival came mostly from Hue in central Vietnam, and drew their inspiration from contemporary reform efforts in China. I would suggest they also tried to emulate the organizational sophistication of the Catholic Church. McHale ends up admitting that the Buddhist Revival's significance for 1920-1945 was limited, thus seemingly

knocking off yet another historical actor. Not until 1963 did the heirs of the Buddhist Revival come into their own--only to be suppressed a few years later by General Nguyen Cao Ky with American backing.

McHale's thoughtful discussion of popular Buddhist devotionism focuses on publications that circulated in the Mekong Delta. It is a brave author indeed who tackles this regime's religious experiences in the 1920-1945 era, beginning with Pure Land influences, but then extending to Theravada Buddhism, local spirits, *The Tale of Three Kingdoms*, Theosophy and much more. McHale quotes at length from a fascinating 1935 song depicting a battle between materialists and idealists, with the latter winning out and entering the land of Nirvana. Clearly old ideas now had to make their way in new historical circumstances. In the process, "traditions" hardly remained the same.

As the title foreshadows, *Print and Power* links the rise of print culture to the emergence of a "public sphere" in Vietnam. I have two problems with this argument. First, it should not be assumed that Vietnam lacked a public sphere prior to arrival of the printing press. Literati, clan leaders, clerks, monks and healers had long interacted outside the state system, communicating via pen-script, poetry, oral messages and face-to-face encounters. Together they affected the opinions and behavior of ordinary people fully as much as did king, court and mandarin.

Secondly, throughout the colonial era, oral, physical and ritual communication continued to shape Vietnam's public sphere. Illiterate men and women could memorize and recite large amounts of classical literature, folk poetry, sutras, genealogies and contemporary political rhetoric. The art of public speaking was introduced, and audiences learned how to clap, cheer, and repeat slogans in unison. Flags, banners, insignia and armbands proliferated. Peasants walked miles to participate in mass demonstrations. In 1945, millions of Vietnamese took up weapons, learned military drills,

and employed political terminology which previously had been the intelligentsia's preserve. We can question the degree to which people understood what they were saying, but not the enthusiasm with which they spoke to each other. Word-of-mouth propaganda proved most effective. This should hardly surprise us: even in today's world of mass communication and multi-million dollar advertising campaigns, word-of-mouth remains that most important form of human communication.

Returning to the problem of teleology, McHale is right to remind us of its pitfalls. As historians, we should make every effort to re-create for readers a time and place where people did not know what we know. Simultaneously, however, we need to acknowledge that such people are constantly trying to fathom the future and making plans to control it. I suggest that progressive intellectuals were better at this in the Vietnam of the 1930s and early 1940s than the proponents of Confucianism or Buddhism. Of course, if the intelligentsia had known that Vietnam would be enveloped by war for thirty years, or that the Communist Party would repress dissent ruthlessly and monopolize power up to the present day, they might have taken a different course.

McHale is acutely aware of the war and Communist dictatorship, and this may help to explain his downgrading of "modern ideologies" in 1920-1945. He devotes his last paragraph to evoking the religious revival underway in Vietnam in the new century. Fortunately, historians do not have to be judged on their capacities at futurology.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: David Marr. Review of McHale, Shawn Frederick. *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. May, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10580>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.