

reforms. For example, in the early reform era, when the state became increasingly unable to feed its citizens, the fact that it allowed people to use their residential land for private purposes was “a deliberate strategy on the part of a central state that was on the verge of a major crisis of legitimacy” (p. 70). Later on, when the land fever of the 1990s intensified real estate speculation, local peoples were already well along in the process of commodifying their land and using it for non-agricultural pursuits. In showing this, the book makes a powerful and important claim that challenges standard narratives in Vietnam studies, which often attribute too much to the effects of the official renovation policies known as *Đổi Mới*.

Using empirical evidence from Hòa Mục, the book also shows that state planners, so often the easy scapegoat, are not all-powerful but “operate in uneasy, unstable interrelationships with other actors and sources of societal power” (pp. 15–16). Linking history with contemporary land speculation, protests and peri-urban sprawl, this book offers a valuable contribution to the study of Hanoi, of urban Vietnam and of peri-urban development in Asia more generally.

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It's a Living: Work and Life in Vietnam Today. Edited by Gerard Sasges. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013. xviii+313 pp.

It's a Living contains a selection of sixty-seven out of 150 interviews conducted over 2010–13 as part of *Project Kiểm ăn*, which sought to “develop a better understanding of the reality of working in Vietnam” and “living in a period of incredible change” (pp. xiv–xv). Led by Gerard Sasges, the project involved collaboration between students in the University of California’s Education Abroad Programme in Vietnam and Hanoi University’s Faculties of Management and International Studies.

The book's strengths are reflected in the range of its interviews and the organization of these accounts. Each of the fifteen chapters is named after the occupational function of the interviewees. For example, Chapter One on "Growing" provides the stories of a farmer and a bonsai-grower; Chapter Two on "Feeding" treats a rice liquor maker and a KFC employee; and Chapter Twelve on "Grooming" features the accounts of a grey-hair plucker. These accounts capture a cross-section of Vietnamese society across age, income level, gender and occupation. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the Hanoi metropolitan area; others were conducted in northern cities and provinces, as well as further south in Ho Chi Minh City (pp. 156, 118). The pervasive nature of temporary or semi-permanent migration from rural to urban spaces within Vietnam means that many of the conversations in Hanoi also contain anecdotal information on the social and economic changes taking place in other parts of the country. There are also a few odd choices, interviews that do not seem to fit with the theme of the book, including interviews with Vietnamese immigrants living in Singapore (p. 266) and the United States (pp. 51, 207, 238).

The narrative arc employed by the book begins with life (farming) and ends with death (bone cleaning or exhumation). This device not only ensures that the accounts reflect the material and spiritual aspects of life and the afterlife, but it also — through the bone-cleaner's and farmer's common association with the soil — mirrors the country's development trajectory and the inevitable tussle over the use of land as Vietnam continues to transform and develop its rural economy (p. 6). In addition, the value of the book's narrative and the interviews' collective ability to capture the "sweep of Vietnam's recent history" (p. 1) are complemented by its introduction, which provides a concise but informative overview of significant economic, social and political events in Vietnam's history from 1975 to 2011. Indeed, the breadth of the accounts allows them collectively to illuminate important policy changes in Vietnam whilst retaining a certain universality. In the course of making a living — *kiếm ăn* in Vietnamese, literally "looking for food" — people perform work that take on various meanings and has various effects: work entails

passion (electrical-appliance repairman, pp. 217–20), building trust (domestic helper, pp. 230–43) and negotiating definitions of honour and success (adult-store salesperson, pp. 130–49). And sometimes it is just dull (bank employee, pp. 174).

The accounts also reveal how the policy of *Đổi Mới* introduced in 1986 created new jobs, made others obsolete, and threw many Vietnamese into precarious forms of employment. The occupations of the flower seller (p. 130) and the shoeshiner (p. 234) as street vendors, for example, have been “labelled ... ‘illegal’” (p. 133) by the government. However, the book also highlights the ways in which the reforms have also brought positive effects to some communities. For example, Chapter Fourteen relates the experience of an elementary school teacher in Yên Bái who was afforded the opportunity to earn a higher salary and whose students — most of whom came from one of Vietnam’s ethnic minority groups — benefitted from improved educational facilities, both as a result of the government policy “intended to support development in remote regions” (p. 286).

While *It’s a Living* successfully conveys the “experience and meaning of work” (p. 10), more could have been done to fulfil its second aspiration of demonstrating the interplay between “change and continuity” (p. 9). It would have benefitted from greater consistency in its disclosure of each respondent’s age and gender, especially for readers unfamiliar with Vietnamese names. Such information was not always provided or implied. In addition, the inclusion of background information in parentheses or as footnotes would have been beneficial, when respondents made reference to specific events or policies. This information appears occasionally (elementary school teacher, p. 286, and car dealer, p. 140), but in several instances it is difficult to contextualize respondents’ experiences within the country’s history or policies and to compare them across space and time. For example, why and how did the introduction of the HIV project (p. 244) lead to the relocation of barbers in Hanoi? When was it implemented, by whom, and who else did it affect? In Chapter Eight, what did the pawnshop owner really mean when he said, “because I’m old the cops only want me working until eight”

(p. 178)? The book thus leaves the reader with “homework”. Snippets of “real-time” background information would allow the interviews, which have substantial breadth, to achieve greater depth.

Nonetheless, *It's a Living* offers an exciting look into social, economic and cultural aspects of Vietnam as it undergoes rapid change. Finally, it appears that no nuance has been lost in the translation of conversations from Vietnamese. Readers will find that each voice retains its own idiosyncratic style of speech. This faithfulness makes each of the accounts vibrant and memorable.

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Fields of Desire: Poverty and Policy in Laos. By Holly High. Singapore: NUS Press, 2014. 213 pp.

Anthropologist Holly High identifies her monograph as a “political ethnography of desire” (p. 1). The study is based on her fieldwork in 2002–3 in Don Khiaw, a village in southwest Laos on an island in the Mekong River. In her 2005 doctoral dissertation, she argued that notions of personal desire and aspiration fuelled many individual poverty-reduction strategies. In *Fields of Desire* she amplifies her analysis of desire with Deleuze’s psychoanalytic concept of “delirium”. She cites Deleuze’s contention that “every society is at once rational and irrational” and that “underneath all reason lies delirium” (p. 180).

Don Khiaw is a fertile site to study investments in desire as its residents often migrate within Laos and even across the border into Thailand to find work and earn money. According to High, “[a]ll of these migrations are fuelled by significant and sometimes surprising desires” (p. 3). That is, the poor — and often young — residents migrate not only for survival but also for the pursuit of dreams and self-transformation. Moreover, state attempts to obstruct and