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ERIC T. JENNINGS

Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina (From Indochina to Vietnam: Revolution and War in a Global Perspective)

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. 374 pages. $60.00 (cloth); $29.95 (paper).

In his most recent book, *Imperial Heights*, Eric T. Jennings departs from the burgeoning scholarship on Vietnamese cities and provincial towns by selecting a seemingly unusual location. Nestled atop the Lang Biang plateau on which it was built, Đà Lạt is known today for its quaint charm and popularity as a honeymoon destination. The lakes, forests, waterfalls, Peugeots, golf courses, hotels, and villas all bring back a nostalgic yearning of a bygone era. But this serene exterior hides a troubled colonial past. From its function as a former colonial resting place to its candidacy as the capital of Indochina, Jennings reconstructs Đà Lạt's history to argue that this city's story embodies the contested and complex legacy of the French empire itself. If one of the purported aims of the French civilizing mission was to produce a mirror image of the homeland in the far-flung colonies, Đà Lạt symbolized at once the power and paradox of this colonizing mission.

Initially conceived as a sanatorium for French soldiers who were perishing at record rates from malaria or other tropical diseases, Đà Lạt was considered a potentially cost-effective alternative to repatriation or to the overseas delivery of the men to other colonial hill stations. Like Simla or Darjeeling, the famed hill stations of British India, Đà Lạt would serve as a respite from the crushing heat of Cochinchina and a haven from the Vietnamese and Vietnam itself. Đà Lạt's altitude and temperate climate were perceived to liberate and reinvigorate the European mind and body, despite the fact that, as Jennings notes, the etiology of malaria was confirmed to derive from the mosquito in 1897, the same year as the founding of Đà Lạt itself. The city's birth, then, along with its eventual development, was founded upon perceived racial survival and preservation—at once a symbol of colonial power and an admission of "vulnerability" and "fragility" (3, 56).

By the 1930s, the city would become a destination not only for the sick but also the homesick, a site on which the French would recreate the motherland

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in what Jennings calls a “cloning exercise” or a colonial “tabula rasa” (2, 113). *Imperial Heights* teases out the ambiguities and paradoxes of this utopian project. The book’s fourteen chapters can be grouped into three key sections: chapters 1–5 chronicle the city’s conception, development and early European settlement; chapters 6–11 probe topical issues about the city’s social, cultural and religious life; finally, the last three chapters explore Đà Lạt’s political symbolism during and after the Second World War. The epilogue reflects on the ironies of Đà Lạt’s postcolonial status as a tourist destination packaged with all the aura of a former colonial resort and the kinds of cultural amnesias necessary to sell such a kitsch image.

To demonstrate the paradoxes of recreating a “little France” in Indochina, Jennings makes effective use of a methodology of “thick description” (2, 71). Indeed, some of the book’s most gripping moments reconstruct the everyday life of the different characters and stakeholders, those who founded, labored, built, flourished, languished or perished in the hill station. The story of the vicious Captain Debay, who abducted, terrorized and brutalized the locals and who subsequently ascended to the status of Officier de la Légion d’Honneur [Officer of the Legion of Honor], is situated within the context of colonial power relations. Jennings persuasively demonstrates how the French attempted to design French schools that were initially only for white offspring; built houses, hotels and villas that were cordoned off to exclude the Vietnamese; reproduced what were considered staple French foodstuffs in foreign soil; and created spaces for French sports and leisure activities to replicate French bourgeois domesticity.

Despite their repeated efforts, however, the French could never truly escape tropical Vietnam. Apart from the inherent contradiction in such an attempt, Jennings argues, Đà Lạt’s very creation relied on the literal backs of indigenous labor. The symbolic grandeur of the Đà Lạt Palace Hotel depended on Vietnamese servants for its ongoing maintenance. The hotel would also become the favored destination for Vietnamese elites such as Emperor Bảo Đại, thus raising provocative questions about the limits of and interrelations between race and class.

The segregation of schools and urban spaces became complicated by *métis*, the products of French and Vietnamese liaisons. The symbolic alterity of the ethnic highlanders was also in need of cultural and political resolution. Through

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the story of Đà Lạt, Jennings demonstrates the fallibility of colonial "blueprints," what he calls their "surprising elasticity," the adaptations, accommodations and deviations born of political exigencies (193). In the process, Jennings unravels an impressive array of intertwined issues about French empire in Indochina, including but not limited to public hygiene, urban planning, architecture, labor conditions, gender identity, ethnic and race relations, and political history. Đà Lạt, Jennings insists, was a microcosm of the French Empire.

One wonders, nevertheless, about Đà Lạt's distinctive character in relation to the larger patterns of empire and how or whether it may have exceeded its symbolic kinship with French imperial logic. True, the French conceived the city, and true, despite the imperfect mimesis the city's colonial legacy lives on in the postcolonial moment. But, once born into this world, children reveal different personalities; they show certain family resemblances but can assume other kinds of overlapping identities. So the question here is twofold: in what ways might Đà Lạt reveal one strain or permutation of French empire? Second, what counter-narratives existed along with or in the aftermath of French imperialism?

As the archives become declassified, these questions could form the basis of future research, continuing the high standard of scholarship that Jennings has established. Elegantly crafted, meticulously researched, erudite and accessible, *Imperial Heights* will surely appeal to a broad and wide range of academics and general audiences alike, including historians, cultural critics, gender and urban studies scholars, and more. It is a welcome contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on Vietnamese cities and provincial towns and the first to provide a detailed narrative of the city of Đà Lạt from its colonial imaginings, creation, and postcolonial afterlife.

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MIMI THI NGUYEN

The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt and Other Refugee Passages

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. 296 pages. $85.00 (cloth); $24.00 (paper).

Freedom can be a wonderful gift but also a terrible burden on those who come to receive it. For Mimi Thi Nguyen, the economy of debt produced through

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