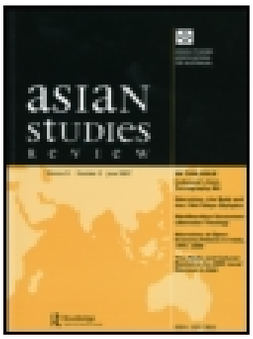

Asian Studies Review

ISSN: 0314-7533 (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/casr19

Recent French monographs on Indochina

Martin Stuart–Fox

To cite this article: Martin Stuart–Fox (1990) Recent French monographs on Indochina, Asian Studies Review, 13:3, 121-128, DOI: 10.1080/03147539008712652

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03147539008712652

Recent French monographs on Indochina

Martin Stuart-Fox
University of Queensland

French scholarship on Indochina, after suffering something of a hiatus during the 1970s, now seems to be undergoing a new fluorescence. While some established Indochina scholars, such as Jean Chesneaux, have turned to other fields in the 1980s, others like Philippe Devillers and Georges Boudarel continue to produce important work.[1] At the same time a new generation of scholars (writing in French, though not all of them are of French nationality) has begun to leave its mark.

Much of the new burst of productivity has been under the direction either of Professor P.-B. Lafont at the Centre d'Histoire et Civilisations de la Peninsule Indochinoise in Paris[2] or of Professor G. Condominas of the universities of Nice and Paris.[3] A third team of researchers is attached to the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS).[4]

Credit for making this new research available to a wide readership must largely go to the publisher L'Harmattan whose new series entitled "Recherches Asiatiques" is specifically designed to make available results of recent research in French universities on the history, politics and sociology of former French colonies in Asia. It thus promises to be of particular importance for students of Indochina. Of the eight volumes in this series to date, two are to do with India, one is an excellent study of Lee Kwan Yew's Singapore,[5] four deal with Vietnam or Cambodia, and the last is a broad comparative study of the role of Catholicism in Asian societies.

Of the four volumes on Indochina, two are published versions of doctoral theses, the research for which was carried out in the French colonial archives housed at Aix-en-Provence. Both are good examples of the kind of revisionist historiography appearing on French Indochina as these sources are fully catalogued and made available to scholars. However, both illustrate the methodological difficulties and historiographical dangers involved in relying

1 For example, Philippe Devillers, *Paris-Saigon-Hanoi; Les Archives de la Guerre 1944-1947* (Paris: Gaillimard, 1988); George Boudarel et al., *La Bureaucratie au Vietnam* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1983).

2 Responsible for such publications as Jean Deuve, *Le Royaume du Laos 1949-1965* (Paris: Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient, 1984).

3 Under whom Tsuboi, Ngaosyvathn, and other young Indochina scholars have studied.

4 Including Christian Taillard, Amphay Dore, Jacques Lemoine.

5 Jean-Louis Margolin, *Singapour 1959-1987: Genese d'un Nouveau Pays Industriel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989), which I have reviewed in *The Australian Journal of Politics and History* 35, 3 (1989).

almost exclusively on one set of sources. As a result, we are presented with somewhat unsatisfying, rather flat and one-dimensional views of major protagonists — of the emperor Tu Duc and his court advisors in the Tsuboi volume,[6] and of the Vietminh high command in Tonnesson's work.[7]

Tsuboi's study examines the difficulties faced by the Vietnamese court at Hue in responding to the challenge of French colonialism between the years 1847 and 1883, that is, during the reign of the emperor Tu Duc. The author draws upon French, Chinese, Vietnamese and Japanese sources but was unable to gain access to the Chau Ban, the official records of the imperial court annotated in vermilion ink by Tu Duc himself. These are still in the process of being catalogued in Vietnam and have not yet been made available to scholars. As a result, though Tsuboi presents a more sympathetic picture of Tu Duc than has been usual, we never enter the mind of the emperor. Perhaps this will not prove possible even with access to the imperial archives, but at least the emperor's motives and concerns will become clearer.

Tsuboi's book is curiously structured. After an introductory chapter outlining the situation in Vietnam prior to Tu Duc's succession, Tsuboi turns to the French presence which he treats under four headings — missionaries, merchants, naval officers and diplomats. Brief biographical sketches of selected figures from Alexander of Rhodes in the seventeenth century to political representatives such as Reinart, Kergaradec and Philastre in the nineteenth lead to the unsurprising conclusion that all worked actively to promote French imperialism.

Next Tsuboi turns to the Chinese. He examines both official and unofficial relations between China and Vietnam, the latter consisting of both commercial contacts and the unwelcome presence in northern Vietnam of Chinese criminal elements and remnants of defeated Tai Ping armies. Emphasis is placed on the Chinese reaction to French intervention in what the Ching court still considered a tributary state.

Half way through the book, after frequent references to Tu Duc's responses to various French and Chinese moves, we suddenly revert to problems surrounding his succession to the throne. This chapter is followed by one giving brief biographies of the emperor and three of his leading mandarins. Only then do we turn to a study of the courtly intrigues and political infighting over how best to respond to the French threat. The next two chapters examine policy deliberations leading up to and following from the capitulationist 1874 treaty that opened the way for further French interference in Vietnam, and the increasingly critical reaction of the Vietnamese mandarinate. The book ends with a brief overview of

---

6 Yoshihara Tsuboi, *L'Empire Vietnamien face à la France et à la Chine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987). Pp. 291.

7 Sten Tonnesson, *1946: Declenchement de la Guerre d'Indochine: Les Vepres Tonkinoises du 19 Decembre*. Translated by Bruno Metz (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987). Pp. 275.

the period from 1874 to the death of Tu Duc and outbreak of the elite-led *Can Vuong* anti-French resistance in 1883.

This semi-thematic structure based on various perspectives tends to be repetitive and not a little confusing, especially in the earlier chapters — a problem only exacerbated by the publisher's or author's failure to provide any index. Nevertheless, Tsuboi succeeds in building up a more rounded picture than has previously been presented of Tu Duc as a ruler aware of his unpopularity and desperately manoevering to protect his own position, even at the expense of losing virtually all support from the Confucian-educated elite. Tu Duc is revealed as tenacious in defence of his interests, which he understandably identified with those of his country. But he was a man trapped within an outdated political system and limited by the resources of a weak economy whose more productive components were beyond his power to control (and tax). One can only concur with Tsuboi's conclusion that Tu Duc did not have much luck in his dealings either with the French or with his own people.

The second volume under review is a study of events during the last three months of 1946 leading to the outbreak of the first Indochina war by the Norwegian historian Sten Tonnesson. The thesis was originally written in English and translated into French for the L'Harmattan series. It is to be hoped that an English edition will be forthcoming.

Tonnesson has made extensive use of the French colonial archives and of military and state papers. What he has not had access to on the French side are archives of the Surete, the secret police. More importantly, he has not drawn upon any Vietnamese sources. We are left, therefore, with a number of unanswered questions. If Tonnesson's thesis is correct — that the French administration in Indochina set a trap for the Vietminh into whey they were disorganized and indecisive enough to fall — then the Vietnamese may be reluctant to make the records available, and we may have to wait decades for a definitive account. In the meantime, although Tonnesson has not been able to determine conclusively the share of responsibility that each side bears for the outbreak of war in Indochina in December 1946, his careful and balanced account must stand as the most accurate currently available.

The previously accepted version of why fighting broke out on 19 December 1946 was that the Vietminh mounted a vicious surprise attack against French forces and civilians in Hanoi, to which the French were forced to respond. With the proviso that they were provoked into attacking first by a series of deliberate French provocations and the belief that the French themselves were only awaiting an opportune moment to attack, it is a version not denied by the Vietnamese. Vietnamese accounts laud the attack as an heroic if suicidal defense designed to permit the withdrawal intact of main force Vietminh units to prepared base areas. Tonnesson's study takes issue with both versions.

There is no doubt that French administrators in Saigon, headed by the redoubtable Admiral D'Argenlieu, were determined to reimpose French rule over all Indochina, and that to this end a policy of deliberate provocation was pursued towards Ho Chi Minh's government in Hanoi. Blame for the train of events culminating in the massacre of Haiphong in which thousands of Vietnamese died under French guns clearly lay with the French. But who was to blame for the final rupture?

Tonnesson demonstrates clearly the role played by French authorities in Saigon in, for example, delaying and even distorting communications between Ho Chi Minh and a succession of French governments in Paris. Both Ho himself and the then French prime minister, Leon Blum, made last minute efforts to avoid a final showdown. Why then did it occur? The French were determined to maintain their military pressure, while the Vietminh were as determined not to concede any further ground. The atmosphere was thus exceedingly tense. Any incident would have been enough to spark a conflict all but impossible to contain. And there were those on both sides who believed not only that conflict was inevitable, but also that the sooner it occurred, the better.

Tonnesson provides a detailed account of events on 19 December, but he is unable to overcome his lack of evidence from the Vietnamese side. We do not know who gave the order to the irregular Vietnamese militia to attack. Nor do we know why Giap took the decision not to commit the bulk of his regular forces. There is a strong possibility that the attack was provoked either by extremist opponents of Ho and Giap within the Vietminh or by pro-Chinese, anti-Vietminh members of the militia who hoped thereby to precipitate intervention by China, the United States, or both. Tonnesson indicates that this last is a real possibility since only a relatively small minority of the militia were members of the Vietminh, and discipline was much more lax than in regular Vietminh units. Giap and Ho may well have been faced with a *fait accompli*, and it will be interesting to see how the Vietnamese respond to Tonnesson's book.

Christian Taillard's admirably presented and documented study[8] of the problems, both internal and external, facing Laos as a "buffer state" between more powerful neighbours, discusses two important questions. The first concerns the political and economic organization most suitable for the development of the Lao state, given the spatial configuration of the country as it now exists. The second concerns those strategies that Laos might logically adopt towards other states which would best serve its national interests, given its geographic position and limited resources base.

Taillard begins by demonstrating how Laos has historically constituted a "cross-roads" in mainland Southeast Asia, both in terms of the movement of

8 Christian Taillard, *Le Laos: Strategies d'un Etat-tampon* (Montpellier: Groupement d'Interet Public RECLUS, 1989). Pp. 200. 120 francs.

people and the movement of goods. Here, as elsewhere in his analysis, Taillard illustrates his discussion through the liberal use of maps and diagrams, which are both informative and instructive.

Taillard develops a series of models of spatial relationships on a succession of social levels — village, district, national — to analyse how traditional "Thai" (I would prefer "Tai") socio-political structures were organized. This leads to a model of inter-"state" relations as interaction between what Taillard calls "concentric aureoles of diminishing frameworks from centre to periphery" (p. 45), in preference to Tambiah's "galactic" terminology. More preferable still, however, would be to adopt the original Indian model and terminology of the *mandala*, as developed recently by Charles Higham.

By whatever name, the inter-"state" system in Southeast Asia rested on the organizing potential of strong "centres", which were at the same time concentrations of religio-symbolic, economic and military power. The division of the unified kingdom of Lan Xang at the end of the seventeenth century substituted three weak centres for the one strong one that previously existed and condemned the Lao principalities to be drawn into the orbits of more powerful centres.

Only the intervention of France temporarily re-established a unitary, if truncated, Lao state. When France withdrew from Indochina in 1954, Laos was again subjected to the centrifugal influences of its more powerful neighbours, and was again divided. This time, however, the division was longitudinal, with a Thai-American sector along the Mekong, and a Vietnamese sector in the mountainous eastern border region. (It could be argued that the Chinese sphere of influence in the north constituted a separate third sector.)

The government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) that came to power in December 1975 sought to overcome these divisions through allying, and in effect subordinating, itself to a single powerful neighbour — Vietnam. At the same time, national unity was believed to require a strongly centralized political system, nationalization of industry and commerce, and collectivization of agriculture.

This policy soon ran into difficulties on two levels. Internally, by concentrating all power at the centre, it failed to take account of historical patterns of power-sharing in the traditional relationship between centre and periphery. Externally, through Laos' close alliance with Vietnam, it precluded exploitation of the opportunities implicit in a "buffer state" situation for the pursuit of national interests. Internally, opposition coalesced around collectivization; externally, Laos came under pressure from both Thailand and China.

Taillard argues that both forms of opposition derived from a failure to appreciate the spatial ordering of socio-economic realities that must inevitably

impinge upon any Lao government. Internally, these realities include population distribution, means of communication, and economic structure. Externally, they derive from the country's strategic geographic location with respect to neighbouring states, reliance on external communications, and chronic economic dependency.

Given these objective factors, which no Lao government can disregard, the LPDR had no option but to work out new strategies to ensure economic development and national cohesion built on the strengths, rather than the weaknesses, of the country's situation.

The internal and external dimensions of the new strategy began coming together in 1988, through a combination of fortuitous circumstances — economic policy changes in the areas of management, finance, and investment, encouragement of the Soviet Union, virtual collapse of the Vietnamese economy, changing attitudes in Thailand, and increased international pressure to bring about a solution to the "Cambodian problem".

What has resulted is a combination of a modern version of the traditional Lao socio-political model internally (permitting a considerable degree of provincial autonomy) with reaffirmation of the country's "buffer" status externally (providing increased freedom for international initiatives).

Overall, Taillard's study is a welcome addition to the meagre literature on modern Laos. It is well argued and beautifully produced, with a spread of sixteen multicoloured maps which are probably the best and most informative set ever produced for Laos. It comes complete with statistical tables, bibliography, and index (regretably limited to proper names).

The last of the four monographs on Indochina I shall discuss is the first in a series of studies on the historical development of the boundaries separating the states of Indochina.[9] This is a welcome series, for of all the boundaries of mainland Southeast Asia states, these have proved the most vexatious. Frontier disputes have led to conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia, especially between 1975 and 1979, and more recently between Laos and Thailand.

For some readers, the "rules" collectively adopted by the group of scholars contributing to this volume may limit the value of their work. One rule is that their approach should be entirely historical: no matters of legal principle are touched upon. A second rule is that each contributor has complete freedom to interpret sources. This means that no attempt is made to reconcile conflicting interpretations based on different texts. We shall have to await the promised

9 P.B. Lafont (ed.), *Les Frontieres du Vietnam: Histoire des Frontieres de la Peninsule Indochinoise* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989). Pp. 268.

publication of a volume of critically annotated documents before coming to our own conclusions about evident contradictions.

The book opens with two introductory essays: the first on the concept of a frontier in "the eastern part of the Indochinese peninsula and the second discussing a number of ancient Vietnamese and European maps and the differing conceptions on which they were based. The first essay, by adopting a straightforward Vietnamese perspective, fails to address a key issue concerning the historical evolution of the frontiers of Indochina — that at this most significant cultural divide in mainland Southeast Asia, Chinese and Indian concepts of the organization of and interrelation between states meet in uneasy conjunction.

The rest of the volume is divided into four sections dealing with Vietnam's frontiers with China (north), Champa and Cambodia (south), Laos (west), and with countries claiming jurisdiction over portions of the South China Sea (east). Within each section, the order is chronological; thus, the northern section is divided into five essays covering differing periods from the eleventh century to the present.

Contributions are variable in both length and breadth of approach. Five pages are devoted to the China-Vietnam frontier from the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries, nineteen to the few years during which France was consolidating its control over Tonkin. Such imbalance is probably to be expected. Sources for the nineteenth century are more numerous and more accessible. Also the European obsession with sovereignty and the drawing of exact lines on maps provided greater opportunities for endless negotiation than did earlier, more informal arrangements.

Breadth of approach is also rather uneven. Some articles stick closely to examining historical changes in the position of the frontier; some include discussion of such related matters as frontier administration, how effective the frontier was in protecting the strategic and security interests of the state, or what the effect of re-positioning a frontier had on frontier people.

In general, the broader the approach, the greater the interest of the article. The studies based on classical Vietnamese sources by Nguyen The Anh tend to be brief and dry. More revealing is the discussion by Charles Fourniau of the Franco-Chinese stand-off during the French occupation of Tonkin.

Overall, the level of scholarship is impressive. It is a pity the border with Champa is treated so briefly (15 pages for the two articles). We would like to know a lot more about the stages in the Vietnamese "march to the south" and the state of the border regions.

Treatment of the frontiers with Cambodia and Laos (47 and 50 pages respectively) is much more satisfactory. The articles by Mak Phoeun on the

Cambodian frontier from the seventeenth century to the French protectorate based on the Royal Khmer Chronicles and by Bernard Gay on the Lao frontier from 1893 to the present are fine pieces of research and writing. What we miss in the case of the early Cambodian frontier is any study based on Vietnamese sources to complement Mak Phoeun's essay. Complementary studies are provided for Laos by Nguyen The Anh and Saveng Phinith.

Particularly welcome in this treatment of Vietnam's frontiers is the inclusion of two studies by Professor Lafont on Vietnam's maritime frontier and the conflict over sovereignty claims to the Spratley and Paracel Islands. Both are accompanied by maps, though it would have been more interesting if conflicting claims had been shown.

The most serious deficiency in this volume is undoubtedly the lack of maps. Apart from a map of Indochina showing only towns and waterways, with no frontiers marked, and the two maps on the maritime frontier, there is only one other in the entire volume (showing the Vietnamese-Cambodian frontier). Another deficiency limiting the book's usefulness is that there is no index.

How the remaining volumes in this "Frontiers" series will be organized remains to be seen. Volumes on Laos and Cambodia will presumably have to include something about their borders with Vietnam. Will these essays from the Vietnam volume be reprinted? Whatever happens, it is to be hoped that subsequent volumes include many more maps and a comprehensive index. Both will greatly enhance the value of this useful series for scholars and general readers alike.

It is good to see this resurgence of French scholarship on Indochina. The problems addressed in these volumes are important ones; the approach is fresh and stimulating; and the conclusions challenge accepted accounts in significant ways. We can undoubtedly look forward to more such contributions in the future.