

BEN KIERNAN

Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 656 pages.

Ben Kiernan's *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* is the latest in a series of one-volume histories of Vietnam published in the last five years, following Keith Taylor's *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and Christopher Goscha's *Vietnam: A New History* (Basic Books, 2016). Kiernan's work is notable for the amount of attention he pays to the period before the emergence of Đại Việt in the tenth century; where Taylor and Goscha both proceed rapidly to take up their main narratives in the tenth and nineteenth centuries respectively, Kiernan devotes three chapters to this period, making up around a quarter of his text. As most scholarship published in English over the last three decades on the history of what is now northern Vietnam prior to the tenth century has been in the form of articles or chapters focused on specific subjects or shorter periods of time, the three chapters in this work constitute one of the longer comprehensive overviews of the topic published in English since Keith Taylor's monumental 1983 work *The Birth of Vietnam* (University of California Press). A reconsideration of the pre-Đại Việt era is therefore long overdue, and would ideally take account of the varied scholarship in archaeology, linguistics, anthropology, and textual exegesis that has been produced since the 1980s.

The trend in recent Western-language scholarship on early Vietnam has been to move away from primordialist historical narratives of a Việt people originating in prehistory and surviving (though somewhat modified) as a distinct population throughout the millennium of Chinese domination.

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Even in Vietnam, the younger generation of historians appears to be moving in a similar direction. In his introduction, Kiernan also seems to be of this mind, noting that “an accurate history needs to refrain from back-dating modern geographical conceptions of territorial polities and from applying them to the prehistoric, Classical and even medieval eras” (4), and warning against narratives of teleological progression towards Vietnamese nationhood. Nevertheless, when he moves on to describing the Vietnam that is the subject of his book as “a place, a series of homelands that have become a shared territory” (5), placing emphasis on the continuities of language and culture within this territory, one cannot help feeling that by grouping together a disparate collection of provinces and polities that one day would constitute the territory of the Vietnamese state, he has had difficulty transcending the national boundaries of the present. As the book progresses, the power of one particular modern boundary (the Sino-Vietnamese border) becomes apparent, and although the scholarship of the last decade has begun to pay more attention to shared similarities between the Pearl River Delta and the Red River Plain, and the difference between taxed and controlled lowlands under Chinese control and autonomous upland societies, it is clear that this has not had much of an effect on Kiernan’s view of the Vietnamese past, which he still views in terms of indigenous Viêts set against the conquering Chinese. One could excuse Kiernan for sticking to this tried and tested narrative of Vietnamese history in a book for a general reader, were it not for the fact that even this has been executed rather badly. In his reworking of earlier and sometimes outdated scholarship of the past, Kiernan has added extra confusion to the story, producing a narrative riddled with so many inaccuracies that it would require major work to compile an exhaustive list of them.

Kiernan’s inability to interrogate the primary sources in Classical Chinese and Vietnamese-language secondary sources would constitute a major setback for any historian of pre-modern Vietnam and necessitates the construction of arguments from translations and secondary sources in English and French. Kiernan has made an extensive collection of such sources, but his injudicious choice of these has led him to carry the mistakes and sloppy scholarship of other authors over into his own work. One particularly glaring example of this is the description of Lạc Việt life

Kiernan quotes on page 73, referenced back to Nguyen Dang Thuc's *The Origins of the Vietnamese People* (1971) as a direct quote from the *Hou Han Shu* [Book of the Later Han]. The paragraph purports to be a detailed vignette of the living environment and culture of the Lạc Việt in the first centuries CE and includes reference to such customs as betel-chewing, swidden agriculture, the eating of boa constrictors, the dying of teeth, the use of bone tipped arrows, and so on. But it turns out that this paragraph is no more than the invention of Nguyen Dang Thuc himself, does not appear in the *Hou Han Shu*, and appears instead to be pieced together from sentences found scattered throughout various other books such as Zhang Hua's *Bowuzhi* [Records of Diverse Matters] (290 CE), none of which connected these customs back to the people called Lạc Việt. In another example, to illustrate an ancient Vietnamese cultural connection to water, Kiernan uncritically repeats Huỳnh Sanh Thông's spurious claims (24) that the words “*nước*” for water (Mon-Khmer) and “*nữ*” for woman (Sino-Vietnamese) are etymologically related (they are not); and later (51–52) that “*nước*” itself derives from a Vietnamese word for woman *nàng*, when this is actually a Tai or Sinitic borrowing into Vietnamese. A quick consultation with a native speaker, a linguist, or, at the very least, a dictionary would have prevented this kind of error appearing in the final work. Kiernan's own original scholarship reveals similar problems: in his discussion of the ethnic and cultural makeup of the Red River Plain in late prehistoric times, he mixes up a variety of sources from many centuries apart, including descriptions of areas as far away as modern Zhejiang and Hunan (Sima Qian quoted on page 72) in the hope that they might indicate something about the people of the Red River Plain, and he indulges in speculation around imaginary customs, suggesting the distinct Việt traditions practiced in the Red River Plain “probably included annual fertility rites focusing on female sexuality” (75).

For those unfamiliar with this period of history, the smaller inaccuracies Kiernan introduces into his narrative are somewhat harder to detect – for instance, where he uses names such as Lạc Việt and Yue/Việt to refer to places and times where they were not used historically, taking it as given that a Lạc Việt people spoke a proto-Vietnamese Austroasiatic language and were the indigenous people of what is now the northern half of

Vietnam. Although such beliefs remain a staple of Vietnamese national history, agreement on the identity of the Lạc Việt is far from unanimous, and even Kiernan himself mentions this (42). After doing so, however, he goes on to apply the term anachronistically and according to his own fancy, at several points suggesting that the term referred only to peoples who lived in the Red and Ma river areas (67–75), calling Jiaozhi, Jiuzhen, and Rinan the “three Lạc commanderies” in contrast to the others that became southern China (83), and thereby subtly ascribing a unity to the people in areas that would become Vietnamese territory in the future that they did not share with those in future China. He also ascribes Lạc Việt identity where it was absent, referring to the third century warrior Lady Triệu of Jiuzhen as “the last of the Lạc Việt rulers” even though none of the Chinese texts from her time that mention her identify her as such (and these Chinese texts certainly do exist, despite Kiernan’s statement to the contrary).¹ The above usages are a misrepresentation of how the term Lạc Việt was actually used in Han texts, where it referred to peoples on both sides of the present Sino-Vietnamese border, not only in the Red River Plain, but also in a large chunk of what is now Guangxi, and only rarely to peoples living as far south as Jiuzhen. Similarly, Kiernan employs terms like Yue/Việt constantly for people who are highly unlikely to have used the name to describe themselves, and he pays little attention to the detailed and nuanced discussions of the term as an ethnic marker and political term in more recent scholarship of Erica Brindley² and my own arguments around the late adoption of the term *Việt* into spoken Vietnamese,³ preferring instead to use Léonard Arousseau’s largely outdated work of 1923 on the origins of the Vietnamese.⁴

Mistakes also arise from Kiernan’s confusion of different geographical terms. On page 72, he notes the distinction between Jiaozhi Circuit (a large administrative unit that encompassed present-day Guangdong, Guangxi, and the northern half of Vietnam) and Jiaozhi Commandery, a smaller unit subordinate to the circuit whose governors oversaw the Red River Plain, but then goes on to confuse both of these by frequently mentioning Jiaozhi without further qualification. To add to the confusion, where Kiernan does qualify, he has made no attempt to regularize translations of administrative units such as *zhou* (province) and *jun* (commandery), and the index

confuses the issue even further by referring to both a (nonexistent) “Jiaozhi Province” and a “Jiao Province.” The section “Unrest in Jiaozhi” (87–91) is the worst, and adds a further term “prefecture” into the mix in place of commandery. When Kiernan quotes that during the Later Han “only Jiao province was calm and unusual men came to live there” he neglects to mention that this actually referred to a much larger region (Jiaozhi circuit or Jiaozhou) that included modern Guangdong and Guangxi until the middle of the third century CE, not just to the commandery on the Red River Plain. Similarly, when he states that Shi Xie was a sixth generation man of Jiaozhi, Kiernan passes over the fact that he was actually from Cangwu (present-day Wuzhou in Guangxi), and was therefore a man of Jiaozhi in the larger sense of circuit, not commandery, and therefore less connected to the society of the Red River Plain than subsequent Vietnamese historical traditions would have us believe.⁵ At another point (120) he refers to a “Governor of Tonkin” using a geographical term that would not come into existence for another thousand years. The term “Yue Province,” in a section which discusses the situation in the lands between Hanoi and Guangzhou (104–106) is pure invention, although a short-lived and rather small Yue Province (Yuezhou) centered on Hepu had existed during the years 474–523 CE, it had already been renamed and divided up by the time under discussion, and probably did not include the homeland of lady Sinn or the Feng family, who are the main topics of discussion in the section. Kiernan mentions the foundation of Yuezhou earlier in the following manner: “Later in the fifth century, the imperial court detached Jiaozhi from South China, where it created a new province named Yue” (100), but this is also a misrepresentation. Yuezhou was formed as a new province by splitting Hepu Commandery off from Jiaozhou and upgrading its status, and had nothing to do with splitting “Jiaozhi from South China.”

Yet other misrepresentations are related to Kiernan’s misunderstandings about the nature of written Chinese and how a character can be pronounced differently in Chinese and Vietnamese. For example, he states “The ancient form ‘Nam Việt’ (the Việt South) first appears (in Chinese as *Nan Yue*) as far back as 207 BCE, its written Vietnamese version dates from 973 CE” (3) and that the name Lạc was first recorded “in its Chinese form Luo” (42). Equally telling, he is often unable to distinguish Chinese

surnames from personal names, referring to the Han general Ma Yuan on pages 80–82 as “Yuan,” and entering both Ma Yuan and Shi Xie in the index as if their surnames were “Yuan” and “Xie.” These are not the only problems with names; for a newcomer to Vietnamese history, the lack of any regularized romanization system for Chinese names must be a major headache. Kiernan notes that he chose to leave those in quoted texts as they were in places “where the Chinese characters are undetermined,” and the result of this decision is that some personal names appear in Wade-Giles, some in Pinyin, others in Hán-Việt transcription, and still others in an odd mixture of different systems that defies description, such as “Tsai Xi,” “Bakviet,” and the “Yangxi River.” The three spellings “Yue,” “Viêt,” and “Yüeh” are all used interchangeably in a confusing mess. For the academic interested in chasing up references, the endnotes are similarly chaotic: the references to Chinese original sources have been copied second-hand, and various different spellings of authors’ names and referencing systems are recorded for the same book (and different editions of it) depending on the secondary sources through which Kiernan obtained his citations.

The foregoing examples are just a small selection of the many factual errors, misinterpretations, and problems peppered throughout the first three chapters of this book, and I lay them out as a representative warning for those who might place trust in the conclusions of a work published by Oxford University Press. It may appear pedantic to use a book review to focus on small errors rather than discussing the general themes of the book, but many of Kiernan’s presuppositions about the history of the period rest on aggregations of these small mistakes and misrepresentations. From the few examples provided in the foregoing two paragraphs (and there are many more I did not include for reasons of space), one can see how a picture has been constructed of a long-lasting stable community of Lạc Việt people distinct from Chinese and inhabiting a territory named Jiaozhi that basically corresponds to northern Vietnam and is distinct from “China,” even though the original texts tell us nothing of the sort.

In conclusion, I would advise that Kiernan’s writing on this early period needs to be approached with extreme caution. Although it may appear to be reasonable scholarship to the non-expert, for anyone who has spent time reading the original sources on which Kiernan purports to base his work, it

is a truly frustrating and disheartening read. Kiernan offers little that is new to the history of Vietnam prior to the tenth century, and through the use of poorly chosen secondary sources, he ends up instead perpetuating and reinforcing some ideas that need to be put to rest, not to mention creating a few new myths of his own.

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Notes

1. For example, Liu Xinqi's *Jiaozhou ji* (Record of Jiaozhou) quoted five times in the tenth century encyclopedia *Taiping Yulan* may have been composed as close as to within twenty years of her death.
2. Erica Brindley, "Barbarians or Not? Ethnicity and Changing Conceptions of the Ancient Yue (Viet) Peoples, Ca. 400–50 BC," *Asia Major* 16, no. 1 (2003): 1–32; Erica Brindley, "Representations and Uses of Yue Identity along the Southern Frontier of the Han, ca. 200–111 B.C.E.," *Early China* 33/34 (2010): 1–35.
3. Michael Churchman, "Before Chinese and Vietnamese in the Red River Plain: The Han–Tang Period," *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 4 (2010): 25–37.
4. Léonard Aurousseau, "La première conquête chinoise des pays annamites (III^e siècle avant notre ère)," *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 23 (1923): 136–264.
5. *San Guo Zhi* 49a.: 9 a/b.

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Ben Kiernan's *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* is the latest of a trio of recent synoptic histories of Vietnam, joining Keith W. Taylor's *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and Christopher Goscha's *Vietnam: A New History* (Basic Books, 2016). Paired with the edited volume *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition* (Columbia, 2012), these works will help teachers design courses on Vietnam that cover its entire history, as well as provide starting points for junior scholars to embark on their own research projects. This is all very good for the field.

Taylor's expertise in classical Chinese and early Vietnamese history permeates his book, which masterfully synthesizes and challenges existing scholarship on premodern Vietnam. His explicit focus on "the Vietnamese people" gives the book a somewhat narrower scope than Kiernan's history, which takes as its subject the history of all people who lived within the "three major lowland regions" of what is now Vietnam. Reflecting the author's training, the strength of Goscha's *Vietnam* is in French colonial history. Ben Kiernan, a Khmer specialist, sees his own contribution as bringing in climate and environmental data, as well as a detailed description of Cham and Khmer influence.

Kiernan explores ten themes, laid out in six chronological parts. The ten themes, defined in the introduction, are a foretaste of the detailed and granular historical account that unfolds over the next six-hundred-plus pages. The six parts are named for the political structures dominant at the relevant time period. This review deals with the middle part of Kiernan's book, covering the years 940 to 1859 CE. The first part, "Kingdoms," refers to the states established following the end of a millennium of Chinese colonization; "Regions" refers to the division of Đại Việt (the most common name for the Vietnamese state in this period) into three distinct zones as it expanded southward. Kiernan synthesizes a huge amount of secondary work, notably by Keith W. Taylor, O.W. Wolters, Alexander Woodside, Nguyễn Quang Hồng, John K. Whitmore, Li Tana, James Anderson, C. Michelle Thompson, Lê Thành Khôi, and George Dutton, along with translations of primary sources and some climate data. He draws climate data from the annalistic history *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* as well as data assembled by Brendan Buckley and other scholars in an article on the demise of Angkor, noting droughts, wet years, and temperature variations.

Given Vietnam's close historical relations with Chinese dynasties and the notable Chinese influence on nearly every aspect of Vietnamese society, China is often an overwhelming presence in studies of Vietnam. Kiernan's emphasis on Cham and Khmer influence is thus welcome. The attention paid to southern kingdoms and to climate differentiates *Viet Nam* from other comprehensive studies of Vietnamese history.

In Chapter 4, "Rice from the Sky," Kiernan describes the expropriation of Cham culture when Cham prisoners were resettled in Đại Việt in the

eleventh century. As one heading claims, “warmer weather incubates social change.” Kiernan suggests that the Medieval Warm Period that coincided with the Trần dynasty (1225–1400) led to good harvests and prosperity, which spurred population growth, cheap labor, and social differentiation. In Chapter 5, “Smooth-Flowing Waters of Government,” Kiernan argues that climate change is one of the major factors contributing to the upheaval of Đại Việt between 1340 and 1570. In keeping with Kiernan’s goal of retelling the history of all the territory that now comprises Vietnam, he goes on to give an overview of the kingdom of Champa in the fifteenth century and the “genocide in Champa” that followed Đại Việt’s 1470 annexation of much of that kingdom.

Part 4, on Regions, begins in a period of climate extremes. Chapter 6, “Inner and Outer Regions,” contends that “repeated breakdowns of central authority” occurred from 1500 to 1800 due to extreme climate fluctuations, agrarian problems, and lack of access to land, refugees heading south, tensions between local and central authority, and the growing commercial importance of southern port cities (221–225). Kiernan describes the steps Đại Việt took to channel water in floods and store water in drought. He argues that the century between 1570 and 1670 was exceptionally dry, contributing to poor harvests and population decline, although punctuated by excessively wet years. This was also a period when Đại Việt’s center of gravity shifted south, and southern spirits were incorporated into religious practice. Champa, though greatly reduced in size, like its neighbor Đàng Trong (southern Vietnam), profited from international trade.

Chapter 7, “Alternative Unifications,” refers to the end of the north-south division between Đàng Trong and Đàng Ngoài, replaced first by the Tây Sơn Rebellion (1771–1802) and finally by the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945). In this chapter, Kiernan untangles this complicated history through 1859, when the French seized Sài Gòn, ushering in a new era. Đại Việt, like Burma and Siam in the same period, faced environmental pressures and collapsed.

A theme throughout the middle chapters of the book is Cambodia’s attempts to maneuver between the expansive states of Đại Việt and Siam. Đàng Trong armies intervened in Cambodia several times. Competition for resources between Vietnamese and Khmer in the wider Mekong region frequently led to violent conflict. In the nineteenth century, the strength of

the Nguyễn state allowed for further expansion into Cambodia, which also endured Siamese attacks. In 1833, Siamese troops crossed through Cambodia on their way to Đại Việt, falling back in 1834. Building upon this military success, the Minh Mạng emperor annexed Cambodia, only to abandon it to Siam in 1841 after constant fighting. Both sides continued to fight until 1847.

In such an ambitious project, mistakes arise. One issue concerns transliteration and translation. Different romanization schemes for Chinese words and names are used throughout the book, causing some confusion. Kiernan relies on translated texts, some rather out-of-date, including nineteenth-century French translations of Vietnamese texts originally composed in classical Chinese. These layers of translation, from classical Chinese to French or Vietnamese and then English, leads to inconsistent translation of terms and some odd or surprising phrases. In general, it is a reminder that there is a need for more up-to-date English translations of Vietnamese sources for students who cannot read the classical Chinese or Nôm originals.

Elsewhere, Kiernan makes some small factual mistakes that carry big implications. For instance, he states that the Lê government had six ministries but that it had no foreign ministry because that would be the responsibility of China (205). This is not the case; in fact the Ministry of Rites was in charge of foreign relations, as was also true in China at that time. At several points Kiernan seems to suggest a zero-sum competition between Buddhism and Confucianism, simplifying the more complicated intellectual milieu of the time. Some anachronistic terms appear, or at least terms that need more explanation, as when Kiernan refers to “racialist thinking” about the Cham (193), and later cites a translation that claims that the Chinese belong to a different “racial stock” (261).

Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present is a good reminder of the importance of the environment, particularly the connection of weather extremes to the rise and fall of states. It will serve as a helpful starting point for scholars wishing to explore these topics in more detail.

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Ben Kiernan, the author of *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*, credits the Vietnamese writer and Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) propagandist Nguyễn Khắc Viện as a foundational influence for his study and a research collaborator during past trips to Europe and Vietnam. In the book, Nguyễn Khắc Viện is portrayed as a dissident democracy advocate and voice of reform in the communist state. This is the same Nguyễn Khắc Viện who, as a medical doctor in his thirties, took a Nazi scholarship in Berlin late in World War II. He returned to France enamored with command economics and authoritarianism, propagating those ideas in the Vietnamese language journal *Nam Việt*. His support then gravitated – not far ideologically – to the Stalinist French Communist Party and the DRV. Contrary to the narrative here, among his later critiques of the DRV was that it had not followed the Soviet path with more fidelity. And the grandiose “popular democracy” he proposed in 1991 was ideally, he wrote, to be led by the Communist Party to resist what he saw as the invidious forces of private economic development following the Đổi Mới economic liberalization (479). He moreover defended the DRV’s party dictatorship and use of concentration camps, calling international criticism nothing more than “abstract humanism.”¹

Việt Nam’s treatment of Nguyễn Khắc Viện – which is unaware of or ignores many of his writings and relevant archival documents – encapsulates the broader limits of the book. Unlike other Oxford University Press general histories of Asia, this book is not authored by a specialist in the country’s history nor one whose use of Vietnamese sources suggests research competency in the language – though the author’s prominent use of diacritics implies those skills to general readers.² Nguyễn Khắc Viện was and is favored by anti-war academics of the 1970s–1980s who took a romantic view of Vietnamese or Khmer communism, who dismissed its opponents as French and American puppets, or who saw Vietnamese history stretch teleologically toward the communist party’s leadership and model of

modernity. The author's study of the modern era is characterized by these same traits. The reader thus encounters a portrayal of Vietnam that, as in the example of Nguyễn Khắc Viện, is dated, curated, and denied its complexity.

Việt Nam's treatment of the nineteenth century does not consider a new generation of scholarship that recasts the Nguyễn dynasty as a dynamic state project with its own vision of modernization. The mandarin state is stultified and powerless, overwhelmed by French colonialism and supplanted by an anachronistic modern patriotism. Of the first forty-five citations in chapter 8, twenty-five contain references to Trương Bửu Lâm's 1967 monograph, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention*, or a 1971 Australian National University undergraduate thesis. Conversely, recent authoritative studies like Emmanuel Poisson's *Mandarin et Subalternes au Nord Việt Nam* are absent.

Working from 1960s English-language translations, which were curated to present a nationalist history, *Việt Nam* presents an outdated narrative that scholars of Vietnam have since corrected. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's poem *Eulogy for the Righteous People of Cần Giuộc* is cited as showing:

Obedience to the emperor, in Chiểu's eyes, was now apparently a lesser virtue than what he called "patriotism" in defense of a "united and sumptuous kingdom." Chiểu wrote his eulogy in *nôm*, disdaining the court's preference for Chinese.... Later the French tried to win Chiểu over and offered him back his family's land, which had been confiscated. He replied: "You took my whole country, why do you trouble to give back my land?" (303)

When compared to an accurate translation of the *nôm* poem, each argument is invalidated. First, the poet did not write the word "patriotism," but rather "righteousness" [*ngĩa*, 義], one of the Confucian values that this scholar-poet cherished. Second, he did not portray obedience to the emperor as a lesser value, but as the utmost. Third, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu himself composed poems in Chinese. Fourth, the cited sentence "You took my whole country, why do you trouble to give back my land?" was also tampered with by the translator to achieve the desired nationalist perspective. The actual statement attributed to Nguyễn Đình Chiểu shows his Confucian worldview: "The king's land is still lost, what does my land matter?" [*Đất vua còn mất, đất tôi sá gì?*]

Unable to interrogate the primary sources, the book is drawn to anachronistic “patriotisms.” The reader is told that in 1918 “French authorities shut down [Sương] Nguyệt Anh’s *quốc ngữ* magazine after it published a ‘subversive’ piece alluding to the patriotism of the first-century Trưng sisters” (340). Yet reading the original magazine’s Vietnamese text we see the article only noted that secondary schools’ history books focused too much on world history. While the books included the names of past emperors and the Trưng Sisters, they did not educate students on their achievements. There was no allusion to “patriotism.”³ Nor was the appearance of the Trưng Sisters the cause of the shutdown. From the very first issue, five months earlier, Sương Nguyệt Anh’s paper featured poems heralding the Trưng sisters.⁴ Other newspapers did the same. Sương Nguyệt Anh, the socially conservative Confucian, instead saw her paper close due to its flagging readership and her failing health.

One of the central arguments of the book is that Vietnam has a timeless, distinctive aquatic culture. In attempting to cite linguistic evidence, the narrative wanders into troubled waters once again (7–10). Nguyễn Trường Tộ’s proposed reforms to the Nguyễn court are cited both as proof of the mandarin’s futility but also of water as a defining Vietnamese attribute, and the author seeks to highlight the use of certain terms.

[Nguyễn Trường Tộ] defined “our territory” as a modern geo-body while using traditional Vietnamese terms in which water (*nước*) remained a motif as predominant as land: “Our mountains and our rivers [*non nước*] our borders and our frontiers, our seas and our lakes, our military posts and our citadels.” (306)

The English-language translation cited by *Việt Nam* contains a footnote that Vietnamese historians would expect: “The original is in Chinese.”⁵ Nguyễn Trường Tộ did not write this court missive “using traditional Vietnamese terms” where “water” was significant – Chinese was the language of the mandarin. *Non nước* does not mean “mountains and rivers” and the cited text has no Vietnamese translation, raising questions about how this mistranslation made its way into Kiernan’s text. Common Vietnamese translations of this text state *những non sông* [the mountains and rivers]. More important, the Chinese original was likely *shanhe* [山河] or *jiangshan*

[山], both of which literally translate to “mountains and rivers” but symbolically represent “country” – as does *non nước*. Another guesswork water translation is noticeable in a Trần Tế Xương poem (295–296).

These may appear trivial flaws in the grand scheme. Yet it bears examination here because this grand aquatic argument rests on nothing more than such trivia. While *Việt Nam* proclaims it uses a regional framework, the unique aquatic character of the Vietnamese could not persist in such a study. The linguistic device employed by Nguyễn Trường Tộ is evidence of a preexisting Chinese concept and thus an inadvertent challenge to the book’s argument. And what of Southeast Asia? In Indonesia “my homeland” is rendered as *tanah airku*, meaning “my land of water” or “my land and water.” This term holds the same dual significance in Malaysian culture. They are far from the only linguistic dichotomies in Asia that invoke land and water to signify the country or community. But in emphasizing this concept, *Việt Nam* proclaims a new Vietnamese exceptional identity, supplanting the now outdated “timeless resistance to invaders” with this more appealing timeless aquatic character.

As *Việt Nam* moves into the 1940s and onward, the aquatic theme disappears. The narrative reverts to a more conventional “Orthodox” history of the Indochina Wars that romanticizes elements of Vietnamese communism as the country’s driving political force and excludes a great many important Vietnamese actors. *Việt Nam* often fails to be a history of its namesake, instead focusing on foreign actors. The book asserts that the former emperor Bảo Đại’s return to government and “his participation in the creation in Cochinchina of a dependent ‘State of Vietnam,’ made little difference” (386). It goes unmentioned thereafter. Yet this state contained roughly half the Vietnamese population and the Bảo Đại solution generated qualified support from Vietnamese through 1946–1955. Most startling is that the book mischaracterizes the State of Vietnam as confined to Cochinchina. It spanned all of Vietnam.

Việt Nam spends ample space discussing Phạm Hữu Chương’s victorious coalition with Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) candidates in the 1938–1939 Hanoi municipal elections (370–371). However, the text conflates the popular front candidates as being members of the ICP or that the success of front tickets was solely attributable to their ICP elements. The

author uses this as an example of how anticolonial movements had drifted to the ICP and implies that Phan Bội Châu supported the ICP (372). This is not only incorrect, but backward. During the 1930s, Phan Bội Châu criticized communism and denounced class-based revolution – this is information censored from Vietnamese histories but which can be found in original sources. Also not mentioned is that Phạm Hữu Chương and a great many others later fled the ICP-dominated DRV and chose to support the State of Vietnam.

As it moves into the 1950s, the book's simple narrative demands the simplification of the studies it cites. *Việt Nam* fixates on the CIA's peripheral role, summoning misleading quotes from CIA historical studies to claim that the United States “chose” Ngô Đình Diệm (402) to lead the State of Vietnam. What the CIA historian Thomas Ahern actually concluded was that the records “suggest, at most, a peripheral CIA role.”⁶ This line of inquiry is of little significance anyhow. Bảo Đại had himself entreated Ngô Đình Diệm to lead the forthcoming State of Vietnam, beginning in 1947–1948 and again in 1950. The author also misleadingly quotes Edward Miller's study of Ngô Đình Diệm to indict this non-communist figure. Quoting from Miller's study, the author describes the future president of South Vietnam as prescribing “fear is the beginning of discipline” and to employ “ruthless, fast arrests” to combat communist activity while a province chief in Ninh Thuận in 1930–1931. The author omits the rest of Miller's description: the arrest of communist organizers was but one part of a broader plan that saw Ngô Đình Diệm travel to villages and hear out their complaints as well as an effort to favor poor farmers in land disputes. This two-pronged approach is typical of counterinsurgency practice.

A broader issue in the section is that *Việt Nam* loses sight of its subject. Vietnamese voices are absent and the proffered history is too often one of American opinions rather than of the Vietnamese. Focus is given to figures like Joseph Alsop, in particular when he spoke favorably, but mistakenly, about the “democratic government” of the DRV (397). The first sentence of the section “The Rise of Ngô Đình Diệm” cites the *Pentagon Papers* to describe “South Vietnam” as “essentially the creation of the United States” (400). Given the excellent scholarship produced on South Vietnam and its origins by Edward Miller, François Guillemot, Geoffrey Stewart, Jason

Picard, Kevin Li, Olga Dror, Phi-Vân Nguyen, Philip Catton, Sean Fear, Simon Toner, and Van Nguyen-Marshall, among others, the reader is done a disservice through *Việt Nam's* reliance on the *Pentagon Papers* for its framework, a long-outdated text based entirely in US government sources, and authored for explicit policy purposes by government analysts without knowledge of Vietnamese history.

In a sweeping two-thousand-year history of Vietnam, the reader will wonder why such non-Vietnamese actors are at the forefront, their opinions privileged and actions amplified. Despite the great many important Vietnamese actors absent from this book, it gives prominent coverage to minor figures like a CIA contract employee named Virginia Spence (400–401). Why, the reader may wonder, are Alsop, Spence, and the *Pentagon Papers* so important in this study? It is because their comments contradicted the official White House position of the 1960s–1970s. Anti-war academics found trophies for their cause in such admissions, ones that *Việt Nam* cannot resist mounting above the mantle once again, regardless if they misinform the reader about Vietnam itself.

In the chapters covering 1955–1975, the DRV receives less attention than South Vietnam. In stark contrast to *Việt Nam's* fixation on the peripheral role of the CIA in 1953–1954, it makes no mention of the central role Chinese advisors played in designing the DRV land reform campaign at that same moment. Contrary to recent studies of the campaign, this book accepts the official DRV version of events that was designed to quell dissent and absolve Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp of blame, instead shifting it onto Trường Chinh. The book asserts, without any real evidence, a “sharp break” between the two men and Trường Chinh (425). This break allows *Việt Nam*, as was intended, to insulate part of the DRV and its two founders from opposition to the policies they championed.

This device operates in subsequent descriptions of the DRV. The author does cover some negative aspects of the communist state, like the suppression of academic and artistic freedom or escalation of war. But those attributes are either impersonalized and attributed to “the DRV” or sloughed off on unsympathetic characters like Lê Duẩn. While there is a discussion of Ngô Đình Diệm’s concept of personalism and how the ideology lent itself to authoritarianism, there is no discussion of communist

ideology in the colonial or post-colonial era and how it drove the authoritarianism that endures to today. Instead, *Việt Nam* again produces a dichotomy between moderate reformers like Nguyễn Văn Linh, who are supposedly willing to undertake political democratization, only to be stymied by vague “conservative” elements (478–479). This is deficient, given that Nguyễn Văn Linh was himself in Eastern Europe and China trying to organize a coalition to save the socialist party-states at the twilight of the Cold War, only to be rebuffed by Moscow and Beijing.

To be sure, an invalid page or paragraph does not necessarily invalidate an entire work. It does indicate that the book that cannot critically utilize Vietnamese sources to tell the history of Vietnam will face a systemic issue that goes beyond any page or paragraph. Instructors will almost certainly find that Keith Taylor’s *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and Christopher Goscha’s *Vietnam: A New History* (Basic Books, 2016) – each of which brought new frameworks to conceptualize Vietnamese history gleaned from decades of original research in relevant materials and archives – to be more useful resources for a general history of Vietnam.

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Notes

1. Nguyễn Khắc Viện, “Writing About Vietnam,” *Vietnam Courier* August (1976): 8–9, 27–28.
2. The author has written elsewhere that they “took daily Vietnamese classes for a year.” *H-France Review* Vol. 17 (December 2017), No. 243. <http://www.h-france.net/vol17reviews/vol17no243kiernan.pdf>.
3. “Việc nữ học,” *Nữ-Giới-Chung* n. 22, 19 July 1919.
4. “Thơ vịnh Bà Triệu-Ấu,” and “Thơ vịnh Bà Trưng-Nhị,” *Nữ-Giới-Chung* n. 1, 1 February 1918.
5. Truong Buu Lam, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention: 1858–1900* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1967), 103n4.
6. Thomas Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954–63* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000), 24.