

Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present

Ben Kiernan introduces his new book (Oxford University Press, 2017)

“The mountains are like the bones of the earth. Water is its blood,” wrote a Vietnamese geographer in 1820. Lowland Việt Nam is aquatic, but it is also multiregional and polyethnic. The country’s three historic lowland regions are bounded by extensive uplands, all linked by interrelated landscapes, economies, and cultures. Throughout the plains, water plays a key role in the economy and communications. In the north and south, the Red River and the Mekong River form wide deltas and flow into the South China Sea. Linking the two deltas is the central region, many hundreds of miles of curving coastline, broken every twenty miles or so by river mouths and port towns.

Central Việt Nam, once known as Champa, is a long, narrow coastal plain that Vietnamese often picture as a thin bamboo pole, at whose ends are suspended two bulky rice baskets, the northern and southern deltas of the Red River and the Mekong. In the past three millennia, these three lowland regions have nourished unique wet-rice civilizations, speaking primarily forms of the Vietnamese, Cham, and Cambodian languages, respectively. Overlooking the lowlands, and descending very close to the coast along the narrow central plain, forested ranges and hills (“the bones of the earth”) serve as the watersheds of the country’s many rivers, occupy three quarters of its territory, and are home to over fifty more ethnic minority groups speaking as many languages.

Thus the rich tapestry of Vietnamese history cannot be reduced to a national story, an unchanging ethnic identity, or an enduring ancient polity—any more than the country can

be reduced to a singular twentieth-century war. What is known today as Việt Nam is a land shared and contested by many peoples and cultures for several thousand years.

Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present treats the country over the millennia primarily as a place, a series of homelands that have become a shared territory, a changing land and common home rather than a continuous culture or a developing polity.

The book focuses not on the origins of Vietnamese nationhood or the persistence of a political identity but on documenting and narrating the experiences of the variety of peoples who have inhabited the country’s different regions since earliest recorded times, as well as their interactions with their natural environments and with neighboring countries. The focus is on much more than the political history of a geographical area defined by the modern state’s contemporary boundaries. Rather, a history of the different regions within those boundaries helps to integrate the multiethnic nature of its people’s histories and their cultural relationships with the lands where they have lived.



Ethnic Khmer children at Wat Somrong, Vĩnh Long province. Photograph by Ben Kiernan, 1975.

The book therefore departs in several ways from previous Western-language histories of Việt Nam. Its multiethnic coverage, its inclusion of non-Vietnamese premodern geographic settings, and its historical organization are all distinct. Most histories have focused on the story of the ethnic Vietnamese, often commencing with their emergence in the north and then pursuing their intermittent “march to the south.” Here attention is given not only to the history of the modern Vietnamese majority but also to the extensive historical record of the Cham and Khmer peoples who have long populated the central and southern lowlands, and to the smaller ethnic groups of the northern uplands and Central Highlands. The histories of

these central, southern, and upland regions and their inhabitants are presented here as significant in themselves, not simply for the part they played in Vietnamese settlement in those regions, though the shared history of their interethnic relations is equally important.

Many earlier works have also focused on specific eras of the country’s history, determined by the ethnicity or political system of its rulers: the Chinese imperial period in the first millennium CE, or that of Vietnamese monarchies in the second; the era before the first French conquests in 1859, or the era that followed; the period up to the 1945 communist revolution, or the postwar era. Previous works have also divided the history of independent Việt Nam (like that of imperial China) into successive, implicitly cyclical eras based on the rise and fall of the kingdom’s ruling families or dynasties, for example the Lý, Trần, Lê, and Nguyễn. In contrast, this book attempts a long-range view that includes in one narrative the diverse people and peoples of all these different eras from prehistory to the present. Its chapters periodize Việt Nam’s past on the basis of broader historical themes—not only political but also cultural, economic, and environmental changes. Some chapters, for instance, are divided on the basis of climate eras.

While this book is not a “deep history” of Việt Nam in the sense of covering forty thousand years of the country’s human habitation, nonetheless “thinking far back,” integrating its prehistory into its history, represents one goal of this survey of the last three millennia there. It seeks to uncover some of the “vibrations of deeper time” that can be detected more easily through a wide-angle view over what historians call the *longue durée*: “horizons longer—usually much longer—than a generation, a human lifetime, or the other roughly biological time-spans that have defined most recent historical writing.” As historians Jo Guldi and David Armitage argue, “Micro-history and macro-history—short-term analysis and the long-term

overview—should work together” by fusing close study of individual eras into “big picture work . . . woven from a broad range of sources” to pursue the search for “crucial pivots, turning points” and achieve an understanding of multiple causality over time. A long-range narrative should enable readers to assess the changes and continuities, the themes and variations, the similarities and differences between historical eras, as well as among the peoples who inhabited the land.

On a transnational level, this book further departs from other histories by assessing Việt Nam not only in terms of its long political and cultural relationships with China but also in the contexts of Southeast Asian and global history, including environmental history. The fact that the name “Việt Nam” became widely used only in the twentieth century was far from unique in Southeast Asia. Siam changed its name to Thailand in 1939, emphasizing its own ethnic majority, and the names “Indonesia” and “Malaysia” are also twentieth-century neologisms. To go back to the early modern era, the formation of the “geo-body” of Việt Nam resembles much more closely those of Burma and Siam than the vast inland empire of China. The long, thin coastal regions of southern Việt Nam, Burma, and Siam all betray their common historical experience of north-south, partly seaborne expansion at the expense of other Southeast Asian realms. For instance, Việt Nam’s incorporation of Champa and of Cambodia’s Mekong delta from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries roughly parallels the Upper Burman kingdom’s conquest of the Lower Burman kingdom of Pegu, which was independent up to 1539 and again in 1740–57, and of the coastal kingdom of Arakan.

In addition, the impact on Việt Nam of what a nineteenth-century Vietnamese thinker termed “world trends” is important. Factors such as colonialism, along with climate changes and other global patterns such as the spread of the Latin alphabet to Việt Nam and other maritime

countries of Southeast Asia—the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia—all merit close study along with the local lifeways they transformed.

A long history of such a rich place brings to the forefront themes of continuity and disruption. This book identifies ten major themes of Vietnamese history, three of which appear to have a rather continuous influence while seven are transformative and often recurrent. Over three millennia, these themes have marked the lives of the people of the region.

Three perennial themes—ecological, linguistic, and genealogical—have permeated the long histories of these lands and their inhabitants. First is the importance of the natural environment, including both the landscape and climate, themselves varying over the different geographical spaces within this territory and changing over time as heavy rains swept silt downstream and new sea levels transformed coastlines. Second is the history of languages spoken in the region. From the first millennium BCE onward, people in parts of this territory spoke Proto-Vietic and Vietic languages, early but scientifically recognizable linguistic ancestors of the dialects of modern Vietnamese. And third, while individuals and groups often migrated and could learn and switch languages over time, some of their genealogical heritage and cultural affinities just as easily persisted.

If nations, states, and sea levels rise and fall, some elements of the regional ecology and climate have proved enduring influences on cultural life in Việt Nam. The country has long possessed an aquatic culture. In his study “Live by Water, Die for Water (*Sống vì nước, chết vì nước*),” Huỳnh Sanh Thông, a scholar of the Vietnamese language and culture, 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. 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.” Huynh Sanh Thông characterized “the Vietnamese worldview” itself as “Water, water everywhere.”

The crucial role of water across the land has long struck foreign observers too. “Elephants can actually swim,” marveled a Chinese border official peering southward in the twelfth century. Samuel Baron, probably the first Westerner born and raised in Việt Nam, wrote in the seventeenth century that in the northern region from March to May, “the great rains” caused floods to descend down the Red River “with that incredible rapidity . . . as threatens banks and dams with destruction . . . drowning thereby whole provinces.” Baron likened the “low and flat” Red River plain to the Netherlands, “especially for its moats and banks.” For most of the year, the river’s many branches irrigated vast areas of “wet ground,” creating “infinite ponds” and flowing into the sea through “eight or nine mouths, most of them navigable for vessels of small draught.” These rivers, he added, “swarm with boats and large barks.”

Not long afterward, but during the dry season, the English buccaneer William Dampier reached northern Việt Nam. He described its landscape as he headed inland up the Red River in July 1688, “sometimes rowing, sometimes sailing” through its low-lying, irrigated delta. Dampier found “a delightful prospect over a large level fruitful country. It was generally either pasture or rice-fields, and void of trees, except only about the villages, which stood thick, and appeared mighty pleasant at a distance.” He

reported: “Every house has a small gate or stile to enter into the garden first. . . . In the gardens every man has his own fruit trees, as oranges, limes, betel; his pumpkins, melons, pineapples and a great many herbs.” But as months passed and the rains returned, Dampier discovered that during the wet season these northern delta villages looked very different: “All the land about them is under water, two or three foot deep,” like “so many duckhouses.” People could not “pass from one village to another, but mid-leg or to their knees in water, unless sometimes in boats, which they keep.”

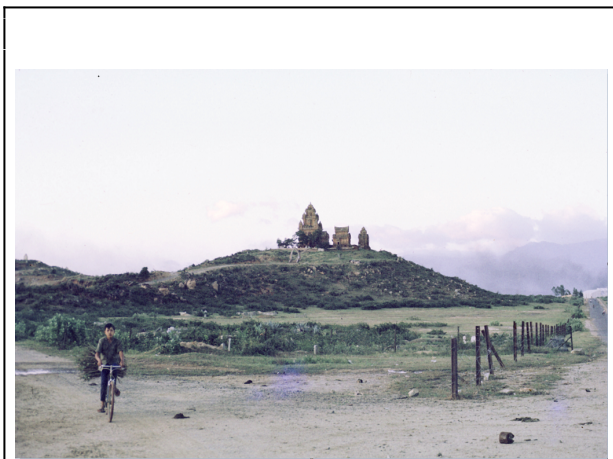
The landscape was different farther south, in the hill country and narrow coastal strip that today comprise central Việt Nam. A Chinese admiral visiting the Hindu realm of Champa in 1433 remarked on its tropical weather and flora, different from those in China: “The climate is pleasantly hot, without frost or snow. . . . The plants and trees are always green.” In 1686 a Portuguese Jesuit described the winds off the South China Sea that often drove ships against Champa’s coasts, where mountains and forests descended almost to the shore and a passing Indian mariner could count the individual branches of trees. “No one can pass by Champa without seeing and hearing the birds in its trees.”

Here, by the seventeenth century, Vietnamese governments and settlers had expanded southward from the Red River delta and gradually conquered most of the land of Champa. Although the lay of its land was very different and the monsoons reversed, the aquatic environment and lifestyle there also struck foreign observers. From 1618 to 1622, the Italian Jesuit Christoforo Borri lived at Qui Nhơn on the central coast. Perhaps the first Westerner to reside in Việt Nam, Borri wrote of “the continual rains” from September to November over the nearby mountains, “whence the waters running down in abundance do so flood the kingdom, that meeting with the sea, they seem to be all of a piece.” And here too

the local population, “very often when they do not think of it at night, . . . find themselves the next morning surrounded with water; so that they cannot go out of their houses.” Nevertheless, “the country being all navigable” and its commodities “very easily convey’d from one city to another,” the wet season saw “the greatest fairs and markets,” and “greater concourse of people than at any other time in the year.” Borri remarked how the locals, their boats loaded with wood from the mountains, would row them “into the very houses, built for this purpose on high pillars.” Between the stilts of their homes, the residents placed only loose boards, removable to “leave free a passage for the water and boats.” Throughout the rest of the year, the proximity of the South China Sea was equally important. Borri recorded that in this central region, a narrow coastal plain “lying all along upon the sea, there are so many boats that go out a fishing, and they bring in so much fish to all parts of the kingdom, that it is really very remarkable to see the long rows of people continually carrying fish from the shore to the mountains, which is duly done every day, for four hours before sun-rising.”

In the far south lay the Mekong delta, part of Cambodia until the nineteenth century. The Mekong’s slow flow through its low-lying, wide basin built up one of the world’s flattest deltas, where marine tides can wash sixty miles inland. In 1686 the Portuguese Jesuit wrote that a traveler heading south from Champa down the coast to Cambodia would see people “collecting wood in its forests.” One of the very first Vietnamese descriptions of the Mekong delta, written in 1776, noted the “many rivers” that made travel on foot difficult there. “Waterways were so numerous that they resembled a net over the land.” By 1820 a more familiar and settled portrayal of the region had emerged: “Water is like a system of blood vessels for the land.” Living on its rivers and islands, “nine people out of ten are good swimmers and know something about piloting boats. They like to eat salted fish.” Moreover, “there are boats everywhere. People use boats as their homes or to go to market or to visit their relatives [and to] transport firewood and rice or engage in itinerant commerce. . . . The boats fill the rivers both day and night.” A modern description of the Mekong delta province of Bến Tre (“bamboo port,” from its original Khmer name Kompong Russei) notes that its three main islands were “created over the years by the alluvial deposits of the four main branches of the Mekong River as they poured their way down into the South China Sea. The province, therefore, is completely surrounded by water and has about 65 kilometers of coastline. The three main islands are further divided into many smaller ones by scores of other rivers, major canals, and waterways which crisscross the main islands like veins in a human body.”

The historical survey in *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* includes all three of the ancient lands—north, center, and south—that fall within Việt Nam’s contemporary frontiers drawn in the twentieth century. In considering these territories as a whole, it attempts to integrate their climate, water, and landscapes into the histories of their different



Medieval Cham Hindu temples at Tháp Chàm. Photograph by Ben Kiernan

inhabitants. The historian of medieval Việt Nam Oliver W. Wolters remarked on the need to take account of the impact of “ecological considerations” on the country’s development, a gap this book aims to help fill.

While cultural and political history tends to focus on change, some environmental issues are perennial. Rhinoceros horn has long been a component of Sino-Vietnamese traditional medicine and a part of the transnational trade in items of the region’s ecology that began millennia ago, long before the “age of commerce” of the early modern era. Around 1620, Christoforo Borri had witnessed a rhinoceros hunt near Qui Nhơn: “A hundred men, some a foot, and some a horseback, and eight or ten elephants” confronted the creature as it emerged from a wood near Borri’s house. The fearless rhino “furiously encountered them all; who opened and making a lane, let the rhinoceros run through.” There in the rear, the Vietnamese governor of Qui Nhơn sat “a-top of his elephant, waiting to kill it; the elephant endeavors to lay hold with his trunk, but could not by reason of the rhinoceros’s swiftness and leaping” and its “striving to wound the elephant with its horn.” The governor held back “till leaping it laid open the naked place, and casting a dart, [he] dexterously struck it through from side to side.” The excited “multitude of spectators” quickly laid the animal’s carcass “upon a great pile of wood, and setting fire to it, leap’d and danc’d about” as they roasted, sliced, and ate the flesh. From high ground the governor surveyed his subjects, enjoyed “a more dainty dish” of the heart, liver, and brain, and presented the hoofs to Borri, who reported that “the horn is good against poison,” but added skeptically, “as is the unicorn’s.” In the Central Highlands in the late nineteenth century, a rhino horn was worth no fewer than eight water buffalo. The trade continued and accelerated from the 1980s on.

Just as the environment set contours from early history, a second long-range continuity is the

country’s Proto-Vietic linguistic heritage and its evolution. Yet linguistic diversity has an equally long history. The oldest surviving text in any Southeast Asian language was composed in the fourth century in a southern region now part of Việt Nam. Its author wrote not in any form of Vietnamese but in the Malayo-Polynesian language and Indic script of the Cham people. By contrast the first extant Vietnamese-language historical sources date only from the fourteenth century, a millennium later.

To write the country’s history exclusively from contemporaneous Vietnamese texts would be to conceive of it as beginning only in northern Việt Nam and as recently as the second millennium. Any traces of preexisting cultures there and farther south must be found in other kinds of evidence. Chapter 1 takes up the rich archaeological record from before the Common Era to survey the prehistory of the lands that became Việt Nam. As chapters 2–4 show, the first thirteen centuries of the Common Era are documented in Chinese-language sources, in inscriptional texts in Southeast Asian languages such as Cham and Khmer, and, at least for the post-939 period, in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Vietnamese histories.

These sources reveal the development in the north over several millennia of complex local communities speaking precursor Vietic languages and dialects that borrowed heavily from their neighbors, slowly transformed into modern Vietnamese, and spread to the center and south. These early inhabitants have been termed “Proto-Vietnamese,” but only in limited linguistic and geographic senses. It would be misleading to see their languages (or cultures or polities) as stages in a teleological “progression” toward modern Vietnamese nationhood, just as it would be tenuous to rely on prehistory for the origins even of a medieval Vietnamese state. The evidence for that emerges only much later, during a millennium of imperial rule.

A history that includes the ancient Việt, Cham, and Khmer lands of what we know as northern, central, and southern Việt Nam necessarily encompasses a range of ethnic groups, a succession of realms and polities, and, even among ethnic Vietnamese, a mosaic of regions and cultures, competing monarchies, successive dynasties, and finally contending republics. Yet over more than two millennia of human history in a single but extensive geographical space, the longevity there of a detectable ethnolinguistic family of Proto-Vietic and later modern Vietnamese dialects does provide, along with the ecologies of the three regions, an element of narrative continuity. That theme projects back into the past a statement of the early twentieth-century Vietnamese scholar Phạm Quỳnh: “As long as our language lasts, our country will last.” If his measure is extended back to include archaic linguistic ancestors of modern Vietnamese, the history of northern Việt Nam has lasted more than two millennia, and that of the Cham and Khmer communities, whose languages are still spoken in the country’s southerly regions, possibly even longer.

A third long-term continuity is the importance most Vietnamese attach to family life and extended clan affiliations. At least as early as the first century CE, regional families dominated social organization. A millennium of imperial influence brought little change in that regard; in China too clan loyalty and “ancestor worship” were features of everyday life. After independence in the tenth century, the Red River delta briefly dissolved into nearly a dozen fiefdoms. Many Vietnamese families have kept records of their ancestors going back for many generations; wealth was often displayed in elaborate ancestral tombs and shrines. The identities of many Vietnamese are deeply rooted in the very land where their ancestors lie buried.

Vietnamese clan loyalties may have outstripped Chinese ones. As late as the 1930s, eight out of

ten Vietnamese in Bắc Ninh province were found to belong to one of twelve surname groups, or lineage clans. Officials vainly tried to prevent people from marrying members of the same clan. Possibly half of Việt Nam’s population today bears the single surname Nguyễn. Genealogical continuity, however, is not necessarily genetic. Centuries of ethnic Chinese immigration have contributed significantly to the modern Vietnamese gene pool, still detectable in DNA. Likewise, in modern southern Việt Nam the DNA of Cham speakers reveals their assimilation of numerous indigenous Mon-Khmer speakers who long ago adopted the Cham language. The genealogical records of some central Vietnamese families trace back as far as their Cham forbears. In the Huế area family names such as Chế have recognizably Cham origins, as do others in Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi provinces (Ong, Tra, Ma). Among ethnic Cambodians in the Mekong delta, unlike in Cambodia itself, a few Khmer family names (Son, Thach, Chau) are very common and identify their bearers as hailing from Kampuchea Krom (Lower Cambodia).

Against these continuous themes of ecology, language, and genealogy, this book argues for seven transformative historical forces. Vietnamese history is punctuated by these transformations and discontinuities, ranging from imperial conquest to climate change to transregional migration, seaborne commerce, ethnic and religious diversification, and regional and political confrontations from north to south, as well as increasingly important interactions between Vietnamese and the world outside—not only in what became China and Southeast Asia but also elsewhere across the globe.

A first transformative influence on Vietnamese history was the Chinese imperial conquest of the early first millennium CE. This conquest was followed by colonization and the local adoption of what became a shared classical

high culture that outlived nine centuries of northern political domination and weathered the storms of subsequent imperial invasions and occupations. Chinese political models and vocabulary and China's writing system and literary canon all helped shape Vietnamese culture.

A second major external influence has been climate change. The young kingdom of Đại Việt, separated from imperial China in the tenth century, benefited from the Medieval Warm Period, several centuries of higher rainfall that raised crop yields in the wet-rice economies of mainland Southeast Asia and their neighbors and favored the development of agrarian states. As historian Victor Lieberman has shown, the "charter state" of early Đại Việt, like those of Burma and Siam, commenced what became many centuries of fitful economic expansion and slow, intermittent administrative and cultural integration. Even after the end of the Medieval Warm Period, Đại Việt had gained sufficient strength to overcome invasions from Champa and Ming China and also launch new southward territorial expansion.

Third, transregional migration has long played a role in Vietnamese history. Especially from the late fifteenth century onward, Đại Việt military colonies and then Vietnamese civilian settlers moved south into the Cham territories, in some cases intermarrying there and in many cases adopting southern customs while also bringing with them their strong attachments to the cults of their northern ancestral shrines. Conversely, conquered Cham communities, often driven north and resettled in the Vietnamese heartland, slowly switched languages but sometimes retained distinctive cultural traits traceable to their Hindu past. An "island" of three Cham villages forcibly relocated north to Nghệ An in the 1250s was still identifiable to a French scholar seven centuries later. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Vietnamese settlers in the flat, waterlogged landscape of the Mekong delta borrowed heavily from its Khmer

inhabitants, not only by propitiating their local spirits (*neak ta*) but also by adopting their fast growing "floating rice" varieties, their agricultural techniques and tools, and their species of draft animals, which worked more effectively in the marshy soils. A new Vietnamese society was emerging based on migration and a sense of genealogical connection to one's origins while adapting to a new southern environment.

Fourth, the new environment meant that Việt Nam was increasingly a seaborne economy. Champa and the sinuous coastline of eastern mainland Southeast Asia, narrow and infertile compared with "the riches that mountains and sea offered," had long been a hub of transregional and transoceanic commerce. After Đại Việt's conquest of most of Champa in 1471, the Cham ports near river mouths strung out along the shore continued to serve as entrepôts of trade with China, Japan, Southeast Asia, India, and the Middle East. Vietnamese settlers moving south from the riverine world of the wide northern delta, historian Charles Wheeler writes, "entered a coastal stream that merged with one of the largest thoroughfares for oceanic shipping in Asia." Here, "riparian, coastal, and overseas crosscurrents converged, somewhere between the sea and the lagoons." Central Việt Nam was a multiethnic littoral society, clustered around a series of port towns integrated into the "archipelagic" world of the South China Sea and beyond.

Fifth, as Vietnamese settlers moved farther south they tempered but also partly reproduced the longstanding regional differentiations along the extended coast of the eastern mainland. The three major contemporary Vietnamese dialects vary greatly in the country's three lowland regions, partly as a result of the fact that their inhabitants once spoke different languages: Vietnamese, Cham, and Khmer.

Language was not the only factor that influenced regional diversity. For many

centuries, Cham speakers of the central coast and Khmer speakers of the southern delta, before becoming ethnic minorities within Việt Nam late in the second millennium, inhabited a variety of successive, sometimes even contemporaneous and conflicting, indigenous polities. The ancient and medieval kingdoms of Linyi and Champa occupied and contested the land that comprises central Việt Nam today. For much of its history Champa was not only multiethnic but also politically divided into several kingdoms along the central coastline. As for the Mekong delta region, classical Chinese writers knew it first as the kingdom of Funan and then as part of “Water Chenla.” It belonged to the Khmer kingdom of Cambodia until the final Vietnamese conquest of the delta in the early nineteenth century. Khmers in modern Cambodia still often call that region Kampuchea Krom. During the period from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, as Vietnamese states incorporated most of the Cham territories and then the Khmer-speaking Mekong delta, historian Keith Taylor identifies no fewer than five discrete geographical and cultural/political regions stretching down the length of Việt Nam. Ethnolinguistic and environmental diversity settled uneasily into a Vietnamese state framework.

A sixth recurring theme has been the persistent historical and political differences that have long divided ethnic Vietnamese and often overlapped with regional divisions. For instance, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, competing Vietnamese kingdoms occupied the northern and central regions. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the French ruled the far south as a separate colony (Cochinchina) and the center and north as protectorates (Annam and Tonkin). Then from 1954 to 1975, the center was divided between Vietnamese regimes based in the north and south. Historians take these political regionalisms seriously. John K. Whitmore stresses “the variety of media and messages available to us from the lands we call Vietnam.”

Taylor urges us to hear these “many voices that undermine the idea of a single Vietnamese past” and to disregard “the strangling obsession with identity and continuity.” Of course these plural histories may not disaggregate the country, while others may transcend its borders.

The seventh key theme is the globalization of Việt Nam’s economy, culture, and politics, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This noticeably began in the early modern era with seaborne international trade; the arrival of European ideas, scripts, and technology; and by the mid-nineteenth century the increasingly thoughtful responses of Vietnamese to the challenges these posed.

Each chapter of *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* addresses some or all of these ten themes as keys to understanding Vietnamese history. The more continuous themes of an aquatic society, linguistic continuity and change, and the importance of family genealogies and ancestral sites appear continually throughout the book. The relationship with China also emerges very early. The Medieval Warm Period, with its boost to the rain-fed wet-rice economy and the agrarian state, represents another distinct transformation that propelled new forces for change: mobility and migration, the seaborne political economy especially in the center and south, a polyethnic culture, regional differences, and global influences.

Over three millennia, Việt Nam’s three main regions have seen dramatic changes in their climate, landscapes, ruling powers, populations, and politics. They have been home to scores of ethnolinguistic groups and most of the world’s major religious traditions, and have experienced dozens of political formations from chiefdoms to provinces, tributary kingdoms, independent monarchies, colonies, and republics. The lasting outcome of the “Vietnam War” was the unification of Việt Nam’s two republics and

three multiethnic geographic regions. The country's democratic future in the fast-changing Southeast Asian and global environment remains unclear.

In a new era of global warming, with droughts and upstream dams restricting the flow of water in the Mekong River, while sea levels rise and a

new conflict heats up in the South China Sea, water is still the life blood of Việt Nam.

This text is excerpted from the introduction to Ben Kiernan, [Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present](#) (Oxford University Press, New York and London, 2017).

Ben Kiernan is the A. Whitney Griswold Professor of History at Yale University, and has served as Chair of the Council on Southeast Asia Studies and as Founding Director of the Genocide Studies Program at Yale. He is the author of [Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present](#) (Oxford, 2017), [How Pol Pot Came to Power](#) (Yale, 2004), [The Pol Pot Regime](#) (Yale, 1996), [Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur](#) (Yale, 2007), and [Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia](#) (2008).