

BOOK REVIEWS

***A Brief History of Vietnam: Colonialism, War and Renewal: The Story of a Nation Transformed.* By Bill Hayton. Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2022. Softcover: 288pp.**

Bill Hayton has produced a probable bestseller on Vietnamese history that is, in equal measure, impressive and frustrating. Impressive in that the entire history of Vietnam, from prehistoric times to the present day, is elegantly condensed into just under 300 pages, while also drawing on the latest scholarship by Vietnam specialists. Frustrating, however, in that it attempts to make such a complex history easily digestible for the curious holiday-goer or discerning expatriate and, at the same time, able to stand up to the scrutiny of the stern academic. In the end, it accomplishes as much as can be expected from such a mammoth task.

As Hayton readily admits in the Bibliography, *A Brief History of Vietnam* does not intend to make an original contribution to the literature on Vietnam. It relies almost entirely on secondary sources, mostly from Anglo-American academia. There are no groundbreaking discoveries unearthed from the archives or archaeological sites, nor detailed endnotes that pinpoint the author's sources for his many vignettes, which makes it difficult to assess the information using conventional academic methodology. Moreover, the central narrative of the book—Vietnam's history is not simply shaped by resistance to outsiders (particularly China) but, instead, is a product of diverse external factors interacting with local actors and conditions in a series of historical contingencies—has been the opinion of scholars such as Keith Taylor, Christopher Goscha and Liam Kelley for more than a decade. In fact, it is now quite difficult to find a serious historian who thinks otherwise. Hayton rightly takes issue with the nationalistic accounts found in Vietnamese history textbooks, but

that is too convenient a foil. After all, one would be hard-pressed to find state-approved national history textbooks of any country that are unproblematic in their nationalist interpretations of the past.

However, *A Brief History of Vietnam* does remarkably well in weaving a coherent and balanced narrative out of the extensive collection of scholarly material that has been produced in recent decades. Although the structure of the book is largely chronological, some conscious historiographical choices are revealed by its periodization. Pre-900s Vietnam is covered in two chapters, the first of which focuses on dispelling nationalist myths of an ancient predecessor kingdom of Van Lang, before covering the period of Chinese domination of the Red River Delta. The second explores the other, often neglected, ancestors of modern Vietnam, including the hill peoples and the Funan and Champa kingdoms. The three subsequent chapters explore Vietnam's dynastic history, including a sensitive, yet dispassionate, discussion of relations with its northern and southern neighbours, as well as passages on the numerous internal divisions, royal squabbles and civil wars that took place between the tenth century—when a state independent from Chinese rule began to emerge—and France's conquest of Cochin China in the late nineteenth century.

The second half of the book focuses on events since 1859. Here, Hayton really shines, distilling the relevant facts and historiographical arguments from the scholarship he cites without becoming embroiled in the frequently emotional disputes that are a feature of Vietnamese Studies, the result of political divisions that arose during the country's fiery twentieth-century experiences. His two chapters on the French colonial period acknowledge the achievements of the colonial administration as well as its heavy-handed oppression, which galvanized radical resistance movements. In the chapters on the Indochina wars, Hayton highlights the central role played by communist leader Ho Chi Minh and the anti-colonial Viet Minh in fighting for Vietnamese independence, but he also provides a frank account of the shortcomings of Ho's government, including its dismal land reforms and the suppression of artistic freedom in the "Nhan Van-Giai Pham Affair", as well as North Vietnam's role in precipitating the Second Indochina War. Similarly, Hayton acknowledges the policy failures of the South Vietnamese government under Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, including discrimination against Buddhists and the strategic hamlets programme, which forcibly moved 8.7 million people into supposedly defensible hamlets, inadvertently making them

so “dependable on food handouts” and “so brutalized that they became sympathetic to the state’s enemies” (p. 228). The book finishes with a short but remarkably dense recapitulation of the progress and challenges Vietnam has faced since 1975 and the end of the Second Indochina War, with a balanced assessment of the accomplishments and problems of its one-party system. Hayton also includes some pertinent warnings about what might lie ahead for the communist government.

A Brief History of Vietnam does well and not so well at some smaller things. Throughout the book, handy one-page text boxes explain significant figures, entities and concepts of Vietnamese history and culture that deserve attention but do not fit so neatly into the tight narrative course that Hayton must run to cover more than 2,000 years in under 300 pages. Perhaps because of the extensive scope of this book, there are a number of small errors. Aside from odd misspellings, such as that of the name of the poetess Ho Xuan Huong (p. 162), there are several irregular English translations from French: the “Indochina” (instead of “Indochinese”) Communist Party (p. 198), the Tonkin “Public” (instead of “Free”) School (p. 189) and the “Claims” (instead of “Demands”) of the Annamite People (p. 192), for instance. The etymological assertion that the term “*Hoa*” (化), denoting ethnic Chinese, originally meant “civilized” (p. 246) is somewhat inaccurate. Possibly, Hayton confused it with “*hóa*” (化), as in “*văn hóa*” (文化), which means “cultured” or “civilized”. However, regarding ethnic Chinese, “*Hoa*” (化) would be better translated as “splendid”, “magnificent” or “flowery” (as related to 花 *hoa*).

In the end, what is likely to drive the popularity of *A Brief History of Vietnam* is its versatility. It could serve as a solid textbook for an introductory class on Vietnamese history and culture. Its bibliography would be extremely helpful for designing a field seminar on Vietnamese history. With a list price of just US\$16.99, it could also be an affordable and compact companion for an interested, non-specialist visitor to Vietnam who wants a concise account of the country’s history that stands up well to academic scrutiny while also being genuinely enjoyable to read.

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