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Rubber and the Making of Vietnam: An Ecological History, 1897–1975

MICHITAKE ASO

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Probably no other industry aside from rubber has such a long and controversial past, which is closely attached to the history of modern Vietnam. Introduced into the country at the turn of the nineteenth century, the cultivation of rubber quickly expanded to other parts of the Indochinese peninsular following the process of French colonization and their *mise en valeur* of the colony. The concentration of rubber cultivation was in Cochinchina in South Vietnam and Cambodia. During the colonial era, the rubber industry was among the most modern, dynamic, and profitable sectors of the economy, attracting large foreign investment as well as the application of modern science

and technology. Due to its close ties with colonialism and capitalism, however, this industry was strongly associated with extreme colonial exploitation and oppression. As a result, rubber plantations came to be centers of anti-colonial movements. These plantations again became targets of the Vietnamese revolution during the First Indochina War (1946–54), when the Vietminh conducted sabotage actions against French-owned rubber plantations. Later, during the Vietnam War (1954–75), governments of both North and South Vietnam sought control of rubber plantations due to their economic and strategic significance. The *Doi moi* (Renovation) of 1986 also incorporated plans for the development of rubber industry in modern Vietnam.

Michitake Aso's *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam: An Ecological History, 1897–1975* discusses the history of rubber alongside the national history of Vietnam. The book is organized into three parts and comprises seven chapters. A chapter in Part One analyzes the discovery of rubber latex, the early introduction of rubber into Indochina, and the role of the French colonial government in facilitating the expansion of rubber in Vietnam. The author argues that by expanding rubber plantations, the colonial government sought to increase its presence in the countryside (p. 48). The land granting system and the policies to force the local people to leave their lands helped planters acquire large-scale lands to establish their rubber plantations. The Montagnards thus became the laborers of the rubber plantations. Part Two of the book consists of three chapters that concentrate on the management of rubber plantations. The author examines the involvement and contributions of individuals, organizations, companies, and the state in the development of rubber industry in colonial Vietnam. While the lack of resources restrained the colonial government from investing in rubber and providing any meaningful support for Vietnamese rubber growers, the development of rubber in Indochina relied on the initiative of French individual planters (p. 65). The colonial government indirectly participated in the management of rubber industry by facilitating scientific research on rubber and providing a legal framework relating to the land concessions, the working and hygiene conditions of rubber plantations, and particularly the collaboration in the fight against tropical diseases threatening rubber trees (fungal pathogens) and rubber workers (malaria). The significant contributions of a number of agronomists, such as Yersin, Pierre Gourou, and health experts at the Pasteur Institute are also brought into the analysis.

Part Three on “rubber wars” consists of three remaining chapters that discuss the wars involving rubber plantations. The author first examines the struggles of Vietnamese rubber workers to improve plantation conditions, such as by increasing benefits and reducing hours of work. He also talks about the sabotage actions carried out by the Vietminh aimed at rubber plantations as part of their “scorched earth” tactics during the First Indochina War. The author then states that the legacy of colonial abuses prompted the Vietnamese laborers to support the anti-colonial Vietminh in their sabotage of rubber plantations. Due to their strategic location—as a gateway to Saigon and Mekong Delta—rubber plantations became during the Vietnam War (1954–75) the battlegrounds for which the National Liberation Front, the Republic of Vietnam, and the US military

sought to take control. The last chapter provides an analysis of the consequences of the wars on rubber production, as well as the long-term environmental and social impacts of rubber for Vietnam.

The above review presents the unique and valuable contributions of Michitake Aso's *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam* in comparison with other research on the history of rubber in Vietnam. Instead of focusing on the economic dimension of rubber and the interactions between rubber plantations and the national revolutions, the author applies a much more nuanced and comprehensive approach. The book covers all major aspects of the rubber production, including science, commerce, governance, healthcare, as well as the position of rubber plantations in the prolonged wars of Vietnam. More interestingly, Aso discusses all these aspects through the lens of an ecological perspective, which clarifies the impacts of rubber on the society, economy, culture, and politics. Another vigorous effort of the author is how he widens the discussion on the history of rubber in Vietnam to a broader context of Southeast Asia, and links it with the nationalist struggles, decolonization, and nation-building in colonial and postcolonial Vietnam. However, perhaps because the book covers so many aspects, an inadequate discussion is reserved for the central hypothesis of ecological history of rubber as conveyed by the title of the book. The ecological and environmental disasters resulting from the Americans' spraying of Agent Orange on rubber plantations are inadequately examined. Moreover, there is insufficient information on rubber management during the Japanese occupation period (1940–45). The statement that Ngô Đình Diệm "on July 21 [1954] signed the Geneva Accords" (p.209) is also inaccurate. In fact, Diệm had refused to sign the Accords and this was the reason why he later claimed his government was not bound by this agreement (Chapman 2013, 69; Gaiduk 2003, 207). Finally, my experience with Dutch colonial expansion in the Indonesian archipelago causes me to have doubts on several points. First, that the expansion of rubber plantations in Indochina was because of a need to increase the French colonial government's presence in the rural areas. Second, that the requirements to protect French rubber planters prompted the French colonial government to establish an effective administrative control of the countryside.

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