

Stretching the Sinitic Interpretation of Vietnamese History

Ben Kiernan

Viet Nam's indigenous environment has long played a key role in its history and culture. My new book, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*, begins with a quotation: "Mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood," wrote a Vietnamese geographer in 1820. Lowland Viet Nam is aquatic."¹

Interestingly, the Vietnamese geographer wrote that passage in a work that he composed in classical Chinese. In the Introduction to my book, I argue that nine centuries of Chinese imperial rule during the first millennium CE had been a "first transformative influence on Vietnamese history." It led to "the local adoption of what became a shared classical high culture" in which "Chinese political models and vocabulary and China's writing system and literary canon all helped shape Vietnamese culture."²

Nonetheless, this northern imperial influence blended with the lifeways of the inhabitants of the south. For example, the aquatic nature of the Vietnamese landscape influenced the local economy, politics, military affairs, and culture. Vietnamese came to call their homeland *non nước*, their "mountains and waters," and even just *nước* (waters), which became the word for one's "country." In his study "Live by Water, Die for Water (*Sống vì nước, chết vì nước*)," Huỳnh Sanh Thông, the founder of Vietnamese studies in the United States and the translator of a vast corpus of Vietnamese literature, documented and analyzed the frequent use, from earliest times to the present, of aquatic metaphors in poetry, writing, and folklore. He wrote: "The ancestors of the Vietnamese attached far more importance to 'water' than to

either 'hills' or 'land' in their idea of a homeland." Aquatic metaphors recurred in nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry.³ In Vietnamese literature, water could represent far more than just the idea of a homeland. "The sea and streams, ponds and lakes, water plants and beasts, barges and bridges, fisherfolk and boaters, all serve as graphic metaphors to embody harsh facts or base desires as well as noble truths or deep thoughts." Huỳnh Sanh Thông characterized "the Vietnamese worldview" itself as "Water, water everywhere."⁴

Other distinguished scholars of Vietnamese history, who know the country's Chinese- and Vietnamese-language sources equally well, have written in similar vein. The late O.W. Wolters of Cornell University noted numerous allusions to water in the records of the Trần dynasty (1225-1400): "Every source is coloured by reference to rivers. Rivers are the scene of naval manoeuvres, warfare, floods, dykes, canals, commercial transport, rafting, markets, and entertainment held on bridges, princely escapes and escapades, legends, and landscape poetry." Trần emperors meditated, and poets extolled their "land of rivers."⁵

Some scholars, however, argue that a more Sinitic culture has defined Vietnam. Liam Kelley, Associate Professor of History at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, writes a blog using a Vietnamese pseudonym, "Le Minh Khai." His blog is subtitled "Always Rethinking the Southeast Asian Past." Kelley's M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, however, are both in Chinese history from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. One of "Le Minh Khai's" core arguments is that Vietnamese history cannot be

fully understood without its Chinese cultural background. As I argue in my book, there is much truth there.

But that is not enough for Kelley. In his view, we fail to understand Vietnamese history, if not “the Southeast Asian Past,” unless we are familiar with Chinese texts, and therefore we must learn classical Chinese. In a recent six-month series of posts about my book, he strained to show that it is flawed for its alleged misunderstanding of Chinese language and history, even as he disregards and diminishes Vietnamese scholars’ contributions to the field. What he has achieved instead, however, is a reckless misreading of that key Chinese-language quotation about Vietnamese geography with which I open the book, and even of the work of its French translator. Kelley made the false, even libelous, allegations that I had “willfully” mistranslated the French and had fabricated the quotation. He is wrong on both counts. Based on such false allegations, he demanded that Oxford University Press “recall” my book. Six months later, he admitted that my translation from the French was correct, but he buried his retraction deep within a recapitulation of his original defamatory statements. At that point, Kelley again attacked the long-dead French author for supposedly mistranslating the original Chinese passage. Kelley worked hard to disguise his original error but in his retraction, astonishingly, he mistranslated the published extant Chinese text. All this falls short of proving the importance of knowing classical Chinese for the study of Vietnamese history.

Kelley launched his critique of my book on March 25, 2017. Although we have never met or corresponded, he immediately announced in his blog: “Kiernan does not know Vietnamese or classical Chinese.” A few days later, however, he inserted a correction after the word “Vietnamese”: “[Correction: I’ve been informed that Kiernan does know some Vietnamese...]”⁶ Kelley would have known that

beforehand, either from a cursory glance at my book or from comparing it with his, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), which does not use Vietnamese diacritics.

It was precisely cursory glances at my book that propelled him into the fray. As he wrote in a second blog post, “I have been trying my hardest not to comment on Ben Kiernan’s recent book, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*. However, a sense of morbid curiosity keeps leading me to open the covers of that book, and each time I look inside I can’t believe what I see . . . For instance, I recently opened the book to the following passage (pg. 173). . . .”⁷ After publishing five blog posts on the book, and two days after calling for it to be pulped, Kelley, a specialist on premodern Viet Nam, admitted on May 10: “I haven’t looked at the parts on the colonial and post-colonial eras...”⁸

Why that hesitation to actually read the book? Kelley rushed into digital print before reading it through. Over six months from March to September, he showed himself to be just the kind of scholar against whom he was warning his readers: one uninformed about basic primary and secondary sources and apparently unable to deploy the languages needed to make his points convincingly.

One of “Le Minh Khai’s” prime targets, for instance, was the leading scholar of Vietnamese language and culture, Huỳnh Sanh Thông. After noting in my book that *Lạc* is “the earliest recorded name for the Vietnamese people,” I quoted Huỳnh Sanh Thông’s argument 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*.”⁹ Kelley tackled the first statement by writing in his May 4 blog that “Kiernan . . . cites an undocumented claim that

the late Huỳnh Sanh Thông made that “*lạc* is ‘a variant of *nác*, an archaic or dialectal [*sic*] form of *nước*,” ([p.]41) which means “water,” in an effort to show that this term “*lạc*” can be seen to symbolize the supposed “aquatic culture” of the Vietnamese.” Kelley then went on to assert that there was no evidence of a historical connection between the words *lạc*, *nác*, and *nước*:

There is a big difference between saying a word is “archaic” or that it is “dialectal.” Huỳnh Sanh Thông did not provide any linguistic evidence to support his claim that *nác* might be archaic. [This dictionary here](#) indicates that it is dialectal, from the area of Vinh.

Huỳnh Sanh Thông likewise did not provide any linguistic evidence to support his claim that “*lạc*” is a variant of *nác*.

While Huỳnh Sanh Thông may have possessed many other talents, he was not an historical linguist.¹⁰

Well, he was a better one than Liam Kelley. He was also a more careful scholar than Kelley, who not only misquotes Huỳnh Sanh Thông but misrepresents “his claim.” Thông specifically wrote that *nác* is “an archaic *or* dialectal form of *nước*” (*my emphasis*), a correct statement. It is indisputably dialectal, at the least. But as Thông likely knew, the fact that *nác* means “water” in the Vinh dialect is itself evidence that *nác* might *also* be an archaic Vietnamese term, and a variant of *lạc*. The Vinh area, or more precisely the nearby uplands of Nghệ An province (of which Vinh is the capital), Quảng Bình province, and an adjacent area of east-central Laos, is precisely the region where historical linguists locate the ancestral homeland of the Vietic language family. Had

Kelley read two pages beyond page 41 of my book, he would have found this point documented.¹¹ There is therefore good reason to see historical connections between the words *lạc*, *nác*, and *nước*, as Huỳnh Sanh Thông did.

As I mentioned, Huỳnh Sanh Thông made a second point linking these three Vietnamese terms. He wrote: “Indeed, many words that denote water or its characteristics sound very much like *lạc*: *lạch* (‘a creek or a stream’), *lạt* (‘to taste bland like water’), *làn* (‘a wave’), *lan* (‘to spread like water’), *lạnh* (‘to feel cold like water’).”¹² Kelley passed over this evidence in silence.

In his fifth blog post on May 8, Kelley turned back to the first sentence of my book: “That sentence is the perfect sentence to open this book, as it perfectly symbolizes how flawed the scholarship in the pages that follow is.” As I’ve noted, my opening sentence quoted the Vietnamese geographer Trịnh Hoài Đức’s 1820 work, *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí*, written in classical Chinese. My English rendering, “Mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood,” is a correct translation of the precise passage in Trịnh Hoài Đức’s text, which was reprinted in Biên Hòa, Vietnam, in 2005. Unaware of that edition, in my endnote I cited G. Aubaret’s 1863 French translation of *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* (unfortunately that endnote cited page 111 instead of p. 115 of the translation, where the relevant sentence appears).

PARTIE I, CHAPITRE V. 115

Si cette mauvaise influence de l'air pénètre plus profondément dans le corps, elle devient l'origine de la maladie nommée *lèpre*¹, qui ne peut donc être attribuée uniquement qu'au climat. Lèpre.

C'est là une horrible maladie, et il est bon d'en connaître la cause.

Les montagnes sont comme les os de la terre; l'eau en est le sang. Les entrailles de la terre, pareilles à celles de l'homme, conçoivent en elles-mêmes, et puis, le jour venu, Montagnes et cours d'eau

Fig. 1. *Histoire et Description de la Basse Cochinchine* (“History and Description of Lower Cochinchina,” a translation of *Trịnh Hoài Đức, Gia Định Thành Thông Chí, 1820*), trans. G. Aubaret, *Gia-Dinh-Thung-Chi* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1863), p. 115.

First, Kelley asserted that Aubaret’s translation of Trịnh Hoài Đức’s 1820 work was “really bad,” conveying the impression that Kelley had carefully read both the Chinese and French texts. He then levelled a serious charge: “Kiernan willfully twisted Aubaret’s bad translation yet further.”¹³ But, more than four months later, in a September 15 “Addendum” to his fifth blog post, Kelley reversed himself. Without mentioning or apologizing for his allegation that I “willfully twisted” the translation, he wrote 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.”¹⁴

Despite his reluctant acknowledgement of my accuracy – without retracting the allegation that I had “willfully twisted” Aubaret, a falsehood which as of this writing (Nov. 18, 2017) remains online and uncorrected in Kelley’s May 8 post – Kelley now argues that his error did not matter. He goes on: “What does all of this tell us? It tells us that “‘The mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood’” is an accurate English-language translation of a passage in a French text from 1863.” The sole issue, Kelley now implies, is what Trịnh Hoài Đức wrote in 1820, and whether *Aubaret* translated that correctly in 1863. If Aubaret mistranslated it, then not only is he at fault, this argument goes, but so is Kiernan for citing and translating him accurately; and then Kelley, despite his egregious libel, can be vindicated.

Before proceeding to examine Trịnh Hoài Đức’s

1820 Chinese-language original, it is worth probing how in the first place Kelley could have missed the sentence on p. 115 of Aubaret that reads “Les montagnes sont comme les os de la terre; l’eau en est le sang” (Fig. 1, above) which as he eventually conceded, I translated correctly. If he had read through Aubaret before declaring it a “really bad” translation, mightn’t Kelley have remembered that sentence? If not, then while checking my incorrect endnote, looking up p. 111 and not finding the sentence there, wouldn’t it have been normal practice for a serious scholar to scan a few pages further on, perhaps even sighting the heading in the margin on page 115 that reads “Montagnes et cours d’eau”? Kelley apparently missed that on both readings. Next to it he would have seen the sentence whose existence he only acknowledged four months later, on September 15.

In the meantime, Kelley insisted that such a sentence couldn’t be found in Aubaret’s translation of Trịnh Hoài Đức. Kelley asserts not only is the passage absent from Trịnh Hoài Đức’s original, but it couldn’t be there: he would never have written such a statement. As Kelley put it in his blog post on May 8, another passage in Trịnh Hoài Đức

repeats something that was written in Wang Chong’s 王充 first-century CE *Balanced Discourses* (*Lunheng* 論衡) where it explains how tides are created:

“Water constitutes the earth’s arteries. Tides are created by the intrusion or extrusion [in the earth’s arteries] of *khí/qi*.” ...

If we could go back in time and get Wang Chong to understand what Kiernan wrote, I suspect that he would be very surprised, as would Trịnh Hoài Đức, as “The mountains are like the bones of the earth.

Water is its blood” is not what these men thought or wrote.

Instead, it’s a “double-distortion.” Aubaret did not understand what Trịnh Hoài Đức had written and Kiernan willfully twisted Aubaret’s bad translation yet further.¹⁵

Here Kelley’s argument is that Trịnh Hoài Đức could not have written what he actually wrote, apparently because he “repeats” views of the first-century Chinese scholar Wang Chong. Thus both “these men . . . would be very surprised” by the words I (correctly) attribute to Trịnh Hoài Đức. Kelley restates this position even towards the end of his blog post of September 15: “And what does “‘The mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood’” tell us about Vietnam or Vietnamese history? Absolutely nothing because these words have nothing to do with anything that was written by Trịnh Hoài Đức, the “Vietnamese geographer” who wrote about the Mekong Delta in the early nineteenth century, or by any other Vietnamese ever.”¹⁶

Note that Kelley has put the term “Vietnamese geographer” between quotation marks, implying that Trịnh Hoài Đức was in some sense not Vietnamese. He then adds, to my purported list of mistakes, an additional error, that of “citing a statement by Trịnh Hoài Đức to indicate something significant about Vietnamese history.”

I’m not sure if Kiernan is aware of this but Trịnh Hoài Đức was very proud of the fact that he was descended from a family of Chinese scholar officials from Fujian Province who fled to the Mekong Delta in the seventeenth century rather than submit to the rule of the invading Manchus.

He was also very proud of the

education that he received as a youngster in the Chinese classics.

And he had good reason to be as Trịnh Hoài Đức was one of the most erudite scholars of his day. His *Gia Định thành thông chí* attests to all of this as it is filled with the markers of the worldview of a highly accomplished member of the premodern East Asian elite. Trịnh Hoài Đức’s ideas about mountains and rivers, and the ways in which the powers of Heaven and Earth interacted with them, were ideas that members of that elite group had upheld for some two millennia by the time Trịnh Hoài Đức compiled his text.

As such, if his statement that “Mountains [sơn 山] are the earth’s bones, and rivers [xuyên 川] are the earth’s blood” in some way demonstrates to us something essential or significant about who the Vietnamese are, then one could easily use it to make an argument that the Vietnamese are 100% Sinitic in their worldview.¹⁷

“100% Sinitic.” Kelley’s position here seems to be that Trịnh Hoài Đức’s worldview was scarcely “Vietnamese.” To me that would suggest that the many nineteenth-century Vietnamese who were indeed “highly accomplished members of the premodern East Asian elite” could “easily” be considered “100% Sinitic in their worldview.” That surely overstates the case, even for those Vietnamese descended from seventeenth-century Chinese immigrants. After nearly two centuries even *their* worldview combined both Vietnamese and Chinese cultures. If Trịnh Hoài Đức, who wrote about the geography of southern Vietnam, might not be fairly called a “Vietnamese geographer,” could it really be more correct to call him a “Chinese

geographer” or “100% Sinitic”?

But it is not only Trịnh Hoài Đức who cannot be very “Vietnamese.” Kelley informs us that the words “The mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood” have “nothing to do with anything” written “by any other Vietnamese ever.”¹⁸ It would seem that all Vietnamese, of all eras, could “easily” be considered “100% Sinitic.”

Kelley winds up where he began six months before, on March 25, playing the classical Chinese “linguistic skills” card: “I don’t think that was Kiernan’s point in beginning his book by quoting an inaccurate translation of something Trịnh Hoài Đức wrote, but Kiernan doesn’t have the linguistic skills to figure that out. That, as I stated before, is why this book is irredeemably flawed.”

Thus, finally, we come to Kelley’s extraordinary blunder in arguing that I misrepresent Trịnh Hoài Đức’s words. He asserts that the relevant sentence from Trịnh Hoài Đức should instead read: “Mountains [sơn 山] are the earth’s bones, and rivers [xuyên 川] are the earth’s blood.” In his September 15 blog post, Kelley repeated that English translation three times, on each occasion inserting those same two Chinese characters. The first time, he preceded the sentence with the following assertion: “The two extant versions of Trịnh Hoài Đức’s text that I’ve consulted state the following at the beginning of a chapter on “mountains and rivers” [sơn xuyên 山川]...” After giving his English translation of the relevant sentence, he then keyed in the following ten characters in classical Chinese:

山為地之骨，川為地之血，...

Kelley keyed in the character for “mountains” (山) first on the line, followed by, in sixth place, the character for “rivers” (川).

Recall that Kelley went on to conclude his September 15 blog by asserting that the words I used, “The mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood,” have “nothing to do with anything that was written by Trịnh Hoài Đức.” Yet, assuming no dispute over the distinction between metaphor and simile, he effectively concedes that my rendering is correct except for the word “water.” Comparing it with what Kelley claims Trịnh Hoài Đức wrote (see the previous paragraph), we may infer that the character for the word “rivers” [川] is extremely important to Kelley, and that to translate Trịnh Hoài Đức’s term as “water,” as I did, and as Aubaret did with “l’eau,” is for Kelley a serious historical error. By stressing the aquatic, it seems I allegedly betray Trịnh Hoài Đức’s “Sinitic” culture and render him too “Vietnamese.”

Where, then, might Kelley have found Trịnh Hoài Đức’s original text with the character for “rivers” [川], rather than “water”? His September 15 blog post doesn’t tell us. Kelley says only that it appears in what he calls “The two extant versions of Trịnh Hoài Đức’s text that I’ve consulted.” He doesn’t name or cite those, nor post them as illustrations (as he often does with other documents in his blog). He merely keys in the character for “rivers” [川] himself. However, between these first and second quotations of his own translation (using “rivers” [川]), Kelley inserts an untitled illustration of a classical Chinese text, without giving his readers any caption or citation.

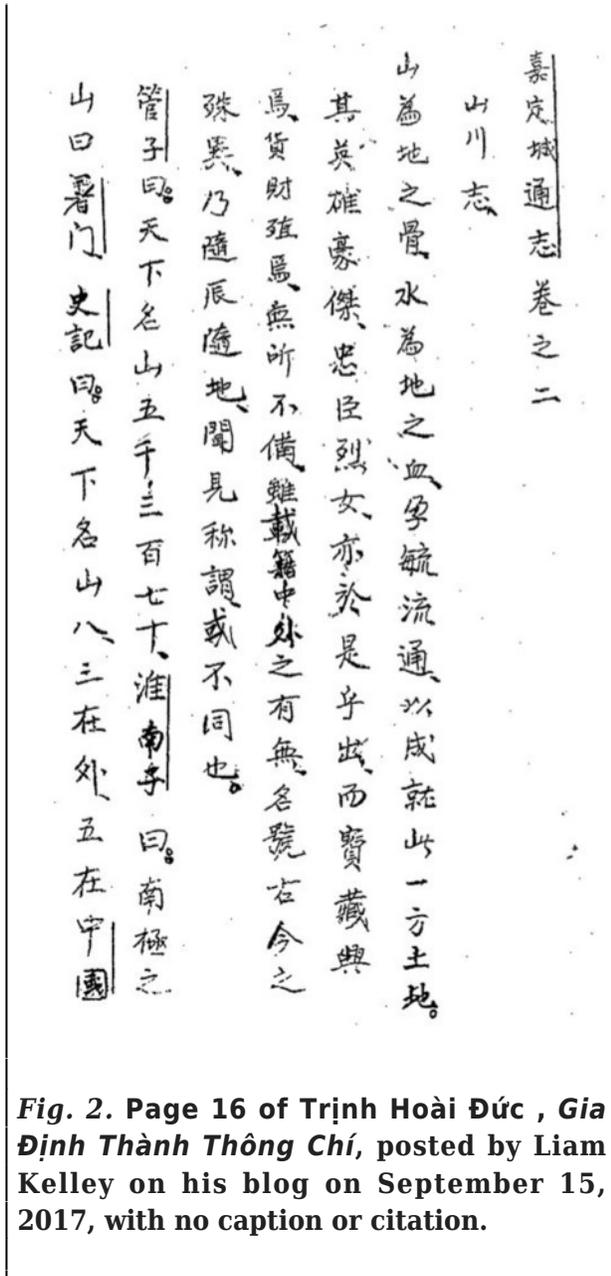


Fig. 2. Page 16 of Trịnh Hoài Đức , *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí*, posted by Liam Kelley on his blog on September 15, 2017, with no caption or citation.

The historian C. Michele Thompson, author of *Vietnamese Traditional Medicine: A Social History* (NUS Press, 2015), had already located this text in the book published in Biên Hòa in 2005.¹⁹ The untitled illustration that Kelley posted in his blog of September 15 is in fact a scanned image of page 16 (the opening page of Chapter 2, “Mountains and Rivers”) of Trịnh Hoài Đức’s *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí*, handwritten in classical Chinese. The 2005 volume, bearing the same title, photographically reproduced Trịnh Hoài Đức’s

text with an accompanying modern Vietnamese translation. Because Kelley has posted a scanned image of page 16 of the classical Chinese between his own typed-in versions of unnamed “extant versions of Trịnh Hoài Đức’s text,” it is possible to compare it with those. The opening sentence is almost the same, but not quite. In the scanned image that Kelley posts of the extant text published in Vietnam in 2005, after the two-line chapter title, the first character in the third line is “Mountains” (山). But the sixth character in the third line is not “rivers” [川] as Kelley asserts on his blog. It is the character for “water” (水).

This republished extant text clearly shows that, as I stated in the opening sentence of my book, Trịnh Hoài Đức did write: “Mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood.” Moreover, it shows that Aubaret translated him correctly in 1863. In his blog on September 15, 2017, Kelley posted clear proof of those facts, but still publicly denies them. Against the very evidence he himself has displayed, Kelley continues to insist falsely that “the text we currently have” uses the character for “rivers.” Nor does he include, among what he calls the “extant versions of Trịnh Hoài Đức’s text that I’ve consulted,” the published extant text whose relevant page he posted on his blog – but has apparently not “consulted.” Kelley has yet to identify the text(s) he has apparently consulted – but did not post.

Let us assume for a moment that Kelley really believed that Trịnh Hoài Đức wrote “rivers” [川], not “water”. Why for six months did he place such emphasis on my alleged mistranslation of “rivers” by “water”? This is no deep search for the truth. Conceding along the way that in a first-century text even “Wang Chong literally mentioned ‘mountains’ and ‘water,’” Kelley then asserted that “the term for ‘water’ in the opening phrase (thủy 水) can also mean ‘river,’ so perhaps that is the meaning that Wang Chong intended by using that term anyway.”²⁰ In other words, Kelley knows the character for

“water,” failed to acknowledge its presence in the key 1820 passage from Trịnh Hoài Đức that Kelley himself posted on the same day, and cannot object to it being correctly translated as “water” – even if a first-century Chinese author might “perhaps” have used it to mean “river.” One conclusion we are legitimately entitled to draw from all this is that Kelley’s real objection is to a historian of Southeast Asia trespassing on his so-called ‘Sinitic’ territory. Academic historians are sometimes accused of not seeing the forest for the trees. Kelley sees only turf to patrol.

Liam Kelley owes Huỳnh Sanh Thông, G. Aubaret, me, his readers, and the field of Southeast Asian Studies an apology. He has done a disservice to Vietnamese historiography and dealt a setback to the efforts of honest scholars who believe that Chinese culture has played a key role in Vietnamese life. Rather than resort to a Vietnamese pseudonym, a clipped “correction,” and a reiterative “Addendum,” Kelley should acknowledge his own egregious errors and the damage they have caused. That damage includes the risk of discouraging new scholars from entering the field. Kelley can only expect such an effect from his self-description “as one of the few academics in the English-speaking world who works on pre-modern Vietnam and who can read the sources in classical Chinese.”²¹ He seems attached to rarified status.

After six months of publishing false assertions, retractions, and errors on his blog, Kelley then reviewed my book in the Sydney *Mekong Review* (November 2017). This time he wrote not as “Le Minh Khai” but under his real name, and stated that “it would be a dereliction of duty for me to stay silent.” Here, his more muted tone demonstrates more dramatically his scholarly failures. For example, in this published book review, he still shows no sign of having read the last third of the book. He selectively quotes passages from earlier parts, but fails to mention adjacent sentences,

paragraphs, and pages that belie his criticisms. He cuts key words from quotations to change the meaning of sentences, and actually misquotes me in passages that he reproduces.

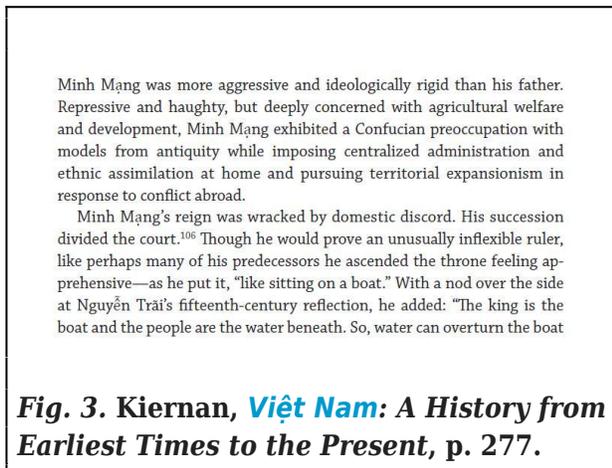
Kelley is also ready to criticize those “few academics” who work on pre-modern Vietnam “and who can read the sources in classical Chinese.” He singles out John K. Whitmore, Alexander B. Woodside, and Lê Thành Khôi, for, respectively, “a garbled translation” that “introduced some inaccuracies,” a supposed erroneous date, and a “woefully outdated” (1981) book.²²

For example, Kelley claims I cite “a problematic passage from an article by historian John Whitmore.” Translating a passage from the chronicle *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* referring to the period 1505-09, Whitmore wrote: “Even the mountainous areas of Thái Nguyên and Tuyên Quang, stripped of trees for houses, had no wood to control the springs.” Citing and following his translation, I wrote (p. 213): “By 1505-09, according to *DVSKTT*, the cutting of timber for housing construction had denuded the upland regions of Thái Nguyên and Tuyên Quang, leaving “no wood to control the springs,” apparently leading to flooding and erosion.” In support of the latter clause, I cited Lê Thành Khôi’s 1981 work *Histoire du Viet Nam des origines à 1858*, stating: “Almost every year from 1512 to 1517 brought either drought or Red River flooding. The floods of 1517 affected the whole lower delta east of [Hanoi].” Objecting to my use of Lê Thành Khôi’s book, Kelley complains that “the dynastic chronicle does not show there was a flood that year” (1517). He neither quotes nor disputes Lê Thành Khôi’s or my statements covering the previous five years. Of the pre-1517 period, Kelley says Whitmore should have translated *DVSKTT* metaphorically, thus: “In building mansions,” [corrupt officials in those] upland areas “did not have the trees to satiate their desires” – but, Kelley implies, had not cut them down or caused erosion or

flooding.

Kelley’s misleading practices of selectively quoting and misquoting are clear in his critique of my assessment of possibly one of the most Sinicized Vietnamese emperors, Minh Mạng (r.1820-1841). He says I describe Minh Mạng from the start “as “aggressive”, “ideologically rigid”, “repressive”, “haughty”, “an unusually inflexible ruler”...” Kelley rises to the defence: “Minh Mang’s first acts as emperor were actually to forgive back-taxes” from his father’s reign and to announce a tax exemption. He adds that then “Minh Mang reportedly distributed more than 730,000 strings of cash... forgiving taxes and distributing money to people in need do not strike me as the actions of a “haughty” and “unusually inflexible ruler”.”

To defend Minh Mạng, Kelley misrepresents what I wrote. As Fig. 3 shows, he misquotes my description of Minh Mạng’s accession (p. 277) by omitting the words in italics here: “Minh Mang was *more aggressive and ideologically rigid than his father. Repressive and haughty, but deeply concerned with agricultural welfare and development...*” In the next paragraph, I added that “*he would prove an unusually inflexible ruler,*” not that he started out as one. Kelley distorted the meaning of my description by selectively quoting it.



Kelley’s defence of Minh Mạng distorts history. Apart from facing well over one hundred rebellions, Minh Mạng is known for his mass executions of Christians and his brutal suppression of Cambodians who revolted against his invasion and annexation of their country. All that, as well as his concern for agricultural welfare and development, is detailed in pp. 277-288 of my book.

Kelley misquotes me to defend Minh Mạng’s rule over Cambodia from 1834. He says I “wrote about a supposed attempt by Minh Mang to “impose his agrarian vision on” Cambodia. As part of this vision,” Kelley goes on, “we are told that in the late 1830s Minh Mang’s officials “brought Vietnamese crops to Cambodia and supervised their systematic cultivation”.” Kelley then asserts that I got the date wrong, that it was not “in the late 1830s” (his phrase, not mine) but in 1834. He uses that date to assert that Minh Mạng’s regime was making “an effort to stave off starvation” in Cambodia in the aftermath of its invasion. “In other words, the food shortage “emergency” was not the result of some impractical agrarian vision of Minh Mang’s, but the product of the previous years of warfare and a condition that the Vietnamese, Minh Mang included, sought to alleviate.”

Here Kelley has misquoted me to make his case that I missed this supposed key point: that Minh Mạng began agricultural programs in Cambodia to deal with the immediate aftermath of the 1833-34 war. Kelley avoids quoting me on the dating, and instead alters what I wrote - “By the late 1830s” (p. 284, see Fig. 4 below) - to “in the late 1830s.”

Let us assume that the year Minh Mạng imposed agricultural reforms was 1834, that of the Vietnamese invasion following the 1833 Thai invasion of Cambodia and Vietnam. If 1833 constitutes “previous years [sic] of warfare,” it does not exonerate Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia, nor does it necessarily prove that Minh Mạng’s purpose was to alleviate

Cambodia’s emergency rather than feed his troops there; nor, if aiding Cambodians was his purpose, does it contradict my argument that he was bent on doing so by imposing his agrarian vision on Cambodia. I had already stated that Minh Mạng was “deeply concerned with agricultural welfare and development,” and I showed that this extended to Cambodia. My point is that he was “imposing” his vision there, and that Cambodians came to resent that imposition. Like Minh Mạng himself, Kelley apparently can’t see their case.

I made the point in its context, stating that Minh Mạng enjoined Vietnamese officials in Cambodia to “teach them our customs” but that he “also meant to impose his agrarian vision on the land” (p. 284). As Fig. 4 shows, I then provided extensive documentation. In making his false claim about my work, Kelley passed over nearly a page of evidence, from my initial assertion to my sentence, “By the late 1830s Minh Mạng’s officials brought Vietnamese crops to Cambodia and supervised their systematic cultivation.” If the actual date was 1834, it does not at all contradict but conceivably strengthens my point about Minh Mạng’s agrarian vision, and certainly does nothing to undermine my previous detailed discussion of it, which Kelley ignores.

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So, while enjoining Vietnamese officials there to “teach them our customs,” Minh Mạng also meant to impose his agrarian vision on the land. He told his viceroy:

I have heard, for example, that the land is plentiful and fertile, and that there are plenty of oxen...but the people have no knowledge of agriculture, using picks and hoes, rather than oxen. They grow enough rice for two meals a day, but they don’t store any surplus...Now all these shortcomings stem from the laziness of the Cambodians...and my instructions to you are these; teach them to use oxen, teach them to grow more rice, teach them to raise mulberry trees, pigs, and ducks...As for language, they should be taught to speak Vietnamese. [Our habits of] dress and table manners must also be followed. If there is any out-dated or barbarous custom that can be simplified, or repressed, then do so.¹⁴⁷

At first Minh Mạng’s approach was paternalistic and gradualist. “The barbarians have become my children now, and you should help them,” he advised his viceroy, Giàng. “Let the good ideas seep in, turning the barbarians into civilized people...As for winning the hearts of the people, and teaching them, we plan to do this rather slowly.” Minh Mạng requested reports from Cambodia on its “customs, people, and agricultural produce. I want to know whether the people are prosperous, and whether or not the Cambodian militia have been trained...if the barbarian people have learned Vietnamese ways, and if they are happy.”¹⁴⁸

The new requirements of intensive cultivation involved official Vietnamese monitoring of previously mobile populations. Huế’s 1834 memorial complained, “The Cambodian territory is broad...but up until now its soldiers and adult males have wandered about and have not been registered and controlled.” In 1835 alone, Minh Mạng dispatched more than a hundred Vietnamese officials to staff the new administration.¹⁴⁹ He also arranged for the deportation of new Chinese immigrants, landless Chinese, and Chams from Việt Nam into Cambodia: “Give them some land, and divide up parcels of land for them to cultivate unused soil. The government will provide those lacking means with seed grain and farming tools.”¹⁵⁰ Minh Mạng ordered progress reports: “After three years, surmise the number of people, of farming plots; organize the data in record books, and report them.”¹⁵¹ By the late 1830s, Minh Mạng’s officials also brought Vietnamese crops to Cambodia and supervised their systematic cultivation. Viceroy Giàng reported: “We have often advised them to till the land diligently and cultivate crops accordingly, to plant beans and rice.” However, food shortages now threatened an “emergency” in the area west of Phnom Penh, which was “in very bad shape.”¹⁵² Minh Mạng finally complained in 1840 that for six years he

Fig. 4. Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*, p. 284.

Kelley is right on one key point. As he says on his blog, “It is impossible to write a survey of Vietnamese history (or of the history of any society for that matter) if one does not have the ability to understand and evaluate the historical sources (both primary and secondary).” His own unprofessional practice has proven that. He might have been in a better position to criticize had he written a definitive, synthetic history of Vietnam. It is clear why Kelley has written no such work, despite claiming the field as his own.

What can we learn from this discussion about Vietnamese history? Where for instance did the idea, “Mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood,” come from? Despite Kelley’s

insistence that no “Vietnamese ever” wrote any such thing, and that it “is not what” Wang Chong and Trịnh Hoài Đức “thought or wrote,” we know that Trịnh Hoài Đức did write that passage in 1820. It may have been his own original depiction of the aquatic Vietnamese environment. Alternatively, though, might he have borrowed the passage from Wang Chong – or another Chinese author? If Trịnh Hoài Đức derived his analogy from such a source, would that make him either “100% Sinitic,” or a

copyist who “repeats” the work of Chinese predecessors? Not at all. Trịnh Hoài Đức was a Vietnamese geographer who followed a time-honored Vietnamese practice, which was not always a creative or successful one, of selecting and adapting elements of Chinese culture to fit the indigenous Vietnamese landscape.

Huỳnh Sanh Thông might have approved of that.

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Notes

¹ Ben Kiernan, “[Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present](#)” *Asia Pacific Journal*, May 15, 2017, Vol. 15, Issue 10, No. 2

² Ben Kiernan, [Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present](#), New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, 1, 13.

³ 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), at 121, 152–53.

⁴ Huỳnh Sanh Thông, “The Vietnamese Worldview: Water, Water Everywhere,” *Vietnam Review* 2 (Spring-Summer 1997), 16.

⁵ O.W. Wolters, “On Telling a Story of Vietnam in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries,” in Wolters, *Early Southeast Asia*, ed. Craig Reynolds, Ithaca, 2008, 227, 230.

⁶ See [here](#).

⁷ See [here](#) (accessed Sept. 25, 2017).

⁸ [Main blog](#); [May 10th post](#); [Reply](#) (accessed June 23, 2017)

⁹ Kiernan, [Việt Nam](#), 40–41, quoting Huỳnh Sanh Thông, “Live by Water, Die for Water,” 139.

¹⁰ See [here](#) (accessed Oct. 26, 2017).

¹¹ Kiernan, [Việt Nam](#), 43, and sources cited.

¹² Huỳnh Sanh Thông, “Live by Water, Die for Water,” 139.

¹³ See [here](#) (accessed Sept. 14, 2017).

¹⁴ See [here](#) (accessed Sept. 16, 2017).

¹⁵ See [here](#) (accessed Sept. 14, 2017).

¹⁶ See [here](#) (accessed Sept. 16, 2017).

¹⁷ See [here](#) (accessed Sept. 16, 2017).

¹⁸ See [here](#) (accessed Sept. 16, 2017).

¹⁹ Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí*, Lý Việt Dũng, Huỳnh Văn Tới (eds.), Biên Hòa, Nhà xuất bản Tổng hợp Đồng Nai, 2005, p. 16 from the back of the book. See [here](#).

²⁰ “[Going Backwards: An Addendum](#),” (accessed Sept. 16, 2017).

²¹ Liam Kelley, “Lost in Translation,” *Mekong Review*, Issue 9, November 2017.

²² Kelley, “Lost in Translation.”