

Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present. By BEN KIERNAN. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xvi, 621 pp. ISBN: 9780195160765 (cloth, also available as e-book).
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Ben Kiernan is best known for his scholarly work on Cambodia and in the field of genocide studies. However, his deep, long-term engagement with Vietnamese studies, in its broadest and most interdisciplinary sense—through his students, his colleagues, and his own travels, wide reading, and research on Vietnam—comes through on every page of this book. Perhaps because of his thorough grounding in the study of peoples, such as the Cham and Khmer, who are usually mere extended footnotes in works on the history of Vietnam, Kiernan’s presentation of Vietnam’s history is unusual.

Every other history of the geographic space that is now the Socialist Republic of Vietnam that I know of, in English, French, or Vietnamese, starts in the north. In contrast, the very first sentence of the introduction to *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* is a quote from a southern Vietnamese scholar writing in 1820 from territory that still contained a large Khmer-speaking population. The next paragraph mentions Champa, Cham, and Khmer languages, and notes the over fifty recognized minority groups and languages in modern-day Vietnam. This is a positively revolutionary way to begin a book on the history of Vietnam! Such peoples and their languages, cultures, and former states usually do not appear until well into works on the overall history of Vietnam, and never before, as far as I can determine, on the first page.

This approach is compatible with Kiernan’s observation that “Việt Nam is a land shared and contested by many peoples and cultures for several thousand years” (p. 5). He certainly does not neglect the ethnic Vietnamese, nor the history of the northern territory from which they spread south and eventually conquered both the Cham polities and the land that was claimed by various Khmer states until well into the nineteenth century. He gives a clear, well-written overview of the major individuals, families, social groups, institutions, and states of the north. But even when focusing on the Việt, Kiernan does not follow the most common division of Vietnamese history into sections defined primarily by dynasty. The book is divided into six parts: “Chiefdoms,” “Provinces,” “Kingdoms,” “Regions,” “Colonies,” and “Republics.” Each part contains one to two chapters, but not even the chapter titles follow the convention of being named after Việt dynasties. Further, information on the “other” peoples of Vietnam—their political entities, their relations with the dynasties of the north, and elements of their culture and religion that became incorporated into mainstream Việt culture—is presented in every single chapter.

Clearly, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* is not primarily a history of the Việt ethnic majority of the contemporary Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Its objective is to be a history of the geographic space that is now that nation. Its primary purpose is “documenting and narrating the experiences of the variety of peoples who have inhabited the country’s different regions since earliest recorded times as well as their interactions with their natural environments and with neighboring countries” (p. 5).

While the book is not explicitly an environmental history of Vietnam, Kiernan weaves information on environmental factors, particularly those such as long-term dry or wet periods that had clear economic impacts, into virtually every major topic covered in the book. Kiernan’s command of the contemporary scholarship on such environmental

factors is impressive, as is his knowledge of the body of scholarship on an astonishing variety of subjects pertaining to Vietnam.

Kiernan utilizes a wide variety of secondary sources ranging, literally, from archaeology and anthropology to zoology in English, French, Khmer, and Vietnamese. For primary sources, Kiernan uses translations of documents in Chinese and archaic Vietnamese written in Nôm, such as those recently published in *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*.¹ He also uses modern Romanized Vietnamese sources, extensive materials from the French colonial archives, and a number of declassified American documents. Unfortunately, this wealth of sources is not as user-friendly as it could be. There is no bibliography. This makes it time-consuming to find a full citation. Further, the consolidated notes render it unclear, upon occasion, which source is being cited for which idea or item of factual information. Even further, the index is woefully inadequate. Numerous topics, rhinoceros horn being one, are discussed more than once but do not appear in the index. One can understand that, with a 656-page book, the publisher would not want to add quite a number of pages. However, at the very least if an electronic edition is contemplated these issues should be addressed.

This is a very ambitious book that should attract a wide readership among scholars who study Southeast Asian history, particularly the mainland, from graduate students to senior faculty with perhaps some upper-level undergraduates and members of the general reading public. As recently as six years ago, scholars working on, and teaching, the history of Vietnam bemoaned the fact that there had been no study of Vietnam published in decades that covered all of its long history. Since then three such books have been published: *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*, K. W. Taylor's *A History of the Vietnamese*, and Christopher Goscha's *Vietnam: A New History*.²

It is my considered opinion that publication of these three books indicates a maturation of Vietnamese studies as a field. The long history of Vietnam has now been examined from a number of different points of view, including Kiernan's. It is natural to Kiernan's training and his scholarly interests to be highly inclusive of information on peoples such as the Cham and Khmers as integral to the history of the whole long stretch of land on the eastern coast of mainland Southeast Asia that is contemporary Vietnam. This is the most unusual and the most original contribution of this book. It is also the aspect of this book that is the most inspiring and provocative. It opens the door to the possibility of a history of the geographic space that is Vietnam written primarily from within the history, and thus the viewpoint, of a group of people other than the Việt. Kiernan has not done that, as that was not one of the objectives of this book, but he has opened the door. This is a healthy thing for Vietnamese studies. This book deserves a place on the bookshelf of anyone with a serious interest in Vietnam, Champa, the Khmer, and mainland Southeast Asia.

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¹George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, eds., *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

²K. W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).