

**COMMUNIST INDOCHINA.** By *R.B. Smith*; edited by *Beryl Williams*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008. xii, 222 pp. US\$160.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-415-46804-6.

I remember reading Ralph Smith's *Vietnam and the West* (Heinemann, 1968) as a graduate student, being particularly impressed by his willingness to take us into his confidence, to make us part of his intellectual quest. As an Englishman, Smith thankfully avoided putting either French or American actors at the centre of the Vietnamese stage, a failing of perhaps 90 percent of all other Western publications. Smith produced a lot more of value in subsequent decades, but his sudden death in 2000, at age 61, meant that a number of studies remained little known or unpublished. Beryl Williams took up the responsibility of editing two compilations, the first titled *Pre-Communist Indochina* (Routledge, 2009), and the volume reviewed here.

*Communist Indochina* contains seven articles published by Smith in five different journals, and two conference papers. Chronologically speaking, we begin with the foundation of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1929-1930, and end with Vietnam undergoing rapid economic change in the 1990s. Along the way we are treated to two essays on Cambodia as well. The four works that Smith published in the 1970s and 1980s stand up well in general argument, yet suffer from the fact that since then abundant new archival evidence, document compilations, and memoirs have become available. During the 1990s, Smith did make effective use of the French colonial archives at Aix, but had yet to tackle the Vietnam National Archives (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City) or the advent of increasingly useful Vietnamese-language publications. Whereas previously students of Vietnam's contemporary history needed to rely on translations in the BBC's *Summary of World Broadcasts* (or FBIS), during the past two decades back issues of periodicals in Vietnamese have become readily available.

Three essays in this compilation focus on events during 1945, the most important year in the modern history of Vietnam. Smith explains the significance of the 9 March Japanese coup, which eliminated French administration, explores the first five months of Democratic Republic of Vietnam operations, and makes some interesting comparisons with events in Indonesia. Smith had a special knack for putting local developments into regional and international contexts.

My favourite essay in this book is the last one, titled "Vietnam from the 1890s to the 1990s: continuity and change in the longer perspective," wherein Smith takes up issues of political culture, colonial economic transformations, and Vietnam's opportunities and failures from the early 1970s onward. Smith posits three key moments of social and political discontinuity: 1916; 1945; and 1954-55. Writing in 1996, he suggests that 1989-91 may prove to be a fourth moment of discontinuity, which today we can affirm with confidence. Smith calls for a "more comprehensive attempt to analyse the structure of

power in Vietnamese society [...] before attempting to define its fundamental character in terms which are too simple to do justice to the reality” (203). And he wonders if the “revolution” had only a “superficial impact on the deeper ways of thinking of the vast majority of rural Vietnamese” (213). Here much depends on how broadly one interprets the word revolution. Vietnamese farmers of the 1890s would not recognize much of what today’s farmers are talking about, and vice versa.

It is a pity that Beryl Williams did not incorporate to this volume a list of all of Ralph Smith’s publications, to assist scholars in locating additional items of interest. I would place Smith among the top dozen or so Western historians of Vietnam in the twentieth century, with a clarity of prose and facility for lateral thinking that should attract readers for generations to come.

*Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*

DAVID G. MARR