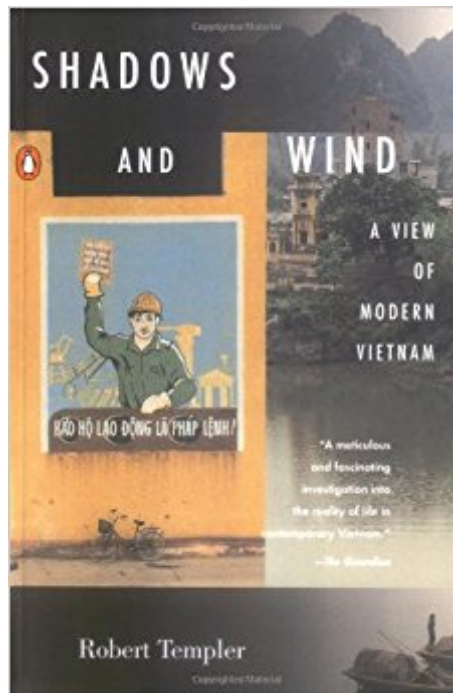




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Shadows And Wind: A View Of Modern Vietnam



Synopsis

In *Shadows and Wind*, Robert Templer paints a fascinating and fresh picture of a country usually viewed with hazy nostalgia or deep suspicion. Here is Hanoi, an increasingly tense and troubled city approaching its millennium but uncertain of its direction. Here are people emerging from a long wilderness of malnutrition, discovering a new lifestyle of leisure and luxury. And everywhere are the anomalies that burst the bubble of optimism: a vastly expensive luxury hotel sitting empty in an unknown town six hours from an international airport; museums crammed with fake exhibits. And there remains the one-party Communist state, still wrapped in secrecy and corruption, and making for an uneasy bedfellow with the rapacious capitalism it now encourages. Drawing on hundreds of interviews in Vietnam and years of research, Robert Templer has produced the first in-depth examination of the problems facing modern Vietnam. *Shadows and Wind* is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the Vietnam that now has emerged from a century of conflict with both foreign powers and with itself.

Book Information

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (September 1, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140285970

ISBN-13: 978-0140285970

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 27 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #200,013 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #197 in [Books > History > Asia > Southeast Asia](#) #315 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Asia](#) #349 in [Books > History > Military > United States > Vietnam War](#)

Customer Reviews

"I am too young to have seen the Vietnam War on television or to have read about it at the time," British journalist Templer announces at the beginning of this penetrating and lyrical history, confessing that his own impressions of Vietnam had been formed by American books and movies. But upon arriving there in 1994 for a three-year stint as a reporter for Agence France-Presse, Templer found that more than half of the population had been born after American troops pulled out of Saigon, and that the reality of life in modern Vietnam was much more complex than he had

realized. The lingering images of French colonial Indochine and the American experience in 'Nam oversimplify and obscure the struggles of a communist nation in the midst of economic reform. Doi Moi, or "renovation" after half a century of armed conflict. Not to mention the "Rip Van Winkle popular culture" that has awakened with an enormous appetite, but uneasy stomach, for Western stimulus. Dismissing as "drive-by reporting" such celebrated books on his topic as Frances FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake* and William Prochnau's *Once Upon a Distant War*, Templer has built his own vision of Vietnam through hundreds of interviews and careful analysis of Vietnamese journalism and literature. A picture of a diverse culture emerges in a nation struggling to understand its relationship with China, adjust to feast rather than famine and balance its communist past with an increasingly capitalist present. (Sept.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Templer, who covered Vietnam for Agence France-Presse in the mid-1990s, begins with the observation that, like the vast majority of Vietnamese, he was too young to have seen the war on TV or have read about it at the time, but the past hangs over all present-day problems. "Imagining Vietnam" is a key topic for a series of chapters showing how Confucian Chinese, French colonizers, American Cold Warriors, and Chinese "Socialist brothers" all misunderstood the nature of the country they tried to change and on which they all left their mark. Through many vivid interviews and brief, crisp essays on economics, politics, culture, and society, Templer reveals the contemporary problems of a government mired in Socialist rhetoric but looking forward to reform and global participation while many common people seek their own ways. His tone is both critical and admiring. Highly recommended for public as well as specialist libraries. A Charles Hayford, Northwestern Univ., Evanston, IL Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Templer's *Shadow and Wind* is a bit dated, but fascinating view of Vietnam up to 10 years ago when it was beginning to shed the shackles of 30+ years of disastrous socialism and single-party control. Most of the population is now a younger generation (born after 1975) who have come of age at a time when they can embrace some free-market reforms, and take advantage of personal choices and a growing economy. This book explains what life was like for the older folks, the corrosive effects of corruption, communism and abusive state control, and many complex layers of Vietnamese history and culture. I worked as a volunteer for a month in Vietnam, and found this book helpful in providing a broad context: identifying and breaking stereotypes; relating history to current culture and society; and understanding challenges involving HIV, corruption, literature, youth, etc. Only Drawbacks: Very detailed and wordy, but a reader can jump between many well-organized

chapters. Written before the widespread effects of open Internet access became apparent.

After suffering through years of either bombast or glowing assessments by authors with ideological axes to grind or diplomatic masters to serve, readers get a genuinely honest and professional assessment from an observer who carried no intellectual "baggage" to Vietnam. The best work on Vietnam since Bui Tin's memoirs. What a shame that the current US administration could not be so realistic. The true motivations of the leaders of the "former" communist regimes in Vietnam and Cambodia are more easily understood through Robert Templer's brilliant work.

Robert Templer, the author, is a young British journalist who was raised in Asia. In 1994 he spent three years as a correspondent for the Agence France-Presse and this book, published in 1998, is a well-researched account of the creeping capitalism, corrupt government, and historical struggles of the Vietnamese people. More than half of Vietnam's population today were born after the war and are more interested in consumerism than communism. But in spite of their smuggled videos and make-believe motor bikes (which are all chrome and glitz and have tiny motors), they live in a culture where corruption is a way of life, the judicial system is almost non-existent, and writers are persecuted and forbidden to portray Vietnam without a rose myth. The extent of the corruption is everywhere. If you are sick you have to pay extra to get the most basic medical care, even if you have government insurance. If you want your children to pass their exams, you have to pay teachers for "private tuition". If you want to move, change jobs or leave the country, you have to pay someone. The police can arbitrarily rob street vendors or require payoffs from anyone at whim. And, as foreign investors have found, unlike other Asian countries, the pay-offs do not necessarily obtain the results desired. There's a history of famine in Vietnam and memories of starvation. There are also food practices that Westerners find abhorrent. Yes. The Vietnamese do eat dogs and cats and restaurants get big bucks for serving meat that is on the endangered species list. I know that I should try to not be judgmental, but the ancient practice of beating a dog to death over several hours in order to tenderize the meat particularly disturbs me. The book is dense with facts and slow reading. And some of the sections were difficult to follow, especially when the author went into great detail about the complexities of corruption in the Vietnamese Communist party where one leader after another would fall into disfavor with the party, be thrown into prison, his family denied any employment and his children forbidden to attend school. To raise money from tourists, especially from Americans who return to Vietnam with a sense of guilt about the war, several war museums have been erected. The fact that many of the exhibits are not authentic does not stop people from visiting

them. There is even a museum that re-creates the infamous tunnels used by the Viet Cong although they had to be made larger to accommodate the larger size American tourists. There is even a make-believe minefield with firecrackers that explode when a wire is tripped. For the Vietnamese who now live in other parts of the world, returning is difficult. They are considered rich foreigners and intruders and it is extremely rare for any of them to come back to settle permanently. It was a bit of a struggle for me to read this book. I learned a lot but cannot say I enjoyed it. There was very little to break the tension and the few shreds of humor were few and far between. And yet, for anyone who is truly interested in a serious comprehensive analysis of what Vietnam is today, this is a worthwhile book and I would definitely recommend it.

I found this both thought provoking and frustrating. Mr Templer has a bias which is anti Marxist which he never quite clearly outlines as the framework of this book. Free market and less government is good but Marxism is dogma that has no merit. Please! It is an unconvincing argument at best where there is ample evidence, such as the recent global economic down turn/austerity that both ideologies are flawed and if misused, cause great social damage. However, this was written towards the end of the 20th century and I wonder what Mr Templer would make of the Vietnam of today (2013). It is so free market in aspects of its day to day business and still controlled by its communist government. An enigma. Mr Templer predicted its erosion or fall. It is still a blend of corruption and ideal. What remains true from Mr Templer's time of writing to the thinking of today is how little importance Vietnam's population (and youth in particular) give the revolution and American war. However, overall this book is a good read for helping to understand social and political Vietnam; people and history. It is a country in flux and where this will take it will be critical in this part of the world.

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