

STÉPHANIE PONSADVADY

Cultural and Literary Representations of the Automobile in French Indochina: A Colonial Roadshow.

Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 247 pages.

Cultural and Literary Representations of the Automobile in French Indochina: A Colonial Roadshow focuses on the history and representations of the automobile in French Indochina. Stéphanie Ponsavady's goal is to "fill in the gap in the narrative of French conquest in Southeast Asia," bringing the colonial history of Indochina into the history of France (20). The author uses archival, literary, and filmic sources—mostly French and some Vietnamese in translation—to illustrate the roles of roads, cars, and passengers in colonial Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Those who are interested in French colonialism, literature and cinema, mobility studies, and Vietnamese history will find the book valuable.

Ponsavady argues that cars became embedded in both the physical and literary landscape of Indochina by the early twentieth century. Automobility was central in the French colonial imaginary, promoting the mission to civilize and develop the colonies. The author begins with the history of road building in Indochina, which she argues was inspired by the myth of Roman roads, the discourse of modernity, and the colonial enterprise. Under the Governor General Albert Sarraut (1872–1962), a network of roads was constructed with native labor. Cars were first used by government officials, journalists, and businessmen who could penetrate deeper into the colonies while maintaining a safe distance from the indigenous population. Mass transportation provided by buses and trains became

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popular and was used by common people. Paved roads and motorized transportation fueled tourism, which previously relied solely on rickshaws, elephants, and porters. Traffic laws, road maintenance, and car accidents also entered the discussion. With its increasing presence, the automobile figured largely in fiction set in the colony.

The book engages with two historiographical trends, mobility and coloniality. The author connects her work to “global mobility,” highlighting the interconnectedness between Indochina and the rest of the world. The book convincingly ties the development of motorized vehicles in colonial Indochina to the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), the economic depression of the 1930s, and the self-questioning of French identity. Furthermore, expanding on the concept of automobility from John Urry (“The ‘System’ of Automobility,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, no. 4–5 [2004]: 25–39), Ponsavady explores “colonial automobility,” defined as “the system, experience, and representations of automobility” that exerted “political, economic, social, and psychological” influence in reaffirming the existence of the colonial empire and the French Republic (2).

Observing that the colonial automobile was a symbol of modernity and progress but also of violence and domination, Ponsavady engages the “ambiguous” framework from Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly (*Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954*, University of California Press, 2009). She provides ample examples of the ambiguities, such as the mission of civilizing Indochina with roads and cars falling short of its modernizing promise. The multifarious and interpretative nature of cultural representations—the focus of this book—adds even more layers of ambiguity. In addition, Ponsavady’s monograph fits into the growing body of literature that examines larger implications of colonial institutional infrastructures in French Indochina, such as the railroad (“Paint the Trains Red: Labor, Nationalism, and the Railroads in French Colonial Indochina, 1898–1945,” by David Del Testa, PhD dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2001), the prison (*The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862–1940*, by Peter Zinoman, University of California Press, 2001), and the asylum (*Beyond the Asylum: Mental Illness in French Colonial Vietnam*, by Claire E. Edington, Cornell University Press, 2019). Similar to these scholars, Ponsavady demonstrates how the colonial

conditions and native populations transformed both the execution and the impact of these imported institutions. Ponsavady's engagement with colonial historiography affirms the book's initial thesis that advocates the inclusion of Indochina in French history.

Throughout her book, Ponsavady is concerned with "gaps." One of the gaps is the mobility gap, which, according to the author, not only narrowed but was closed due to the arrival of the automobile in the colony. She argues that the new generation of Vietnamese raised under French colonial rule had access to automobility, with better roads, efficient vehicles, and safer transportation. The automobile also allowed French and Vietnamese writers in the colony to catch up on new cultural expressions from the metropole and to observe, at closer range, the contradictions of French colonization. French and Asian passengers being in the same vehicle, as illustrated by the 1992 movie adaptation of Marguerite Duras's 1984 novel *L'Amant*, signified the "last colonial mobility gap" (20). Roads and cars may have allowed Vietnamese elites in the colony to enjoy some conveniences previously available only in the metropole. However, as the author discusses in the volume, for the vast majority of the people in the colony, cars in fact widened "the gap" as Indochinese were forced to construct the roads as *corvée* and penal laborers, were run over by cars, and were subjected to the exoticizing gaze of the tourists in enclosed, motorized vehicles. The argument about "gaps" is "ambiguous," as colonial projects usually are.

Cultural and Literary Representations of the Automobile in French Indochina is a rewarding read, for both French colonial culture enthusiasts and historians of Southeast Asia. Although I cannot speak for the former, I think the latter may find, in some parts, uncritical and uneven analysis of archival sources. Furthermore, many sections of the book could have benefited from editing to eliminate repetitions, temporal discontinuities, and erroneous diacritical marks. Finally, the book leaves me to wonder how the automobile in French Indochina would be portrayed differently if one relied on mainly Vietnamese-, Laotian-, and Cambodian-language archives, novels, periodicals, memoirs, and films.

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