

Book Reviews

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Vietnam: A New History. By Christopher Goscha. New York: Basic Books, 2016. xiv+552 pp.

This book has an interpretive vantage on modern Vietnamese history that sparkles with fresh thought and interesting themes. A salient strength of the book is its critique of the cliché of Vietnam as a unified historical phenomenon. In Goscha’s words,

We need to recognize that the history of Vietnam, like any other place in the world, is a series of interlocking forces and people, occurring and acting at specific points in time and space, each generating its own possibilities and eliminating others at the same time. (p. 6)

The theme of “multiple Vietnams” is a kind of backbone that gives the book its coherence and conceptual force. The importance of this cannot be overestimated, for historical scholarship on Vietnam has until recently been confined to a narrow, linear interpretive path in service to the notion of a united “Vietnam” that has followed a teleological trajectory from ancient times to the present. This book is a strong, cogent, and compelling argument against that point of view. It proposes that contemporary Vietnam contains multiple possibilities that vie with the ruling orthodoxy to define the future of the nation. The presentation of this idea might nevertheless have been stronger if the book had explored the complicating constraints imposed by the close relationship between the ruling elites now in power in China and Vietnam.

A second strength of this book, extending from the above, is its critique not only of a romanticized vision of what are asserted

to be national traditions but also of the clichés that have become embedded in contemporary discourse about the modern history of Vietnam. For example, Goscha writes, “No torch was necessarily passed in late July 1954 from the French to the Americans, no sparks flew from the embers of one empire to light the flames of another” (p. 284). His insistence that the post-colonial wars that pitted Vietnamese against Vietnamese, albeit with the participation of foreign powers, was not a product of the Cold War but were rather episodes in a conflict between Vietnamese that “emerged over a century ago, before communism arrived; and therein lies one of the keys to understanding political change in modern Vietnam today and what lies ahead” (p. 446). Goscha defines this conflict as “the clash between Vietnamese republicans and communists over the future of Vietnam” (p. 448), and he perceptively relates this clash to, among other things, opposing views over the national constitution.

For the communists today, the 1960 constitution is the founding document for their Vietnam, not the 1946 one. And this is why republicans in Vietnam today push so hard for the restoration of the 1946 constitution, which they consider to be the “real” one. It would allow them to roll back the communist confiscation of the state during the First Indochina War. (p. 451)

Goscha offers an opportunity to escape from simplistic global explanations; he proposes to give Vietnamese history back to the Vietnamese — all of them.

The above highlights a third strength of this book. It posits modern Vietnamese history as a struggle between republican and authoritarian options for organizing a post-colonial polity. Goscha sees this struggle as one that predates the emergence of Vietnamese communists as the leading authoritarians, and to a large extent he sees it as a struggle between reformist and revolutionary responses to the colonial conundrum and the corresponding alternative dreams of a modern Vietnam. This reading powerfully disrupts the propagandistic historical narrative that views communists as the only plausible representatives of a modern post-colonial Vietnam.

A weakness of the book is that, aside from the period of the First Indochina War upon which Goscha's previous research has been focused, there are many factual errors. For example, despite the interpretive direction indicated above, the book suffers from curious pre-modern slips back into the teleological groove, such as the statement that "The Vietnamese regained their independence in the tenth century" (p. 1). This statement is a mantra of modern Vietnamese historical writing, commonly found in books about Vietnam, but in fact it is an anachronism to speak of "Vietnamese" in the tenth century; what we mean by that term, linguistically and culturally, emerged after the tenth century. The term "independence", used with reference to the tenth century, is also an anachronism; what we understand by this word is a modern concept. Furthermore, the term "regained" implies that the "Vietnamese" had previously been "independent" — an idea for which there is no evidence. Modern writers have hidden the actual context for kings appearing in what is now northern Vietnam in the tenth century behind a screen of national voluntarism. The book ignores the fact that beginning in the tenth century northern Sinitic dynasties were in the words of Wang Gungwu "lesser empires" (Wang 1994, p. 237) that lacked the military capability of previous dynasties to extend their power into the region. This reality diminishes local agency to a matter of simply taking up the slack created by changes in the governance of the northern empire.

It is not feasible to itemize all the factual miscues in this book, but a few examples from various epochs will give a sense of the problem. The Lý and Trần dynasties are conflated (p. 26), although they were in fact very different. Attributing the Vietnamese use of gunpowder to the Ming occupation of the early fifteenth century (p. 8) ignores evidence that Vietnamese used gunpowder weapons as early as 1390. The book claims, "Civil war followed in 1627, when the Trinh attacked the Nguyen headquarters in Hue" (p. 41). In fact, the 1627 Trịnh campaign never reached Huế, and Huế was at that time not yet the "Nguyen headquarters". The Qing expedition of 1786 is described as a response to Nguyễn Huệ's proclaiming

himself emperor (p. 43), when in fact it was the Qing expedition that prompted Nguyễn Huệ to make this proclamation. The connection between the Khmer uprising of 1820 and the construction of the Vĩnh Tế Canal (p. 54), although asserted in many books, is not supported by evidence. The book refers to “Le Van Duyet’s revolt against Minh Mạng’s unification project in the early 1830s” (p. 219). But Lê Văn Duyệt never led a revolt against Minh Mạng; the revolt in question broke out after the former’s death. The book tells us that, “backed by colonial authorities in Saigon”, Henri Rivière was in the early 1880s “convinced that he could easily take control of Tonkin, and thereby force Paris to follow suit” (p. 68). In fact Rivière did not act until after he received instructions to do so directly from Paris. The book twice describes Sơn Tây as a town on the Sino–Vietnamese border (pp. 69, 70), when in fact it is located a short distance northwest of Hanoi. The book’s account of the Cần Vương movement and of the roles of Tôn Thất Thuyết and Hàm Nghi in the 1880s is full of misinformation and distortion, as is its account of Phan Đình Phùng’s role in this movement (pp. 90–93). The book uses exuberant adjectives without explanation to describe Hồ Chí Minh (pp. 192, 194, 198) and, while ignoring the Nam Kỳ Uprising of 1940, attributes its effects to the death of Nguyễn An Ninh in 1943 (pp. 193–94). The “August Revolution” is made to sound like a one-man show (pp. 197–98).

Further, Goscha writes with reference to events in 1946,

The failure of the French and the Vietnamese to find a peaceful solution to the status of Cochinchina allowed colonial hardliners in Indochina like Thierry d’Argenlieu to take matters into their hands, making a compromise solution increasingly difficult to achieve. (p. 205)

This is backwards, as d’Argenlieu’s policies and actions were exactly what prevented “a peaceful solution to the status of Cochinchina”. The book claims that Ngô Đình Diệm “refused to sign the declaration” of the Geneva Accords of 1954, saying that others did sign it (pp. 271–72); in fact, no one ever signed the “declaration”.

Agrovilles are conflated with Strategic Hamlets (pp. 314–16), the mythology of the 1963 Battle of Ấp Bắc (p. 316) is rehearsed, and the account of the 1963 Buddhist Crisis (pp. 317–18) is superficial and inaccurate. Goscha writes that “the People’s Army of Vietnam finally took the city [of Khe Sanh] from the Americans in July 1968” (p. 332). But Khe Sanh was a mountain base, not a “city”, and it was never taken from the Americans. The Americans destroyed and evacuated the base. The account of Lyndon Johnson’s decision to leave politics after the Tết Offensive of 1968 (p. 333) is abbreviated to the point of incoherence. The account of the 1972 Spring Offensive and subsequent negotiations in Paris (pp. 336–37) is abbreviated, inaccurate and misleading; getting it backwards, Goscha claims that the offensive’s “real objectives” were met, leading to abandonment of Hanoi’s demand to dismantle the Saigon government. In fact, Hanoi gave this demand up after it became clear that it had failed to achieve its objectives. Similarly backwards is the assertion, “knowing that Nixon desperately wanted to announce a peace agreement before the upcoming presidential elections, Tho demanded...”. In fact, it was after Lê Đức Thọ understood that Richard Nixon was sure to be re-elected that he dropped his demands, and this concession enabled the drafting of an agreement. Goscha says that the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord specified in that agreement included three parties: the People’s Revolutionary Government, the National Liberation Front, and the Republic of (South) Vietnam. In fact, the People’s Revolutionary Government and the National Liberation Front were the same thing. The third party was something called “the third force”, supposedly to be made up of neutralists. His account of the “Christmas bombing” (p. 338) of 1972 is incorrect and misses the point of it; after Hanoi’s air defences were destroyed, the North Vietnamese dropped their demand to link the release of U.S. and Vietnamese POWs, thereby making the 1973 Paris Agreement possible. These are a few representative examples of a carelessness that tends to diminish the book’s achievement.

Another weakness is the book’s organization. An “Introduction” proposes the theme of “many different Vietnams”. Chapters 1

through 5 present a narrative from ancient times through the 1930s, one primarily focused on political, administrative and military matters. Chapter 6 adds a discussion of economy, society and religion under French colonialism. Chapters 7 through 11 provide a political and military narrative of the period 1940–75. Then there follow three chapters that articulate with the previous chapters in ways that are not entirely clear. Chapter 12 aims to treat the topic of a “cultural revolution” during “the long 20th century”; chapter 13 presents a political, military and diplomatic narrative of the years 1975–95; and chapter 14 is a narrative about Vietnamese “imperialism” towards upland peoples and Chams from antiquity to the present. A “Conclusion” propounds a theme of “Authoritarianism, Republicanism, and Political Change”. There is no obvious way to understand this organizational scheme. And the book’s system of subheadings displays randomness and redundancy.

Finally, this book uses terminology such as “imperial”, “colonial”, and “cultural revolution” with anachronistic exuberance. It displays a rhetoric that forces all of Vietnamese history into categories that emerged to describe modern events. The result is a superficial and simplistic vision of the pre-modern past.

Despite these criticisms, the strengths of this book far outweigh its weaknesses. Most of the problems that I have mentioned will be of interest to specialists only. A general reader will easily absorb the important message that is the core of the book — that the particular form that the existing state of Vietnam has assumed in contemporary times is not the result of any predetermined historical necessity imposed by something essential to an imagined spirit or character of the Vietnamese people. On the contrary, it is the result of the push and pull of politics and military alliances and decisions made by people in particular situations. There is no sacred national aura that cloaks the current state of affairs. Options about the future of Vietnamese government and society are not the purview of the party denizens in Hanoi only, but rather all people who participate in a sense of being Vietnamese who are living in countries all over the world have a legitimate stake in narrating the history of their

ancestors. This is a very timely message and this book conveys it admirably.

REFERENCE

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The Origins of Ancient Vietnam. By Nam C. Kim. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. xvii+354 pp.

Nam Kim is a careful and well-informed scholar. He has written a very carefully researched and highly informative book, one that elucidates the most recent findings on the origins of state formation in what is today northern Vietnam. The book also validates what many scholars have surmised from earlier evidence: that a politically sophisticated society, founded by an aristocratic elite, was already in place in what we today call the Bắc Bộ area well before its incorporation as one of the southernmost territories under the control of the Han Dynasty.

The primary evidence for this conclusion comes from the excavation of the major walled site at Cổ Loa, just northwest of the modern capital city of Hanoi. Kim has since 2005 conducted fieldwork focused on that site in collaboration with the Viện Khảo Cổ (Vietnamese Institute of Archaeology). But, before turning to that evidence, he finds that he must first survey and synthesize in considerable detail both the relevant general archaeological record for Southeast Asia as a whole, with emphasis on comparable walled sites.