

HISTORY

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Ben Kiernan

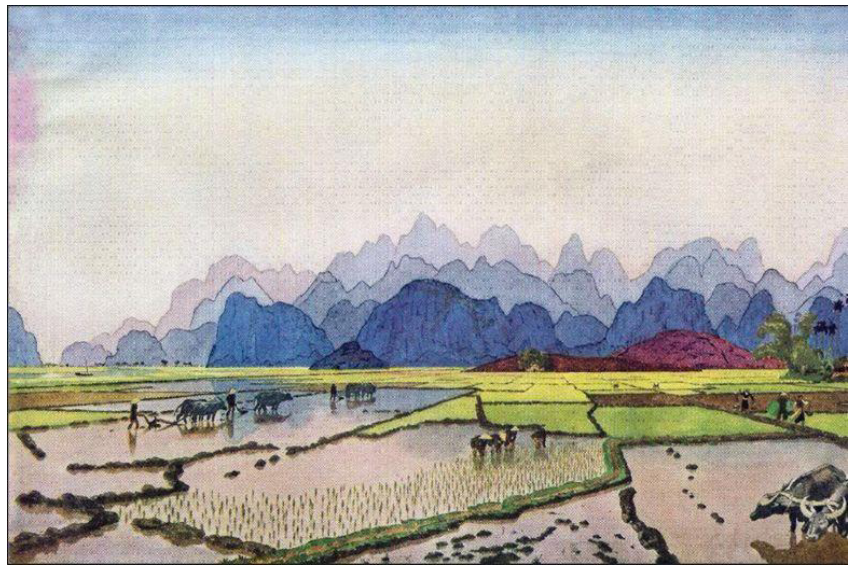
VIETNAM

A history from earliest times to the present
656pp. Oxford
University Press. £30
(US \$34.95).

Christopher Goscha

**THE PENGUIN
HISTORY OF MODERN
VIETNAM**

633pp. Penguin.
Paperback, £10.99.



Ninh Binh Province, Tonkin, Vietnam by Jean Despujols (1886–1965)
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Reimagined nation

SOPHIE QUINN-JUDGE

Today, Vietnam refers to a geographic territory, as opposed to a national homeland. This fact, acknowledged by both Ben Kiernan and Christopher Goscha, means that the people who once inhabited the lands now within Vietnam’s borders are brought into their narrative as important players. Cham, Khmers, Tais and smaller minorities, still represented among Vietnam’s citizens, influenced Vietnamese culture, fought their armies and eventually ceded territory to them.

These two excellent histories both take advantage of two distinct historiographical developments. Almost twenty years ago, Vietnam opened up to a new generation of scholars. Over the course of these years a significant body of fresh research has been published that challenges earlier conceptions of a once obscure nation. Both books also demonstrate the influence of changing perceptions of the nation state, in particular the work of the late Benedict Anderson, whose book *Imagined Communities* (1983) unleashed a wave of academic studies on “re-imagined” nations. Both authors make clear that, thanks to Anderson’s and other scholars’ work on nationalism, we no longer speak of it as a primordial, inherent force – it is commonly viewed as the creation of modern print capitalism and the spread of literacy in indigenous languages.

In the case of Vietnam, the creation of a national identity centred on resistance to foreign aggression is now largely credited to the anticolonial revolutionaries of the early twentieth century, both communist and non-communist. Kiernan and Goscha both interrogate this view and each

devotes considerable space to the rise of the romanized national script (*quoc ngu*, first developed in the 1650s) in the twentieth century, to replace both Chinese and Vietnamese written with Chinese characters (*chu nom*). This change encouraged the rapid growth of literacy, as the years of arduous study to master Chinese and *chu nom* were no longer necessary. Newspaper publishing and the translation of books and journals, on topics ranging from Western philosophy to international fashion, created a “public sphere” and the beginnings of civil society in urban centres.

Goscha, however, takes the deconstruction of Vietnam’s nationalist underdog image a step further, and much further back in time, by pointing out that once Vietnam had freed itself from Chinese occupation in 938 and begun its process of state-building, it too became a colonizer, eventually spreading southward down the coast to absorb the Cham centres of My Son and Dong Duong, in the hills south of what is today Danang, and then under the Le dynasty to the Cham capital of Vijaya, where present-day Qui Nhon is located. In his book, Kiernan classifies this fifteenth-century expansion as a genocide, something he is well acquainted with from his studies of Cambodia. But he also describes Cham aggression against the Viet kingdom of Dai Viet in the 1370s and 80s, when the Cham had been freed from their rivalry with the Khmers, who had been diverted by Siamese attacks on Angkor. Kiernan’s dispassionate recording of the behaviour of the regional powers – Champa, Cambodia, China, India – should help to make *Vietnam: A history from earliest times* a durable work.

Behind this new aggression was the Confucianizing spirit of the Le dynasty. After their founder Le Loi had chased the Ming occupiers out of the Red River Delta in 1427, he and his successors embarked on a social transformation built on the Chinese model: a civil service selected by competitive examinations in the Confucian classics, a legal code in part based on the seventh-century Tang code, government promotion of agricultural improvements (irrigation and flood control), and the writing of dynastic history. As Kiernan explains, the official historian Ngo Si Lien’s “backdating of the Le rulers’ ancestors to the ‘dawn of humanity’ polished the prehistory of Dai Viet that had first emerged in the late fourteenth century”. This gave Dai Viet a pedigree as old as China’s. The Vietnamese elite’s early insistence on their separate identity and language, whether or not their prehistory is fanciful wishful thinking, demonstrates an earlier national awareness than the “imagined communities” paradigm allows for. A strong oral tradition of myth and folk poetry contributed to this perception.

Later Viet expansion into the Khmer lands of the Mekong Delta is a complex story that has been elucidated by the Australian Chinese scholar, Li Tana, among others, and both authors rely on her. The role of a military family, the Nguyen from Thanh Hoa province, in spreading Viet power, beginning in the sixteenth century, southwards was mostly ignored by orthodox Confucian historians, as well as their successors in Hanoi, before 1992. The reason, Li posits, is that “national unity and resistance to foreign aggression are the two themes deemed central to the Vietnamese experience. The Nguyen flouted both”. The rule of the Nguyen “lords”, ostensibly in the name of the Le dynasty in Hanoi, eventually stretched from Hue south to what became Saigon, after it was ceded to them in 1623 by a beleaguered Khmer king. They were maritime traders, who built ships and cannon, and eventually accepted French assistance to overcome the resistance movement led by the Tay Son brothers, to finally unify Vietnam from north to south in 1802 and claim the throne.

The second Nguyen emperor, Minh Mang, mimicked the Le in his efforts to gain legitimacy. He undertook to Confucianize his rule by promulgating a new, conservative law code, limiting popular entertainments, and spreading Confucian decorum to the Mekong Delta and Cambodia. His occupation of Cambodia from 1834 to 1841, in an attempt to turn Khmer “barbarians” into productive, Sinicized subjects, resulted in widespread uprisings and mutual massacres of Viets and Khmers. It also placed a heavy burden on the southern Vietnamese, who were drafted in large numbers to serve in Cambodia. After Minh Mang’s death the Vietnamese withdrew and the French soon entered the picture, rescuing Cambodia from Thai and Viet pressures.

Goscha covers the French conquest of Vietnam and the subsequent movements and war for independence with compelling mastery. A long-time resident of France who knows the various colonial and military archives as well as anyone, he shows how French insistence on retaining control of their colony doomed their anti-communist Vietnamese allies to the status of collaborators. His focus on the French Indochina War (1946–54) underscores the violence of this conflict, something often forgotten, with the massive use of bombing that arrived with the US–Vietnam War. He mentions a French massacre of 200 women and children in 1948 at My Trach, still unknown in France, and in 1951 the first use of napalm, the phosphorus gel received from the Americans.

Goscha would like to believe in the nation-building efforts of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu in the 1950s. He underplays their alienation of the Buddhists, failing to mention the grievances that built up as they

forced civil servants to attend training sessions run by Catholic priests in their “personalist” philosophy and resettled Buddhists in the Central Highlands. But he cannot defend their “strategic hamlet” programme that removed peasants from their land.

On the American war in Vietnam, Kiernan wisely allows the official CIA historian to have the final say: “the US Army failed to grasp the causes of the insurgency and therefore lacked any prescription for a cure”; and again: “The North Vietnamese tanks rolling into Saigon on 30 April 1975 sealed a victory the Southern insurgents had won more than a decade before”.

Both authors’ writing on the secretive communist politics of Vietnam is less surefooted than their coverage of earlier eras. Kiernan argues that the “Vietnam Workers Party’s divisions were mostly internal”, but although the politburo was strongly factionalized over the years, these factions were mostly aligned with competing Soviet and Chinese policies. The documents of the famous 1963 Ninth Plenum, after which Ho Chi Minh was removed from day-to-day decision-making, reflect an obsession with the role of the working class in the party and the concern that the leadership was too bourgeois. After this plenum, the chief ideologist, Truong Chinh, announced that the party was endorsing the Chinese line in both domestic and international affairs.

Goscha elects to stick with the orthodox Hanoi picture of Ho Chi Minh as the allpowerful chief. In describing Ho’s cult of personality, he fails to note that this was used to present an outward picture of unity, when the politburo was actually demoting Ho to a largely propaganda role, as the father of the Vietnamese revolution. Ho never achieved the total power associated with communist cults, such as those of Stalin, Mao, Kim Il-sung, or today with Xi Jinping.

These criticisms pale, however, beside the perceptive synthesis that each author provides in his approach to this complex, much debated subject. In the larger scheme of things, their questions about Vietnam’s future are more important than their analyses of past communist politics. Water is one of Kiernan’s major themes, and his prediction that Vietnam’s rice production could fall by 20 per cent by 2050, due to rising sea levels and increasing salinity of the deltas’ water, is not far-fetched. The flow of the Mekong is also threatened by shrinking glaciers at its source and dam-building upstream. Goscha considers the future of political reform in Vietnam, raising the increasing boldness of critics of its monopoly on power. Corruption, land use and careless development of bauxite mining are some of the issues causing public dissent. This now spreads across the

political spectrum, but the number of long-time party members willing to sign petitions and speak out shows a deep unease with Vietnam's present predicament, in particular with China's growing power.