

Print and Power Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam


By Shawn Frederick McHale

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In this ambitious and path-breaking book, Shawn McHale challenges long held views that define modern Vietnamese history in terms of anticolonial nationalism and revolution. McHale argues instead for a historiography that does not overstress either the role of politics in general or Communism in particular. Using a wide range of sources from Vietnam, France, and the United States, many of them previously unexploited, he shows how the use of printed matter soared between 1920 and 1945 and in the process transformed Vietnamese public life and shaped the modern Vietnamese consciousness. *Print and Power* begins with an overview of Vietnam's lively public spheres, bringing debates from Europe and the rest of Asia to Vietnamese studies with nuance and sophistication. It examines the impact of the French colonial state on Vietnamese society as well as Vietnamese and East Asian understandings of public discourse and public space. Popular taste, rather than revolutionary or national ideology, determined to a large extent what was published, with limited intervention by the French authorities. A vibrant but hierarchical public realm of debate existed in Vietnam under authoritarian colonial rule. The work goes on to contest the impact of Confucianism on premodern and modern Vietnam and, based on materials never before used, provides a radically new perspective on the rise of Vietnamese communism from 1929 to 1945. Novel interpretations of the Nghe Tinh soviets (1930-1931), the first major communist uprising in Vietnam, and Vietnamese communist successes in World War II built an audience for their views and made an extremely alien ideology comprehensible to growing numbers of Vietnamese. In what is by far the most thorough examination in English of modern Vietnamese Buddhism and its transformations, McHale argues that, contrary to received wisdom, Buddhism was not in decline during the 1920-1945 period; in fact, more Buddhist texts were produced in Vietnam at that time than at any other in its history. This finding suggests that the heritage of the Vietnamese past played a crucial role in the late colonial period. *Print and Power* makes a significant contribution to Vietnamese and Asian studies and will be of compelling interest to those in the fields of comparative religion and European colonialism.

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About the Author

Shawn Frederick McHale is associate professor of history and international affairs at George Washington University.

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