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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 Panivong Norindr, University of Southern California

Eric Jennings's important and fascinating study on the founding and colonial development of the city of Dalat is a timely contribution to the study of French colonialism in Southeast Asia. The scope of the analysis is comprehensive, the methodology sound, and, most importantly, the book raises a number of important questions that remain central to a better understanding of French colonialism, namely, the understudied question of the role of native labor in French empire building and its equally muted corollary colonial violence in its many forms and figurations. Of course, to reduce Jennings's book to these two issues would fail to do justice to the author's masterly scholarly demonstration that Dalat must be regarded as an exemplary paradigm for the "making" and "undoing" of French colonialism in Southeast Asia, perhaps even more compellingly than if the city of Hanoi or Saigon had been the focus of his study since Dalat was wholly conceived by the French as a "ville d'agrément" (p. 118) and not built over the ruins of a native city. By privileging the city of Dalat over Hanoi or Saigon, Jennings can trace its emergence as a hill station and account for the early struggle to establish it on the Liang-Ban plateau, its relative success as an early health station when no major roads had been carved out from the steep hills, and its changing fortune over more than a century, a period that covers not only the heyday of French colonialism in the Indochinese peninsula, but also World War II and the Japanese occupation, the Vietminh's nationalist struggle to liberate its territory from the French, and, after the French military defeat at Dien Bien Phu, from the United States, and in the closing chapter, Dalat's current status as a romantic city for Vietnamese newlyweds in postcolonial Vietnam.

Dalat is indeed a brilliant choice because the city bears witness, from its very inception, not only to the ambitions of its colonial founders, but reveals the methods of French colonialism as a system as Sartre described it.^[1] But rather than constructing a totalizing frame to account for the colonial order of things, Jennings provides a layered history of Dalat by invoking the distinct voices of colonial civil servants, health officials, military leaders, writers, journalists, and many others gleaned in colonial reports, military tribunal proceedings, medical treatises, novels, memoirs, and reportage, which reveal the varied and different attitudes towards the development of a health station in colonial French Indochina. Excavated from a wealth of archives, these documents unveil the competing claims made by geographers, urban planners, health officials, military officers, travel writers, and novelists. They contribute to the polyphonic richness of Jennings's nuanced study that privileges the "thick description," a critical approach brilliantly adapted from Clifford Geertz's cultural analysis of Balinese society, but here tailored to delve into French Indochina.^[2] These different voices make the French presence in Indochina appear much less driven by official policies than by the individual initiatives and desires of such pioneers as Alexandre Yersin or Victor Adrien Debay. They reveal the real tension that existed between official policies and private interests. Jennings also pays close attention to visual documents (maps, postcards, cartoons, advertising, coats of arms, etc.) that not only illustrate many of his arguments but supplement them in ways that provide a more

subtle understanding not only of French colonial policies in Indochina but of colonial everyday life in Dalat.

As suggested above, one of the most important aspects of Jennings's book is his unabashed chronicling of different forms of colonial violence. I will not dwell on the "barbarous" "Debay method" (p. 25), "the captain's pattern of brutal, murderous behavior and his terrifying, impulsive ways" (p. 24), which appear to be an extreme and isolated case of military abuse. I want to focus briefly on a much more pervasive form of colonial violence, the practice of labor recruitment in colonial Indochina and the French treatment of Vietnamese workers and coolies. Using archival sources, Jennings described the "frenetic quest for labor around the time of the hill station's initial development" (p. 101), revealing, for instance, the fact that to build the mountain roads to Dalat, it was estimated that "some twenty thousand indigenous 'coolies' had perished trying to develop and build access routes to the Lang-Bian" (p. 62). These are the type of numbers that colonial apologists never mention in their desire to account for the positive contribution of French colonialism, rewriting at the same time the history of the French imperial nation-state, as Gary Wilder has dubbed it so appropriately.^[3] Jennings's book provides a much-needed scholarly corrective by pointing to the massive requisition of native laborers who were used to build these vaunted infrastructures, the "disposable labor" (p. 96) that was requisitioned at will, with no regard for the health of these often-uncompensated workers. Whereas the "corvée" and the "prestation" were abolished in metropolitan France centuries earlier, the Code de l'Indigénat allowed for the massive recruitment of workers throughout the French colonies and, in the case of the hill stations in Indochina, unpaid *montagnard* laborers who toiled and died on these unhealthy work sites. Often unmentioned or ignored by critics, the Indigénat regime is what the French called a "législation d'exception" used throughout the colonies, but studied more systematically in the case of French colonialism in Algeria.

Although Jennings is not a labor historian, the author provides us with many examples of the ways the general principles of French law did not apply in French colonial Indochina by authorizing or tacitly sanctioning these *corvées* and military recruitment, for instance, encouraging the massive migration (or more accurately, "deportation") of Vietnamese ethnic workers when no highland minority workers were to be found in sufficient numbers. Whereas the Code de l'Indigénat was officially abolished in 1946, Jennings discloses that "Indeed, the practice of requisitioning minority laborers by force in and around Dalat [only] ended in 1952" (p. 104). Although "la corvée privée" had disappeared in the kingdom of France in the eleventh century, private plantation owners expected the colonial authorities to help them round up workers so that their demands for free labor could be met. They were "surprised" when the native laborers left the plantations during the rice harvest season, which they could simply not afford to miss for fear of starvation. Jennings does not belabor the point. The archives are full of examples of the diversion of the "travaux prestataires" for the private benefit of the "grands colons." The solidarity between the "petit blanc" and the poor Khmer farmers, as it was so movingly represented in Duras's novel *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) must therefore be seen as an anomaly. Duras's novelistic account is a devastating indictment of what she calls "le vampirisme colonial," represented by the corrupt colonial civil servants, the "agents du cadastre" who had assigned to the mother allegedly arable land suitable for cultivation and growing crops but were nevertheless flooded by sea water during the high tides.^[4] These colonial officials also confiscated the most productive farmland to award it to the rich French and Chinese and French plantation owners. Even when the native workers were paid, Jennings informs the reader that they were paid incredibly low wages, "railroad workers in Lang-Bian were paid "40 centimes and 1.50 francs a day" (p. 68), "far lower than the wages for workers on the Yunnan line" (p. 68).

If I have one very minor quibble with the author, it is with Jennings's reliance on French progressive authors like Emile Zola, who have indeed written very eloquently about social unrest in France, workers' strikes, and the repressive measures used by the authorities to repress these labor demands in metropolitan France. And although this kind of comparative work still needs to be undertaken in a sustained fashion, fiction is not to be confused with reality, even if the literary quality of the accounts written by a writer like Emile Zola helped make better known the deplorable working conditions of the laboring class, and may have helped in improving workers' rights in France. But as suggested above, the laws that were beginning to be enacted to protect workers' rights in France had almost no bearing on the working conditions of the Indochinese workers and farmers still subjected to the Indigénat Code. We could turn productively to Vietnamese writers who have also written eloquently on these French abuses and mistreatments during the interwar period. And Jennings does indeed refer to Nguyen Ai Quoc's response to these shocking conditions under which Vietnamese workers toiled in his famous *Procès de la colonisation française* (1925): "En route to the Lang-Bian, en route to the mountain where death awaited, underfed, going in fact days without food, the requisitioned or those serving the corvées either revolted or fled, provoking a terrible repression on the part of guards, and dotting the road with their corpses" (quoted by Jennings, p. 62).^[5] But there were many more native informants and accounts that were as equally incriminatory.

Although the accounts of Vietnamese writers who also wrote about modernity and urban development fall outside the scope of Jennings's thorough study of Dalat, the insights that can be gained into the colonialist mentality and milieu are significant. The accounts of their day-to-day encounter with the French colonists complement in interesting ways the extensive archival sources uncovered by Jennings. Thus, if Jennings focuses on both Debay and Yersin, it is not only to illustrate two colonial modes of establishing a hill station in Indochina, but it is also to address the question of "symbolic" and "real" colonial violence, as exemplified by Yersin's "symbolic violence of colonial domination from atop a mountain bastion" and "in the case of Bana, the humiliation of arbitrary and horrifying colonial violence" (p. 34). I would like to bring to bear and discuss briefly a form of colonial violence that was not considered to be "horrifying," but a part of everyday life in the colonies. Jennings uses a cartoon entitled "Military Rate," in his chapter entitled "Murder on the Race for Altitude", not only to illustrate Debay's murderous violence towards the natives, but also to suggest that it is a form of violent behavior that was pervasive in all the colonies, whether they were ruled by the French, British, or German. The use of the beating, kicking, and whipping as way to establish the colonialists' ascendancy over the natives was a common occurrence, simply accepted, and, potentially, the source of great mirth and laughter. The "tarif militaire" cartoon (on page 33) depicts a uniformed and decorated French soldier violently kicking a rickshaw coolie, a pictorial representation that was supposed to draw laughter precisely because it was such a familiar sight.^[6] And Jennings adds, "Here Debay took to extreme ends a practice--slapping or kicking Indochinese--that was widespread as a way of 'correcting' servants or employees in the colonies. In another colonial context, the Belgian Congo, it was the whip that became metonymic with colonial rule" (p. 33).

To supplement Jennings's account of the common ill-treatment of the rickshaw coolie, I will cite the reportage written by Vu Dinh Chi (1900-1986), who used the penname Tam Lang. The Vietnamese writer and journalist took a job as a rickshaw driver and wrote an account of his experience in "I pulled a rickshaw," originally written for the *Hanoi Midday News* in 1932 and first published in book form in 1935.^[7] The reportage, what we would call today a piece of investigative journalism, was, in fact, inspired by the strategy used by a French woman author, Maryse Choisy. As Tam Lang tells us, he "borrowed a set of working clothes from a labourer, put them on, and adventurously went looking for work in the rickshaw trade."^[8] His journalistic piece of investigative reporting focused on the maltreatment and insults hurled at

the rickshaw coolies. The abusive behavior was not the exclusive domain of the French colonialists; the Vietnamese rickshaw supervisors were also ruthless, meting out brutal beatings to the coolies who could not pay back the daily rental fees of the rickshaw. But Tam Lang recounts the more common occurrences of French abuse and how little could be done against the Frenchmen who did not pay the full fare as initially agreed upon. And just as depicted in the cartoon, they “kicked or slapped”[9] as a form of retaliation if the rickshaw pullers complained about not being paid the full amount for their hard labor. They could not count on the French police for redress. As the rickshaw driver notes, “Because I’d have to put up with more kicks in the arse.”[10] According to the French colonists, well-dressed French customers could not possibly be cheaters.

The French Ligue of the Rights of Man brought up the issue of rickshaws at the 1931 Exposition Internationale Coloniale de Paris, requesting that they be banned from the fair and not displayed as one of the legitimate “local products of Indochina.”[11] As Tam Lang’s reportage made quite evident, it was comforting for him to know that “People in the imperial country think that the situation of people pulling people is a disgrace and try to do something about it.”[12] Indeed, the paradoxes inherent in French colonialism as a system were glaring even then, and the practice of using poor humans as “horse-people” was disquieting in its inhumanity. Furthermore, rickshaws are not indigenous to the Southeast Asian peninsula, having first been imported by the French from Japan via China, and could hardly be seen as an Indochinese “local product.” Tam Lang quotes another of his Vietnamese compatriots, the journalist Phi Bang, who considered “The rickshaw problem” to be part of a larger problem: “In life, people often give great consideration to big issues, but often neglect small ones, unaware that these insignificant matters have a big influence on our lives, our country, our race.” [13] Of course, Lam Tam realized that the outright banning or abolition of such a trade would have endangered the livelihood of fifteen hundred people in Hanoi alone, but he also appealed for a transformation of two-wheeled rickshaws into the three-wheeled tricycle, which first made its appearance in Shanghai. In his words, “When people pedal a tricycle for others, it is a more respectful, more humane activity, because the person pedaling is also able to sit [...] there is nothing offensive to human dignity.”[14] Quoting Pierre Brocheux, Jennings is well aware of these Vietnamese sources: “Indochinese news chronicles are riddled with everyday incidents marked by brutality, humiliation and injustice” (p. 32), but his purpose is not to catalogue these kinds of abuses, prominently discussed in Marc Ferro’s *Livre noir du colonialisme* (2003).[15]

I have not touched upon many other compelling aspects of Jennings’s book that deserved a more extensive engagement with such questions as the place of private Catholic education in Dalat; Dalat as the agricultural center of French “home produce,” or the Vietnamization of Dalat. My purpose was to highlight the extensive but heretofore understudied role played by the indigenous workers, the *montagnards* and ethnic Vietnamese who made the development of Dalat possible during the difficult process of establishing a French settlement colony in the highland of French Indochina. Eric Jennings’s *Imperial Heights* is a truly important book on French colonial history precisely because the author did not fail to account for the labor of these invisible workers and did not neglect to address the issue of colonial violence. This thick history of colonial and postcolonial everyday life in the health station of Dalat is destined to become a classic and mandatory reading for all those who want to have a much more nuanced understanding of French colonialism in Southeast Asia.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, “Le colonialisme est un système.” *Les Temps Modernes* 123 March-April 1956); reprinted in *Situations V* (Paris: Gallimard/NRF, 1964), 25-48.

- [2] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
- [3] Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- [4] Marguerite Duras, *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1950).
- [5] Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh), *Procès de la colonisation française* (Paris: Librairie du Travail, 1925); re-edited by Le Temps des Cerises (1999).
- [6] The cartoon was originally published in André Joyeux *La vie large des colonies* (Paris: Maurice Bauche, 1912).
- [7] Tam Lang, "I Pulled a Rickshaw," in Greg Lockhart & Monique Lockhart, trans., *The Light of the Capital* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996), 51-120.
- [8] Tam Lang is referring to Maryse Choisy's reportage *Un mois chez les filles* (Paris: Editions Montaigne, 1928). Maryse Choisy was "the French journalist who disguised herself as a maid so that she could work in a brothel and write a book about it" (p. 53).
- [9] Tam Lang, "I Pulled a Rickshaw," 84
- [10] Tam Lang, "I Pulled a Rickshaw," 90
- [11] Tam Lang, "I Pulled a Rickshaw," 114
- [12] Tam Lang, "I Pulled a Rickshaw," 114
- [13] Tam Lang, "I Pulled a Rickshaw," 115
- [14] Tam Lang, "I Pulled a Rickshaw," 117.
- [15] Marc Ferro, ed., *Le Livre noir du colonialisme. De l'Extermination à la Repentance*. (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2003).

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