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K. W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*

Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xvi, 696; bibliographic essay, figures, tables, maps, index.

Reviewed by Norman G. Owen.

REVISING HISTORY, REVISIONING VIETNAM

Let us begin by stipulating that no one is better qualified to write this book than Keith Taylor. He first went to Vietnam with the US Army almost half a century ago; upon his return he got his PhD in Vietnamese history at the University of Michigan, with his dissertation later revised and published as *The Birth of Vietnam* (1983). Ever since then he has continued to study and teach Vietnamese history, most recently at Cornell University, somehow managing to avoid being sucked too far into administration or into teaching the History of Civilization, which sidelined so many of us over the years. He is bright, he is skilled in the necessary languages, and he is tenacious. He is the scholar we all intended to be. We can only endorse the blurb (by Peter Zinoman) on the back cover that this “elegant, erudite and stunningly comprehensive” book “is, by a wide margin, the finest general survey of Vietnamese history ever produced in any language.”

Having conceded that I am in no position to challenge Taylor's knowledge of his subject (and nothing that follows should suggest otherwise), it remains for me as reviewer to raise some questions about this massive volume and its implications for readers, for Vietnam, and for Southeast Asian history as a whole.

The first question is, for whom is this book intended? Taylor refers to it as an “introductory survey,” but at over 700 large pages in length, of which 626 are text –

dense prose uninterrupted by illustrations or any other distractions – it is far too long to be used as a general survey in any college course, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, or to be read by any but the most dedicated of scholars.

There are a few snappy one-liners in the text (“Le Sat had a habit of killing people,” page 193; Trinh Tung “was baffled by any problem that could not be solved by soldiers,” page 258) and some elegant *aperçus* (Le Tu Thanh “ruled as if his reign were one long study session for the country,” page 209; Nguyen Du “believed that a dysfunctional Confucian family was still better than no family at all,” page 406). But far too often, for pages at a time, it bogs down in summarizing the chronicles, passages reminiscent of the “begats” familiar from Bible studies:

Tran Ly had married into the To family, and his wife's brother, To Trung Tu, was a powerful ally; whether these people were related to To Hien Thanh is not known, but such would be a powerful conjecture. Tran Ly had three talented adult sons, Tran Thua, Tran Tu Khanh, and Tran Thu Do, all of whom would be prominent in coming events. (page 103)

Tran Kien's father, Tran Quoc Khang, was a son of Tran Lieu, but born after Tran Thu Do sent Tran Lieu's wife to Tran Canh. Tran Quoc Khang was adopted as a son by Tran Canh and remained loyal to the throne throughout his life, but his son Tran Kien nurtured the resentment of his grandfather . . . (page 115)

Arguably, Taylor has performed a service to the field in sorting these relationships out, but they make for slow reading at best. Over the course of several weeks, as I diligently worked my way through the entire tome, I kept wondering how many other readers would ever do so voluntarily.

For students, moreover, there are conspicuous omissions. Although there are twenty-one historical maps tucked away at the back of the book, they are less helpful than they might be, due to a shortage of topographic detail (except in Map 10) and the absence of such crucial maps as one displaying information relating to the Vietnam Wars of 1945-75 (showing, e.g., the 17th parallel, demilitarized zones, and the sites of major battles or bombings) and, even more importantly, a map

showing the provinces of Vietnam today. The latter is vital because of Taylor's habit of locating historical sites by reference to current provinces, which is of little use to those of us who do not have the political map of contemporary Vietnam memorized, or by our side as we read.

The index, which is quite good on personal names – including almost six full columns of “Nguyens”! – lacks a number of terms and locations that readers might wish to look up, e.g., August Revolution, Black Flags, Cha Ban, Con Son (Poulou Condore), Cochinchina, *dinh* (in the sense of “garrison,” page 270), *doi moi*, Hoi An, *mission civilisatrice*, *nam tien*, the Thai Nguyen and Yen Bay mutinies, etc. Even if Taylor regards these as irrelevant or inappropriate entries, providing cross-references might have been more user-friendly. Some familiar names and terms appear to have been omitted entirely from the text as well, e.g., McGeorge Bundy, *can vuong*, *collaborateurs*, DMZ, Ho Chi Minh Trail, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, *Sûreté*, Tet Offensive.

Serious historians of Vietnam, of course, will overlook these omissions and acquire this book at once (if they have not already done so), mining it for facts and insights. But as a scholarly work intended for such an audience, this *History* displays other curious deficiencies. For a start, there are no diacritical marks, without which Vietnamese written in western script (*quoc ngu* – or, more properly, *Quốc Ngữ*) is, I am told, only semi-intelligible. Moreover, the book has neither footnotes nor endnotes, but rather an extensive bibliographic essay, most of which is made up of “Suggested readings in English and French organized by chapters.” This makes sense in a “survey” for readers who know no Vietnamese or Chinese, since presumably most of the quotations or points of potential controversy are drawn from Asian-language sources that we can't read anyway. But I suspect that Vietnam specialists – perhaps the chief users of this book? – may find it a bit frustrating.

And so this *History* will be acquired – should be acquired – by every research library with any pretense to cover Asian history. There it will only be read by a few experts,

but dipped into by many other people interested in some question about Vietnamese history that can either be defined chronologically or located in the index. Such readers, however, may not bother to refer to or reflect on Taylor's broader analysis, to which we now turn.

What Taylor has constructed, under the great mountain of historical details that he amasses, is a challenge to almost all historiography of Vietnam from the last half-century. It is a profound work of revisionism, reading at first almost like a throwback to the 1950s and the “traditional” Franco-Vietnamese view of the country, as articulated in English in such works as Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon* (1958). Vietnam was seen then as a country very much influenced by, and in the orbit of, China (the “Greater Dragon”); it could only be understood by those who came at it from a Sinic perspective. (Thus at Harvard University Vietnam was, and for many years remained, under the rubric of East Asia rather than Southeast Asia).

But Taylor's view is far deeper and more nuanced than that of Buttinger and the French scholars on whom he drew. His own background is in Southeast Asian studies, and although he reads Chinese he does not, like some of his predecessors, regard Vietnam as merely a flawed copy of the Chinese original. And he dismisses French-sponsored “traditional Vietnamese culture” as “in large part a colonial invention based on aspects of Confucianism that enforced gender and age subordinations in family relations. It also fed from the aura of a venerable antiquity with which the French invested the dynastic routine in ‘Old Hue’” (pages 511-12).

Taylor's real quarrel is not with this antiquarian view of Vietnam, but – as he puts it in the “Retrospective” that ends the book – with the “stridently nationalistic version of Vietnamese history” that has dominated recent historiography, not just in Vietnam itself but also in Western-language scholarship from the 1960s onward. He identifies two major elements that he regards as misguided: an affirmation of Vietnamese identity prior to Chinese rule and “dominant themes of rebellion against

colonial oppression and resistance to foreign aggression.” Neither of these, he claims, is supported by the historical evidence (page 620).

Taylor offers no grand synthesis to replace these discredited themes; in fact he asserts that “there is no discernible pattern” in most of Vietnamese history, merely a “great swath of failed experiments in social organization and government” (page 620). Instead, he puts forward three major “reconsiderations.” First, Vietnamese relations with China were both foundational (“Every aspect of Vietnamese culture appeared as a result of being in that empire,” page 621) and essentially positive (“With few and very episodic exceptions, Vietnamese and Chinese have lived in peace and amity,” page 623). Second, the Vietnamese have never been a unified people; regional antagonisms both between North and South and within both North and South were a constant theme. Finally, it is useless to search for a single “real” Vietnam today, since it has been so fragmented by history, especially over the last two centuries, when European influences entered to meld or clash with Sinic and local ones. “Being Vietnamese offers many options” (page 626).

Yet it would be a disservice to Taylor to respond only to this provocative “Retrospective” without reference to the more than 600 pages of evidence that precede it and underlie his views. Century after century, dynasty after dynasty, detail after detail, he takes us from the Chinese invasion of the third century BCE – dismissing all that came earlier as not really Vietnamese – up to the present day, although the most recent period (since 1975) is cursorily dispensed with in less than six pages. More than most, Taylor is capable of making us see the *longue durée*, thus keeping episodes like the brief American involvement in perspective. We realize anew that even the French, whose involvement in Vietnam was far deeper than that of the US, did not rule the country as long as China's Tang dynasty.

His sources are predominantly Vietnamese and Chinese, many of them either chronicles or the material from which such chronicles were assembled: annals, inscriptions, collections of biographies, etc. They tend to reflect traditional elite

concerns: court intrigues (including so many homicides they may remind one of *Game of Thrones*), appointments, wars, and government policies, even when those policies did not result in any effective action. From such texts and the major literary works of the past, which he also seems to have mastered, Taylor manages to reconstruct not just the intricate saga of Who Did What To Whom, but certain larger trends within Vietnamese society, both economic (primarily as refracted through revenue considerations) and cultural (as literary themes suggest social concerns). He is particularly strong on regional, even micro-regional, analysis: which provinces produced the most successful examination candidates, which were particularly active in advising the emperor or quelling insurgencies, who concentrated their energies on warfare and who on Confucian culture, etc. The only major topic that seems conspicuously under-represented is organized water control (dams, dikes, irrigation – none of which appears in the index), one of the distinctive features of Vietnam within Southeast Asia.

Although Taylor cites such world-historical themes as climate change, trends in global silver prices, and imperialism when they impinge on Vietnam, he does not generally attempt to situate Vietnamese history in any larger context than that of the country's immediate neighbors, particularly China, Cambodia, and Siam. He does not mention, much less engage with, such scholars as Victor Lieberman (2003, 2009) and James C. Scott (1976, 2009), who included Vietnam in some of their broader comparative studies. This *History* is resolutely empirical, rather than theoretical.

Taylor does not analyze the central questions with which he wrestles throughout the book – how can, and how should, Vietnam be ruled? – through reference to any larger model of governance. Instead he simply depicts a long series of failed efforts to solve the problem. The few temporary exceptions to the tedious litany of frustration are attributed to individual contingency. For example Le Tu Thanh's long and successful reign (1460-97) is characterized as “a fragile achievement of one man's unusual personality” (page 223). Collapse appears all but inevitable; the

Trinh “inhabited an institutionalized contradiction, which made it difficult to resist the lazy pleasure of enjoying power and easy to avoid the headaches of government” (page 340).

Within this gloomy framework, Chinese rule is no worse than indigenous governance (pages 37-38, 180). Even the French are given a conditional pass: “French colonial rule cannot be judged as more virulent and corrupt than the regimes that had governed the Vietnamese in earlier ages” (page 467). France’s “*mission civilisatrice*,” which to many today sounds condescending if not downright hypocritical, is credited for being genuinely “idealistic” in principle, though corrupted in practice.

With regard to American involvement, Taylor displays greater ambivalence, and his last substantive chapter (“From two countries to one,” pages 561-619) is likely to be his most controversial. He emerges as the last – at least the most articulate and best informed – defender of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) against both the communists (for whom he has little use) and those Americans who first tried to control Saigon and then eventually betrayed it. He ignores or sidesteps leftist critiques of the US for undermining the 1954 Geneva conference, provoking or faking the Tonkin Gulf incidents of 1964 (as a pretext for widening the war), sabotaging the 1968 Paris talks, “secretly” bombing Cambodia in 1969, and undertaking the Christmas bombing of Hanoi in 1972 for no obvious reason. Instead, he reserves his wrath for Averill Harriman and his State Department clique, who inspired the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem – “Kennedy’s most fateful achievement in Vietnam” (page 589) – and for those responsible for the withdrawal of American support in 1975, leaving the Republic fatally “wounded by a faithless ally” (page 626).

This perspective runs so counter to conventional scholarly wisdom (both in Vietnam and among Vietnam specialists overseas) that it may be necessary to remind ourselves again that Taylor is not arguing from ignorance. He is very much on top of the material, and indeed contributes substantially to our knowledge of certain

aspects of the period, particularly by providing insight into the politics of Saigon (and, to a lesser degree, Hanoi) from the 1950s through the 1970s. He devotes two and a half pages (pages 608-10) to analyzing the elections held in what he calls the “Second Republic of Vietnam” (1967-75), arguing that they were “relatively democratic” and demonstrated the rule of law, rather than executive tyranny. Similarly, he reassesses some much-maligned leaders of the South. Although acknowledging their flaws, he portrays Ngo Dinh Nhu as having democratic intentions (page 581; Nhu was disliked, Taylor alleges, because of his effectiveness in maintaining security and his resistance to American tutelage, page 577), Nguyen Cao Ky as showing “no hint of corruption” (page 593), and Nguyen Van Thieu – in fainter praise – as not being “known for either excessive corruption or egregious abuse of power” (page 607).

Taylor's perspective on the course of the conflict is, again, revisionist *vis-à-vis* most recent accounts of the war. He claims that the much-criticized Strategic Hamlet program was a local initiative (no mention of its supposed connections to British tactics during the Malayan Emergency) and that it was fundamentally democratic; despite its shortcomings – which he admits – it was starting to be successful at the time Diem was overthrown, when it was rapidly dismantled (page 580-83, 590). He similarly sees the “communist offensive of 1968” (i.e., Tet) as a win for the Second Republic, incorrectly perceived by Americans as a defeat (page 604). He regards the incursions into both Cambodia and Laos as positive in permitting time for Vietnamization of the war, and thus for the “success” of the Saigon regime “in stabilizing South Vietnam” (pages 606-7) – at least until the US sold it out in the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, which “discarded the sovereignty of the Second Republic” (pages 612-13).

The end came quickly in Vietnam, but it comes even more quickly in this *History*, where just one sentence covers the final campaign and the liberation or fall of Saigon, without a hint that large numbers of RVN troops and officials abandoned their positions and fled before the advancing Northern army. (“In early 1975, North

Vietnamese leaders determined that the US would not return and initiated a campaign that within two months obtained total victory,” page 613)

Readers who balk at this Cold War revisionism should not use it as an excuse for ignoring the previous 560 pages (and over two millennia) of Vietnamese history as expounded here. Every Vietnam specialist will want to read this book, or at least consult it on issues of interest. It will also, I suspect, be indispensable for every historian of Cambodia and highly useful for historians of Laos and Thailand. About the rest of Southeast Asia, Taylor has little to say, but we can imagine how his larger revisionist project – setting aside his interpretation of the “American War” era – might play in the arena of Southeast Asian history. A few ways suggest themselves, avenues that we as readers may explore, though Taylor himself has not traveled far down them (not that we would wish this volume any longer!).

First, his challenge to Vietnamese “essentialism” – the idea that Vietnam has been a self-conscious “nation” for millennia – brings that society more into line with what we know of the rest of the region. In every other country, scholars have tried to trace the evolutionary rise of “national” culture and consciousness, rather than assuming that it was primordial (although some people still persist in believing that Lapu-Lapu was somehow “Filipino,” Queen Suriyothai was “Thai,” and Dipanagara was “Indonesian”). Taylor, by drawing Vietnam into the same universe of evolving consciousness, removes one of the anomalies in the study of Southeast Asian history, where for decades we have had to dance around the propositions that “nationalism” emerged gradually everywhere else in the region but sprang fully-formed from the brow of some primeval proto-Vietnamese ancestor in the Red River delta.

Second, Taylor insists that Vietnam was never really unified. In all historical eras, he asserts, there were severe tensions between regions – political, economic, linguistic – that rulers had to manipulate or overcome; they could never take the unity of their realm for granted. Chapter headings and subheadings – on the

“Seventy Years War,” the “Fifty Years War,” the “Thirty Years War” – suggest how bloody and interminable such internecine conflicts, not to mention numerous foreign wars and countless rebellions, were. The result was a fragmented political and cultural imaginary. Even in the late eighteenth century it was possible for Nguyen Nhac, oldest of the “Tay Son” brothers, to see himself as lord only of a local domain, rather than of the “One Vietnam” which modern nationalists affirm and then project onto their past (page 396). This perspective, again, makes the history of Vietnam look more like that of Myanmar/Burma and the maritime polities of Southeast Asia, all of which were in constant turmoil over similar issues: What is this realm and where exactly does it extend? Who belongs to it and who is loyal to it? How can it be preserved from overthrow or disintegration? How far are rulers willing to go to enforce their vision of the realm and its subjects?

Third, his emphasis on the *longue durée* and the importance of Vietnam's relationship with China helps remind us of the Asian context of Southeast Asia, even during and after the Western-dominated “imperial centuries” of modern history. Taylor does not look at “China” as an abstraction or a constant, but he is aware – as Vietnamese rulers have always had to be – of the rise and fall of dynasties, what their priorities were, where their interests lay, how strong the center was relative to rivals and local lords, and every other element affecting how the empire interacted with weaker states nearby. Among Southeast Asian polities, Vietnam was the most vulnerable and therefore the most sensitive to such considerations, continually resulting in a “fundamentally compliant relationship with China enforced by governments modeled on what exist[ed] in China” (page 626). But no other Southeast Asian state could – or can today, as China reclaims its place in the world – manage its affairs intelligently without some comparable assessment of its great neighbor to the north.

Finally, this *History* provides such a wealth of detail that individual readers will doubtless find parallels of their own as they go along. For me, the Ming destruction of Vietnamese texts (pages 179-80) calls to mind Spanish missionaries in the

colonial Philippines; the harmonious Tran arrangement of “senior” and “junior” kings (pages 125-6) prefigures Lee Kuan Yew; the constant royal struggle for resources is reminiscent of Thai and Burmese kings periodically attempting to regain control over land and labor after decades of gradual dispersion to temples and private estates; the “spread of alphabetic literacy” as “the most decisive event in the history of French Indochina” (page 521) evokes Benedict Anderson (1983); and the regular re-appearance of the same “rebel” – Le Duy Minh – years after he was first executed (page 451) echoes through the “underside of history” everywhere in the region. Not all Southeast Asianists will venture to read this daunting volume, but those who do will be edified by it.

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