

## SOJOURN Symposium

*A History of the Vietnamese.* By Keith W. Taylor.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Review essays by Bruce Lockhart and Haydon Cherry, with  
a response from Keith Taylor.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Sino-Vietnamese relations, chronicles, nationalist historiography,  
regional differentiation, the Tây Sơn rebellion, French Indochina.

### Review Essay I: Bruce M. Lockhart

Keith Taylor's *A History of the Vietnamese* is, in the words of Shawn McHale — like this reviewer, a former student of Taylor's — quoted on its back cover, “a magisterial achievement”. Its author has synthesized an incredible volume of information into a narrative which is the most detailed account of the precolonial period available in any Western language. He has also undertaken a more streamlined yet informative and perceptive study of the century and a half since initial French colonization of the country. At more than 600 pages and with a wealth of details and names, the book is not for the faint-hearted — or, most probably, for the casual reader — but it is an excellent piece of scholarship and a significant contribution to the field.

Taylor relies heavily on the Vietnamese chronicles, which constitute our main source of information for the precolonial period. A reader familiar with this historical genre will have the rather pleasant sensation of reading a Vietnamese chronicle written in English. On the one hand, Taylor fills the pages with names and anecdotes from the chronicular accounts — including omens and

other supernatural events, mention of which reproduces the flavour of traditional historical texts. At the same time, he intersperses these narrative passages with incisive and insightful commentary rather like the interjections of a Confucian scholar in the original texts.

While the main emphasis of the book is political history, it is certainly much more than a work of “kings-and-battles” history, though there are plenty of both in the narrative. Taylor includes observations on economic and social developments as well as on the evolution of Vietnamese culture, along with literature and art. The reader thus gets a feel for each phase of Vietnam’s past in its own context as well as for how it fits into the larger picture of Vietnamese history.

The book has some quirks with which not all specialist readers may be comfortable. For example, emperors prior to the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) are referred to by their personal names rather than their posthumous imperial titles, as would be the norm in most historical writing. Since rulers other than the founders of dynasties are rarely remembered by their personal names, Taylor’s approach makes it easy to confuse emperors with relatives bearing the same surname. The rulers are, moreover, consistently called “kings” rather than “emperors”. Although the Vietnamese term *vua* has both meanings, “emperor” would better reflect the imperial aspirations and self-perception of successive dynasties. The renaming of the Tây Sơn conflict in the late eighteenth century as the “Thirty Years War” (pp. 365 ff.) is not unreasonable, but it would have been useful to explain this choice of terminology. A reader looking through either the table of contents or the index for Tây Sơn will come up empty-handed. Finally, relabelling the triangular conflict of the late 1970s among Vietnam, China and Democratic Kampuchea as the “Sino-Khmer War” is slightly misleading, particularly since this term can also refer to Cambodia’s Chinese minority.

A more complex issue is the treatment of China in the text. It has become common in the field of Vietnamese studies to debate the issue of “China”/“Chinese” versus “Vietnam/Vietnamese” and the relevance of these labels for earlier generations of Vietnamese.

The tone of the debate has become particularly contentious since the publication of Liam Kelley's *Beyond the Bronze Pillars* (2005), which minimizes the significance of the distinction between "Chinese" and "Vietnamese" as it may have existed in the minds of members of the precolonial elite of what is today Vietnam, steeped as its members were in the shared East Asian *ecumene* with China as its centre. Taylor does not directly engage this argument, although he does emphasize that the Sinic influences in Vietnam downplay the element of conflict in the historical relationship between the two peoples (about which more below). A peculiar — and unexplained — feature of this book, however, is that "China" as an entity scarcely exists in the story. Instead, we have "Tang officials", "Ming troops", "Qing bandits", etc. This usage does in fact conform to the general style of Vietnamese chronicles, but it is not particularly clear why such a pattern is consistently followed in an English-language study. People from China only become "Chinese" when they settle in Vietnam and form part of the minority community known to the Vietnamese as *Hoa* or *Minh Hương*. More importantly, the index contains no entries for "China", "Chinese", or any of the Chinese dynasties; given China's important role as a protagonist in Vietnam's historical narrative, this is a serious omission.

If China as a country is largely absent from Taylor's story, this is even more true of "Vietnam" itself — a reflection of the intellectual journey which Taylor has made during his career as a scholar. His first and best-known work, *Birth of Vietnam* (1983), traced the evolution of a Vietnamese "nation" from before the period of Chinese conquest through the tenth century, when Chinese rule ended and successive Vietnamese polities came to dominate the stage. In recent years, Taylor has gone in the opposite direction and worked to repudiate the vision of Vietnam which informed his original work: the perennialist model of a Vietnamese nation which predated the Han dynasty's conquest in the second century BCE and then re-emerged triumphant in the tenth century. Particularly in a seminal 1998 article in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (Taylor 1998), he challenged the "national unity" trope of Vietnamese nationalist historiography — a challenge taken up by other scholars, particularly

those focusing on the territory which constituted the Republic of Vietnam between 1945 and 1975. It is certainly no accident that the title of Taylor's new book does not refer to "Vietnam", and generally speaking it is indeed a history of "Vietnamese" and "Vietnamese speakers" rather than of the country or countries that they inhabited. Even the idea of a "unified Vietnamese people" existing over the *longue durée* is, in Taylor's opinion, a "conceit" (p. 623).

Taylor addresses the issue of Vietnam's nationhood in his "Retrospective", the thoughtful final chapter which serves as a conclusion to the book. He centres the chapter around three main arguments which have been implicit throughout the text but which are made explicit at the end.

First, and as just discussed, he argues against the "unified nation" paradigm of Vietnamese history, emphasizing the regional differences within the country; he makes the particularly insightful observation that Northerners tend to be more favourable to China as a model, whereas Southerners are more likely to be "wary of how things are done" in their powerful northern neighbour (p. 624). These regional differences are emphasized throughout the book, even for the period when there was a single Vietnamese kingdom, and Taylor argues convincingly and in more detail than in his 1998 article that many of Vietnam's political complexities and divisions during its early centuries of independence can be explained in terms of regional loyalties. Some readers may feel that Taylor has pushed his "anti-nationalist" perspective too far, but it certainly provides a healthy corrective to the Vietnamese narrative of a fixed national identity which has held together a unified nation for hundreds, even thousands, of years.

A second core point of the final chapter is to question the assumption that "the Vietnamese have preserved an ancient, or at least a pre-modern identity, through the vicissitudes of the modern age" (p. 625). It is of course precisely this assumption which is held dear by most present-day Vietnamese. Taylor recognizes the validity of a linguistically and geographically based identity, but contends — again quite persuasively, to my mind — that this identity has not been a constant and that what it meant to be "Vietnamese"

has varied dramatically from one place and one period to another. Vietnamese scholarship is to some extent moving in this direction, with an increased emphasis on local and regional culture, folklore, and history. But it is unlikely that the hallowed tale of a Vietnamese “nation” existing as far back as the Bronze Age will be abandoned any time soon.

The last of Taylor’s three concluding arguments is in some respects the most original and perhaps the most contentious: that “with few and episodic exceptions, Vietnamese and Chinese have lived in peace and amity” (p. 623) and that “the nationalistic conceit of being in a constant state of aggravation with the Chinese has no basis in fact” (p. 622). His point is well taken to the extent that, if one considers the broad sweep of history, episodes of warfare were more the exception than the rule. Moreover, Taylor is not the only scholar to challenge the assumption that “resisting foreign aggression” (*chống ngoại xâm*) has always been a fundamental characteristic of the Vietnamese, and his discussions of collaboration during the original Chinese colonization as well as the Ming occupation are illuminating. That said, however, when foreign aggression *has* occurred in Vietnamese history, it has most often come from the north, and the pantheon of Vietnamese heroes and heroines before the French colonial period is largely composed of those who fought Chinese enemies. Furthermore, it is clear that, for present-day Vietnamese too young to remember the war with the Americans, let alone the conflict with the French, China remains a perennial source of suspicion, and two millennia of history lie behind this view. Taylor’s excellent study allows us to have a more nuanced perspective on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, but a case can be made that that relationship is less benign than he suggests.

### Review Essay II: Haydon Cherry

*A History of the Vietnamese* spans more than 2,000 years from the third century BCE to the twenty-first century: from the establishment

of Nan Yue (Nam Việt) by Zhao To (Triệu Đà), to the contemporary ramifications of a border treaty that Lê Khả Phiêu negotiated with China in 1999. Keith Taylor's review of that long history persuasively argues that our knowledge of the Vietnamese past must be reconsidered in three ways. First, the role of China in that past is fundamental. "Vietnamese history as we know it today", Taylor argues, "could not exist without Chinese history" (p. 3).

Vietnamese language, literature, education, religion, historiography, philosophy, family system, social and political organization, cuisine, medicine, music, and art: all are deeply imprinted with the marks of what is commonly called East Asian or Sinitic civilization. (p. 621)

Given their close proximity and deep affinity, Taylor maintains that China and Vietnam have enjoyed a basically pacific relationship. Second, Vietnamese from the north, the centre and the south of the country — and even from province to province — are characterized by profound regional differences. It is a "conceit", probably an error, to conceive of a "unified Vietnamese people" (p. 623). Third, "the idea that the Vietnamese have preserved an ancient, or at least a pre-modern, identity through the vicissitudes of the modern age must be reconsidered" (p. 625). People who speak Vietnamese are the product of a long accumulation of "different religious, ideological, and cultural orientations" (ibid.). A "Vietnamese identity pre-dating contact with the ancient Chinese" and a past characterized by "rebellion against colonial oppression and resistance to foreign aggression" cannot "be sustained by a study of existing evidence about the past" (p. 620). Taylor advances these arguments in what is a profound work of scholarship and also of intellectual humility. Whether he or she fully accepts its revision of the Vietnamese past, no reader of this book will demur from Peter Zinoman's assessment, offered on the back jacket, that, "elegant, erudite and stunningly comprehensive, *A History of the Vietnamese* is, by a wide margin, the finest general survey of Vietnamese history ever produced in any language".

The book is intended to be accessible to students and general readers. It is organized chronologically, rather than topically or

conceptually. Indeed, according to Taylor, “there is no discernible pattern to explain how times of prosperity and well-being alternated with times of misery and violence” in Vietnamese history (p. 620). And Taylor refuses to impose such a pattern. In his own analysis of that history, he has no use for such academic fashions as Marxism, modernization theory, postmodernism, postcolonial theory, or subaltern studies. Given how quickly scholars shrug off one fashion in favour of another, this is doubtless a good thing. But this book is not a tedious litany of “one random thing after another” (p. 620). It is a story of rulers — of kings, lords, governors general, chairmen, general secretaries, and prime ministers — and the people they ruled. It is a story told from the centre looking out. The political story at the centre helps bring focus and clarity to the countless points of light that shine in the firmament of Vietnamese experience: the Buddhist sermons and essays of emperor Trần Thái Tông (Trần Cảnh) on the non-duality (*bất nhị*, literally “not two”) of phenomenal experience (p. 117); the role of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, from the Chinese state of Lu, in the palace examinations of the Lê restoration (p. 208); the devotional exercises, liturgical aids, biblical stories, and literature on the lives of saints that Father Girolamo (or Jerônimo) Maiorica wrote in *nôm*, the Vietnamese vernacular script, for use in Vietnamese communities in the seventeenth century (p. 289); the “tally songs” (*ca trù*) and “happy girl songs” (*hát ả đào*) that Vietnamese sang in the tea and wine shops of Hà Nội early in the nineteenth century (p. 407); the experimental painting of Nguyễn Phan Chánh (p. 519); the innovative lacquer work of Nguyễn Gia Trí (p. 519); and the novels of Nguyễn Tường Tam (Nhất Linh), Nguyễn Tường Long (Hoàng Đạo), and Nguyễn Tường Vinh (Thạch Lam) — three remarkable brothers at the heart of the Self-Strengthening Literary Group (*Tự Lực Văn Đoàn*) (p. 520). The great achievement of this book is to make such creations intelligible from the perspective of the Vietnamese who first experienced them.

Captious specialist readers will naturally notice small errors of fact and interpretation. In February 1929, for example, a “rogue member of the Vietnamese National Party, seeking to prove his

party's anti-colonial prowess to those tempted to join the Youth League" did not assassinate a Frenchman named Hervé Bazin (p. 507). He assassinated a Frenchman named Alfred Bazin. The well-known French author Hervé Bazin did not die until 1996 at the age of eighty-five. Furthermore, Alfred Bazin was not "in charge of recruiting laborers from Tonkin", if this implies that he had any official authority or responsibility for doing so (p. 507). Bazin was the director of a private company, the Office Général de main-d'oeuvre Indochinoise, which recruited Vietnamese workers from Tonkin without any government sanction or mandate. Movie theatres may have "made an appearance in Vietnamese cities during the 1920s", but not for the first time (p. 519). Léopold Bernard screened the first film in Sài Gòn in 1899. Many other films were shown in the city subsequently, in venues such as the Eden Cinema on the Rue Catinat. But these are small points.

Of greater consequence are the controversial summary judgements that Taylor sometimes passes. In the middle of the 1920s, was it really "the venerable voices of Phan Chu Trinh, in public lectures, and Phan Boi Chau, speaking in his defence during his trial", that "woke many Vietnamese from the mental somnolence induced by living under French rule" (p. 501)? Or had youth educated in Western-model institutions gradually become radicalized by their studies and profound changes in the structure of the colonial economy? And were they ever "somnolent" in any meaningful sense? It is true that in the 1930s the publication of newspapers, journals, magazines, books and pamphlets burgeoned, especially in the cities. Vietnamese read not only works of fiction, but also treatises on science, economics, medicine, history, philosophy, religion and many other fields of knowledge. Vocabulary and syntax changed and literacy in alphabetic Vietnamese increased. New structures of thought and argument developed. Was "the spread of alphabetic literacy ... the most decisive event in the history of French Indochina" (p. 521)? Perhaps. But such an assessment requires more detailed argumentation than Taylor offers for it. After all, probably no more than ten per cent of the Vietnamese population was literate at the end of the Second World



War. Literacy spread much more quickly in the post-independence Democratic Republic of Vietnam and Republic of Vietnam. Surely, other events in the colonial period were also decisive, such as rapid population growth, the draining and settlement of the Mekong delta, vast internal migration, a substantial increase in rural indebtedness, and the integration of the colony into a global economy centred on the North Atlantic. Perhaps more tendentious yet is Taylor's *aperçu* that while "educated Vietnamese put a large measure of intellectual energy into engaging the modern world", the French "were mentally inert and could not relax from their policeman's pose", their attitude "unimaginative" (p. 523). It would be churlish to complain that without footnotes it is difficult to evaluate the evidential basis for such assessments. But this appraisal seems unfair to the many French scholars and bureaucrats, such as the economist Paul Bernard, the agronomist Yves Henry, the lawyer Grégoire Kherian, and the polymath Paul Mus, who laboured earnestly and creatively to understand the social changes that took place in Vietnam under French rule.

*A History of the Vietnamese* is itself the product of earnest and creative labour. Indeed, it is the culmination of a lifetime of scholarship and learning. Perhaps, as Taylor writes, "no conclusion can be drawn in the sense of discovering some deep logic governing a presumed destiny of the Vietnamese people" (p. 620). But this is not a melancholy fact — it is hopeful and profoundly liberating: no implacable logic, no grand teleology, no inscrutable force determines the future of the Vietnamese people. The present need not be what it is; things might be other than what they are.

#### Author's Response: Keith W. Taylor

I am grateful to Bruce Lockhart and Haydon Cherry for writing these essays, and also for an opportunity to respond to points they have raised and thereby express some ideas more explicitly than I did in my book.

Bruce Lockhart proposes two general areas of discussion, nomenclature and memory, which are not unrelated. While he accepts contemporary conventions, I am more inclined to depart from them when I find that they obscure my view of the past.

Lockhart prefers to refer to premodern kings by their posthumous titles. I use their personal names, which helps me to see them as living people acting in their own times and places rather than as deceased rulers. I aimed to show people in “real time”; posthumous titles by their very nature relegate them to the past. I admit that providing posthumous names in parentheses at first mention could be helpful to a few readers, but I assume that it makes no difference to non-specialists and that specialists can consult reference materials when needed.

Similarly, Lockhart prefers to call Vietnamese rulers emperors while I call them kings. He thinks the demotic word *vua* has both meanings. Vietnamese rulers accepted a place of vassalage within the Sinic imperial hierarchy. I view their closet pretensions to emperorship as a local conceit. From my perspective, the word *vua* is different from both “king” and “emperor”: something like “father-king”. Lockhart prefers the term *Tây Sơn* in reference to what I call the Thirty Years War. I avoided using *Tây Sơn* as a generic reference to a period of time or an assembly of personalities and events because modern historians have encrusted the term with heavy ideological elaborations that have no relation to actual events. The term *Tây Sơn* has become something like a posthumous title; in that time it did not have the meaning that is evoked by use of the term today. After all, the main theme of the Thirty Years War was the rise of the Nguyễn Dynasty, not the spectacular but short-lived eruption of a few provincial heroes from a place called Tây Sơn.

More fundamentally, Lockhart regrets that I have neglected to follow the modern nationalist groove that attributes an essential continuity to “China” and “Vietnam” across centuries and millennia; for him the absence of “China” and “Vietnam” as countries in my narrative is “a serious omission”. I, on the other hand, consider the terms “China” and “Vietnam” to be great obstacles to historical

understanding. The Han, Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties reveal an assemblage of discernibly different societies, polities, ideologies, religions, cultures, ethnicities, and linguistic realms. The same is true for “Vietnam”; the Lý, Trần, Lê, Mạc, Trịnh, and Nguyễn regimes represent a variety of time-specific versions of political and social organization, cultural practice, and geostrategic mentalities in a succession of events resulting in what today we recognize as “Vietnam” and “Vietnamese”. Beginning with the Ming it is possible to see something akin to what we mean with the modern term “China”. Doing this for “Vietnam” may be even more difficult; various interpretive strategies produce recognition anywhere from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. I would rather not encourage modern nationalists, whether Chinese or Vietnamese, to imagine a sense of ownership over centuries and millennia in the past, which inevitably becomes a weapon against others.

In a similar vein, Lockhart objects to my discarding of one of the great clichés among modern Vietnamese historians about many centuries spent fighting northern (“Chinese”) aggression. I discarded it because there is no evidence for it. After the collapse of the Tang Empire and the tenth-century wars that erupted in its debris, a time before we can reasonably speak of there being something recognizably “Vietnamese”, I count two invasions from Northern Song in the tenth and eleventh centuries (the latter of which was in response to a Lý invasion across the Song border), one Ming invasion in the early fifteenth century, one limited Qing expedition in the eighteenth century (in response to an appeal from the Lê king), and one war with modern China in the twentieth century. The three Mongol-Yuan wars may or may not be considered as “Chinese aggression”; it depends upon one’s favourite argument. Altogether, these episodes do not account for much in the context of a millennium. There is abundant evidence that, in quantitative terms, Vietnamese suffered much more from the misgovernment and oppression of their own rulers than they ever suffered from “foreign aggression”. Furthermore, since the fifteenth century, setting aside the great number of rebellions, Vietnamese in separate polities

have fought one another in four long wars for a total of over 170 years, much longer than all the northern invasions combined since the tenth century, when local monarchies began. Also, for centuries Vietnamese have practised aggression against upland peoples, Chams and Khmers. Continuing to use the cliché of foreign aggression into Vietnam as an important historical trope, disregarding the above, can be done only in ignorance, wilful or not.

Finally, Lockhart appeals to national memory as if it has arisen in some natural and ineluctable way without the benefit of modern education and national propaganda. He writes at the end of his essay,

... when foreign aggression *has* occurred in Vietnamese history, it has most often come from the north, and the pantheon of Vietnamese heroes and heroines before the French colonial period is largely composed of those who fought Chinese enemies. Furthermore, it is clear that for present-day Vietnamese who are too young to remember the war with the Americans, let alone the conflict with the French, China remains a perennial source of suspicion, and two millennia of history lie behind this view.

First, I do not believe that pre-tenth-century people can be considered “Vietnamese” in the sense that we understand that term today. So counting “heroes and heroines” before that time is questionable. Second, “the pantheon of Vietnamese heroes and heroines” is the object of a national cult constructed over time, an ideology, not a representation of history. Third, it is remarkable indeed if Vietnamese “who are too young to remember the war with the Americans” are nevertheless able to remember wars with China going back several centuries; that they claim to do so cannot be attributed to “two millennia of history” lying “behind this view” (wherever that may be) without the influence of modern education and propaganda. Fourth, unlike France and the United States, located far away, China is and for the foreseeable future will be a big neighbour on Vietnam’s border, with all of the complexities that come with that. I do not believe that historians should encourage the use of history to excuse animosities that arise primarily from national education and propaganda.

I am grateful to Haydon Cherry for pointing out some errors. I have already begun to make a list of errors, typographical and other, found in the book. Two are egregious. The name of the twentieth-century monk Thiện Chiếu ended up being rendered as “Vien Chieu” (pp. 522, 526, 586, and index, p. 695). And on page 408 I incorrectly wrote about Nguyễn Công Trứ, “Nothing has been recorded about his family background”. This is not true, as I have subsequently learned.

Cherry makes three substantive comments, all about the twentieth century. He sees the “new generation” of Western-educated youth that erupted in 1925 as relatively autonomous, without debts to an older generation, while I see it learning from the ineffectual politics of would-be Vietnamese revolutionaries and reformers and moving into public action under the inspiration or patronage of some of these older figures — not only Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh, but also Bùi Quang Chiêu and Nguyễn Phan Long. He does not evaluate the shift from writing in Hán-Nôm characters to writing with an alphabet as highly as I do, and he evaluates the importance of “good Frenchmen” a bit differently than I do.

On the first point, there is no doubt that alienated and increasingly radicalized youth were fermenting ideas and passions before their breakthrough into public politics. In the early 1920s, some of them began to gather around André Malraux and a few of the Constitutionals who were critical of the colonial regime, especially Nguyễn Phan Long, but they did not emerge into prominence until a series of events in 1925 and 1926 (which I discuss on pages 499–503) revealed the impotence of the older generation of Vietnamese and opened up possibilities for them to generate their own momentum. These events arose from several sources but were fundamentally driven by the election of a more leftist French government and the appointment of a new governor general, and by the dramatic conclusions to the public careers of the two most prominent Vietnamese of the older generation. Phan Bội Châu returned from abroad under arrest, spoke out at his trial and was sentenced to house arrest. Phan Chu Trinh willingly returned from

abroad, gave inspirational lectures and died. Ignoring the context from which the younger generation climbed into view looks like an echo of the revolutionary narrative given by Communist historians to “the Party” as the vanguard of the younger generation, a narrative that emphasizes the role of ideologically correct emissaries from a headquarters in another country.

A related point is Cherry’s objection to my use of the word “somnia” to contrast the state of mind of “many Vietnamese” before 1925 with their post-1925 anticolonial activities. I used this word to distinguish the state of public discourse and clandestine organization before and after 1925. It does not of course apply to those few Vietnamese inclined to take the lead, but for the “many” who followed I still think it can apply. In fact, the word came to mind in relation to Vietnamese living under another totalitarian regime — national rather than colonial — whom I met in the 1980s and 1990s, and who were by intention politically asleep while awake to what could not harm them.

On the second point, I still believe that the spread of the alphabet was “the most decisive event in the history of French Indochina” (p. 521). Cherry cites demographic and economic changes as equally or more important. But these kinds of changes had been occurring among the Vietnamese for centuries without any change in the writing system. These phenomena are perennial. What was new in the twentieth century was how people were led to understand and respond to these changes. This was something unprecedented because of what alphabetic writing and reading made possible in terms of the dissemination of information and ideas as well as the formation of a new mental framework of expression. This framework of expression included vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph formation and the aesthetics of literary production. Cherry seems to suggest that the impact of the alphabet can be equated with calculations of the percentage of the population that was literate. I think that these are fundamentally unrelated. The impact of the new alphabet extended beyond those who were literate because it became the main medium used by intellectuals and public figures

and because, inclined towards how people used everyday speech, it could be read to and understood by those who were not yet literate. It was not just an alphabet but an entirely new way of using language to describe what was happening.

Yes, there were good French people, and I mention some of them in my book, but they were relatively exceptional and had no discernible impact upon the colonial regime. The people listed by Cherry fostered circles of Franco-Vietnamese understanding in areas peripheral to government policy. “Goodness” was not in the nature of the French colonial regime; “goodness” was not in the nature of any colonial regime, however “sentimental” or “benevolent” it may have been. French people who, in Cherry’s words, “laboured earnestly and creatively to understand the social changes that took place in Vietnam under French colonial rule” were nevertheless part of the colonial system and unable to have any decisive influence over it. Even including the very few French people who sided with Vietnamese against the colonial authority, the number of those who “laboured” in the way that Cherry describes was relatively tiny. The overwhelming majority of French people in Indochina were racist and uninterested in the well-being of the Vietnamese. At the same time, Vietnamese entered the modern world under the tutelage of the French regime, acquiring from the French much that has served to define modern Vietnam, from infrastructure to scholarship.

**Bruce M. Lockhart** is Associate Professor in the Department of History, National University of Singapore, 11 Arts Link, Singapore 117570, Republic of Singapore; email: hisbl@nus.edu.sg.

**Haydon Cherry** is Assistant Professor in the Department of History, North Carolina State University, 350 Withers Hall, Campus Box 8108, Raleigh, North Carolina 27695-8108, USA; email: haydon\_cherry@ncsu.edu.

**Keith W. Taylor** is Professor in and Chair of the Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 380 Rockefeller Hall, Ithaca, New York 14853, USA; email: kwt3@cornell.edu.

## REFERENCES

- Kelley, Liam. *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005.
- Taylor, Keith W. *The Birth of Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- . "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region". *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (1998): 949–78.