

H-France Forum

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Eric T. Jennings, *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2011. 352 pp, 37 ill. Notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00/£41.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-520-266599.

Review Essay by David M. Pomfret, The University of Hong Kong

Bar the odd foray, Dalat has remained largely off the beaten track for historians. Eric Jennings' remarkable new book, *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina*, not only addresses this notable gap in the scholarship but also provides a timely response to recent calls from scholars for more local case studies of colonial cities informed by extensive archival work.[1] In fact, Jennings' intention is to go further still. By allying the historian's craft to the kind of "thick description" (p. 2) more commonly associated with the historical anthropologist, he has produced a history which aims to be both "local" and "global" (p. 4) and to use Dalat as a "prism" through which "the apogee of European imperialism" (p. 3) may be read.

Those familiar with Jennings' work will not be surprised to discover that *Imperial Heights* is written in a lively and accessible style and that the book is based upon painstaking, solid archival research. These particular archives often proved exasperatingly difficult for the author to locate, let alone access. This, to be sure, partly explains the relative dearth of prior work on such an important center of colonial power. Jennings' indefatigable pursuit of these elusive records has reaped considerable reward. The author has pieced together an impressive history (or perhaps more appropriately "histories") through the ingenious and imaginative use of a wide range of materials (including his own private collection of postcards).

Jennings' "thick description" of life at the hill station integrates fascinating accounts of individuals (such as Victor Debay, Alexandre Yersin and Gabrielle Vassal) and detailed analysis of overarching themes. Eschewing a top down approach, the author brings to light the striking multiplicity of anxieties, ideals, sensibilities, and petty rivalries that played a part in the emergence of Dalat. This is a rare work in the field of colonial history in that it integrates the perspectives of a very diverse set of stakeholders including adventurers, administrative cadres, missionaries, the burgeoning indigenous middle class, anti-colonial insurgents, and tourists. These are all deftly connected and interpreted through the hill station, and from this set of overlapping, divergent stories, contradictory stakes, rivalries, and collaborations, a vivid picture of Dalat emerges. Indeed, through its method the book provides an important new contribution to a growing body of literature, which compellingly illustrates that colonialism was far from being monolithic "on the ground."

Imperial Heights is exemplary not only in the way that it brings together multiple perspectives but also in the way that its focus on one urban center permits a wide-ranging discussion of a variety of themes. It is unusual to see, for example, disease, medicine, urban planning, education, and missionary work discussed together in a single work. However, by weaving these overlapping themes into the story of a specific site, Jennings manages to offer a fresh perspective and to challenge a number of existing assumptions and hypotheses concerning the

role of the imperial state. For example, with regard to medical, sanitary and segregation policies, by exploring the relationships between specific individuals as agents of colonial scientific, medical, health and planning policies, and broader social, political, and economic processes, Jennings' book complements recent work examining professional cadres' contributions to the planning of colonial cities.[2] In chapter seven, along with the work of other less renowned planners, he discusses Ernest Hébrard, who drew upon his knowledge of the hill station of Baguio (Philippines), the garden city in Welwyn, London, and Thessaloniki, Greece, as he prepared his "master plan" for Dalat. Like many contemporaries, Hébrard conceived of colonial cities as spaces where modern, hygienically informed city planning might proceed in relative freedom, compared with the cluttered and confined centers of the metropole. Jennings' history of Dalat provides valuable insights into the process through which such dreams failed. By elaborating on these paradoxes of colonial urban planning, *Imperial Heights* makes an important contribution to debates extending across disciplines, and urban and planning historians will find much of interest here.

Jennings' book also provides fresh insight into how contemporary theories of medical spatiality were elaborated in a colonial context. Building on his earlier work, Jennings highlights the enduring significance of older models of disease transmission (the resilience of "climatic determinist, telluric and miasmatic models" (p.14) in French colonial contexts.[3] By showing how past practices and beliefs about disease continued to inform the decisions that shaped city building in Dalat, *Imperial Heights* makes a useful contribution to a growing body of work showing how older medical models in which environmental agents were understood as the principal threats to white bodies were not entirely supplanted by newer emphases on pathogens as the primary agents of disease, but endured in complementary relation until remarkably late in the period. His findings thus help to challenge the putative shift, which has also been critiqued elsewhere, from medical enclavism in the nineteenth century to public health in the twentieth.

The stories Jennings tells reveal how the disciplinary power of the colonial state and its attempt to regulate indigenous bodies repeatedly broke down and failed. So, for example, he shows how indigenous elites were able to contest the right to reside in Dalat, often exposing the hypocritical, unrealizable, and self-defeating nature of French schemes intended to "protect" the city's supposedly "pristine" condition. Planners, meanwhile, were gripped by the recurring fear that modern technologies had merely created sites conducive to the more effective circulation and concentration of disease. The limits of the colonial state's ability to curb such undesirable circulations in the heights were, as Jennings reveals, in practice, quickly reached.

This forum, through its dialogic nature, provides an opportunity to identify some of the specific issues, overarching themes, and arguments raised by *Imperial Heights* for possible further discussion. A theme fundamental to the Dalat story is, of course, segregation, and this is also an issue currently attracting much scholarly interest from historians concerned with the transnational movement of ideas about modern urban planning.[4] Having outlined the segregationist intent of planning and urban management, the author locates an interesting shift in the 1930s, which appears to take the form of a growing reluctance to strictly implement segregation both on the level of the neighborhood and within the institution of the school. Two significant consequences of this shift are the proliferation of Vietnamese-owned dwellings and the growing racial heterogeneity of neighborhoods resulting in the failure of Hébrard's rigidly segregationist urban plan (p.182) and the gradual admission of Vietnamese and other non-European children into schools formerly reserved for European children.

It would be very interesting to know more about what precisely drove this shift. Given the striking importance of education to Dalat's reputation by the late 1930s, perhaps it would be worth elaborating upon a little by taking the case of the breakdown of segregation in Dalat's

lycées. Jennings mentions the emergence of a “reformist spirit” in the mid- to late-1930s (p. 183). To be sure, the Popular Front government and its representatives in Indochina, such as Justin Godart, head of the Commission of Inquiry set up to recommend improvements in the colonial system, changed the political landscape. Yet while Godart strongly supported raising barriers to entry for Vietnamese students seeking to enroll in *lycées* elsewhere in French Indochina, he also advocated the rapid expansion of *lycée* capacity in Dalat at a time when changed admissions policies had already begun to make these institutions less racially homogeneous.[5]

Why, then, was the principle of segregation in colonial education dispensed with in Dalat at a time when it was being reinforced elsewhere? Did religious workers’ contemporaneous efforts to create a secondary education institution for Vietnamese and French girls influence this shift in admissions policies? Moreover, since other historians of the British empire have connected the gradual breakdown of neighborhood segregation to the slow decline of hill stations’ colonial influence, this raises the question as to why, amid a similar creeping heterogeneity, Dalat flourished as a symbol of French power.[6]

Another question arises in relation to the impetus for Dalat’s development between the wars. Jennings covers the early stages during which Dalat was (re)conceived and planned in very impressive detail, exposing the gap between dreams and far messier realities. The author’s argument that wartime exigencies drove development beyond a still-rudimentary level is effectively made. If the association between altitude and power was as clear as Jennings suggests, and the “hill station imperative” so strong, and indeed if “death in the tropics” was so costly to the administration and so prevalent, it is intriguing to consider why the “race for altitude” flagged, the early plans went unrealized, and the project had largely been mothballed on the eve of the Great War.

It would also be useful to know more of how the author sees Dalat as having been able to make the transition from languishing in 1909 to “blossoming” in the post-war period. Given the cooling of wartime demand for its accommodations, the glacial pace of the post-war rail project, the hemming back of Hébrard’s plan, increasing construction costs, and lingering doubts over malaria etiologies and hygienic conditions, it would be useful to know more about how Dalat managed to emerge as a symbol of French imperial power, and avoid the fate of certain other hill stations of empire, which became, in the same period, symbols or symptoms of imperial decline.

Jennings’ laudible intention is that *Imperial Heights* should stand as a “global” as well as a local history. The author often invokes a frame of analysis beyond the nation-state, and emphasizes circulations linking center and periphery. Jennings brings situated entanglements in other colonial hill stations into view in “references out” (p.7 for example, refers to British India; on p.45 references are made to other models of hill stations). Through his transregional pursuit of individuals such as the French bacteriologist Alexandre Yersin, Jennings points the way toward an engagement with key themes in colonial history that takes into account the geographical mobility of important (state and non-state) agents between the metropole and South and Southeast Asia. The intellectual potential of such an approach, at a time when colonial history is still very often segmented by empire or region, is exciting, and indeed the hill station makes a perfect focus for studies taking account of developments in different regions and at different scalar levels.

Given this intention and the fact that Jennings is attempting “to understand a process – ‘the apogee of European imperialism’” (p. 3) it would be intriguing to know more about the ways in which Dalat really was, or was not, exceptional. Did it fit within trends more generally observable within the network of hill stations in Asia? Jennings suggests that “Dalat tells a

different story from most other hill stations” (p. 4). If this is the case, what does the Dalat case tell us “about empire” beyond the specifics of the French situation in southern Annam? Dalat’s interwar growth is certainly rather striking when contrasted with the development of certain hill stations in the region such as those in British colonial contexts, for example.

Jennings is sensitive to the extent to which contemporaries saw hill stations as a set, perhaps even a “circuit,” in the wider region, as his fascinating discussion of Yokohama indicates. Yokohama was 2,505 miles from Saigon and thus a much closer option for climatologically-challenged colonials seeking temporary reacclimatization than France. However, at the turn of the century those pursuing the altitude cure who lived in Indochina would travel not only to Japan, but also to what some contemporaries referred to as the “sanatorium of Hong Kong,” which was only 935 miles away, with good transport links from Haiphong and Saigon and which Francophone writers often lavished with praise for its relatively modern infrastructure, hotels, views and other amenities. It would be interesting to know when, why, and for whom Dalat superseded such alternatives and, moreover, quite what impact the continued availability of such alternatives had upon stakeholders’ pursuit of the hill station project in the Lang Bian.

Dalat’s history appears here as one which “uniquely encapsulates the colonial era” (p. 2) and which was “paradigmatic of and central to French colonialism” (p. 2). Dalat may well have been a French paragon but such a contention raises the question of how this particular locale was understood not only in relation to other hill stations in the region, but also those in Indochina and, moreover, major lowland centers. In his excellent chapter on Debay, Jennings does mention Bana, but rather briefly. This is really a (fascinating) essay on a highly controversial and little studied figure. Other stations such as Tam Dao, which also grew into significant seasonal centers hosting schools and colonials’ families, are certainly mentioned but rather in passing (e.g. pp 33-4). It would be useful to know more of how those with a stake in Dalat saw the specific roles and functions of that particular site vis-à-vis others. Certainly, when considering the question of Dalat’s exceptionalism it does seem to have been the case that contemporaries ascribed quite specific meanings to different hill stations. So, for example, during this period while Dalat came to be reinvented as a center for desegregated secondary education and a reception center for Eurasian children (though they also attended summer camps with dedicated buildings in nearby Nha Trang), Bana became the focus of efforts to establish *colonies de vacances* organized on an strict, explicit racially segregationist basis. If Dalat “tells a different story,” (p.4) it seems important to know how contemporary narratives of this particular site differed from those of other hill stations; otherwise these other associations may end up being subsumed beneath a rather nebulous notion of hierarchy.

Jennings demonstrates expertly that by the 1920s, authorities, for all of their wishful thinking, could not stem fears that the contagions of the lowland areas were also circulating in the heights. Given this fact, one also wonders to what extent the impetus for continuing to invest in Dalat derived among a variety of groups from perceptions of lowland areas and centers within French Indochina. So, for example, did authorities’ efforts to map and index malaria (in some places through costly entomological studies and splenic index evaluations) help to *create* the Lang Bian in contrastive relation to other highland areas. If the jury was still out on whether Dalat was indeed “safe,” did the fact that other highland areas, e.g. Tonkin, were seen as being even more badly affected (e.g. requiring even higher doses of quinine treatment) somehow underpin the Lang bian’s “hygienic” status? Dalat was clearly not immune from political contagions either, as Jennings demonstrates. Yet perhaps in getting to grips with the question of a French “apogee” it might be useful to consider how far the ongoing commitment to making French Indochina in the heights derived from perceptions of Dalat’s relative tranquility vis-à-vis the greater political ferment in the plains.

Jennings provides a profoundly nuanced insight into the lively social scene that burgeoned in Dalat between the wars. He provides tantalizing glimpses of the struggle that emerged as dreams of Dalat as an elite “playground,” a commercial showcase of French grandeur and *savoir faire* for all Asia (p.140) ran up against the interests of cadres wary of courting “cosmopolitanism.” Jennings mentions how *Cercles* remained closed and highly regulated. Anxieties about gambling led to the repeated squelching of plans for a casino (p. 83, p. 152). Feraudy’s hotel was closed down in spite of his protests. The possibility of another Dalat, more worldly *and* more distinctively local, more open and entrepreneurial, seems to have chafed alongside considerably less racy administrative and federal projects.

Yet as Jennings relates, tellingly, Dalat facilitated “passing.” Here the term *étrangers* could easily apply to all but non-temporary residents. Villas sprang up in a wide diversity of architectural styles. In this Dalat the golf course was conceived of primarily to lure British tourists. Schools were to draw in the cream of the region’s rising generation. Wealthy European and non-European tourists would mingle. Perhaps this dimension of Dalat’s past might be worthy of further discussion since its significance certainly extended beyond the realms of tourism and architecture and had an impact upon other debates, such as those concerning hygiene measures, landownership, education policy, and the future of Dalat itself. So, for example, the threat of a greater non-French presence was invoked to crush Vietnamese demands for greater access to French *lycées*. Bitter wrangling accompanied the debate over the alienation of land to foreigners in the 1930s. The municipal commission fretted over the resentment felt by “locals” toward them as a body on which Saigon residents were perceived to be overrepresented.

Overall, *Imperial Heights* succeeds in its aim of telling different stories through a single, fascinating site, and the book provides a valuable insight into the “mentalities that went into making Dalat” Eric Jennings unquestionably succeeds (p. 21). His concern is to avoid deterministic frameworks and provide a portrait of a place, and the methods used allow the author to unpick a mass of overlapping, divergent, and contradictory stakes. Jennings very effectively manages to draw out the complexity of the challenge to segregation, the dialectic between regionalism and international modernism, and the tension between planning ideals and urban management. It is to be hoped that the comments offered above might be seen less as a criticism of this fine work and more as an indication of the considerable interest that the insights and arguments it contains will surely inspire among those with an interest in the history of France and its empire.

NOTES

[1] John M. Carroll, *Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 9.

[2] See for example, Robert K. Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities* (London: E&F Spon, 1997); Ambe J. Njoh, “Urban Planning as a Tool of Power and Social Control in Colonial Africa,” *Planning Perspectives* 24, no. 3 (July 2009): 301–18; and Zeynep Celik, *Empire, Architecture and the City: French-Ottoman Encounters* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

[3] Eric T. Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers: Hydrotherapy, Climatology and French Colonial Spas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

[4] Carl Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[5] Justin Godart, *Rapport de mission en Indochine: 1er janvier-14 mars 1937*, présenté par François Bilange, Charles Fourniau et Alain Ruscio (Paris: Harmattan, 1994), 152.

[6] Dane Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 204.

David M. Pomfret
University of Hong Kong
pomfret@hkucc.hku.hk

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