

# Witness to Vietnam's Transformation

By Michael Scown

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Since Vietnam began opening its economy through a policy of "doi moi," the country has experienced intense economic, social and political change. It has also witnessed the creation and bursting of an investment bubble of epic proportions. The end result of all this tumult remains unknown. "Shadows and Wind" (Little Brown, 384 pages, GBP 18.99) may be modestly presented as an "attempt to examine some of the strains of life in contemporary Vietnam." But as a Hanoi-based correspondent for AFP from 1994-97, Robert Templer was able to observe first-hand this period of transformation, and his analysis provides important clues as to how the reform process will turn out.

Thus, there was a palpable sense of anticipation amongst the foreign community in Vietnam when word got out that Mr. Templer was writing this book. Many hoped that stories reporters based in Vietnam couldn't write about would finally get told. However, while "Shadows and Wind" is generally well-written and provides some interesting examples of how modern Vietnamese society is coping, it falls short of being a definitive look at modern Vietnam. One is left with a sense that Mr. Templer knows a lot more than he is telling here.

## FULL TEXT

Since Vietnam began opening its economy through a policy of "doi moi," the country has experienced intense economic, social and political change. It has also witnessed the creation and bursting of an investment bubble of epic proportions. The end result of all this tumult remains unknown. "Shadows and Wind" (Little Brown, 384 pages, GBP 18.99) may be modestly presented as an "attempt to examine some of the strains of life in contemporary Vietnam." But as a Hanoi-based correspondent for AFP from 1994-97, Robert Templer was able to observe first-hand this period of transformation, and his analysis provides important clues as to how the reform process will turn out.

That a book like this has appeared at all says much about where Vietnam is today. As Mr. Templer notes, the foreign press in Vietnam has been subject to severe constraints on its reporting. Some of these are practical, in that all foreign press bureaus are required by the government to be located in Hanoi and reporters are frequently accompanied on trips by government "minders." There are also attempts at outright censorship -- subjects such as criticism of the Communist Party or corruption by government officials are generally off-limits. These limits are not abstract: Reporters have been called on the carpet or had their visas revoked for reporting deemed unfriendly by the Vietnamese government.

Thus, there was a palpable sense of anticipation amongst the foreign community in Vietnam when word got out that Mr. Templer was writing this book. Many hoped that stories reporters based in Vietnam couldn't write about would finally get told. However, while "Shadows and Wind" is generally well-written and provides some interesting examples of how modern Vietnamese society is coping, it falls short of being a definitive look at modern Vietnam. One is left with a sense that Mr. Templer knows a lot more than he is telling here.

While those looking for a comprehensive analysis of modern Vietnam may be disappointed by this, Mr. Templer

notes that he wanted to write on subjects that don't generally get reported. Along with the restrictions imposed by the Vietnamese government on foreign journalists, many reporters feel frustrated that their own editors are uninterested in anything but economic or business reporting.

Much of what Mr. Templer writes is dead on. His most important message is that the biggest obstacle facing Vietnam is the Communist Party itself. The overarching irony and tragedy of Vietnam today is that the Party, many of whose members risked their lives to free Vietnam from foreign control and reunify the country, will now not risk the loss of political power in order to allow the country to develop economically.

A major gap in the book is a lack of analysis on the role of foreign investment in shaping Vietnam. The catalyst for Vietnam's economic development in the 1990s was the opening of Vietnam to foreign trade and investment. Mr. Templer's book looks at a number of issues that flow from this, but is unfairly dismissive of the forces that drove foreign investment to Vietnam: "In the 1990s, Vietnam was attracting a new generation of fantasists and dreamers . . . looking to wallow in nostalgia for places and times that had never been." While a number of questionable assumptions were made about Vietnam's economic potential, and much hype went into the creation of the Vietnam bubble, the attention focused on Vietnam by investors merits a more serious look than is presented here if one is to truly understand the forces that are shaping modern Vietnam.

One more nit: The book is very Hanoi-centric, which may be due to the restrictions on journalists. Given the drastic differences between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, a view of the north cannot be taken as a view of Vietnam.

Another, more serious flaw is that the background references are inadequate for a book that draws some strong conclusions. For example, Stanley Karnow, who followed the origins of the Vietnam war through a long reporting career and authored one of the most widely read books on the history of Vietnam, is criticized for having "unquestioningly swallowed [General Vo Nguyen Giap's] tendentious version of history" in a 1990 New York Times profile of Gen. Giap. Unfortunately, the article isn't quoted in the text or the extremely brief chapter notes; the reader is left to rely on the author's judgment that Mr. Karnow was taken in.

Similarly, Larry Hillblom, the late founder of DHL, is said to have made an "illegal" hotel investment in Dalat. While Mr. Templer alleges that Hillblom circumvented the U.S. trade embargo of Vietnam, no specific law is cited and no support for Mr. Templer's conclusion is given. (Full disclosure: I did legal work for Danao International, foreign investor in the joint venture that owns the Dalat Palace Hotel).

As Mr. Templer notes, part of the problem in dealing with Vietnam in the 1990s is the inability to break free of our stereotypes of Vietnam. "Shadows and Wind" offers some new perspectives on a small nation and a complex people that for much of the latter part of the 20th century have occupied a disproportionate place in the world's imaginations.

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Mr. Scown practiced law from 1993-98 in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

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