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Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xvi + 621 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-1951-6076-5.

Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*. New York: Basic Books, 2016. xiv + 553 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-4650-9436-3.

K. W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xv + 696 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$49.99 U.S. (pb) ISBN 978-0-5216-9915-0.

Response by Ben Kiernan, Yale University.

Gerard Sasges' review of my book, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*, is riddled with errors and fails to meet scholarly standards for peer reviewing.^[1] Sasges demonstrates an incomplete grasp of sources and interpretation. Significantly, he erroneously asserts that I did not consult sources in local scripts, and he publishes false statements about the evidence on which my book is based. Moreover, contrary to professional best practices, he failed to independently verify incorrect assertions from Liam Kelley's non-peer reviewed blog posts on which Sasges bases much of his review, some of which Kelley had retracted before the review's publication. Perhaps most astonishingly, he contacted me directly several times during the review process and then ignored the primary sources that I provided to him that contradict his and Kelley's assertions.

Sasges flounders on his first step, failing to recognize a collection of primary sources in his own field of colonial Vietnamese history. He writes, "Kiernan has not fully grasped the opportunity to engage with new currents in Vietnamese historiography.... One key source for Kiernan's account of colonial rule, for example, is Trương Bửu Lâm's 1967 *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention*...without taking account of newer scholarship and the way it revises, revises, or refutes [such] work."

Sasges clearly does not know—he seems to have never opened the book—that *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention: 1858-1900* is an anthology of twenty primary historical documents, mostly written in that early colonial era.^[2] By its nature, the book simply cannot reflect an outdated 1960s "current in Vietnamese historiography," as he asserts. Could Sasges really find it unprofessional for a historian writing an early colonial chapter in a history of Viet Nam to quote from a series of historical documents composed in the early colonial period? Or should a historian quote only from texts written by one's own generation? Sasges cites no instance of how "newer scholarship...revises, or refutes" Trương Bửu Lâm's 1967 *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention*. Sasges singles out this volume as an "example" of an outdated historiography, apparently simply because of its publication date.

Next, Sasges asserts that my book's endnotes "make it clear that Kiernan has failed to consult sources in any of the local scripts or alphabets." For the record, I consulted sources in both Vietnamese and Khmer

scripts. While the notes to a work can scarcely list all the texts consulted in its preparation, my book's 2,466 endnotes contain hundreds of citations to Vietnamese- and Khmer-language texts. Moreover, my book is the only one of the three Sasges discusses that uses Vietnamese diacritical marks.

In a breach of scholarly reviewing protocol, Sasges initiated an exchange with me and then ignored that primary source (me) as well. Sasges first contacted me by email on April 7, 2017, saying "I've managed to talk myself into writing a review essay for H-France Review." He asked me to describe the genesis of my book project, and said he was following the same procedure with the authors of the two other books. That reviewing mine was a very new idea became clear from a May 9 follow-up email, asking me, "is there any way you could arrange for me to receive an electronic copy of the book? I'm not sure what the holdup was, but the editors at H-France Review were unable to get me a copy before I left for my summer research in Vietnam, so I now find myself in Saigon with only two of the three books." [3]

My reply to Sasges' initial inquiry pointed out that in 2009-2010, "I took daily Vietnamese classes for a year." I added, "Among other things I was fascinated to explore the very early relationship between the Khmer and Vietnamese languages. But apart from pursuing Viet Nam's early linguistic history and its relations with its neighboring cultures (including Chinese), I wanted to be able to read and write Vietnamese and to compose an up-to-date history of Viet Nam that offered readers the many Vietnamese proper names, terms, and toponyms in their correct Vietnamese spellings with their diacritical marks, which would make them immediately recognizable to Vietnamese readers." [4] Why then did Sasges write that I ignored local scripts and alphabets?

Apparently, Sasges had already decided to accept an unreliable secondary source--the non-peer-reviewed blog of Liam Kelley, writing under a Vietnamese pen-name, Le Minh Khai. On March 25, 2017, two weeks before Sasges first contacted me about his review of my book for *H-France*, Kelley had published the first of his many blog complaints about my book, including this false statement, "Kiernan does not know Vietnamese." Note, Kelley and I have never met or corresponded.

A few days later, however, Kelley had found himself obliged to write, "Correction: I've been informed that Kiernan does know some Vietnamese." [5] Of course Kelley would have known that beforehand, either from a cursory glance at my book or from comparing it with his own, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship*, which itself does not use Vietnamese diacritics. [6] In his review in *H-France Review*, published on October 24, Sasges failed to inform your readers that Kelley had had to correct his misrepresentation of my work on his blog. Sasges simply mimicked Kelley's original charge, by then retracted, that I do not "know Vietnamese."

Ignoring Kelley's retraction, as well as my knowledge of Khmer and French, Sasges asserts that I am "dependent on translations." If historical surveys depended upon the author personally translating all of the material he or she used, there would be little point in publishing translations to make texts more widely accessible. But more damning, Sasges fails to show that any of the many different translations I drew upon (or any of the Vietnamese-language tables, maps, and terminology I provide throughout my book) are incorrect. He simply asserts that "most of them" come "from what might be termed the Vietnamese 'canon'." Sasges does not explain what he means by the Vietnamese "canon," nor does he reveal that many of the translations I use are the work of scholars who would be horrified to find their work placed in that category. Nor does he mention my use of the important 2012 scholarly compendium *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, with its nearly 600 pages of translated documents. [7] My book quotes from ten of those documents. But the only instance Sasges cites of my use of translations is the "undergraduate thesis by a certain Nguyễn Điền submitted at the Australian National University in 1971," which Sasges makes no claim to have read but appears to find representative of "the Vietnamese 'canon'." [8] He doesn't mention that Nguyễn Điền's translations stand or that his thesis gained him a First Class Honours degree in Asian Studies and a fulltime teaching appointment in Asian History at the University of New South Wales.

After misrepresenting my sources and translations, Sasges briefly turns to the themes of the book, without evaluating them on their merits. “Such translations,” Sasges goes on, “are then taken up and refracted through ten enduring themes – three 'perennial' and seven 'transformative' – that Kiernan has discerned running through three-thousand years of history (p. 7).” Nonetheless, through which of the ten themes I supposedly take up and refract Điền’s thesis, Sasges does not say. A normal review might at this point list these “enduring themes” of the book. But instead, immediately, Sasges cites Liam Kelley’s blog, “In his efforts to highlight these themes, however, Kiernan can take considerable liberties with evidence. Writing under the pen name Le Minh Khai, the historian Liam Kelley has highlighted problems of sources, translations, and method in Kiernan’s treatment of the precolonial period, such problems persist throughout the rest of the text.[4]” In his endnote 4, Sasges writes, “See the series of six posts by Liam Kelley entitled “Going Backward,” beginning with <https://leminhkhai.wordpress.com/2017/05/04/9455/>, accessed August 7, 2017.”

In the months between the date Sasges accessed that blog and when his review was published on October 24, he apparently did not recheck Kelley’s blog for later corrections. Had Sasges done so, he would have been wary of depending on any of Kelley’s unsubstantiated and incorrect allegations. For example, in his May 8 “Conclusion” to those blog posts, Kelley had charged that G. Aubaret published a “really bad” French translation of an 1820 work by the Vietnamese geographer Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí*, and Kelley had added that “Kiernan willfully twisted Aubaret’s bad translation yet further.”[9] That is false and libelous. Aubaret had correctly translated a passage from Trịnh Hoài Đức’s classical Chinese text, writing, “Les montagnes sont comme les os de la terre; l’eau en est le sang.”[10] My book opens with that quotation, “The mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood” (p.1). It took Kelley over four months, until September 15 (five weeks after Sasges had accessed Kelley’s blog post on August 7) to publish an “Addendum” reversing his falsehood of May 8. Without mentioning or apologizing for the libel that I had “willfully twisted” Aubaret’s translation, Kelley now conceded that a “passage on page 115 of Aubaret’s translation appears to be what Kiernan translated. So his English translation of Aubaret’s French text is accurate.”[11]

That Sasges failed to recheck Kelley’s blog before publication is shoddy scholarship, but more remarkable is that he failed to do so after I had earlier provided him with the original Chinese text and French translation. On August 15, 2017, unaware that only eight days previously Sasges had accessed Kelley’s false and libelous blog posts, I emailed Sasges copies of the relevant pages of Trịnh Hoài Đức’s 1820 Chinese text, Aubaret’s 1863 translation, and a modern Vietnamese translation. I wrote, “I thought you might like to see the original Chinese, and the Vietnamese (2006) and French (1863) translations, of the quotation from Trịnh Hoài Đức that opens my book. I’ve attached them all here in case you are interested.” Sasges replied the next day, acknowledging receipt, “Thanks for sending this along Ben. It’s always fun to compare different translations, even if I can’t read the Chinese!”[12]

Thus, before publication of his review in *H-France Review*, Sasges failed for more than two months to check the translation that opens my book against the French original that I had provided to him, which Kelley had erroneously claimed I “willfully twisted.” Instead, he approvingly cited Kelley’s second false (and by then, also retracted) assertion. Sasges’ response to being confronted with the primary evidence just a week after he had read Kelley’s libelous charge that I had “willfully twisted” Aubaret’s translation—“It’s always fun to compare different translations”—fails to meet the barest minimum standards of professional diligence. And, since Sasges “can’t read the Chinese!”, he relied without verification on Kelley’s blog posts for the content of Trịnh Hoài Đức’s Chinese-language original. Kelley had also mistranslated that, as my detailed reply to him demonstrates.[13] Kelley, and now Sasges, owe an apology to Aubaret, as well as to me.

When Sasges finally turns to my book’s substance, he repeats another of Kelley’s inaccurate criticisms. Sasges writes, “One of the book’s claims of originality is its attention to ecology, one of Kiernan’s three 'perennial' themes. In turn, a core part of this theme is Kiernan’s contention that water is central to

Vietnamese conceptions of self and nation. As he puts it, 'the country has long possessed an aquatic culture' (p. 7). As proof of this assertion, Kiernan cites an article by the translator and scholar of Vietnamese literature, Huỳnh Sanh Thông, who 'analyzed the frequent use, from earliest times to the present, of aquatic metaphors in poetry, writing, and folklore' (p. 7). Whether existing sources allow us to say anything about attitudes of 'Proto-Vietic' people more than two millennia ago is an open question that Kiernan does not address."

Sasges is wrong again. I do address that question, and not only on page 7, where I quote Huỳnh Sanh Thông's statement in a 1996 article, "Live by Water, Die for Water (*Sống vì nước, chết vì nước*): Metaphors of Vietnamese Culture and History," that "the ancestors of the Vietnamese attached far more importance to 'water' than to either 'hills' or 'land' in their idea of a homeland." [14] I return to that issue on pp. 41-43, a section of my book that Kelley also ignored. [15] After noting that *Lạc* is "the earliest recorded name for the Vietnamese people," I then quote Huỳnh Sanh Thông's analysis that *lạc* is "a variant of *nác*, an archaic or dialectal form of *nước*, or 'water,'" and that many other Vietnamese words denoting water or its qualities "sound very much like *lạc*." Thông gave examples: *lạch* ('a creek or a stream'), *lạt* ('to taste bland like water'), *làn* ('a wave'), *lan* ('to spread like water'), and *lạnh* ('to feel cold like water'). [16] In 1997, Thông published a second article on this subject, which I also cite, entitled "The Vietnamese Worldview: Water, Water Everywhere." [17] Yet Sasges withholds from Huỳnh Sanh Thông any credit for initiating what Sasges now calls the "aquatic turn" in Vietnamese historiography, which he asserts I am "responding to." He cites only newer works, one published in 2005 (to which I also refer) and one in 2013, and therefore he occludes the contribution of Huỳnh Sanh Thông, who died in 2008.

Distinguished non-communist overseas Vietnamese scholars such as Huỳnh Sanh Thông and Trương Bửu Lâm seem to be key targets for Sasges, as they are for Kelley. Sasges erroneously criticizes me on the grounds that Lâm's *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention* is a "key source for Kiernan's account of colonial rule." In my two chapters on the French colonial period, that book accounts for just 18 citations among the numerous other, mostly primary sources listed in my 473 endnotes to those chapters. Sasges is similarly wrong to assert that an "important source" of mine for "the early colonial period" was the "undergraduate thesis by a certain Nguyễn Điền." In chapter eight on the early colonial period, I cite that thesis 13 times in my 223 endnotes. Many of those individual endnotes in both chapters cite multiple sources, including a plethora of other documents from my extensive research in the French colonial archives and elsewhere. Sasges omits mention of those primary sources, just as he omits to mention my endnotes citing the compendium *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, or the large corpus of Huỳnh Sanh Thông. [18]

Nevertheless he charges that my book "provides readers with an account of Vietnamese history little different from the one taught in Vietnam's high schools." If such a serious and falsifiable allegation were true, a normal book review would surely cite a contemporary Vietnamese communist high school text that, for example, quotes the leading early nationalist Phan Bội Châu praising the southern anticommunist leader, Ngô Đình Diệm, as "a truly great man" (quoted in my book on p. 372, but overlooked by Sasges on a page he quotes three times--see below, for example). Or he could have cited a textbook that criticizes communist actions as I do, to take just a few examples, on pages 383-84, 389, 420, 422-431, 444-45, 452-55, 464-65, 469-70, 478-79, and 481-84. If Sasges knows of any Vietnamese high school textbook that covers the major issues I raise in those pages, he does not cite it.

Finally, Sasges seriously distorts my treatment of the rise of communism in Việt Nam. He writes, "Kiernan has written a classic romance: celebrating the triumph of the good.... The central character and the end point of the story should be clear: the communist party and Vietnamese independence.... Kiernan quotes the future Communist leader, Phạm Tuấn Tài, who wrote that the ICP [Indochina Communist Party] was 'the only party capable of leading the masses in their efforts of liberation from the yoke of imperialists and capitalists' (p. 372)." What I actually wrote was not a teleological statement about "the

future Communist leader.” Instead, I described both Tài and another man who joined the ICP, Trần Huy Liệu, as having begun their careers as leaders of the non-communist Vietnamese Nationalist Party, or VNQDD: “One of the three founders of the VNQDD, Phạm Tuấn Tài, wrote his fellow party members a last 'Political Testament,' urging them also to join the ICP, which Tài now considered “the only party capable....” By labelling Tài simply “the future Communist leader,” without mentioning his previous VNQDD career, it is Sasges, not I, who adopts a teleological view of history and occludes the other possibilities that existed for Vietnamese political development.

In yet a further example of taking “considerable liberties with evidence,” Sasges purports to summarize my view of the communists’ victory: “The reason for their success, of course, is their 'nationalist appeal' (p. 380).” But on page 380, I make no such statement. On p. 386, I cite “their nationalist appeal to many Vietnamese” as “an underlying factor,” but only one of three. The “two other factors,” which I discuss on pp. 387-89, are “the December 1949 communist victory in China,” and thirdly, “the appeal of land reform to many peasants” and the communists’ “execution of landlords.” By attributing to me a view that just one of these three factors was “the reason” for communist success, Sasges has again distorted my argument, while his misidentification of the relevant page prevents readers from easily checking what I did write.

My objective was not to write a “romance” of communism, but to chart the historical reasons for its rise, including documenting “the role terror and assassination played,” as Sasges concedes in an afterthought. My “narrative strategy,” to use his term, is an old-fashioned one that scholars have practiced for centuries. It is called historical explanation. That is what Sasges considers a “romance.” His quarrel is with the facts.

Sasges’s review published in *H-France Review* has disseminated the false charges of mistranslation levelled against me by Liam Kelley and Sasges himself, both of whom had the resources and the time to conduct correct translations, or check them, and failed to do so. As of this writing (December 22, 2017), Kelley’s libelous falsehood that I “willfully twisted” Aubaret’s translation remains accessible online on his blog post of May 8, 2017 and Sasges has recommended it to readers of *H-France Review*.

NOTES

[1] *H-France Review*, Vol. 17 (October 2017), No. 194.

[2] Trương Bửu Lâm, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention: 1858-1900* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series, 1967).

[3] Email communications from Gerard Sasges to Ben Kiernan, April 7 and May 9, 2017.

[4] Email communication from Ben Kiernan to Gerard Sasges, May 8, 2017.

[5] “The Problem of ‘Textual Drift’ in Studies on Premodern Vietnamese History,” March 25, 2017: <https://leminhkhai.wordpress.com/2017/03/25/the-problem-of-textual-drift-in-studies-on-premodern-vietnamese-history/>

[6] Liam Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005).

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

[8] Nguyễn Điền, “Vietnamese Response to French Conquest, 1858–1885” (honours thesis, Australian National University, 1971).

[9] “Going Backwards: Conclusion,” May 8, 2017: <https://leminhkhai.wordpress.com/2017/05/08/5-going-backwards-conclusion/> (accessed Dec. 22, 2017).

[10] *Gia-Dinh-Thung-Chi: Histoire et Description de la Basse Cochinchine* (translation of Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí*, 1820), trans. G. Aubaret (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1863), p. 115.

[11] “6. Going Backwards: An Addendum,” September 15, 2017: <https://leminhkhai.wordpress.com/2017/09/15/6-going-backwards-an-addendum/> (accessed Sept. 16, 2017). This online page has since been removed from Liam Kelley’s blog. A copy is in the possession of Ben Kiernan.

[12] Email communications between Ben Kiernan and Gerard Sasges, August 15 and 16, 2017.

[13] Ben Kiernan, “Stretching the Sinitic Interpretation of Vietnamese History,” *The Asia Pacific Journal* 15(23/1), November 20, 2017: <http://apjif.org/2017/23/Kiernan.html>.

[14] Huỳnh Sanh Thông, “Live by Water, Die for Water (*Sống vì nước, chết vì nước*): Metaphors of Vietnamese Culture and History,” *Vietnam Review* 1(Autumn-Winter 1996): 121-153.

[15] Kiernan, “Stretching the Sinitic Interpretation of Vietnamese History.”

[16] Huỳnh Sanh Thông, “Live by Water, Die for Water,” p. 139.

[17] Huỳnh Sanh Thông, “The Vietnamese Worldview: Water, Water Everywhere,” *Vietnam Review* 2(Spring-Summer 1997): 16-97.

[18] See for example, Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed., *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979); and Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kiều*, translated and annotated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983).

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