
David Elliott is well known to students of modern Vietnam through his magisterial and widely praised two-volume work The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975 (2003). In that work, Elliott argued that the Viet Minh movement gained a moral advantage with the August Revolution of 1945 that the non-Communist regimes and their backers were never able to cope up with in the following three decades. So, to what extent has the allure of revolutionary glory been able to maintain itself until the present time? This is part of the issue that Elliott addresses in Changing Worlds. His new investigation commences more or less when the former one stopped, in about 1975, with the bulk of the work dealing with the years 1989-2006. As is well known, these years saw a number of decisions and policy changes that paved the way for an increasing engagement with the outside world including the old enemies U.S. and China, and a restructuring of the economy of the country.

It is important to note what the book is not. Anyone expecting a broad depiction of social and economic changes during the period in question will be disappointed. Also, it is not a study of the Vietnamese political system per se. Comparative aspects are limited in spite of the obvious parallels with the post-Maoist Chinese case. The task that Elliott has set upon himself is rather mapping the emergence of a new thinking among the elite groups, changes in political intent, and the dynamics of the political system. How did the once unthinkable become mainstream within a decade and a half? Divergent views of key political issues among the elite are analysed in circumstantial detail, in particular those linked to security and foreign policy. Given the secretive nature of the Marxist state, archival work is obviously off-limit, and Elliott’s analysis is based upon interviews, media stuff and other printed materials in English and Vietnamese. As he himself admits towards the end of the book, the methodology entails numerous potential pitfalls. Are the statements emanating from the political elite sincere or merely rhetoric? Are they expressions of a true change of mind or just after-the-fact conventions? Elliott dares not give a definite answer, although he points to a number of factors in recent history that have encouraged
increasingly open and sincere statements—elite changes, the role of internet, more open debate, and so on.

Party theoreticians in these days still insist that the new Vietnamese society that has taken shape after 1989 is in line with the tenets of Marxism-Leninism. At the same time, foreign observers have argued that Vietnam of today might not be too different from the country that U.S. policymakers wished to create in the 1960s. This divide begs the question how the changes in the political intent of the elite came about. As Elliott puts it, was the shift in collective ideas a cause or a consequence of changing conditions? How were they related to alterations of global power structures or the positive and negative incentives from the global economy? Actually, much policy change has taken place with utmost reluctance. The abysmal economic conditions of the first decade of unified Marxist rule (1975-1985) led to a rejection of the old central planning of the economy that had been upheld by hardliners like Le Duc Tho. This rejection undermined the idea that the party was always right. Other major shifts were the withdrawal from Cambodia and the 1991 adoption of a policy of becoming friends with any country willing to have normal relations with Vietnam; both of these were done in the face of diplomatic isolation that stymied Vietnam’s efforts of economic development and political security. The fall of the Communist Block and the Soviet Union in 1989-1991 looms large; the Vietnamese leadership was unprepared for the shock, and attempts of creating a new Socialist front with China, North Korea and Cuba were basically pathetic (a ‘lonely hearts club’). Resistance to the economic and political opening up was fierce from some quarters, and the concept of ‘peaceful evolution’ was launched in a negative way—a supposed covert strategy of foreign interests to undermine the Vietnamese revolutionary state. It was only in 2000-2006 that the leadership was finally ‘taking the plunge’ and the old hardliners were marginalized. Economic and diplomatic necessity created change, but do not necessarily engender transformation in a political pluralist direction. Elliott believes that the Vietnamese state will be ruled by the Communist Party in some form for the foreseeable future.

The book is rich in colourful detail and will surely be a standard work about the collective idea change of the modern Vietnamese political elite. It is nevertheless no easy reading since it assumes that the reader is already familiar with the general political and economic developments since the 1970s. This is not a book I would put into the hands of my advanced
students given the relatively limited context provided. It is sometimes hard to see the forest for all the trees, or, to put it another way, figure out where the discussion is heading; in particular, one would have wished for more succinct conclusions of the various chapters. As a specialized study of changing political intent it nevertheless makes a lot of sense. Indeed it is hard for the traveller to present-day Vietnam to imagine the conditions of the immediate post-victory society when (as shown in a photograph in the book) enamelled tin basins were at the height of consumer aspirations.

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Reference
Elliott, David W.P.