

Review: Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, “Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954”

Wednesday 28 September 2011, by [DEL TESTA David](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2011).

Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954*. Series “From Indochina to Vietnam: Revolution and War in a Global Perspective.” Translated by Ly Lan Dill-Klein, with Eric Jennings, Nora Taylor, and Noémi Tousignant. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009. XV + 490 pp. \$60 U.S. (hb). Illustrations, notes, index. ISBN 978-0-520-24539-6.

Review by David Del Testa, Bucknell University.

Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery’s excellent *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization* offers an English-language audience its first modern, single-volume, critical study of the history of France’s colonial occupation of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and the creation of a colonial collectivity known as Indochina. Over the years, many authors have addressed colonial Indochina’s history in volumes focusing on Vietnam, such as Joseph Buttinger in his classic, *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam*; or focused on the Vietnamese, such as David Marr, in his unparalleled texts, including *Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*; or on the relationship of France’s interaction with the Vietnamese, such as Eric Jennings with his excellent chapter, “Toward a New Indochina,” in his book, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain and the National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940 - 1945*. [1] But not since Virginia Thompson’s *French Indo-China* has an author attempted a comprehensive historical analysis of France’s Southeast Asian colony. [2] This book then satisfies an important need, not only for scholars interested in French colonial Indochina, but also anyone wanting a strong, critical summary of the events preceding the French and American wars in the countries that emerged from Indochina; those who want to make strong comparisons between contemporaneous colonial efforts; and those wishing to understand the potential impact of the colonization of Indochina on France.

The core of this book is not exactly a new. *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization* is a revised and extended English-language version of Brocheux and Hémery’s *Indochine: Une Colonisation ambiguë*. [3] Many interested individuals snapped up the relatively few copies of the original edition of *Indochine: Une Colonisation ambiguë* issued by La Découverte in 1995 or the revised edition issued by the same publishing house in 2004. The French edition itself had already had a long genesis, with the original manuscript completed by 1988, but delayed for editorial reasons until 1995. Thus, the authors have had the time to eliminate many of the faults of its French-language predecessor (such as the incomplete replication of citations in the bibliography), to incorporate to an important degree the ample English- and French-language scholarship on Indochina that bloomed

between 1995 and 2009 (including that of the author of this review), and to refine the overall presentation. Few local language sources informed the French-language editions and that remains the same for this version as well, but the volume is comprehensive otherwise.

In brief, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization* documents France's colonization of what became known as Indochina between 1858 and 1954. The authors explore quickly the initial motivations for Napoleon III to authorize an attack on the pre-colonial, independent, imperial Vietnam in 1857, the conquest of what is now southern Vietnam, and the resistance to the French that accompanied its colonization. Thereafter, they illustrate in much greater detail the politics of the government of France and the court of Vietnam in, respectively maintaining or resisting colonialism, illustrating that certainly not all French wanted a colonial empire and that not all Vietnamese rejected the presence of the French. They also spend some time explaining why the Cambodian court would ally itself with France and subject the Cambodians to colonial occupation. After the treaties, commercial interests, and early anti-colonial resistance groups receive detailed attention, Brocheux and Hémery address the imposition of complete control over all of Vietnam and the extension of that control over Laos.

The remainder of the text addresses the hardening of colonialism and French control over these areas, with a strong focus on Vietnam, and the resistance to a hardening position that the opportunities provided by colonialism created. The modern state and commercial apparatus that the French imposed needed local collaborators who knew French and modern methods of accounting, engineering, and so on. This need, combined with an enduring official sponsorship of a colonial civilizing mission, created Vietnamese and to a much lesser extent Cambodians, Laos, and highlanders, well versed in modern Western thought. Brocheux and Hémery subtly illustrate how local peoples grappled with the fundamental hypocrisy of republican France's colonialism and in the end used the very revolutionary ideas that the French had personified against them. They also show how, by the 1930s, Indochina increasingly became the stage for a global Realpolitik that had little to do with local people and more to do with life-and-death struggles between larger actors.

Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization provides an impressive amount of detail in 490 pages. A long series of introductory features (foreword, preface, and introduction) precedes eight substantial chapters, and there is a substantive conclusion and supplementary materials as well. Each of the eight chapters of *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization* addresses a particular theme (conquest, economics, culture) in a chronological fashion for greater or lesser periods of time between 1858 and 1940. For example, chapter three, "Colonial Capitalism and Development, 1858-1940," covers the entire time-period of the book, whereas chapter seven, "Resistance, Nationalism, and Social Movements, 1900-1939" covers a briefer period. Some readers might find the constant back-and-forth coverage of the same eras annoying or repetitious, but Brocheux and Hémery explain each of the themes so carefully and holistically that little confusion results from the reading of them. Ten maps and thirteen charts within the main text, as well as thirty-seven tables distributed within the text and in appendices, aggregate and appropriately illustrate the exchanges, regional movements, and volumes of trade that the authors analyze in thorough detail throughout the book.

It is important to remember that this text is an overview of the whole history of the colonization of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and that in so doing it must tackle simultaneously the dynamics of French, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian societies, the motivations for and consequences of the encounters between those societies facilitated by colonialism, and transformations in each society as a result of this colonial occupation. Thus, it cannot address in detail any of those societies and it suffers from a lack of scholarship and perhaps expertise on some aspects of the relationships that it addresses, thus over-representing (perhaps justifiably) France's presence in Vietnam and the consequences of colonialism for the Vietnamese, while hardly presenting any discussion of Cambodia and even less on Laos. Some critics may fault the authors for not addressing, for example, the

importance of certain aspects of local societies, such as Vietnamese family networks or Cambodian social hierarchy, that influenced who participated and how in colonial society or resistance to it. Readers cannot expect in-depth analyses of the minutiae, but at least the authors present an up-to-date twenty-page bibliography in which interested individuals could trace those details should they wish to do so.

Because of the high vantage point from which *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization* surveys the creation and eventual unraveling of colonial Indochina and because of their particular scholarly approaches to colonization, Brocheux and Hémery strongly favor analyses of elite political and economic institutions and the resulting politico-economic relationships to describe the institutional structures that provided the colony with its momentum. Individuals and conflicts between individuals receive ample attention, but they and their conflicts are always a part of a larger structure on which they depend or from which their perspective emanated. Both men are professors emeriti from the particularly productive Department of History at the University of Paris VII campus at Jussieu. They worked together productively for decades on various projects concerning colonialism and Vietnam, and they focused particularly on revolutionary history and colonial economics. The cross-fertilization of those topics between them is evident in this text.

Despite its subtitle, *An Ambiguous Colonization*, the reader leaves the text with a number of sureties about colonialism in Indochina. One is sure, particularly for Vietnam, that colonialism created modern Vietnam by simultaneously generating the skills necessary among the Vietnamese to operate a modern state and the hatred necessary to expel a modern occupier. One is sure that the French, or at least a certain well-positioned segment of French society, profited luxuriously from the imposition of a colonial economy over Indochina, and that the members of the colonial and metropolitan financial and commercial sectors used an ever-changing notion of a civilizing mission to provide excuses to encourage certain forms of development that favored their interests. Simultaneously many politicians, military leaders and idealists, both French and local, believed fervently in a civilizing mission for Indochina, and their dedication to the civilizing mission made colonialism there a going concern, even if they made choices that aligned with the desires of Indochina's financial and commercial sectors. And one is sure that local people—Vietnamese, French, Lao, Khmer, highlander—left the experience of colonialism and entered independence profoundly changed because of the colonial experience. A reader must delve more deeply and elsewhere, however, to understand the peculiarities of the transformations that occurred and their longer-term origins and consequences. In this way, the strength of this text will remain its holism, and it will certainly serve in this capacity for decades to come.

David Del Testa

Bucknell University
ddeltest bucknell.edu

P.S.

* H-France Review Vol. 11 (June 2011), No. 121. Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. This review may be found on the H-France website at: <http://www.h-france.net/vol11reviews/vol11no121DelTesta.pdf>

Footnotes

[1] Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966); David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial: 1920- 1945* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Petain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-44* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2004).

[2] Virginia Thompson, *French Indo-China* (New York, Macmillan, 1937).

[3] Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochine: La Colonisation ambiguë 1858-1954* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995, 2001, 2004).