
H-France Review Vol. 11 (March 2011), No. 69

Van Nguyen-Marshall, *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008. X + 180 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4331-0215-8.

Review by Michael G. Vann, California State University, Sacramento.

It is difficult to write the history of colonialism. This is an obvious statement, but we should consider the specific nature of the difficulties. Working in colonial history is like sailing a dangerous passage. First and foremost, the professional historian working with primary sources must assess the language issue. A command of the colonizer's language is essential but often insufficient for a complete portrait of the colonial encounter; the researcher may need to be able to work in two or perhaps three or four languages. Second, the historian must select the sources. The colonial historian is fortunate in that modern, bureaucratic, industrial states ruled the empires of the era of the New Imperialism. These state systems left detailed bureaucratic records of the governance of vast tracts of land in Asia, Africa, and Oceania where millions of people lived under colonial rule. However, as the Subaltern Studies Group and others have shown, these archival remains of the conquerors can create a reflection of the past distorted by Eurocentricism, the assumed primacy of the state, and the invisible backpack of gender and class privileges, placing all agency and voice with the white male administrator of the subject population.^[1] Finally, the historian of empire faces the challenge of intended audience. For whom is the research written? Readers interested in the colonizing power or the colonized society? Scholars with an interest in inter-colonial comparative history or scholars who want to expand their knowledge of the wider Francophone, Lusophone, or Anglophone worlds? Experts on the functioning of globalized bureaucracies or theorists of resistance and revolution? Those individuals captured by the romantic nostalgia of the colonial good life or those engaged in a critical re-examination of race, racial identity, and racism? Fortunately, Van Nguyen-Marshall has successfully navigated these dangerous waters and produced a nuanced, balanced, and significant piece of research with *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam*.

Nguyen-Marshall's book uses the prism of debates about poverty and charity to explore the colonial encounter in early twentieth-century Tonkin, the northern portion of Vietnam that the French ruled as a protectorate from the 1880s to the 1950s. By using two main sources, published writings from the Vietnamese elite and archival documents from the French bureaucracy, she seeks to give equal weight to the colonized and colonizer. More than merely giving balance, she argues that "poor relief was a domain where French colonists and Vietnamese intellectuals vied for moral authority" (p.1). The discourse was a site of contestation in which two elites struggled for power.

Nguyen-Marshall goes further, noting that this debate revealed a great deal about how the French saw themselves as colonizers and how the Vietnamese elite questioned its identity, role, and future in a changing Vietnam. For the French, the failure of the colonial political-economic order to achieve the material goals of the *mission civilisatrice* revealed an embarrassing truth and even suggested that their presence was doing more harm than good. Indeed, economic

intervention coupled with inefficient systems of state relief revealed that the French were in Vietnam for their own benefit, not that of the Vietnamese. That famine deaths were not only tolerated by the colonial state but that several French observers blamed poverty and food scarcity crises on the moral and intellectual failings of the victims, belies the sad truth that the empire was a method of exploiting Vietnam's resources not bettering the lives of the Vietnamese. For the Vietnamese elite, economic desperation suggested that they were failing in their duties as Confucian father figures and needed to consider some sort of modernization campaign to better their society.

Unfortunately, modernity was closely tied to westernization and colonial rule and thus politically suspect. Hence, nationalist politics were a constant backdrop to discussions of poverty and modernity. Nguyen-Marshall is a skilled historian who knows that her sources tell us much about their authors but are less reliable for understanding their subjects. She clearly sets the parameters of her argument by stating that she is focused on the French and Vietnamese elite and not the impoverished masses they claimed to understand. Thus, in choosing an excellent pool of source material and by carefully establishing her field of study, Nguyen-Marshall has crafted a very successful and extremely insightful (yet mercifully brief) monograph. The author built a clear and logical structure for this short book of fewer than 140 pages. A very concise introduction presents her argument, describes her sources, and cites a few key theorists of poverty. Experts in economic history may view the occasional citation of scant secondary literature as a shortcoming. That said, the lack of overly complex and esoteric literature reviews and theoretical ruminations is not only refreshing, it ensures that a wider audience of scholars will find the book accessible. The second chapter describes pre-colonial system of poor relief in the neo-Confucian Nguyen Dynasty. Chapter three covers the initial moves of the French state in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In particular, this chapter looks at the discourse of the "civilizing mission" and how it failed to stop human suffering in the crises and famines of 1906 and 1915-1917. The chapter closes by looking at the French colonial bureaucracy's response: the formation of a commission whose findings were impossible to distance from the colonial agenda and whose recommendations could be easily ignored by the colonial state.

The fourth chapter looks at the public writing of Tonkin's Vietnamese elite in the years from the close of the Great War to the arrival of the Great Depression. As the spread of the Romanized Vietnamese script (Quoc Ngu or "national script") was part of the wave of colonial modernity that was reshaping Vietnam, the Tonkinese elite turned to journalism as a domain to explore social issues. Frequently, articles on poverty were really veiled ways to skirt the north's censors and safely discuss issues of national survival. These elite authors tried to create a new identity that would blend Confucian values with the most useful and beneficial offerings from the West. The fifth chapter looks at the role of elite women in poverty discourse and relief organization. Here Nguyen-Marshall finds that elite Vietnamese women carved out a socially acceptable manner to engage in the public sphere. Thus, both chapters four and five demonstrate the ways in which the elite could use poverty discourse for other agendas, be they nationalist or proto-feminist. The sixth chapter examines the growth of new forms of Vietnamese literature such as the novel and the short story with attention to issues of poverty, gender, and nationalism. Here again we see a variety of agendas at work as these authors developed a new art form and tied it to social engagement. The final chapter returns to the French. Nguyen-Marshall narrates the initially enthusiastic energy and ultimate failure of the Popular Front. While the coalition government came into power with many promises and raised many hopes, it was mired in political troubles in Paris and a colonial state resistant to change. The book concludes with a very brief summation.

In Search of Moral Authority will be of interest to a number of different readers. Obviously, historians of Vietnam will benefit tremendously from her analysis of the journalism and fiction of early twentieth-century Vietnamese intellectuals. Following in the footsteps of Hue Tam Ho Tai and David Marr, Nguyen-Marshall's work discusses the varieties of elite Vietnamese perspectives including nationalist, traditionalist, Westernizing, and hybridizing.[2] Historians of colonialism in general, but especially of the French empire and of the Southeast Asian colonial era, will find much to consider in this book. The author does a fine job at pointing out the limits of the colonial state's power and authority. Indeed, readers might leave the book sneering at French pretensions of control as well as the failure and hypocrisy of the *mission civilisatrice*. Those interested in the interplay between colonizer and colonized will learn much about the formation of a colonial modernity. Importantly, this type of modernity was not forced on the Vietnamese by the French but rather it was created by the Vietnamese who selectively chose or rejected aspects of Westernization and tradition. Here Nguyen-Marshall excels at giving voice and agency to Vietnamese historical actors. World historians will also find much to ponder in this slim volume. Similar to Mike Davis' passionate indictment of classical liberalism and imperial conquest, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Nguyen-Marshall directs our attention to the human consequences of the profound socio-economic transformations of era of the global European empires.[3] French historians, admittedly the primary readers of this list-server, should read this book, but might find challenges within it. While Nguyen-Marshall does an excellent job at introducing the uninitiated to the basic patterns of Vietnamese history and while her clear organizational structure serves as a constant guide to the reader, chapters four, five, and six, do go deeper into Vietnamese literary history than many French historians might find necessary. The debates amongst Vietnamese intellectuals can be a little overwhelming, especially with the barrage of unfamiliar and similar names. Consider the case of Nguyen Nguyen Hong. When writing his novels about social degeneration he used the pen name of Nguyen Hong. The scholar trained in French studies might honestly wonder just how liberating such a *nom de plume* really was. That the discussion of Nguyen Nguyen Hong, aka Nguyen Hong, is inter-mixed with analysis of Nguyen Cong Hoan (neither of whom should be confused with the current historian of literature, Nguyen Huong) will create a bit of confusion in some minds (pp. 110-14).

That said, this is an important book for French historians of the early twentieth century. Nguyen-Marshall shows how policies created in Paris and exported to the empire shaped the development of culture in Hanoi and Haiphong. Elsewhere, Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall and I have argued that this is exactly the type of perspective historians of France must integrate into the national narrative if we are to overcome the field's generations of Eurocentrism (which threatens to degenerate into provincialism in this increasingly inter-connected post-colonial world).[4] As these global connections of politics, ideology, and identity contribute to our understanding of a history of imperial France, Nguyen-Marshall is to be commended for this fine contribution.

NOTES

[1] Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[2] Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996) and *Passion, Betrayal, and Revolution in Colonial Saigon: The Memoirs of Bao Luong* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). David Marr, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[3] Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso, 2002).

[4] Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall and Michael G. Vann, "Making French Connections: France in World History," *World History Association Bulletin* vol. XXVI, no. 1 (2010) and http://www.thewha.org/bulletins/spring_2010.pdf.

Michael G. Vann
California State University, Sacramento
mikevann@csus.edu

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172