K.W. Taylor


As the only detailed, accurate history of Vietnam in English, the present work is no doubt a landmark in the historiography of a country that is otherwise mostly synonymous with war in the Western imagination. While one-volume histories of Vietnam have appeared from time to time, they have tended to treat premodern history sketchily, as an introduction to the colonial and postcolonial periods. For example, Joseph Buttinger devoted 56 out of 565 pages to the precolonial period in his *Vietnam: A political history* (1969). Alternatively, they have read history backwards and traced imagined trajectories of rebellion, struggle against outside aggression, or (proto-)nationalism. The title of Thomas Hodgkin’s survey of pre-1945 history is instructive: *Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path* (1981). Such attempts to make sense of Vietnamese history are explicitly denounced by Keith Taylor who, unlike most Westerners who have written on the subject, is familiar with the original sources written in Sino-Vietnamese. Attempts to pinpoint historical characteristics of the Vietnamese people are problematic at best, considering the regional variations and the difference in historical experience between the north and the south. Likewise, the idea that the Vietnamese preserve an ancient or premodern identity discernible until the present is doubtful considering Vietnam’s engagement with France, America, Marxist-Leninism, and lately globalisation.

Keith Taylor, professor at Cornell University, is well known to students of premodern Southeast Asia, not least for his detailed study *The Birth of Vietnam* (1983) that took the story up to the state formation of the tenth century. The present work is something of a continuation. The ancient period, encompassing the thousand years of Chinese governance, is summarised in 33 pages and followed by a very detailed narrative of 430 pages that spans the succession of indigenous dynasties from 939 to 1883 when the Harmand Treaty made an end to national independence. This in turn is followed by an account of the French colonial regime, the Indochina Wars, and the unified Marxist regime, encompassing 146 pages. Events since the early 1970s are summarised in a mere 7 pages, and Taylor manages to limit the account of the Communist takeover in 1975 to one single sentence. Throughout the book, Taylor is careful to give the Vietnamese perspective of events. That is especially apparent when we approach modern times. While most works dealing with the post-1945 era focus on the Indochina Wars and the international political game, Taylor has little to say about the war events as such and rather focuses on the construction of the northern and southern Vietnamese states. The South Vietnamese republic is
portrayed as a potentially viable nation with at least some democratic and pluralist features, far from an American puppet.

The method applied by the author is simple and straightforward: the book presents a chronological account centred on the political development. Issues of culture, ideology, economics, social conditions, and ethnicity, are subordinated to this narrative thread. The author excuses his approach with the fact hinted at in the beginning of this review: this has never been done in any detail, and with the advantage of recent scholarship in Vietnamese and Western languages. It is instructive to compare *A history of the Vietnamese* with the other detailed one-volume work available in a Western language, Le Thanh Khoi’s classic *Le Viet-nam: histoire et civilisation* (1955). Khoi, writing from a strongly nationalist and pro-Việtminh perspective, combined a detailed account of political history with equally detailed sub-chapters on art, literature, social and economic developments. From this point of view, Taylor’s book complements rather than supersedes that of Khoi; a lot of aspects on Vietnamese civilisation discussed by the latter are quite simply missing with Taylor. The emphasis put on particular episodes differs significantly between the two. Events like the Tay Son victories over the Trinh in 1786 and the Qing in 1789, narrative highlights in Khoi’s book, are mentioned in the tersest terms by Taylor who instead expands on the organisational skills of the enemy and eventual nemesis of the Tay Son, Nguyen Phuc Anh. Unlike Khoi, who provided extensive footnotes to primary sources and literature, Taylor has taken the choice to do without them. This is balanced by a comprehensive discussing bibliography.

Another point of comparison is the way that the two historians set Vietnam in a regional and international context. Taylor rightly points out how several important shifts in Vietnamese history can be explained with reference to developments in China. Actually, as he argues, there is no way to come around the profound impact of China on Vietnamese civilisation, which operated differently and more thoroughly than in the cases of Korea and Japan. On the other hand, Taylor rarely expands on the Southeast Asian context. While Le Thanh Khoi paid attention to the Hindu-Buddhist Champa, which encompassed a large part of present-day Vietnam, Taylor merely mentions this kingdom (or conglomerate of kingdoms) when it came into direct contact with Vietnamese rulers. There is not even the sketchiest summary of the rise of Champa in the first millennium AD. Recent decades have seen an output of Cham studies of some consequence, and much more should have been done by Taylor in this respect. In his book the indianised regions of Southeast Asia appear to belong to a separate world up to the early-modern period. Not least, the author could have benefited from the macro-historical perspectives in Victor