



## Vi?t Nam: a history from earliest times to the present, by Ben Kiernan

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To cite this article: Michael G. Vann (2018): Vi?t Nam: a history from earliest times to the present, by Ben Kiernan, Asian Studies Review, DOI: [10.1080/10357823.2019.1522710](https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1522710)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1522710>



Published online: 23 Sep 2018.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**Việt Nam: a history from earliest times to the present**, by Ben Kiernan, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, 656 pp., US\$34.95 (hardback)

In the past few years, three leading historians of mainland Southeast Asia have published major surveys of Vietnamese history. The near-simultaneous appearance of Keith Taylor's *A History of the Vietnamese People*, Christopher Goscha's *Vietnam: A New History*, and Ben Kiernan's *Việt Nam: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present* speaks to a new maturation of the historiography of Vietnam. Of the three, Kiernan's is the most comprehensive yet readable book. It will serve the needs of both experts in Vietnamese history and general readers interested in Vietnam.

Kiernan offers a tidy and well-crafted narrative structure backed up by an impressive amount of detail. He divides the almost-500 pages of prose into 6 chronological parts: Chiefdoms, Provinces, Kingdoms, Regions, Colonies, and Republics. If those familiar with Vietnamese history find this aspect of the book fairly conventional, new readers will appreciate *Việt Nam's* accessibility. Throughout this chronological narrative Kiernan identifies and consistently returns to 10 major themes. He argues that 3 of these themes are continuous, presenting ecology, linguistics and genealogy as perennial influences. The other 7 themes are recurrent, with punctuated periods of significance. They are Chinese imperial conquest, climate change, transregional migration, maritime commerce, regional diversity, north/south political conflicts, and economic, political and cultural globalisation. Kiernan's ability to identify and integrate these themes into his prose gives the reader a much-needed map to navigate this densely packed book. These themes illustrate Kiernan's sophisticated analytic skills and his refreshing ability to communicate with a wide audience.

Kiernan pays special attention to Vietnamese linguistic history, cultural syncretism and the socio-cultural relationship with water. He carefully lays out the development of the Vietnamese language, noting its origins in the Mon-Khmer language group and the waves of historical influences from Chinese and other language groups. As the title indicates, Kiernan, unlike Taylor and Goscha, uses diacritic marks throughout *Việt Nam*, thus underlining the importance he places on language. Later in the book, as the Vietnamese state moved further south, he calls attention to examples of words and names borrowed from Cham and Khmer. This discussion is not obscure linguistic history but central to Kiernan's portrait of Vietnam as an evolving and dynamic culture. Thus, his linguistic narrative is closely related to his discussion of the way in which Cham animist and Hindu deities, as well as Khmer Theravada traditions, were incorporated into Vietnamese religious practices. This syncretism is carried through the colonial era with borrowings from the West and Diem's failed Personalist movement. Kiernan also pays special attention to Hoa Hao Buddhism and the Cao Dai faith as further evidence of Vietnamese blending and cultural evolution. If Heraclitus taught that the only constant is change, Kiernan teaches that the only constant in Vietnam is the incorporation of new influences. By highlighting such an argument, the author pulls the rug out from underneath nationalist certainties. What is "Vietnam" and "Vietnamese" has changed over time in a variety of ways including geography, language, ritual and state-craft. In pointing out these historical constructions, however, *Việt Nam* does not deny Vietnamese identity.

Kiernan's repeated discussion of Vietnamese history's relationship to water is perhaps his most original contribution. In keeping with the work of scholars who have studied the *orang laut* and other inter-tidal cultures in Southeast Asia, this book situates Vietnam in its riverine and maritime setting.

*Việt Nam* is certain to become a classic in Vietnamese studies, but the book might pose a challenge for some undergraduates or general audiences. Readers may feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of detail Kiernan has included, as illustrated by 150 pages of scholarly endnotes. As with Kiernan's other work, the book can veer into history as "one damn thing after another". In particular, the detailed dynastic and royal history sections may leave some having difficulty seeing the forest for the trees.

Fortunately, Kiernan has learned much from the new school of environmental history and gives the reader a clear map through the jungle of kings, battles and dynasties. He is a gifted writer and his prose is engaging. *Việt Nam*'s 10 themes and tight organisation should keep most readers from getting lost. Those familiar with Vietnamese history will appreciate Kiernan's critiques of traditional nationalist narratives and his persuasive argument that Vietnam is a land of diversity, syncretism and hybridity, a site of constant evolution. Finally, *Việt Nam*'s ability to integrate ecology into political, cultural and economic history is truly impressive. Kiernan consistently returns to discussing rain, rivers and rice paddies, as well as coastal port cities, new islands rising out of delta silt and fluctuating sea levels, placing the Vietnamese in the land and water of Vietnam.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1522710>

