

Completing the most monumental series on the “National History” of Vietnam

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Vietnam has a long and rich history. In effort to recreate its heroic but equally tragic historical episodes, so far, many domestic and foreign works have been written on various topics. However, large-scale historical works are rare. As the country needs a national history series commensurate with the significance of Ho Chi Minh’s era, and to follow the policy of the Party Central Committee Secretariat and the direction of the Government, the Ministry of Science and Technology has organised a state project (KHXXH-LSVN/14-18) to research and compile a special series on Vietnamese national history. In November 2021, the last volume of the series was finalised at the state level. This article offers an overview of the research and compilation process and highlights outstanding new insights of the most accomplished works on Vietnamese history thus far.

Previous significant publications on Vietnamese history

I begin by reviewing a number of works that are considered “National History” and some significant others written by domestic and international scholars. The earliest is the *Dai Viet Su Luoc* (A summary of the history of Dai Viet). This chronicle was compiled at the end of the Tran Dynasty. It was then lost. Fortunately, on a very special occasion in the early 1960s, Vietnam received a book set titled *Viet Su Luoc* (越史略)¹. According to researchers, this is the same historical document that was lost

in the 15th century. Another text that has not survived to this day is the *Dai Viet Su Ky*, consisting of 30 volumes, compiled by Le Van Huu in 1272. This can be considered as the first large-scale series on “National History”, which received a commendation from Emperor Tran Thanh Tong. It is possible that this series was destroyed or taken away during the 20-year rule of Ming China.

Since the victory of the Lam Son uprising, the Le court attached great importance to history writing. Under Emperor Le Thanh Tong’s attention, Ngo Sy Lien and other historians of the Le successfully compiled the *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu* (Complete Annals of Dai Viet). As of 1492, it comprised 24 volumes, which were then supplemented further by later historians. The project lasted until the 18th year of Chinh Hoa (1697) when it was first engraved and

¹This may be the *Dai Viet Su Luoc* (大越史略) that the Ming brought to China in the 15th century. After being lost for a long period, the document was found in *Complete Library in Four sections* (四庫全書) and then published, but the word *Dai* was omitted. In the early 1960s, this document was given as part of a gift from the Chinese Government to Vietnam (reprinted). The original may still be kept in the *Complete Library* in Beijing.

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Ministry of Science and Technology of Vietnam received the "National History".

printed. Today, this series remains one of the most important original documents for the study of Vietnamese history. After this series, there was another "National History", *Dai Viet Su Ky Tien Bien*. It comprises 17 volumes, written in Chinese, compiled by Ngo Thi Sy, and edited by Ngo Thi Nham. The series was engraved in 1800 during the Tay Son era. Next is *Kham Dinh Viet Su Thong Giam Cuong Muc*, with 53 volumes, prepared by the Bureau of State Historiography at the order of Emperor Tu Duc. This project mobilised a large number of historians over nearly 30 years. Along with the national histories written from the founding of the country to the end of the Later Le, the Nguyen also commissioned the compilation of dynastic histories called the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* (*Tien Bien* and *Chinh Bien*). This series is

made up of 584 volumes and was the largest series up until that time. Although it began in 1821, it was not until 1909 when the book was printed, which was under the reign of Emperor Duy Tan. Thus, by the August Revolution in 1945, there were many printed "National History" series available. But so far, only three of them remain to this day including *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu*, *Dai Viet Su Ky Tien Bien*, and *Kham Dinh Viet Su Thong Giam Cuong Muc*. Although the *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* is massive, it focuses only on Nguyen rulership.

During the French colonial period, there were almost no complete works except for Tran Trong Kim's *Vietnam Su Luoc*. Published in 1920 and reprinted many times later, the work has a significance of its own as it was the first Vietnamese history written in Latinised

scripts and chronologically compiled by an erudite, professional historian. It is easy to read and understand. Despite its limitations, the text was widely received.

After the August Revolution, especially after northern Vietnam was liberated in 1954, Vietnam's modern historiography was rapidly resuscitated and developed. With many achievements, it has been vibrantly contributing to the mission of national liberation, defence, and development. Besides monographs, there are a number of works compiled in chronicle forms. Among these, the *Vietnamese History* series prepared by the Vietnam Social Science Committee can be considered national history. During the fiercest years of the resistance war against the US, the series is aimed at raising historical awareness about national and revolutionary traditions and promoting people's fighting spirits. The editorial board was working under the direction of the Steering Committee with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong as an advisor. Volume I of the series (from beginning to 1858) was published in 1971, volume II (1858 to 1945) in 1985, and volume III (from 1945 to 1975) is not yet published².

Over the past two decades, publications from history research and training institutions have come in various formats and genres. As for chronological historiography, we should take into account the three-volume *Dai Cuong Lich Su Vietnam* (General Outline of Vietnamese History) compiled by Hanoi National University of Education; *Tien Trinh*

Lich Su Vietnam (Vietnamese Historical Progress); and a four-volume *Vietnamese History* published by the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. The largest effort is the fifteen-volume *Vietnamese History* compiled and published by the Institute of History, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. Other than chronicles, thematic historiography is also prepared in a highly methodical and meticulous manner. We can mention various works on the Vietnamese history of the Communist Party, Government, National Assembly, and Military (including a 14-volume series on military history and a five-volume on military thought). These works are all valuable contributions.

Thus, after more than seven decades since the August Revolution, only a two-volume *Vietnamese History* has been compiled and published as a national history. However, the work is rather undetailed and carries a specific political purpose of supporting the fight for national independence and reunification. Today's necessities for developing and protecting the country require a new project on "National History" that serves the national mission of industrialisation, modernisation, and international integration.

Organising activities

To complete the massive workload, the project management board³ has mobilised a team of more than 300 national historians and foreign researchers working continuously over five years. To address its important mission,

²Volume I of the series, the authors' names are subsumed under "Vietnam Social Science Committee", but volume II (published in 1985), under "Vietnam Social Science Committee", there are specific names: Nguyen Cong Binh, Van Tao, Pham Xuan Nam, Bui Dinh Thanh.

³The Board of Directors was established under Decision No.510/QĐ-BKHCN, 26 March 2014 with the late Prof. Phan Huy Le as Chairman. Three Vice-Chairmen are Prof. Dr. Vu Minh Giang, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Tran Duc Cuong, and Prof. Dr. Nguyen Quang Ngoc together with two secretaries, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vu Van Quan, and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Doan Minh Huan.

the Board had scrupulously organised various exchanges among domestic and international experts. On this basis, a scientific Council of 21 prestigious social scientists was chosen to be the editors of the volumes. The Council also developed regulations specifying the functions, task allocations, personnel management, and Council membership.

This is an enormous project with strict standards and is carried out by a large number of experts with diverse research and writing styles. Searching for common voices and methods is extremely important. The Board of Directors, therefore, prepared a specific manual on *The le bien soan bo Lich su Viet Nam* (Compilation Regulations of the *Vietnamese History* series).

To ensure the uniform quality across chapters in each volume, the management board first requested 'sample chapters' to be submitted for critical discussions and thereby providing lessons for subsequent chapters. This approach has brought many conveniences to the authors. It can be said that this is the premise for the series to be prepared in an utmost methodical, scientific, and scrupulous manner.

The structure of the series

Writing this *Vietnamese History* series that is, preparing a new "National History" series, is considered a national mission. It includes 25 volumes of chronicle history and 5 volumes of chronology.

The chronicles cover the entire historical process from primeval times to 2015, divided by time frames for each volume. Accordingly, the entire primeval era is presented in the

first volume. Volume II focuses on the first movement of state formation in the North from the 7th century to 179 BC, which is often called the Hung Vuong and An Duong Vuong eras. Volume III presents the Chinese domination period and the struggle against Sinic courts. It also includes state formations in the Central (Lam Ap, Champa) and South (Funan, Thuy Chan Lap) regions from 179 BC to 905. Volume IV is about an extremely exciting period with important historical milestones. It covers the end of the thousand-year domination of Chinese regimes, which opened the era of national independence. Volume V deals with the brilliant Dai Viet civilization created by the Ly dynasty (1009-1226). Volume VI writes about the achievements of martial arts and literary legitimacy under the Tran up until the middle of the 14th century. The last part is reserved for resistances against the Ming, which is further presented in Volume VII.

The entire Ancient - Medieval history is presented in the first thirteen volumes, ending with the event of the French - Spanish attack in Da Nang. The next twelve volumes cover periods of early modern history from 1858 to 1884. Then, each subsequent volume is commensurate with a historical period that begins and ends with a specific landmark event. For example, volume XIX begins in 1939 when the Communist Party of Vietnam made a strategic shift in revolutionary leadership to match the situation after the outbreak of World War II and ended with the victory of the August Revolution in 1945. The next volume covers the period after 1945 up to the 1954 Dien Bien Phu Victory and the Geneva Accords.

In addition to twenty-five volumes of chronicle history, chronological volumes serve as toolkits to help readers look up, study, and compare tens of thousands of events in Vietnamese history. Volume I of the chronological volumes covers events from primeval times to 1400 when the Tran collapsed; volume II covers subsequent events up until 1771 when the Tay Son movement broke out; volume III continues until the French colonial invasion in 1858; volume IV is devoted entirely to the events between 1858 and 1945; and the final volume highlights histories that took place from the August Revolution of 1945 up until 2015.

In addition to 30 volumes of chronicle and chronology, the project also introduces three sets of historical databases including General Directory (*Tong thu muc*) serving international research on Vietnamese history; Vietnamese history database (*Co so tu lieu ve lich su Vietnam*), which is extracted and compiled from multiple domestic and foreign databases; and finally, Digitised database (*Co so du lieu*) which will be updated continuously provides a search engine for Vietnamese history studies worldwide.

Highlights of the series

A new feature that stands out from all previous Vietnamese histories is the attention towards the comprehensiveness of national history. Following Party leadership and Ho Chi Minh's thought on issues related to Vietnamese history, and using modern research methodologies, the "National History" series is consistent with an approach that uses the contemporary territory of Vietnam as an inclusive space for understanding the past. By so doing, the series

covers the history of all communities, ethnic groups, and kingdoms that had existed within the territory. Previous historical narratives have begun Vietnamese history by observing primeval inhabitants and then moving towards a sequence of state formations from the Van Lang and Au Lac, Dai Viet, Vietnam, Dai Nam to the present day. In this trajectory, the history of Vietnam continues wherever the Vietnamese people went. With this conception, the history of the South-Central Coast and the South only began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, hence, excluding the history of Champa and Funan.

Vietnam is a country with a long and rich history. In today's territory, since ancient times, there were civilisation centres associated with ancient kingdoms that exerted great influence on different historical eras. The residents in Northern Vietnam built up a brilliant Red river civilisation serving as the material and spiritual foundation for the formation and development of the Van Lang and Au Lac regimes; in the central coast, from the Sa Huynh culture, the state of Lam Ap and Champa gradually formed; with the Oc Eo civilisation in the lower Mekong region, the Funan state was once the centre of international trading posts. These three states established certain relationships but also were distinctive historical entities. For various reasons, quite a long time ago, writings on Vietnamese histories were often presented in a way that emphasised the movement of ethnic Vietnamese (the Kinh). As a consequence, ancient southern civilisations and kingdoms were presented very faintly or even completely absent from the historical records. This has led to a particular perception,

as commented by some foreign historians, “wherever Vietnamese people have gone to, Vietnamese history emerged”. This is not only a mistake in historical scientific awareness, but, more dangerously, it also affects the minds and emotions of many communities and is a loophole for reactionary forces to distort, divide, and introduce anti-government propaganda. Given the new principle of comprehensiveness, all content presented in the contemporary *Vietnamese History* series takes the current Vietnamese territory as the starting point. With this principle, history from primeval to modern times throughout Vietnam is explicated more faithfully in each respective period. Cultures of Sa Huynh, Dong Nai, Lam Ap, Champa, Funan, and Thuy Chan Lap are all included more commensurably in the series.

Another new feature of this “National History” series is to highlight the multidimensionality of Vietnamese history. In the history of Vietnam, anti-foreign aggression plays a decisive role in the survival of the nation. Therefore, these activities need a proper place in historical research so that objective truths are respected and valuable historical lessons can be drawn. Equally important, along with the history of anti-foreign aggression, the volumes on chronicle history have also adequately concentrated on many other historical dimensions ranging from politics, economy, and diplomacy to society and culture. Therefore, along with comprehensiveness, multidimensionality is also an important principle that has been thoroughly grasped in the process of preparing the series. This principle helps overcome the limitations of previous historiographies. Multidimensionality requires the series to properly represent all

historical aspects of Vietnam, in which the economy, society, and culture are fundamental and the most extensive, while impacts of politics and military are also well incorporated.

Because Vietnamese history is often driven by war, historians can be occupied by political and military topics. Thus, writing about war is often overwhelming, while economic activities and socio-cultural dimensions, which are also the fundamental aspects of history, are often in disproportionate positions or even forgotten. This situation has led to distorted perceptions about the history and people of Vietnam. There was a time when the Vietnamese themselves thought that the Vietnamese were only good at conducting resistance wars against foreign invaders, while foreigners thought of us as belligerents. These narrow perceptions make it easy to forget when a Vietnamese pianist won the prestigious Chopin competition in 1980, or the recent winning of the Field Medal - an award equivalent to the Nobel Prize in Mathematics.

The origins of these narrow views can be explained by many reasons, such as writing incomprehensive and biased history, being overwhelmed by wars, or one-sided praises of military victory that reduces the significance of social-economic and cultural factors and processes. Applying a comprehensive perspective to the preparation of the current *Vietnamese History* series empowers us with more objective and scientific views of national history that further enhances our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Vietnamese so that they can turn everything they have into a competitive advantage in the

era of globalisation. The series has made this point very clear throughout.

One important scientific standard that have been achieved in preparing the current *Vietnamese History* series is that it has covered the most updated research both at home and abroad. Many historical events and periods are presented according to new research findings that have been widely accepted. The series also presents new arguments addressing controversial and sensitive historical issues. This is a great effort from the group of authors.

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