

REFERENCES

- Nora, Pierre, and Collaborators. *Les lieux de mémoire, tome I: La République* [Site of memory, volume I: The Republic]. Paris: Gallimard, 1984.
- . *Les lieux de mémoire, tome II: La Nation* [Sites of memory, volume II: The Nation]. Paris: Gallimard, 1986.
- . *Les lieux de mémoire, tome III: Les France* [Sites of memory, volume III: France]. Paris: Gallimard, 1993.

DOI: 10.1355/sj33-2m

Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngô Đình Diệm's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955–1963. By Geoffrey C. Stewart. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xii+265 pp.

One of the hallmarks of Republic of Vietnam President Ngô Đình Diệm's regime (1955–63) was its concerted effort to bring about a Personalist Revolution (*Cách Mạng Nhân Vị*) throughout the Vietnamese nation. Geoffrey Stewart's first book chronicles how this revolution was "propagated at the grassroots ... across the South Vietnamese countryside" (p. 2) through the work of the Special Commissariat for Civic Action (*Đặc Ủy Phủ Công Dân Vụ*). Stewart's monograph represents the first dedicated scholarly treatment of this important state institution in either English or Vietnamese. Thorough engagement with Vietnamese and American archival documents relating to the subject informs its comprehensive account both of the political vision of the commissariat's leader Kiều Công Cung and of the activities of its thousands of cadres. Beyond making a valuable contribution to a burgeoning historiography of nation-building in the Republic of Vietnam, Stewart builds on the recent work of Daniel Immerwahr (2015) to gesture at a crucial transnational context for Ngô Đình Diệm's revolution. He argues that the concept of "harnessing local human resources to a self-help effort" that provided the basis for the work of the Special Commissariat was "consistent with ideas underpinning a broad rural development

movement that was circulating throughout the Third World known as community development” (p. 27).

The six chapters of Stewart’s book chronologically trace the evolving relationship between the Special Commissariat and these ideas of community development.

Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the genesis of the Special Commissariat in a plan developed by Ngô Đình Diệm and Kiều Công Cung to garner support for the government in preparation for the 1956 elections mandated by the Geneva Accords and its restructuring in the wake of the former’s consolidation of power in late 1955. That restructuring saw the commissariat become a means of “extending the reach of the government down to the countryside to counter the communist presence” (p. 72). In conceiving of civic action in such instrumental terms, however, Kiều Công Cung was, Stewart contends, still “not discussing community development” (p. 72).

Chapters 3 and 4 elucidate the evolution of the Special Commissariat from 1957 onwards into a “full-fledged community development agency” (p. 129). On the basis of the two central tenets of “Raising the People’s Intellectual Standards” (*Nâng Cao Dân Trí*) and “Welfare Improvement” (*Cải Thiện Dân Sinh*), Kiều Công Cung now sought to create “morally just peasants, willing to sacrifice their personal pursuits for the betterment of the community” (p. 100). Through the voluntary labour of those peasants, he also sought to establish in villages “local infrastructure that would form the basis for an economically diverse and modern nation-state” (p. 100). The emphasis placed in these new initiatives on “individual self-sacrifice” and “communal self-help” not only “lay at the heart of the community development ideal” (pp. 137–38), Stewart suggests, but also “resonated ... strongly with the central tenets of the Ngô’s Personalist Revolution” (p. 110).

Chapters 5 and 6 then turn to the commissariat’s departure, at least in some measure, from this revolutionary agenda from 1959 onwards. It became increasingly “reactionary” (pp. 163, 194), in Stewart’s assessment, as Civic Action cadres became involved in security operations in response to the pressures of a growing southern insurgency.

Some issues in the book could be clarified. Perhaps most frustrating among these is Stewart's puzzling claim in his introduction that he "reveal[s] the agency of South Vietnamese actors" by exploring how the "global community development movement ... came to the Republic of Vietnam by way of a variety of sources including American advisers" (p. 7). In his presentation of these relationships, Stewart seems at times to be suggesting that the community development idea was derived completely from agents of the West. He depicts Kiều Công Cung, for instance, as having first taken an interest in community development after "reading up on it and seeking 'American experts to advise him'" (p. 53n42). Further, while Kiều Công Cung initially disagreed with the approach advocated by some of these "experts", the "American ... relationship with Civic Action" in the Republic of Vietnam persisted, and the "'lure of community development' was so strong that the Special Commissariat could not escape its pull" (p. 74). Here, Stewart's borrowing of the phrase "lure of community development" from Immerwahr (2015) further indicates his endorsement of the latter's view of the American origins of the idea. These observations seem to obscure Vietnamese agency rather than to reveal it, and they exist at some tension with Stewart's suggestions elsewhere that an effort to "keep the program in lockstep with the development of Ngô Đình Diệm's nation-building plan" guided Kiều Công Cung's "movement of Civic Action toward community development" (p. 95). At the heart of that plan, Stewart notes, were the president's Personalist ideology and its emphasis on "self-sacrifice for the greater good" (p. 95). Was Kiều Công Cung's conception of community development ultimately governed by the intellectual influence of Western advisors or by the inspiration of Ngô Đình Diệm's Personalist ideas? This question, left unresolved by the author, is especially crucial in the context of his evaluation of the "Vietnamese and American conceptions of the means and ends of the developmental process" as fundamentally distinct (p. 126).

Stewart's book would also benefit from deeper investigation into Vietnamese discourses around the ideas that he considers central to community development. Whereas "self-help", "self-sacrifice", "self-reliance" and "self-sufficiency" recur throughout his discussion of

both Personalism and the community development ideas undergirding the Special Commissariat's work (for example, pp. 107–11), Stewart neither provides the Vietnamese for these terms nor does he examine how these terms were propounded, explained or debated in texts from the Ngô Đình Diệm era. Perhaps engagement with the work of Jason Picard (2014 and 2016) on the deployment of such ideas in campaigns by the Ngô Đình Diệm regime to resettle refugees from the north (*Bắc di cư*) in the Republic of Vietnam — work that escapes mention in Stewart's book — would have allowed the author to think more comprehensively about these issues.

More broadly, Stewart's book, while thorough in its use of archival sources, neglects Vietnamese-language sources such as newspapers, memoirs and other publications from the Ngô Đình Diệm era. It cites the two Vietnamese newspapers listed in the bibliography, *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia* and *Saigon Mới*, only once each (pp. 196, 206). Of the two Vietnamese books cited, only one relates directly to the Ngô Đình Diệm era. The limitations of such purely archival research are apparent in the book. Stewart tells us, for instance, that there are “no examples of the texts used by the [Civic Action] cadres in the Vietnamese archives to [allow us to] appraise their content” (p. 142). This reviewer wonders, however, whether more comprehensive engagement with non-archival Vietnamese sources may not have yielded some insight on questions like this one.

It should also be noted that Stewart uncritically endorses the position taken by many American scholars in the past that Ngô Đình Diệm's articulations of Personalist ideas were invariably “vague and obscure” (p. 142), or “far too convoluted to be easily understood by most government officials” (p. 237). These conclusions would almost certainly have been revised in favour of a more nuanced position if Stewart had consulted some of the numerous texts on Personalism published in the Ngô Đình Diệm era. I have in mind, for instance, those by authors like Trần Hữu Thanh, Dương Thành Mậu, Mạnh Đạt and Bùi Tuân, or the volumes published by the Vĩnh Long Personalist Training Centre (*Trung Tâm Huấn Luyện Nhân Vị Vĩnh Long*), some of which remain available today in libraries in both Vietnam and the United States.

These criticisms should not detract from the fundamental importance of Stewart's work. By drawing our attention to the Special Commissariat for Civic Action, a crucial institution through which the Ngô Đình Diệm regime endeavoured to engage the rural inhabitants of the Republic of Vietnam in the state-led revolutionary movement, Stewart opens promising avenues for future research. The impact of Civic Action cadres' activities on the lives of villagers at the local level, for instance, might be a rewarding subject for further investigation. Stewart's consistent view of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime as highly autonomous, dictating the nature of its engagement with its own citizens, and often at odds with American interests also makes his book a welcome contribution to a new historiography in Vietnamese studies — one built on the extensive use of Vietnamese archival sources and a keen focus on the agency of Vietnamese actors.

Mitchell Tan

Council on Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, P.O. Box 208206, New Haven, Connecticut, 06520-8206, USA; email: mitchell.wl.tan@gmail.com.

REFERENCES

- Immerwahr, Daniel. *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Picard, Jason. "Fragmented Loyalties: The Great Migration's Impact on South Vietnam, 1954–1963". Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2014.
- . "'Fertile Lands Await': The Promises and Pitfalls of Directed Resettlement, 1954–1958". *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2016): 58–102.

DOI: 10.1355/sj33-2n

Imperial Bandits: Outlaws and Rebels in the China-Vietnam Borderlands. By Bradley Camp Davis. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017. xiii+266 pp.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a new political system emerged in Southeast Asia, one grounded in the nation-state and in