

## THE GOOD GREAT AND COMMON

Philippe Papin. 2001. *Histoire de Hanoi*. Paris: Fayard. 400 pp.

After more than a thousand years of Chinese occupation, the city we know today as Hanoi became the capital of the Viet kingdom in 1010 A.D. The Ly and the Tran dynasties made it the centre of a prestigious Empire. Under the name of Thang-Long, 'The City of the Rising Dragon', Hanoi had its golden age in the 15th and 16th centuries during the Le dynasty, with the dynasty's successive kings made it the heart of the Dai-Viet kingdom. In the 17th century, traders and craftsmen migrating to the city from the surrounding countryside to supply the court triggered a gradual replacement of the '*lettrés*' by the '*commerçants*'. Then came a troubled period during which the country was divided to be later expanded and united under Emperor Gia Long, who transferred his capital to Hue in 1802. In the 19th century, as a consequence of that out-migration of the court craftsmen and traders, Thang-Long shrank to no more than a provincial town. The French conquest of Tonkin in 1883 unexpectedly resuscitated it and crowned it not only the capital of Vietnam, but of all of French Indochina. This new golden age which saw considerable economic activity and caused the capital's population to soar from 50,000 in 1880 to 200,000 in 1940, was then abruptly ended by 30 years of war that took their gruesome toll and left profound scars on the architecture of the city as well as in the memory of its inhabitants. The collectivisation years influenced profoundly the geographical distribution of the population. In the post-*Doi Moi* and still Socialist Hanoi of today, temples are standing side by side colonial villas, the statue of Lenin contemplates what is left of the old Imperial Citadel, and Hanoians devoutly pray to their ancestors' spirits next to the Catholic cathedral, in the constant noise of thousands of newly imported Japanese motorcycles.

Few cities in Asia can claim a history so turbulent, yet so rich as Hanoi's. Surprisingly though, very few books have been written about it in any Western language. Among this very select group, Papin's work clearly stands out.

Since 1996, Philippe Papin, a fluent speaker and reader of Vietnamese, has been director of the Hanoi branch of the *Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*. An historian by formation, erudite though still relatively young, and an Hanoian by adoption – he has been living there for over 10 years – these distinctions and his previous publications on the migration of villagers into old Hanoi all point to him as one of the best possible Western authors for writing a history of the city.

The book is definitely the work of a scholar, covering centuries of history and using published documents as well as archives written in Vietnamese, French and English, indeed half of the bibliography is in Vietnamese. Yet, it is highly readable and the publisher, Fayard, whose readership goes well beyond narrow academic circles, certainly saw to make sure the author it commissioned for this work in its series '*Histoire des grandes villes du monde*' (incidentally, Hanoi is the first truly Asian city in the series), was not only a competent historian, but an excellent writer too.

The book has 17 chapters covering every important period from the mythical times of Hanoi to the present, with an epilogue. The text fluidly blends expected information on the Good and the Greats with welcome depictions of the daily life of commoners and craftspeople, often leaving the front stage to humble and nameless Hanoians. It has several appendices providing information concerning successive names for the city and the country, names of successive dynasties, and a chronology of the important dates in Hanoi's history. There is an index of place names and one of historical and legendary characters. The black-and-white iconography is informative (but I would have liked it to be more important) and both front and back inside covers are adorned with colour maps of Hanoi in the late-19th century.

In my opinion, Papin's history of Hanoi is destined to be the reference on the subject for a good while, in any Western language I can read. For the benefit of the English and international readership, it is hoped that an English language publisher will take on the much needed task of providing us with a competent translation soon.

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