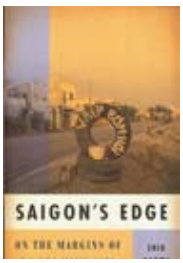
Vietnam



Erik Harms, *Saigon's Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City*

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 312 pages. Glossary, notes, bibliography, index, 13 b&w photos, 1 map, 2 tables. Cloth, $75.00; paperback, $25.00. ISBN 978-0-8166-5605-9 (cloth); 978-0-8166-5606-6 (paperback).

Saigon's Edge is a rich ethnographic study of the effects of urbanization on Vietnam's largest city and its agrarian suburbs. As the story is commonly told, the rapid urbanization of Vietnam's metropolises, Ho Chi Minh City in particular, resulted in cultural changes that are understood by Vietnamese people, as well as foreigners, in terms of the binary of modern and traditional. Harms takes the reader to the place where these two worlds meet—and collide—in Hóc Môn province, on the northwestern edge of Ho Chi Minh City, commonly referred to by its historic appellation, Saigon.

Hóc Môn is widely known in Vietnam as a wasteland: a former swamp that became an agricultural zone, now a no-man's land on the edge of a rapidly growing city. But, as Harms repeatedly reminds the reader, this division between the city and the country is a social construction. As the city gradually encroaches into densely populated agricultural zones, Hóc Môn has become "uncomfortably both" rural and urban, modern and traditional (3).

Harms examines how the Hóc Môn's residents make sense of and navigate this disconnect between "modernization" brought by the encroaching city and the traditional life of the countryside. Harms also looks at how these binaries of urban/agricultural, traditional/modern, and Vietnamese/un-Vietnamese are reproduced—or not reproduced—in Vietnam, and how they are skillfully deployed. He draws from anthropological research in Hóc Môn province, including interviews, literature, and history to find that residents of Hóc Môn are artfully ambiguous in the way that they "straddle symbolically opposed concepts" of city and countryside, traditional and modern, Vietnamese and "un-Vietnamese" (5). Rejecting models of the margins for their inherent disempowering implications, Harms describes denizens of Hóc Môn as "edgy," presenting the metaphor of a double-edge blade that can cut the structure of political and economic power, yet can also cut those using the blade themselves. Harms's model of "edginess" will transform the way we understand the margins of society.

Harms divides the six chapters of the book into three parts, organized by the way that his interview subjects presented their lives. In the first part, Harms uses social relations to examine how the denizens of Hóc Môn understood their position on the outside of the city, removed from Vietnam's economic boom, and unable to reap all the benefits of the cultural transformations attributed to modernization that their neighbors in the city enjoy. This section examines the ways in which ideal representations of the modernizing city and its surrounding agricul-

tural zone played out in the lives of Hóc Môn's residents. It is in this section that Harms develops his theory of social edginess in terms of relations not only with the state, but among the denizens of Hóc Môn or with outsiders. Although rapid urbanization was pushing Hóc Môn residents to the edge, many of them used the edge to work in their favor.

In the second and most fascinating part of the book, Harms embarks on an engaging discussion of how time is imagined, layered, and used to measure different situations within the context of a national "development dream that hinges on sacrificing the present for the hopes of a better future and a celebration of the past" (91). This section explores the spacio-temporal relations that developed on the city's edge. In studying time perception, Harms compares the lives—and preferences—of Hóc Môn residents to imported factory workers to show how locals engage in an economy of labor that is dictated by the relationship between labor, time, and physical proximity to household.

The third part of the book examines the fantasies of modernity. Harms explores the Trans-Asia highway project and its impact on the social lives of local residents. The highway project, often heralded as a symbol of progress, is part of a development scheme for Southeast Asia. It connects Vietnam's economic capital to Phnom Penh and other major Southeast Asian cities. As Harms found, the highway, with its high speeds, cement barriers, and orientation towards far away places, is changing the social lives of Hóc Môn's residents. Road shoulders are one of Vietnam's most important social and economic spaces, an interface between multidirectional traffic and local business and society. Yet, by making roadside shoulders obsolete—and dangerous—the new highway project transforms roads into an antisocial space. And finally, Harms concludes with a rich analysis of the paradox of Vietnam's peasant-based revolution, which is key to its political identity, though the peasants are commonly dismissed as being "uncivilized."

Saigon's Edge is a brilliant meditation on the relationship between time, space, and "progress." The book is beautifully written in a way that makes Harms's complex ideas accessible to students of all disciplines. The strength of *Saigon's Edge* is its theoretical contribution to the way we understand the dynamics of power. Harms is gifted with a sensitivity for the nuances of power and how they are deployed. This book is a valuable contribution to the field of Vietnamese studies, which, in the last fifteen years, has been critically reexamining the ideological structures that dominated the way academia understood Vietnamese culture, society, and history. For his part, Harms encourages those of us in Vietnamese studies to question preconceived ideas about the binaries of city and country, traditional and modern, Vietnamese and un-Vietnamese that lead scholars inside and outside of Vietnam towards egregious historical teleologies.

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