



BOOK REVIEW

Liam C. Kelley and Gerard Sasges (eds.). *Vietnam Over the Long Twentieth Century: Becoming Modern, Going Global*. Singapore: Springer, 2024

Published online: 29 August 2025

To cite this article: Bui, T. H. 2025. Book review: Vietnam over the long twentieth century: Becoming modern, going global. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 21 (2): 321–323. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2025.21.2.17>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2025.21.2.17>

As part of the book series “Global Vietnam: Across Time, Space and Community”, edited by Liam C. Kelley and Phan Le Ha, the volume *Vietnam Over the Long Twentieth Century: Becoming Modern, Going Global* under the editorship of Liam C. Kelly and Gerald Sasges (2024) represents a significant contribution to Vietnam studies, offering a transdisciplinary exploration of Vietnam’s historical, cultural, and social dynamics in a global context. It makes a continued commitment to the series’ aim to advance scholarship on Vietnam by nurturing new voices and perspectives, reflecting the complexities of a globalised, decentralised knowledge production era.

The volume has indeed realised this promise by engaging scholars “at the early stages of their careers” (p. 9) to deeply explore Vietnam’s transformation over the “long” twentieth century through a transdisciplinary lens, emphasising its journey toward modernity and global integration. The book is structured around key themes such as civilisational discourse, women’s roles in social and educational reform, publishing and cultural production, religious localisation, language policies, transnational diplomacy, diaspora experiences, and legal reforms. The contributors’ documentation of twentieth-century Vietnam is illuminating in multiple respects. Altogether they serve as a strong reminder of the importance of historical scholarship in Vietnam studies in the context of the overly focus on contemporary affairs.

For example, Chapter 2 (Civilisational Discourse) and Chapter 6 (Religious Localisation) exemplify how global ideas are vernacularised in a nuanced way. Discussing the civilisational discourse in Vietnam at the turn of the century, Chapter 2 brings to the fore the pro-French Sino-Vietnamese historical writings situated within the Duy Tân (reform) movement by Đào Nguyên Phổ, Ngô Giáp Đậu and Hoàng Cao Khải. It effectively connects Vietnamese intellectual history to a broader East Asian intellectual network, challenging Eurocentric narratives of modernisation. The excellent use of primary Sinitic sources, such as reformist texts, strengthened the chapter’s historical rigor. Meanwhile, Chapter 6’s focus on religious syncretism, illustrating how oral traditions, state policies, and diaspora communities transformed Our Lady of La Vang into a national symbol that blends Catholic and indigenous Mother Goddess worship. This offers a compelling case study of vernacularisation. Its transnational perspective, particularly the inclusion of diaspora contributions, further enriches the volume’s global framework.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore how various writers, such as Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hoà and contributors to *Women’s News* (*Phụ nữ tân văn*) sought to modernise the lives of Vietnamese women and contributed to social and educational reforms during that period. The early 20th century was a

period of significant transformation in Vietnam, driven by multiple forces like the shift from Confucian traditions to modern education, the influence of French colonialism, and the rise of nationalist and feminist movements. These chapters represent efforts to reclaim and restore the rightful prominence of these writers in Vietnamese history and literature.

Chapter 5 examines publishing in colonial Cochinchina (1930–1944), with a particular focus on the interplay between sacred and secular texts. It analyses non-periodical deposits and donation records, showing how publishing served as a medium for both commercial and religious practices, reinforcing traditional beliefs while promoting modernity. The chapter's innovative focus on publishing as a cultural and economic practice broadens the understanding of civil society by highlighting non-elite contributions, such as temple donors.

Chapter 7's comparative analysis of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam provides a nuanced view of Vietnam's divided educational landscape. Its focus on student protests and academic agency is directly connected to civil society dynamics, illustrating how education became a site of contestation. However, the chapter's focus on elite institutions and urban protests overlooks rural educational contexts and minority language policies and it lacks engagement with post-1975 language policy developments in the reunified Vietnam.

Using Polish and Vietnamese archival sources, Chapter 8 offers a valuable context for understanding how international relations shaped Vietnam's political environment. It examines high-level contacts between Vietnam and Poland during the Vietnam War as a litmus test of socialist solidarity and honesty. Supported by strong historical evidence, the chapter critically questions the official narrative and highlights dishonesty as a prominent feature of top-level Polish-Vietnamese interactions from 1965–1970. Interestingly, this argument presents a compelling challenge to the ongoing emphasis of Vietnamese leaders even nowadays on sincerity as a core diplomatic value across time.

Chapter 9's focus on diaspora experiences enriches the volume's transnational framework. This chapter examines media portrayals of Vietnamese migrant workers in East Germany during German reunification (1989–1990). It highlights their marginalisation, resistance (e.g., threatened strikes), and contributions to German society, using sources like the *Berliner Zeitung* and *Neue Zeit*. Its analysis of media narratives as sites of contestation demonstrates how migrants asserted agency despite discrimination. The last chapter, which has a comparative approach on legal vernacularisation highlights how global legal norms are adapted to Vietnam's socialist context. While its detailed analysis of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)'s role adds a policy-oriented perspective to the volume, it does not explore how these reforms altered its socialist modernity, embraced neoliberal modernity, or engaged with grassroots legal advocacy or civic participation. The explicit point it makes is that Vietnam-specific outcomes in JICA's legal assistance are underemphasised in comparison to Cambodia and Laos. Even though law reform is a crucial theme for contemporary Vietnam, this chapter is quite divergent from the book's overall framework and focus on Vietnam's journey towards modernity and global integration. It serves as a critical review of JICA's role in legal technical assistance for three countries, i.e., Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, rather than an engagement with how law reforms in Vietnam reflect its search for or abandonment of any modernity while going global. The different direction that this chapter takes is an unfortunate departure from the main focus of the book.

Even though the book editors do not spell out their own periodisation of Vietnam's long twentieth century, it can be inferred from their choice of chapters that the timeline is organised along the axis of colonial Vietnam, post-colonial and wartime Vietnam, and post-Cold War Vietnam. As

such, the first five chapters focus on the colonial Vietnam and its historical legacies while the next two chapters deal with two different issues during the wartime period namely, language policies and transnational diplomacy. The final two chapters discuss the Vietnamese diaspora experiences in Germany at the end of the Cold War and Japan's legal technical assistance in 1990s. Within this structure, the volume would be more balanced if one or two chapters on post-1975 and pre-1990s period been included. While the volume claims to cover the long twentieth century, most chapters concentrate on the colonial or Cold War periods, with relatively little attention paid to post-Đổi Mới Vietnam.

While the book's aim is ambitious and the methodology is innovative, it faces challenges inherent to its broad thematic scope as demonstrated by the series itself. The wide range of topics organised along a temporal axis covering the twentieth century is a strength but can at times feel fragmented, potentially overwhelming readers seeking a cohesive narrative. Additionally, the book's reliance on conference-derived essays (with the exception for Chapter 7 "Another Kind of Vietnamization", all contributions originated from the Engaging with Vietnam Conference held online in August 2021) resulted in some chapters being highly specialised with interconnections that are less coherent than the editors suggest.

The expanded scope, ranging from civilisational discourse to legal reforms, contributes to this sense of fragmentation. The Introduction (Chapter 1) attempts to unify the volume under the theme "Becoming Modern, Going Global" but the connections between certain topics, such as diplomacy and women's reform, are not always clearly articulated. That said, the problem of fragmentation is significantly mitigated by the editors' introduction that is crafted with clarity and analytical dexterity, deftly weaving together disparate themes with astute insight. The editors contextualise the contributions within broader global Vietnam discourses and ultimately do justice to the volume's actual focus on traditional Vietnamese or Chinese language-based research, rather than the transnational or global elements the title may initially imply.

Overall, *Vietnam Over the Long Twentieth Century: Becoming Modern, Going Global* is a critical resource for understanding Vietnam's search for modernity in the last century and shedding clearer light on how the country forged its modern identities and evolved its role in a globalised world. The volume's emphasis on new scholarship and interdisciplinary methods makes it an indispensable resource for Southeast Asian studies scholars, students, and those interested in Vietnam's diaspora and cultural dynamics. By challenging methodological nationalism to a certain extent and embracing global perspectives, the book richly portrays Vietnam as a site of vibrant, contested, and interconnected histories. It is particularly relevant for readers interested in civil society and history, as it illuminates how Vietnamese actors navigate state constraints to foster civic spaces, a theme that is resonant with contemporary debates on authoritarianism and globalisation. For this readership, the volume offers valuable insights into how Vietnamese actors vernacularise global concepts and contest state power, though a more inclusive and cohesive approach would enhance its overall impact.

Thiem Hai Bui

Stockholm Center for Global Asia, Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden