

BOOK REVIEWS

***Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism: Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective.* Edited by William S. Turley and Mark Selden. Colorado: Westview, 1993. 358 pp.**

Two factors collude to make this book disappointing for a greater part of its 358 pages: the clever title about reinventing socialism and the delay in publication of conference papers which were delivered at a June 1990 Workshop in Hanoi. To term the Vietnamese attempt at economic and political reforms as “reinventing socialism” is not inaccurate. Socialism, after all, is being chopped and changed and altered beyond recognition in Vietnam except that the leadership insists that it is still the country’s ideological goal. “Reinventing socialism” unfortunately also connotes a sense of a grand ideological enterprise taking place, which it is not. Vietnam’s leaders were forced into reforms and the way they have gone about it makes one suspicious that much of it is extemporizing.

To make matters worse, by now, the story of the ups and downs of *doi moi* (the Vietnamese term for reforms) is rather over-told. Thus, this collection arriving as it does now in 1993 is really long overdue although, to be fair, all the articles have been updated to include events in 1992. But several collections of such essays have already been published, one by the Australian National University in 1992.

The chapters in the book are divided into sub-themes such as economy, agriculture, politics, and society. Part Two on the economy is the most tedious because the issues which two out of the three papers cover are by now common knowledge among scholars. These were prepared by two senior researchers from Vietnam, Vo Dai Luoc and Le Duc Thuy.

As with most learned papers coming out from Vietnam, they are passable in comparison with those produced by the turgid ideologically driven scholarship of the past. But they are still long on description and celebration of first principles, and short on hardheaded assessments. Thuy concludes that efforts at political reforms in his country have not been adequate and if not redressed swiftly, will impede the process of economic reform. But the problem is that he has not bothered to explain why.

Luoc, in his paper on inflation, is even more cryptic. He points out that 1989 had the same per capita food output as in 1982 and the latter was considered a year when the food situation was tight. But, as he indicated quite clearly, 1989 was considered a good year: the country exported food, increased the production of consumer goods, and people put their money in savings deposits as never before. The confusion deepens when the third article in the section on the economy by Hy Van Luong refers to economic recession in 1989.

By far the best paper on the economy is that of Ngo Vinh Long, a historian, and it appears in the section on Agriculture under the title "Reform and Rural Development: Impact on Class, Sectoral and Regional Inequalities". Long makes judicious use of thirty years of statistics published by the General Statistical Office in Hanoi to paint an accurate picture of the economic dislocations that have come with the success of *doi moi*, problems which are only lately being acknowledged in the rural sector. But what was most appreciated in Long's article was his rather lucid account of the political disagreement over reforms which preceded the 1991 Party Congress. Long teaches at the University of Maine and his work is one further example that the best social science research on Vietnam cannot be done by the natives at home. Scholastic works from Hanoi are for the most part still rather exasperating to read and it is not because Vietnamese researchers are inherently inferior to their overseas counterparts. Those familiar with Vietnam are aware that in private conversations, the country's scholars can be rather incisive. It is just that *doi moi* has not progressed far enough in scholarship, at least where published works are concerned.

Another major feature of this volume of research papers is the comparative perspective it offers. Unfortunately, this may once more be a liability of the title of the book. It raises expectations without quite assuaging it. Comparisons attempted between Vietnam and other socialist states in transition can be quite desultory and some of the papers do not even bother to do this. Where they do in a fairly extensive way, as in Mark Selden's "Agrarian Development Strategies in China and Vietnam", it makes the reader wonder what is the purpose of putting the experience of the two countries together. Selden did just that, narrating developments

that took place separately in China and Vietnam, at the end of which crystallized thinking about what one country's method meant for another was not clear. Selden's co-editor, William Turley, did not do a better job of comparison when he dealt with "Party, State and People: Political Structure and Economic Prospects". In parts, the comparative perspective was rather inane in his work.

The two sections on Politics and Society have interesting papers by Brantly Womack and David Marr. Womack's analysis of the options open to Vietnam is an intellectually rigorous effort and his comparative perspectives are also useful and thoughtful; Marr on his part provides a rare look into the world of research and media in Hanoi.

However, a paper by Kristin Pelzer, "Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Renovation in Vietnam: *Doi Moi* as Dialogue and Transformation in Gender Relations" should have been better left out of this book. Her topic is interesting and deserves attention because most research is so taken up with the conventional issues of politics and economics. Unfortunately, her methodology is extremely questionable and the conclusions drawn lack depth. She analyses the significance of beauty pageants in Vietnam as reported in Thai newspapers. An *Asiaweek* cover picture of a Vietnamese woman entrepreneur also becomes a paragraph of serious musings on the role of women in capitalism or socialism. It may not have occurred to her that the picture could just have been the quirk of the magazine cover design artist, no more, no less. A few other pop icons are thrown in as well with the hit musical *Miss Saigon* and the movie *Full Metal Jacket*. About the only thing that can be taken seriously in this paper is her straightforward retelling of the controversial short story and movie, *The Retired General*, by Nguyen Huy Tiep. Tiep provides her with engaging material about the collapse of the old cultural order and assumptions as reforms plough ahead in Vietnam.

RUSSELL HENG HIANG KHNG
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

***Mirror on the Wall: Media in a Singapore Election.* By Eddie C.Y. Kuo, Duncan Holaday and Eugenia Peck.** Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, 1993. 132 pp.

The title of this slim volume is allusive: not unlike the relation between Snow White's stepmother and her fabled mirror, the political leadership