

Response Page

The following response was posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Ben Kiernan's response to Gerard Sasges's review of three books:

Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*

Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*

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

Sasges' original review is located at *H-France Review* Vol. 17 (October 2017), No. 194:
<http://www.h-france.net/vol17reviews/vol17no110savage.pdf>.

Kiernan's response essay is located at *H-France Review* Vol. 17 (December 2017), No. 243.
<http://www.h-france.net/vol17reviews/vol17no243kiernan.pdf>.

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In May 2017, the editors of *H-France Review* contacted about reviewing Christopher Goscha's recently-published *Vietnam: A New History*. I replied by suggesting instead a review essay that would make the most of a remarkable conjuncture in Vietnamese historiography by comparing Goscha's book with those of Keith Taylor and Ben Kiernan. The editors agreed, and I began.

One thing I wanted to know better, both as a reader and as an historian, was about the origins of the books, the processes that had produced them, and how the authors themselves situated their works in the field. Each of the authors responded to my emails generously with their time and thoughts, and Professor Kiernan kindly helped arrange for me to receive an electronic copy when my hard copy was delayed in the mail. My correspondence with all three authors provided invaluable background as I began to organize my thoughts and write the essay. I also referred to these contacts in the essay, writing, for example, how in an email to me Professor Kiernan had described the book as the outcome of a decade of intensive research. He now sees these contacts as "a breach of scholarly reviewing protocol." If that's the case, it's a breach of protocol in which he, along with Goscha and Taylor, seems to have willingly participated. Had he raised these concerns with me or the editors of *H-France Review* at the time, I would have called a halt to the project. He did not, and I proceeded.

From the beginning, my intention was to write an essay that would simultaneously place the works in the context of recent developments in Vietnamese Studies and in dialogue with each other. Anyone reading all three books cannot help but be struck by two things. One is their very different approaches to sources and translations, and the other is their very different narrative strategies. It is the former that has particularly exercised Professor Kiernan in his response to my essay, and so that is where I will begin my own response.

Professor Kiernan's assertion to the contrary, at no place in the essay did I write that he did not know Vietnamese. I simply pointed out that the book's notes contain remarkably few citations to documents in the two scripts most useful for the study of Vietnamese history: the standard logograms ("Classical Chinese") used by Vietnamese elites into the twentieth century, or the modern Vietnamese alphabet that gradually replaced it. There are, however, references to secondary and some primary sources in French and Khmer. This is perhaps understandable, given that Professor Kiernan is best known as a scholar of modern Cambodia. Whatever ability he has to read Vietnamese scripts, according to Professor Kiernan, he gained when he "took daily Vietnamese classes for a year." If Professor Kiernan did gain a functional research competence in modern Vietnamese in a year, then he's truly a gifted linguist.

As proof of the competence gained in that year of classes, Professor Kiernan makes much of the fact that Vietnamese terms in his book are written with diacritics. To place that statement in the context of an essay originally intended for historians of France, this would be like claiming that the ability to write correctly "Pierre Mendès France" or "Communauté européenne de défense" was proof of one's competence in French. Equally questionable is Professor Kiernan's insinuation that Liam Kelley and other scholars of Vietnam who choose not to use diacritics in some of their publications are somehow less than competent. By this reckoning, the language skills of senior historians like Keith Taylor, Hue-Tam Ho-Tai, or Truong Buu Lam – on whose work Professor Kiernan relies – would all be called into question.

But even if we assume for the sake of argument that Professor Kiernan has the functional research competence to work in one or both of the two primary scripts used historically by Vietnamese, it's still remarkable how little trace of that competence reveals itself in the book's notes. Again, to put things in context, it would be like writing a scholarly history of France based almost entirely on sources in English and German. It seems unlikely that a major university press like Oxford would accept such a manuscript. And the way this somehow becomes acceptable when the object of study is Vietnam and not France may reveal some uncomfortable truths about the biases and habits of thought that continue to shape how certain individuals in Western academia and academic presses engage with the rest of the world.

Rather than his competence in modern Vietnamese or Classical Chinese, instead the notes in his book reveal Professor Kiernan's overwhelming dependence on translations. Every historian working across languages and cultures knows that the act of translation is fraught. But it becomes more so when one is called on to translate from a language like Vietnamese or Chinese to a European language, and even more difficult again when translating from more archaic to more contemporary contexts. Rather than belabor this point for readers of my essay, I chose to refer those who might be interested to a series of blog posts by Liam Kelley, a leading scholar of pre-modern and early-modern Vietnam. In the posts, he explores some of the problems that occur when Kiernan's analytic framework meets his patchwork of translations of texts in Classical Chinese and Nom, the Vietnamese demotic script.

Professor Kiernan takes particular offence with this reference to Kelley's blog and my decision to include it despite his email to me informing me of Kelley's "mistakes" and "retractions." He neglects to add that whatever mistake Kelley may have made arose from the fact that Professor Kiernan's original citation was incorrect (to quote Professor Kiernan's email, "As you'll see in the second pdf, the passage in Aubaret's 1863 book appears on p. 115, not p. 111 as is stated in endnote 1 on p. 493 of my book. I'm correcting that in the paperback edition."). More important, Professor Kiernan seems to have missed the point that the issue is not his or Kelley's translation of Aubaret's French, but rather Aubaret's translation of the original Chinese. As Kelley went on to demonstrate in a subsequent post, Aubaret's translation of Trinh Hoai Duc's text may tell us a great deal about the practice of French colonialism, but it does not, as Professor Kiernan seems to believe, tell us much of anything about Vietnamese conceptions of geography. My decision to retain the reference to Kelley's blog was thus a considered one. Despite Professor Kiernan's claims to the contrary, Kelley's wide-ranging and trenchant critique still stands.

Professor Kiernan ridicules the way my inability to read Classical Chinese leaves me dependent on scholars like Kelley, writing “since Sasges “can’t read the Chinese!”, he relied without verification on Kelley’s blog posts.” On the one hand, this is an odd point to make given that Professor Kiernan appears to be equally ignorant of Chinese. On the other hand, it makes a crucial point that Professor Kiernan seems not to grasp. My scholarship on colonial Vietnam emerges from the sources, approaches, and languages I know best. For example, there are many ways that sources in Classical Chinese might be used to tell important new stories about Vietnam’s colonial period. But I know I’m not the scholar to tell them. If my research does sometimes bring me into contact with sources or languages I’m unfamiliar with, I defer to the opinion of those who know better. And never in my wildest imaginings would I take a year’s worth of classes in modern Khmer and then attempt to write a 600-page history of Cambodia “from earliest times to the present.”

Some readers may disagree and reply that it’s possible to write a scholarly history relying only on translated and secondary sources. Yet as I underlined in my review, the field of Vietnamese Studies has been indelibly marked by the wars of the twentieth century. As a result, the existing scholarship is marred by large gaps in coverage, the accounts that do exist are sometimes based on other unreliable secondary accounts, and historical narratives are frequently over-determined or distorted by politics and ideological bias. This is a point that seems to elude Kiernan. In my essay, I highlighted a 1967 collection of translations by Truong Buu Lam on which Professor Kiernan relies for his discussion of the early colonial period, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention: 1858-1900*. After suggesting I “have never opened the book,” Kiernan writes that “the book simply cannot reflect an outdated 1960s “current in Vietnamese historiography,” as he [Sasges] asserts.”

If Professor Kiernan were to reopen the book, he might notice that the book’s introduction is titled “Vietnamese Nationalism: The Link with the Past.” The translations that follow are then selected from exactly the nationalist “canon” that I refer to in my essay, beginning with a poem by Ly Thuong Kiet in the eleventh century and ending with an anonymous “Poem on True Heroism” from ca. 1900. I will leave it to others more qualified than Professor Kiernan or myself to evaluate Truong Buu Lam’s translations. But as should be clear to most readers, both in conception and in framing the collection fits seamlessly within a stream of historiography, dominant in US academia in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, that projected the existence of a Vietnamese nation back millennia and located the core of its identity in a supposed tradition of resistance to foreign rule. This is, of course, a vision of Vietnamese history that has been patiently deconstructed by a new generation of scholars active since the 1990s.

This should make clear the vital importance of two things for any scholar attempting to write Vietnamese history. One, as I’ve outlined above, is the ability to work wherever possible with primary sources in the original language, to understand the contexts in which they were produced, and to use them to evaluate critically the secondary sources available. The other is the need for real engagement with the scholarship that has emerged thanks to the combination of a new generation of scholars, new approaches, and above all, new access to archives. In his response, Professor Kiernan points to some of the more recent scholarship he cites. These are the exceptions that prove the rule. Anyone who examines Professor Kiernan’s notes will see his dependence on Vietnamese historiography from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Many of these works are of great value. Yet many of them, like Truong Buu Lam’s *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention* are undeniably shaped by the contentious politics from which they emerged.

Even more important than when a source was published is the way it’s used and the kind of narrative it’s made to support. Because Professor Kiernan himself brings it up in his response, let’s take as an example the figure of Ngo Dinh Diem, who would serve as President of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) from 1955 to 1963. To challenge my characterization of his book’s narrative as a “romance” describing the triumph of the (communist-led) Vietnamese nation over adversity, Professor Kiernan points to how he cites a poem written by the onetime revolutionary, Phan Boi Chau to the effect that Diem was “a truly great man.” [372] I’m not sure exactly what this is supposed to prove: Chau had been dead for more than a decade before Diem came to power in the RVN, and his praise referred to events in 1933, not to Diem’s legacy as an anticommunist. Moreover, Professor Kiernan places the quotation in a paragraph that makes a clear teleological argument about the Communist Party’s rise to power. Tellingly, the paragraph also has Chau refer to future President Ho

Chi Minh as a ““very reliable” custodian of the mission to achieve independence.” Next, “the independent radical Nguyen An Ninh moved towards close cooperation with the ICP” [Indochinese Communist Party]. Then, it’s time for leading members of the VNQDD [Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang, or Vietnamese Nationalist Party] to “collaborate with the ICP.” How this account is incompatible with the version of history taught in contemporary Vietnamese schools somehow escapes me.

Of course, there are many things in Professor Kiernan’s book that would not find their place in a Vietnamese history syllabus. Here, Professor Kiernan misrepresents the position I took in my essay. I note with approval, for example, his use of work by scholars like Peter Zinoman, Charles Keith, and Philippe Peycam, and the care he takes to explore the role violence played in the Communist rise to power. Without a doubt, these and other points all add complexity to the book’s narrative. This is a good thing. Yet they do little to alter its basic form.

Once again, Professor Kiernan’s own treatment of Ngo Dinh Diem provides a useful illustration. A section entitled “The Rise of Ngo Dinh Diem” (400-402) contains the phrase “Though no puppet, Diem depended on U.S. support to implement his vision for the country.” Yet for Professor Kiernan, the issue is clearly US support rather than Diem’s agency. The section opens with a quote from *The Pentagon Papers* describing the future RVN as “essentially the creation of the United States.” The penultimate paragraph closes with a quote from CIA historian Thomas Ahern, who wrote in 2001 that the US “chose” Diem as the head of “the southern rump state.” Then the last paragraph adds an anecdote informing readers that although newly arrived CIA operative Edward Landsdale “had never heard of Diem,” nevertheless, “Saigon’s other CIA station certainly had.”

A Vietnamese history textbook couldn’t have described Diem and the RVN better: a “rump state,” “essentially the creation of the United States,” with a leader chosen by the US and dependent on powerful CIA handlers who don’t even know who he is. Yet this sort of portrayal of Diem and the RVN is untenable in the face of recent work by scholars like Ed Miller and Phillip Catton, based on work in Vietnamese archives and using Vietnamese sources. The section is all the more remarkable for the way it references the work of Ed Miller not once but twice. Among many other contributions, Miller has demonstrated that the idea the US “chose” Diem is simply false.

Perhaps Kiernan didn’t understand what Miller wrote. Perhaps he wasn’t able to evaluate which of these two types of secondary sources – one based on work in Vietnamese archives, the other based on work in American archives – might tell us more about Vietnamese pasts rather than American. Or perhaps he just couldn’t help reproducing the account of Diem and the RVN that has dominated US academia for most of his career. Whatever the reason, the passage encapsulates the problems of source, translation, interpretation, and narrative that run through Professor Kiernan’s book. At the same time, it highlights the achievements of scholars like Christopher Goscha and Keith Taylor when they produce deeply considered yet innovative new accounts of Vietnamese history. Where Kiernan’s work points to the field’s past, theirs points to its future.

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