

## VIETNAM

TRAN, NHUNG TUYET, AND ANTHONY REID, editors. *Việt Nam: Borderless Histories*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. ix + 370 pages. Maps, photographs, index, bibliography, glossary. Cloth US\$65.00, £41.50; ISBN 0-299-21770-9; paper US\$24.95 £15.95; ISBN 0-299-21774-7.

The basis of this book was a conference held at the University of Pennsylvania in April 2000 titled “Moving beyond the War: New Directions in the Study of Việt Nam.” Its editors are Anthony Reid, a leader of studies of Southeast Asian history in the Braudel style, and Nhung Tuyet Tran, one of the younger generation of historians of Việt Nam.

The effects of nationalism on the study of Việt Nam history have been profound. Reid and Tran say that it is only recently that a new generation of historians have been able to explore the political and cultural complexities of relations between the many peoples who have inhabited the Indo-Chinese peninsula without having to consider the effect of their words on national struggle (3).

It is necessary to explain what “borderless” means, as it is a crucial term. What is the difference between “borderless” and *nam tiến* (the southern expansion of the Việt people)? And how different is this from a Việt-centric view of history? From thirteenth century until recently, in the major narratives of Vietnamese history, *nam tiến* has been portrayed as glorious victories of the Việt people, and the histories of the Cham and Khmer peoples, who originally lived there, has been ignored. Việt-centric historians have asserted their version as if the present-day conditions of Việt Nam have existed for some four thousand years. But this is not true.

Two authors elaborate on this issue in different ways. As Wynn Wilcox explains, when we study the war between the Tây Sơn movement and the early Nguyễn Ánh Gia Long court yet only concentrate on the present-day border, we miss the reality of transnationalism and multiethnicity of the period. To alleviate their desperate supply situation, between 1777 and 1789 Nguyễn Ánh sent his officials on diplomatic missions to Cambodia, Siam, India, France, and Melaka. They frequently purchased supplies and ammunition from Spanish, Dutch, Chinese, and English outposts. Finally during this period Nguyễn Ánh appeared to be willing to accept support from anyone with ability, regardless of education or nationality; as a result, Chinese pirates, Spanish mercenaries, and French missionaries, among others, not only assisted the Nguyễn regime but became integrated into Nguyễn official life. Wilcox stresses the diversity of backgrounds of officials from other areas, such as China, Cambodia, and Spain, and emphasizes that even the “Vietnamese” of the court came from different areas. This diversity makes it difficult to distinguish a single group of

officials that opposed “the French” (195–96). This transnationality is maintained by another author, Li Tana, who refuses to consider separately Sài Gòn and Bangkok, the two major economic and political centers of mainland Southeast Asia that are built so close to each other temporally and spatially. In doing so, she supplies a full review of trading patterns that were common in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century southeast Asia (154).

In addition to an Introduction by the editors and a summary of the Vietnamese village land holding structure (Chapter 1) by Phan Huy Lê, professor of history at Hà Nội University, this book consists of three parts.

In Part 1, *Constructing Việt against a Hán World*, we learn that although the Vietnamese overcame the threat of invasion from its much larger neighbor China, there were cultural elements that were impossible to distinguish from those of China. Scholars here challenge pre-nationalist understandings of Vietnamese history and identity by examining the differing perspectives of the two most influential chroniclers of Đại Việt, Lê Văn Hưu and Ngô Sĩ Liên (Yu In Sun, Chapter 2), the basis for Đại Việt’s remarkable fifteenth-century expansion to the effective adoption of Chinese-derived military technology (Sun Laichen, Chapter 3), and the subverting of the contemporary construction of Vietnamese womanhood based on inheritance provisions in the Lê Code (Nhưng Tuyet Tran, Chapter 4).

The group of essays in Part 2, *Southern Pluralities*, explores the particular complexity concerning the new territories (*Đàng Trong*) into which Vietnamese migrated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which fragmented the state in two while introducing new interactions with Cham, Khmer, Chinese, and Montagnard peoples. They show the southern part of the Indochinese Peninsula before the nineteenth century as a contested, open “water frontier.” Li Tana demonstrates that the history of the most complex and vigorous part of Việt Nam is profoundly distorted by projecting modern national borders back into the past (Chapter 5). Charles Wheeler (Chapter 6) shows the value of uniting the usually separated histories of the Cham, Vietnamese, and Chinese peoples in order to understand the long-term history of a economic zone in what is central Việt Nam today. He demonstrates how the coexistence of the Cham and Vietnamese peoples in the eighteenth century renders the relentless *nam tiến* narrative inappropriate. Wynn Wilcox (Chapter 7) exposes the pluralism at the heart of period in which a unified Việt Nam was constructed under Gia Long (founder of Nguyễn dynasty).

Two of the essays in Part 3, *Vietnamese-European Encounters in the Fresh Light of Borderless History*, reverse the Orientalist paradigm by highlighting Vietnamese discoveries of Europe. George Dutton (Chapter 8) introduces us to the remarkable life of Father Philipê Binh, a prolific Vietnamese Jesuit who spent half his life in Portugal in the early nineteenth century. Binh’s writings represent the fullest pre-colonial Vietnamese portrayal of Europe as well as the largest surviving body of pre-colonial *quốc ngữ* writing. Kimloan Hill (Chapter 9) explores the participation of almost one hundred thousand Vietnamese during the First World War in Europe and the extraordinary impact this had on their lives. Hill shows how their daily experience eroded their perception of the civilized French as they encountered firsthand racist attitudes and humiliation under the French military. Finally, J. P. Daughton (Chapter 10) investigates Pigneau de Behaine, a French priest and an adviser for Nguyễn Ánh Gia Long. His ambivalence toward his cosmopolitan life turned him into an icon of colonial nationalism.

Although this book is historically oriented, anthropologists will find some parts very attractive, especially chapter 4, “Beyond the Myth of Equality.” Nhưng Tuyet Tran questions a characteristic that was held up to demonstrate the “uniqueness of Vietnam:” the notion that under the Lê Code, daughters had the rights of equal share with brothers when the household was divided. She concludes that the Lê Code decrees that only in the

absence of a will could the brothers and the sisters divide the household among themselves. Furthermore, in mentioning the division among brothers and sisters, the statute uses the phrase “to divide among” (*tuong phân*=相分), not “to divide equally” (*quan phân*=均分), a difference with enormous implications. If the law decreed equal inheritance for daughters and sons, then the character for “equal division” (*quan phân*) would have been used (131). She demonstrates her case with real testaments (*chức thư*) relating to unequal division between brothers and sisters, and concludes that a daughter’s right to family property was conditional. The power to decide who inherited the family property lay in the hands of the parents (139) without falling in the dichotomy of whether daughter had family property rights or not, as was the case with the French colonial court. The challenge Tran offers is very appealing and takes the reader beyond the “myth.” In contrast to China, statute laws decree that property rights for women is still evidence of “Vietnamese uniqueness.” Further investigation is required concerning why this happened in Việt Nam.

In general, this book presents a series of new challenges and exciting findings, and brings readers into a new sphere of Vietnamese studies.

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