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Berestford’s book on Vietnam give a good introduction to the country for social scientists interested in contemporary Vietnam. It consists of five parts (history and political traditions; the social system; the political system; the economy; and the regime’s policies) and gives the roughly same weight to each of these parts (though the part on the social system is somewhat shorter). In general, the book is well written and documented. For those who are interested in further reading, there is a bibliography at the end of the volume. Since writings on Vietnam are scattered and many of these were written in relation to American involvement in Vietnam, it had been difficult to get a detached view of contemporary Vietnam before this book appeared. Before a similar book appears, it will serve as the introductory text to contemporary Vietnam.

To write a good introductory book on a country is difficult. First, the author has to be familiar with the literature and has to have necessary factual data. For countries like Vietnam on which information is scanty, to obtain relevant factual information alone is a difficult task. But a good introductory text has to go beyond that. The author has to have either a theoretical framework or a comparative framework to process his information. Otherwise, the book ends up as a fact book, and fails to give insight to the structure, processes, and problems of the country.

Ms. Beresford must have been in contact with scholars interested in other socialist regimes or communist movements in other countries, for here and there, she throws in comparative analyses. But some of her comparative analyses are weak. For example, in discussing why the communist movement succeeded in Vietnam but failed in Thailand (pp. 209-210), she brushes aside the fact that Thailand was an independent


This is one of the books which have been published in Marxist Regimes Series with Bogdan Szajkowski as general editor. The scholars on Southeast Asia might find the books on Laos and Kampuchea also interesting.
country as a minor factor and gives the more
developed division of labor as the major ex-
planation. But one can easily argue that because
Thailand remained as an independent country
and therefore developed indigenous institutions,
these could sustain and interact more smoothly
with economic development, therefore enhance
the social division of labor. Although the fact
that Thailand was independent may not have
been the immediate cause of the failure of the
Thai Communist Party, it seems to have been
an important indirect, given factor one must
take into account when discussing the failure.

The author argues that the Army is under
the control of the Vietnamese Communist Party
and implies that it is not obstructing the
economic reform the Party is trying to promote.
However, prima facie, one can argue that the
major stumbling block for economic liberaliza-
tion in Vietnam is the Army. As the author
argues, there may be no split between the
Party and the Army, but to prevent this, it
can be argued, the Party cannot push economic
liberalization much. A large number of soldiers
died or were maimed during the war, and the
Army must feel responsible to them and their
families. And there are still a large number of
soldiers and reservists. These people are sup-
ported by resorting to nonmarket mechanisms.
The Army which loses all these with economic
liberalization cannot be neutral. If it is not an
obstructionist factor, why this is so should be
more convincingly explained than done in the
book.

One basic question concerning Vietnam is
why the economy is doing so poorly. Looking
at the history of the country and the region,
one gets an impression that it has the best
potential for development. As the author ex-
plains, despite the poor economic performance
vis-a-vis the neighboring countries, Vietnam
has a high education level for a developing
country (p. 179). The author argues that the
Vietnamese Communist Party is responsive to
the needs of the people (p. 119, for example),
but if so, why is its economic performance so
miserable? Or does she argue that it is what
the people want? If it is not, despite the human
potential, why is Vietnam's economic per-
formance so poor?

The author might say that the incorporation
of capitalist South created unprecedented
problems. But why? In a few years after South
Vietnam was liberated, there were no more
private firms where there was a concentration
of capital. Small capitalists, she might argue,
have been obstructing the socialization of the
former South Vietnam, and this created enor-
mous problems for the Communist Party. But
doesn't economic liberalization mean that small
capitalists are accepted? At least, this is the
direction in which China and some other socialist
countries are going, and it is the only way in
which economic reforms can have any uplifting
effects on the economy. Isn't this policy (and
its full implementation) difficult in Vietnam,
because of "the backwardness" of the Vietnam-
ese Communist Party? Why then is it so
"backward"? Here again, the strength of the
Army seems relevant. Although it was a cru-
cially important institution in bringing about
national integration, in the peacetime, it seems
to have become a dragging factor. In a way,
Vietnam seems to be the victim of its own
success. This sort of problem-oriented questions
is not well answered in the book.

(Kunio Yoshihara <吉原久仁夫> · CSEAS)