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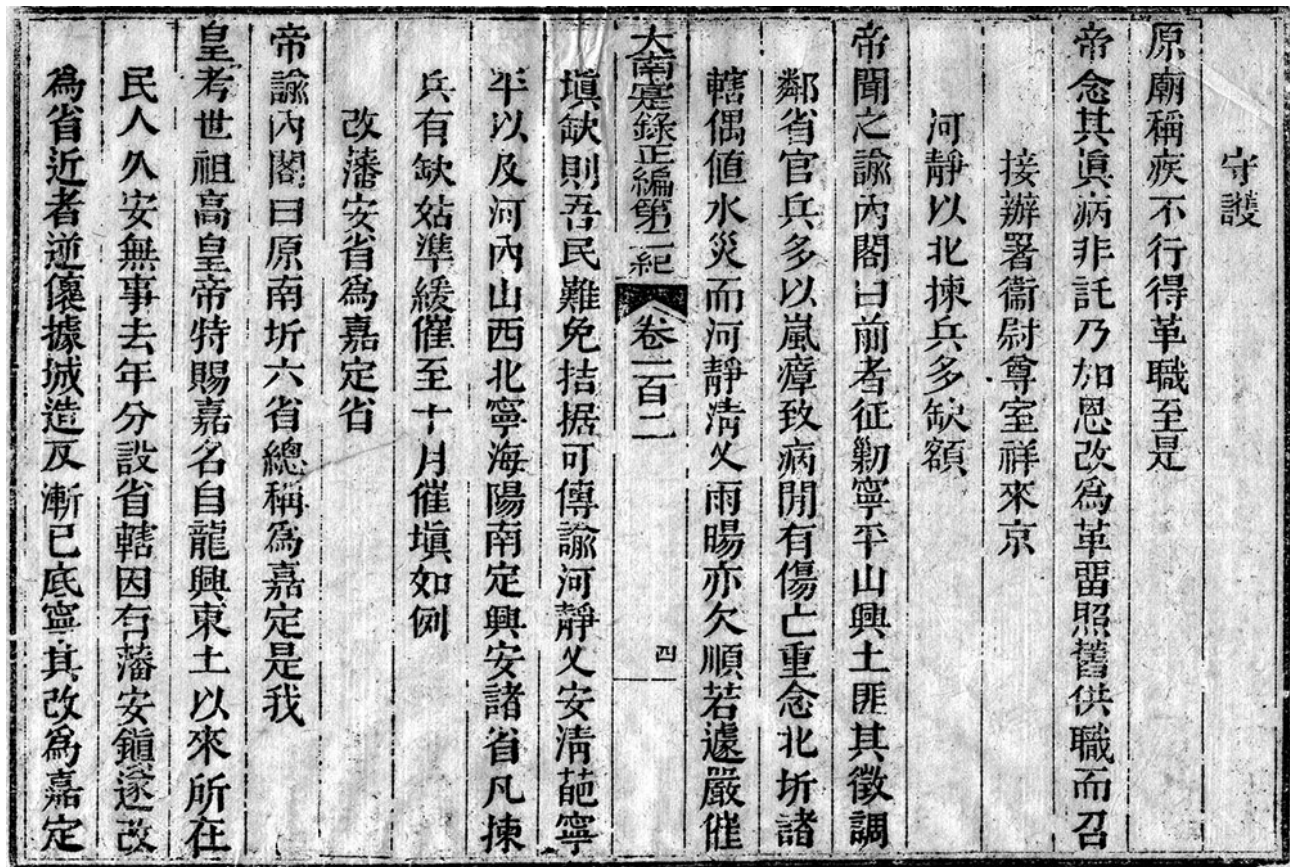


Asian studies , Reviews , Vietnam

## Lost in translation

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Dai Nam Thap Luc (Veritable Records of Dai Nam) from the nineteenth century

## **Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present**

Ben Kiernan

Oxford: 2017

**B**en Kiernan is the A. Whitney Griswold professor of history at Yale University. He rose to academic fame in the 1980s as an expert on the Khmer Rouge. In the 1990s he put that expertise into action by establishing the Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale and a research institute in Phnom Penh, the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, to facilitate the collection, preservation and study of historical materials from the Khmer Rouge period

Since the 1990s, Kiernan's research has extended to the topic of genocide more broadly; his *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* was awarded the best work of history published in 2007 by the US Independent Publishers Association. Through his numerous publications on the Khmer Rouge and genocide, Kiernan has established himself as a world expert on these topics. Now apparently not content to rest on his laurels, he has published a survey of the entire span of Vietnamese history, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*.

Vietnam is of course not the same as Cambodia, and the skills required of a historian to research and write about the Vietnamese past are therefore different. Here, the greatest challenge lies with the period of pre-modern Vietnamese history, that is, the period before the twentieth century. The primary sources for pre-modern Vietnamese history are largely in classical Chinese. Some have been translated into Vietnamese and French, but the quality of available translations is uneven, and it is difficult to make use of them if one does not possess knowledge about the intellectual and cultural

contexts in which the originals were produced, knowledge which ultimately comes only from reading those sources in their original form. The extant secondary scholarship on pre-modern Vietnamese history is also uneven in quality.

Kiernan, however, decided to spend some 300 pages of his 500-page tome on a survey of pre-modern Vietnamese history. Without knowing classical Chinese, and possessing limited Vietnamese-language skills, it is clear right from the start of the book that the sources would get the better of him.

**A**fter an introduction, Kiernan dives right into early history and presents the reader with a perennial theme that he has identified: the persistence of a supposed “aquatic culture”. Kiernan’s ideas about this theme were clearly influenced by the writings of the late Huynh Sanh Thong, a scholar and translator who worked at Yale University from the 1960s to 1980s. Best known for his translations of Vietnamese poetry, Huynh Sanh Thong also published several articles in a journal that he edited, and a book that attempted to demonstrate the importance of the concept of water in Vietnamese culture throughout time.

The word for “water” in Vietnamese is “*nuoc*”. The same word can also mean “country”, as can the term “*non nuoc*” or “mountains and waters”. These linguistic correspondences are extremely important for Kiernan because they signify to him a deep connection for Vietnamese between water and ideas about life and community. Here he also seems to have been impressed by British paediatrician Stephen Oppenheimer’s *Eden in the East: The Drowned Continent of Southeast Asia*, an imaginative work of “pop scholarship” that argues that Southeast Asia was the site of an early civilisation that was inundated by a great flood at the end of the Ice Age, dispersing peoples and creating flood myths.

Citing Oppenheimer, Kiernan argues that the use of stilt houses in the first millennium BC “may stem from an early cultural experience, when former coastal lowland communities had moved inland to escape fast-rising sea levels, which fostered cultural exchanges as ‘sedentary coastal peoples rushed back past each other’”. Alternately, he argues, a more significant cultural experience may have come when “the sea receded again” and early inhabitants migrated “into the new coastal wetlands, encountering the estuarine crocodiles and other reptiles that appear on Dong Son drums and bronze situlas from the Red River valley”.

Regardless of which ancient deluge left a deeper imprint on the Vietnamese psyche, Kiernan believes that something extremely significant took place in antiquity such that the words and concepts for “water”, “mountains” and even “crocodiles” all became fundamental elements of Vietnamese culture, a theme for which he finds repeated evidence in the historical record. He notes, for instance, that a Vietnamese official by the name of Nguyen Thuyen wrote a poem in the Vietnamese vernacular in 1282 that was thrown into the Red River to ward off a crocodile. Kiernan states that this poem contains “the first attested use of the Vietnamese term for their land, nuoc Viet (literally, the Viet waters)”.

A poem thrown into water to ward off a crocodile in the land of the “Viet waters” is a perfect example to the author of the perennial theme of an aquatic culture, and it undoubtedly would be a perfect example if it were true. However, it is not, and a quick check of the sources makes that obvious.

Kiernan relies on a bilingual (Vietnamese and French) poetry collection published in Saigon in the 1960s. That book did not indicate where the poem came from, and in fact, no such poem exists in pre-modern sources, nor is there even evidence that Nguyen Thuyen ever wrote such a poem. A

fifteenth-century dynastic chronicle does record that Nguyen Thuyen composed a document to drive away a crocodile, and it also mentions separately that he was good at composing poetry in the vernacular.

In other words, the document that Nguyen Thuyen drafted to drive away the crocodile and the poetry he composed in the vernacular during his leisure time were two separate matters. The poem that Kiernan cited was created in the mid-twentieth century.

A much more helpful perspective on the past comes from Kiernan's effort to connect Vietnamese history to climatic and environmental change. To do this, he employs the findings of a recent study, "Climate as a contributing factor in the demise of Angkor, Cambodia". The scholars who produced this study examined tree-ring data to identify periods of heavy rainfall and drought over a 759-year period from 1250 to 2008, with some less reliable data extending back to 1030.

The tree-ring data in this study comes from an area in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, near Dalat. There is another study that produced tree-ring data from north-western Vietnam for a 535-year period ("Tree-ring based hydroclimate reconstruction over northern Vietnam from *Fokienia hodginsii*: eighteenth century mega-drought and tropical Pacific influence"). As we should expect, in comparing the data from these two studies, it is clear that the climatic conditions in northern and southern Vietnam were different.

Relating the southern tree-ring data to historical conditions in the north is already problematic, but this problem is, again, exacerbated by the historian's lack of the linguistic skills to examine the historical sources. So, for instance, to see if tree-ring data from the south about increased rainfall in the eleventh and twelfth centuries can be corroborated in historical records from the north, Kiernan relies on a translation of a pre-modern

Vietnamese source that he commissioned. In the translation, terms that indicate phenomena such as dew and snow were all associated with rain. This translated “data” fit what the southern tree-ring data suggests, but it is not what was actually recorded in the source that was used.

At other times Kiernan simply makes no effort to see if there is information in historical sources that corroborates the tree-ring data. He states, for instance, “The period from 1340 to the 1360s saw the most sustained drought of the 759-year Vietnamese climate record”, and that this may have “caused the Red River, whose silt over many centuries had built up the eastern delta, to change its direction”. While a drought in these years may have affected the Central Highlands where the data comes from, the historical information that we have for this period relates to events in the north and centre of what is now Vietnam and there are no records of droughts for this period, only in 1337 and 1379. Similarly, Kiernan also states, “The period 1400-1424 alone, with its seven drought years, made the fifteenth century the driest in the entire eight-century climate record”. Here again, there are no records in the dynastic chronicles of droughts during these years, only one in 1399 and another in 1434.

At other times Kiernan cites problematic information about the environment from secondary sources. For example, he cites Le Thanh Khoi’s woefully outdated *Histoire du Viet Nam des origins à 1858* (1981) to claim: “[F]loods of 1517 affected the whole lower delta east of [Hanoi]: ‘The bodies of peasants dead from starvation were piled one on top of the other’”. Le Thanh Khoi does not indicate where he got this information, but the dynastic chronicle does not show that there was a flood that year, only that there was starvation that was particularly bad in the lower delta, where a major rebellion was being fought.

On the same page, Kiernan also cites a problematic passage from an article by historian John Whitmore about corruption in the early sixteenth century to make a claim about environmental degradation at that time. The early sixteenth century was indeed a time of political instability and corruption, and it would be interesting to know if that instability was in any way related to climatic or environmental change. The dynastic chronicle for this period discusses some of the actions of some of the corrupt officials and then contains the following metaphorical statement: “In building mansions, the [mountainous] areas of Thai Nguyen and Tuyen Quang did not have the trees to satiate their desires [literally, ‘springs of desire’].”

In an early 1990s paper, Whitmore translated this passage more literally, and as a result introduced some inaccuracies. He wrote, “Even the mountainous areas of Thai Nguyen and Tuyen Quang, stripped of trees for houses, had no wood to control the springs”. In Whitmore’s rendering, metaphorical “springs of desire” became literal springs of water that for some unexplained reason needed to be controlled with wood, whatever that means. Kiernan distorts this statement even further: “By 1505-9 ... the cutting of timber for housing construction had denuded the upland regions of Thai Nguyen and Tuyen Quang, leaving ‘no wood to control the springs,’ apparently leading to flooding and erosion”.

So, from a metaphorical statement about the extent of corruption in early sixteenth century Vietnam, we now have “historical evidence” of deforestation and erosion in that period. Whitmore may have produced a garbled translation that begs to be verified, but he certainly did not make any claims about flooding and erosion. That is the contribution of a historian who cannot read and evaluate Vietnamese historical sources, either primary or secondary.

**K**iernan's linguistic limitations also lead to numerous problems in his coverage of the final years of pre-colonial Vietnam under the Nguyen dynasty in the nineteenth century. The second ruler of this dynasty was Emperor Minh Mang, whom he describes as "aggressive", "ideologically rigid", "repressive", "haughty", "an unusually inflexible ruler" and a man who "exhibited a Confucian preoccupation with models from antiquity". As proof of this, Kiernan writes, "Minh Mang's 1820 coronation coincided with a major epidemic of plague that reduced the population by more than two hundred thousand people. Yet one of his first acts was to order the banning of the *nom* script from all court memorials written in the examination system."

The "*nom* script" was a demotic script, based on Chinese characters, for writing Vietnamese words. There is one historical source that states that prior to Minh Mang's reign, some officials had been including such characters in their memorials and other official documents, and that Minh Mang ordered that all characters must be written following the style in the Qing dynasty *Kangxi Dictionary*, which would mean that documents from that time onward could contain only Chinese characters, and not demotic ones.

Such an act is clearly not as important as attending to a plague; however, there was no plague at that time. The change in the script policy was made during the first month of Minh Mang's rule. The plague occurred at the end of that year. Kiernan got his information about the plague from a monograph on this period that Alexander Woodside published in 1971. Woodside did not indicate when in 1820 the plague struck, and Kiernan did not, or could not, check.

Minh Mang's first acts as emperor were actually to forgive back-taxes from the eighteen years of his father's reign and to announce a tax exemption for



the current year. In response to the plague that struck later, Minh Mang reportedly distributed more than 730,000 strings of cash. I am not sure how much that helped, but forgiving taxes and distributing money to people in need do not strike me as the actions of a “haughty” and “unusually inflexible ruler”.

Kiernan presents a similarly erroneous characterisation of Minh Mang in discussing the 1830s, when the Nguyen dynasty fought a war with Siam and then sought to annex Cambodia. Woodside mentioned in passing in his 1971 monograph that, as part of this effort, “Vietnamese crops were imported and systematically planted in the late 1830s”. Kiernan had a research assistant translate a Vietnamese translation of the document that Woodside referenced, and, based on that, he wrote about a supposed attempt by Minh Mang to “impose his agrarian vision on” Cambodia. As part of this vision, we are told that in the late 1830s Minh Mang’s officials “brought Vietnamese crops to Cambodia and supervised their systematic cultivation”. According to Kiernan, however, this plan did not go well. He cites a Vietnamese official, via the Yale undergraduate’s translation, as stating, “We have often advised them to till the land diligently and cultivate crops accordingly, to plant beans and rice”. However, and again citing the same translation, these efforts failed, and “food shortages now threatened an ‘emergency’ in the area west of Phnom Penh, which was ‘in very bad shape’”.

This is all a complete misunderstanding that results from Kiernan’s inability to read the sources for the period. Woodside erroneously attributed some information about the planting of crops in Cambodia to the late 1830s. In fact, it dates from 1834 — a fact Kiernan’s translator apparently also missed — right when the Vietnamese first gained control of Cambodia, and when that country was suffering badly from the devastation of years of warfare, particularly in the area to the west of Phnom Penh. In an effort to stave off starvation, the Vietnamese had beans and corn — not rice — planted in some

areas, because these crops can grow in various types of soil. In other words, the food shortage “emergency” was not the result of some impractical agrarian vision of Minh Mang’s, but the product of the previous years of warfare and a condition that the Vietnamese, Minh Mang included, sought to alleviate.

I do not take pleasure in pointing out the failings of this work. However, as one of the few academics in the English-speaking world who works on pre-modern Vietnam and who can read the sources in classical Chinese, it would be a dereliction of duty for me to stay silent. This is a major publication from a reputable press. Many readers will undoubtedly approach this book assuming that it is solid, but it is not, and for its coverage of the pre-modern period, only a few scholars will have the ability to see this.

Furthermore, the above examples are by no means isolated cases. There are countless other such instances in the 300 pages that deal with the pre-modern period. Ultimately, what this results in is a kind of crude positivism. Without the ability to read primary sources, Kiernan also lacks the ability to evaluate secondary scholarship and translations. As a result, virtually any information in English or French then becomes acceptable as “data” for his examination of the past.

I will leave it to the experts on modern Vietnamese history to evaluate to what extent *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* contributes to our understanding of the modern period. However, for the more than two millennia of pre-modern history that it covers, it is singularly damaging.

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