

Abstracts
Beyond Dichotomies: Alternative Voices and Histories in Post-Colonial Viet Nam

Panel 1: Civil Society and State Reach

Tuan Hoang (University of Notre Dame)

"Learning to Be Human: The Promotion of Bourgeois Values in Saigon"

This paper looks into two popular series of publications that came out from Saigon between the mid-1950s and the early 1960s: *Người dân học tập* [Citizens study] and *Học làm người* [Learning to be human]. The paper argues that these publications represent from-below efforts to disseminate and promote a moderately bourgeois culture in post-colonial Vietnam. It also points to renewed popularity of many titles in the two series (especially the latter one) after the *đổi mới* period as evidence of the enduring influence of – and attraction to – the ideas promoted there.

The paper traces the roots of these publications to cultural and intellectual changes during the period 1920-1945. Next, it addresses the themes and concerns of the publications in these series. Prominent among these themes are education and work, entrepreneurship and money-making, marriage and family life, health and beauty, and citizenship and nationalism. Frequently couching these themes in the traditional rhetoric of “art” and “skills,” the authors of these publications aimed to make these bourgeois values palatable and attractive to Vietnamese during a time of massive economic and political changes.

For the 2008 workshop, the call for papers suggests half a dozen of examples, including “sways of thinking and being in the modernizing post-colonial world (beyond the politics of war and revolution), as expressed in literature, fashions, advertising, performing arts, religion and other cultural modes and habits.” This paper is concerned with the popularization of modern middle-class ideas and ideals in the immediate post-colonial period; in turn, these ideas and ideals have outlasted revolutionary rhetoric and practices. The paper looks into a period that is traditionally overshadowed by narratives of political and military contestation. However, it aims to shift attention to cultural and intellectual realms that, in the long view, look to be equally important as (if not more than) war, politics, and diplomacy.

Van Nguyen-Marshall (Trent University)

"Associational Life in Saigon, 1950s-1970s"

This paper examines the involvement of Saigon residents in voluntary associations during the period of warfare (c. 1950s-1970s). As part of a larger book project exploring the state-society relationship, this paper focuses mainly on the roles and activities of voluntary associations, such as charitable and social organizations. During the war, particularly during periods of intense fighting and during the Americanization of the war, Saigon experienced severe social and economic disruption and dislocation. Already a multiethnic city, Saigon was the designation for many Northern immigrants who came South after 1954. During the war, refugees also streamed into the city seeking protection and employment. Even though the South Vietnamese government offered social aid to refugees and poor residents of Saigon, international relief organizations (such as the Catholic Relief Services and CARE) also provided many social services. However, there remained a great need for volunteer organizations to contribute to social relief. These groups were encouraged by the availability of international funding and infrastructure. While the South Vietnamese government recognized the practical and political importance of having these volunteer groups help with wartime social and economic problems, it is questionable whether their policies and actions helped or hindered these groups.

By examining the activities of voluntary associations, which are important aspects of civil society, this paper will provide insight into the nature and state of civil society in Saigon. The paper will also query whether or not these associational activities constituted a public sphere in providing Saigonese with a forum for critical discourse and civic activities that aimed to protect their particular interests. There exist two opposing views regarding civil society. While there are many academics and community

development practitioners who link the existence of civil societies to the emergence of democratic institutions, others have also demonstrated that such links cannot be taken for granted. Studies from Nigeria, for example, have shown how civil societies based on ethnicity or religion were actually detrimental to democratic development. Without a doubt the successive governments of the Republic of Vietnam were authoritarian with a strong dislike for freedom of the press and opinion, and yet the state was unable to control the public sphere, which at times exploded to radical heights as with the Buddhist protests in 1963. This paper will determine whether or not less radical forms of public and civic engagement were effective in protecting people's interests vis-à-vis the state.

This proposed paper fits into the workshop theme in two ways. First, as South Vietnam until recently has attracted little scholarly attention, this paper contributes to the endeavour to resuscitate South Vietnam from obscurity and from its overly simplistic portrayal as an American construction. The paper also fits into the theme of the workshop in that it focuses on ordinary men and women who sought to survive and cope with the war. While there is no doubt that political and military leaders (for both sides) played important roles in the history of Vietnam, there has been very little research done on the activities of ordinary people, especially those non-revolutionary, non-communist actors in South Vietnam and specifically in Saigon.

Tai Van Ta (Harvard University)
"Democracy in Action, with American Influence"

David Biggs (University of California, Riverside)
"From Casiers Tonkinoises to Strategic Hamlets and Khu Cong Nghiep: Modernist Responses to the Agricultural Crisis in the Mekong Delta"

With the crash in rice prices after 1930 and the increasing attention paid by Vietnamese and French writers and critics to the dire conditions for millions of peasants living in the countryside, the idea of the "agricultural crisis" was publically born. The crisis, especially in the newly opened lands of the Mekong Delta, was at once social and environmental as observers commented on the near total absence of controls on interest rates for tenants, famine and disease outbreaks brought on by poorly planned irrigation works, and the increasing activities of young radicals venturing into the hinterlands to organize market protests and occasional raids on privately held rice granaries. These events on the ground triggered different reactions in the colonial administration; especially during the Popular Front's brief tenure and during the years of the Vichy government when widespread famines broke out in the Red River Delta. A new corps of agricultural engineers proposed developing rectilinear grids of model villages called casiers (casements) to be settled by the poor in hopes of simultaneously boosting agricultural production, eliminating the susceptibility of peasants to revolutionary propositions, and improving living conditions.

These discussions of model settlements with grids of waterways to be located in the most barren reaches of the delta were realized in 1944 when a settler colony of Tonkinese peasants from the famine-stricken area around Thai Binh was established near Long Xuyen. With almost a million war refugees moving south after 1954, Ngo Dinh Diem and officials from the former Bao Dai government carried out similar resettlement strategies beginning in 1956. Claiming that he was neither a puppet of the United States nor an advocate of foreign counter-insurgency models, Ngo Dinh Diem and a cohort of advisors continued developing new schemes that they claimed were mostly born from existing, Vietnamese ideas. Drawing from French, Vietnamese and American documents, this paper argues that Vietnamese modernist responses to agricultural crises such as agrovilles and strategic hamlets were not so much implementations of American counter-insurgency design but elaborations on earlier responses to the agricultural crisis first articulated in the 1930's. Even post-war rural development projects such as collectivization schemes in the 1970's and industrial zones today were often situated on or near past settlements; thus even the contemporary discourse on rural modernization bears some relation to older modernist schemes.

Geoffrey C. Stewart (University of Western Ontario)

"Making the 'Personal' Political: Modernization and Civic Action in the Republic of Viet Nam, 1955-1963"

My paper, entitled "Making the "Personal" Political: Modernization and Civic Action in the Republic of Viet Nam, 1955-1963" challenges the traditional, overly-simplified and deterministic perspective of the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) that paints it as a hopelessly backward state that was little more than an American puppet. Using newly released documents from National Archives Number 2 in Hồ Chí Minh City, this paper views the RVN on its own terms, demonstrating that the government of Ngô Đình Diệm possessed its own revolutionary plan to develop a viable, independent state in the southern half of Viet Nam based on Emmanuel Mounier's philosophy of Personalism. In doing so, it moves beyond the standard Cold War paradigm of the Viet Nam Conflict by examining the campaign for the allegiance of the rural population in terms of a competition between secular and spiritual paths to modernity as articulated by the National Liberation Front (NLF) and Diệm government respectively. Just as significantly, it brings out important similarities between the Leninist-inspired organization underpinning the efforts of the NLF and the Personalist philosophy that guided the policies of the Civic Action cadres at work in the villages of Southern Viet Nam. Moreover, by employing newly available action reports and memoranda from Civic Action groups in the field in Southern Viet Nam this paper brings the voices of the rural Vietnamese population into the discussion, providing a first-hand account of the impact of the Diệm government's policies on the rural population. Thus, by attempting to legitimize the RVN's rural development policies this paper promises to add much to a hitherto little-studied aspect of post-colonial Vietnamese history and provide fresh insight to the scholarship on this period that complicates the views expressed in much of the existing literature.

Ken MacLean (Clark University)

"Uncertain Fixations: Reassessing the Experimental Wave of the Land Reforms (1953-1954)"

The land reform tribunal in Đại Từ District of Thái Nguyên Province announced its verdict in July of 1953. The tribunal concluded Cát Thanh Long (also known as Nguyễn Thị Năm) was on the basis of the evidence presented a class enemy and should be put to death. The decision, although approved by both the Central Land Reform Committee and the Central Committee of the Worker's Party, was nonetheless a controversial one due to Cát Thanh Long's past contributions to the revolutionary struggle. For this reason the controversy did not end with her execution; it instead continued until 1993 when efforts by family members and colleagues to have government officials correct her class fraction and have her service publicly acknowledged reached a successful conclusion. This paper draws upon the life, death, and posthumous campaign to rehabilitate Cát Thanh Long as a means to unsettle the existing historiography on the land reforms, which her problematic trial helped officially launch. Towards this end, this paper focuses on the experimental wave that occurred in Thái Nguyên Province between December 1953 and October 1954. A close examination of field reports prepared by land reform officials who oversaw the experimental wave reveals several items of interest. Most obviously, the reports provide insights into how officials sought, with mixed success, to "localize" the class struggle by modifying the categories and practices they had been instructed to use to mobilize lowland Kinh peasants against land lords and other enemies of the revolution in the context of ethnically diverse upland areas. The form and content of the reports, which are surprisingly varied, also highlight the unorthodox methodologies used to assess the class status of others were flexible rather than fixed; moreover, the negotiated process by which these labels were assigned reflected substantial disagreements over how to correctly implement the class struggle in this area.

Dang Dinh Trung (Australian National University)

"Post-1975 Collectivization in Southern Viet Nam: How Local Conditions and Local Politics Affected the Performance of Viet Nam's National Policies"

Soon after reunification in 1975, Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP)'s leaders decided to remake the south's economy in the line with socialist north. In the agricultural sector, VCP's leaders

called for carrying out 'socialist agricultural transformation' and collectivization. At the fourth party's congress in 1976, the party's leaders vowed that collectivization would be completed in the south by 1980.

The result of the reform varied from region to region. Collectivization was rapid in the Central Coast but face major difficulties in the Mekong Delta and other parts of the Southern Region. By 1980 the Central Coast had completed the task of socialist transformation of agriculture and collectivization while the Mekong delta failed to achieve the target; collectivization there incorporated only a minority of peasant households and land. With additional effort and struggle, VCPO leaders claimed in the mid-1980s that collectivization in the Mekong Delta and elsewhere in the Southern Region had been completed.

By comparing two provinces in these two regions: Quang Nam province of the Central coast and An Giang province of the Mekong delta, the paper reveals how local conditions and local politics influenced the implementation of the national policies. This paper argues that the faster pace of collectivization and other agrarian reforms in Quang Nam relative to the An Giang came from weaker peasant resistance and stronger local cadres' commitment to the socialist transformation of agriculture. In other words, there were two major reasons for the differences in outcomes of national policies between two these places. First, local cadres in Quang Nam had more experience with VCP's polices and north collectivization and were more loyal to VCP's socialist transformation of agriculture than their counterparts in An Giang. Second, collectivization encountered weaker peasant resistance in Quang Nam than in An Giang. Being heavily affected by wars and living in extremely difficult socio-economic and ecological conditions, villagers in the Central Coast were closer to the 'moral economy peasants' defined by moral economists. Their main concern was subsistence and survival. So, peasants there tented to comply with state policies to avoid any risk and disadvantage. Meanwhile, villagers in the Mekong delta were better off and lived in favorable socio-economic and ecological conditions and thus were closer to being 'rational economy peasant' as defined by political economists. Their main concern was profitability so they tended and were able to resist more strongly and evade collective farming when saw its disadvantage.

My paper looks at regional differences (the Central Coast compared with the Mekong delta) of the south to explain the differences in local responses to and outcomes of national policies. I think that my paper fits well with the main themes of the workshop which concern about regional and local identities (instead of north/south binary) and their responses to development issues.

Abstracts

Beyond Dichotomies: Alternative Voices and Histories in Post-Colonial Viet Nam

Panel 2: Region, Time, and Movement

Tran Ngoc Them (Viet Nam National University – Ho Chi Minh City) and Le Xuan Hy (Seattle University)

"Beyond Dichotomies: Cultural Diversities and Confluences"

Before the North-South political division in 1954, a wide range of cultural diversities existed among the 54 ethnic groups and the six cultural regions in Vietnam in terms of language, customs, diet, economies, and so on. The two new political ideologies added to the existing diversities but did not overwrite them. Three periods of large population movements created confluences of these diverse cultures: a large group of Northern Catholics moved South in 1954, Northern soldiers moved South during the war, and more movements since 1975. We focus more on the mix after 1975, when the ideological demands became blurred. We examine the cultural results of this mix in terms of the performance arts, language, cultural scholarship, and extended family relationships. The resulting mix has brought improvements, but there were also unintended adverse effects. Two examples of the latter are gradual losses of the traditional theater (hát bội) and ethnic languages.

This paper address the “cultural movements and phenomena in their particular contexts and meanings” as written in the call for papers. It addresses the cultural phenomena, not ideologies. It takes into account existing differences before the dichotomies, and the mixes afterwards.

Christoph Giebel (University of Washington)

"Comments on Post-Geneva Spatial Representations of War"

Reducing the complex historical, social and regional aspects of the Vietnamese wars to a simplistic dichotomy regarding the period after the 1954 Geneva Conference is a widespread phenomenon. In this flawed binary—both in popular discourses and in scholarship—the conflict is one between countries (or political entities) called “North Viet Nam” and “South Viet Nam,” separated by a border at the 17th parallel. Usually, “North Viet Nam” is assigned the role of aggressor.

The paper analyzes spatial claims of the Vietnamese states founded in 1945 and 1949, their connections to nationalist precepts and loyalties, and how the 1954 Geneva Accords sought to accommodate these opposing assertions. The emerging binary of “South Viet Nam” and “North Viet Nam” after unification elections were denied reflect a Cold War need for clear demarcations that belied the complexity of competing nationalist visions, regional identities, political loyalties, and mutually exclusive claims of states. Particularly, the routine conflation of “South Viet Nam” with the Republic of Viet Nam implicitly assigns sole legitimacy over a space smaller than what the RVN declared to represent and larger than it actually controlled for most of the war. Consequently, many Vietnamese in the center and south opposed to the RVN continue to be rhetorically and symbolically excluded from this space, hindering a better post-Cold War understanding of the wars.

Claudine Ang (Cornell University)

"The Accommodative Nature of Southern Narratives of Vietnamese History, 1954-1975"

The paper I would like to submit to this conference-workshop is a study of how historians of southern narratives of Vietnamese history exhibited an accommodative nature to regional differences within the territory of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and how Northern émigrés influenced these historical narratives. Specifically, I propose possible explanations for how historical actors were allotted places in the southern pantheon of heroes and how the Nam tiến (southern advance) was represented in journals published in Saigon at this time.

The larger background to this paper is my interest in a comparative study of the narratives of Vietnamese history published in Hanoi and Saigon from 1954 to 1975. The observations I make of the southern narratives are contrasted with the treatments that these historical actors and events received in

the historical narratives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). For example, Party historians publishing in Hanoi were silent on the Nam tiến, while historians publishing in Saigon made significant use of varying narratives of the Nam tiến in their publications, even with a special issue dedicated to it in one of the journals published in Saigon.

From this study, I propose using a lens of regionalism – the use of southern historical and events – to study RVN narratives of Vietnamese history. Using specific examples from the *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* (Journal of Historical Research), *Tập San Sử Địa* (The Quarterly Review of Historical and Geographical Research), the *Việt Nam Khảo Cổ Tập San* (Transactions of the Historical Research Institute, later Transactions of the Archeological Research Institute) and the *Báo Bách Khoa* (The Encyclopedia), I discuss how historians in the RVN of various regional origins accommodated different regional historical trajectories within narratives of Vietnamese history that have been classified as Saigon narratives of Vietnamese history.

My paper focuses on “southern” narratives of Vietnamese history. In referring to the “south” without a capital ‘S’, I hope to differentiate it from the political “South” that has come to dominate studies of Vietnamese history in this period. Undeniably, the historical backdrop to this period makes the political division a relevant way to understanding Vietnamese history as it probably formed a large part of the people’s consciousness. The “South”, however, can be further analyzed by the regional components that comprise it and such a study would illuminate the alternative views that existed even within the hegemonic discourse of the South. As such, while this paper makes reference to the North-South dichotomy of the 1954-1975 period, its interest is in breaking down the idea of “South” as one that is dominated by Saigon.

Kate Jellema (Marlboro College)

"Doing Our Part (Gop Phan): History, Agency and Merit in a Northern Vietnamese Village"

Based on ethnographic and archival research in the northern Vietnamese village of Đình Bảng, this paper examines a collectively-authored work of local history in order to explore connections between history, agency and merit at the village level. I argue that the authors of the History of Đình Bảng Commune understand village and state to be bound together in a mutually-constitutive cycle of công, meritorious contributions to the public good rewarded by the grateful recognition of the state. In this book of village history, published in 2001, the elders of Đình Bảng depict themselves as active, enthusiastic participants in the glorious past of Vietnam who remain engaged with the post-revolutionary nation-state in a sacred relationship of mutual obligation.

One of my goals in this paper is to question some of the assumptions underlying the quest for what Indonesianist John Smail called “autonomous history.” In recent decades, scholars of Southeast Asia have sought to correct three historiographical elisions: of colonized voices silenced in histories by the colonizers, of local voices overlooked in histories of the nation, and of Southeast Asian voices ignored in regional accounts favoring China and India. Hoping to recover the stories lost by this pattern of omission, historians and anthropologists have listened for the “small voices” which can speak directly of and to the subaltern experience, against hegemonic narratives of power. A laudable goal, the quest nonetheless runs two risks, first of assuming a priori both the possibility and the desirability of an autonomous local subject, unsullied by nation or empire, and second of artificially confining authentic local agency to acts of resistance. Materials from Đình Bảng point to the need to “decouple agency and resistance,” as Saba Mahmood so aptly suggested in her study of the Egyptian mosque movement, and also to admit to a local self which is more relational than autonomous. In my paper, I hope to show that the village of Đình Bảng is inextricably and essentially national, right to the very heart of its collective moral personhood. The agency of this village is not autonomously prosecuted, nor does it necessarily aim towards subversion of the state. On the contrary, Đình Bảng’s agency is also, at least in some circumstances, that of cooperative participation in national work.

“Doing Our Part,” takes a village-level perspective on the problems of history, agency and merit, in order to destabilize some of the underlying assumptions of the quest for “autonomous” local history in Southeast Asia. The paper calls for a critical re-examination of one of the foundational binaries scholars

have used to think about Vietnam and its past, by suggesting that we need to think “beyond the dichotomy” of village and state and seek non-binary ways to express the culturally and historically particular ways in which some local Vietnamese communities understand their own past to be always already national.

**Nguyen Quang Hung (Viet Nam National University – Ha Noi) and Le Xuan Hy (Seattle University)
"The North Vietnamese Catholic Village of Phung Khoang During 1945-1986"**

The Larger Context: The Vietnamese Catholics (currently about 6.2 million, or 8% of the population) have always existed in tension with the political authorities under different historical periods for various reasons. From the beginning of the Catholic mission, its ban of ancestor worship prompted oppositions. The Nguyen kings disliked the presence of European missionaries. The fight against French colonialism at times became Catholic massacres. Catholics had to build their own arm forces in Phat Diem and Bui Chu to resist both colonialism and Communism.

North Vietnamese Catholic Villages 1945-1986: This is a long period of political instability. During the colonial period, some Catholics collaborated with colonial authorities, confirming the negative view of Catholics. After the Geneva Agreement in 1954, about 600,000 Catholics, or 50% of those in the Hai Phong, Bui Chu and Phat Diem dioceses, left for South Vietnam while local militia tried to stop them. Then the Marxist-style land reform of 1954-1957 confiscated church properties, and the Catholic Church opposed land reform. Furthermore, all European missionaries were expelled from North Vietnam. Seminaries were closed. The contact with the outside world in general and with the Vatican in particular was severed. Till the 1980's there were some self examination and thawing in the relationship between Catholics and the Communist government, but tension remains.

The analysis of the case of the Phung Khoang Village in the Tu Liem District (about 15 km from Hanoi) provides a detailed example for the situation of Catholic community in North Vietnam during this period.

The Catholics, particularly those in North Vietnam, clearly did not fit into the Communist ideology, nor can be identified with South Vietnam, thus become a clear case of “beyond dichotomies.”

**Diane Fox (Holy Cross College)
"Agent Orange: Blurring the Boundaries"**

The story of Agent Orange is full of sad, bitter ironies that transgress what have generally been thought of in the West as boundaries between such binaries as generative and destructive, human and natural, benign and malevolent, ally and enemy, combatant and non-combatant, self and other, actor and subject. Chemicals that were developed to promote plant growth as an aid to American soybean farmers became agents of death for the upland and mangrove forests and rice plants of Vietnam, for example. Chemicals that targeted hormone growth in plants turned out to have related effects on humans. And chemicals that some decision-makers had argued would provide a more humane form of warfare by causing only short-term destruction of foliage while sparing human beings turned out to have long-lasting devastating effects for both the environment and human health.

Those who sprayed the chemicals became victims of their own actions, blurring the line between ally and enemy, self and other, actor and subject. Some “Ranch-handers” who sprayed the chemicals themselves suffer (to an extent that is still debated) from the effects of dioxin poisoning, along with their American, Australian, New Zealander, South Korean and Vietnamese compatriots and allies who fought on the ground in the regions they had sprayed. In addition, the military efforts by Americans and South Vietnamese (the parts of the south represented by ARVN) to deprive northern and other southern (the parts of the south represented by the National Liberation Front) troops of food and protective camouflage exposed perhaps five million or more southern civilians to the poison at the time (and unknown numbers in the years following), laid waste to ten to fifteen percent of the productive forests and cropland of the south, destroyed the means of subsistence and assaulted the social fabrics and cultures of another uncountable number of southerners, in particular but by no means exclusively of those southerners who lived in and on the forests. Foreign troops, northern troops, southern troops and southern civilians all

suffered, and both, indeed all, parts of the south suffered—all of the complex, splintered political sides, that is. Geographically and demographically there were distinctions as some regions of the south were sprayed more than others, and as more women, of special importance more pregnant and lactating women, were affected in the south than in the north.

This presentation adds new voices to the historical record through the stories told by people from the north, center, and south of Vietnam thought to be affected by Agent Orange, as it reflects on boundaries blurred by the use of chemicals in Vietnam, by their long-term effects, and by efforts to those have those effects recognized and addressed.

Abstracts

Beyond Dichotomies: Alternative Voices and Histories in Post-Colonial Viet Nam

Panel 3: Opposition and Dissidence

Hoang Ngo (University of Washington)

"A Rising Tide: The Buddhist Movement in 1964"

This paper examines the themes of the Vietnamese Buddhist weekly *Hải Triều Âm* (The Sound of the Rising Tide) during its circulation in 1964. The paper discusses the nature of the themes presented in *Hải Triều Âm* to shed light on the changes and development of the Buddhist Movement during 1964. It also compares the representation of the Buddhist Movement by *Hải Triều Âm* with those of scholars from both Việt Nam and the US in the postwar period. This paper has four parts: Engaging, Voicing, Responding, and Remembering. Each part corresponds to a theme presented in *Hải Triều Âm*. The underlying emphasis of the paper is to present a dissonance not only in the teleological interpretation of the war by scholars from Việt Nam, but also the predominant interpretation of the war with Cold War binary, such as Communists vs. Nationalists, by scholars in the US.

This paper primary engages with the conference's sub-theme of "so-called 'Third Force,' neutralist or peace forces on the margins of the Republic of Việt Nam." It precisely shows that many Vietnamese, especially Buddhists, from Central Việt Nam overwhelmingly wanted peace rather than the escalation of war. Besides the obvious sub-theme, the paper touches on an understudied topic of Vietnamese regionalism in two of its four parts, "Voicing" and "Responding." Through these two parts, the paper presents the frustration and anger that Central Vietnamese Buddhists had against the Nguyễn Khánh regime, which completely ignored the religious oppression against Central Vietnamese Buddhists by former bureaucrats of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime. Ultimately, the threat of Central Việt Nam seceding from the republic, which was perceived to embody the Buddhist Movement, forced the Nguyễn Khánh regime into responding, though haphazardly. I hope this paper will inspire others to study Vietnamese regionalism, so that modern Vietnamese history can one day break away from dichotomies.

Sophie Quinn-Judge (Temple University)

"A Study of Local Women and Globalized War: The Revolutionary Women of Quang Nam and Quang Ngai Provinces"

This is a preliminary report on interviews carried out over two years with ten women who joined the National Liberation Front and communist party between 1945 and 1968. The interviews were done by myself and Jane Griffith, a colleague who like me worked for the American Friends Service Committee in Quang Ngai province in the early 1970s. Our main goal was to examine the motivation of a variety of women, two of whom we have known since 1972, in choosing to resist the South Vietnamese government and its American allies. We also wanted to look at the way that the war had affected their lives over the long term.

U.S. historians have increasingly been devoting attention to narratives of the Government of Vietnam or GVN: its first leader, Ngo Dinh Diem; its armed forces; and the refugees who left in 1975 and the following years. We believe that it continues to be important to focus on a more detailed understanding of the "other side", in this case to explore issues connected to local culture and traditions, as well as gender. There is no resource for this part of Vietnam comparable to the Rand Corporations interviews with NLF/communist prisoners and defectors in the Mekong Delta, used so productively by David Elliott and David Hunt. This is inevitably a narrower, more subjective sample of the revolutionary population. Yet the trajectories of these women's lives are representative of an important sector of the local population, where support for the NLF was so high that the US military opted to "sterilize" or depopulate certain districts, rather than try to win hearts and minds. Our sample includes women who did everything from diplomatic work to logistics and guerilla warfare.

One of the conclusions that arise from these interviews is that class background had no effect on the women's commitment to the revolution; only two of our interviewees classified themselves as from

poor peasant families. Another is that a local tradition of resistance to the French, dating back to at least 1907, was a defining feature of the districts these women came from and of their family histories. Finally, they all identified strongly with the communist party, as the embodiment of this tradition of resistance. They shared an ideal of communal welfare and national self-determination, but did not share any precise goals in terms of a Marxist future for Vietnam.

This research looks at a sample of women who tend to be forgotten in recent histories of the American War, both in Vietnam and in the United States. These are middle-class and middle peasant women who internalized Vietnamese traditions of nationalism, yet who were strongly influenced by their local history. This was a history in which Vietnamese attempts at modern transformation, including modern education for women, were thwarted by the French desire for control. This history was marked by the Duy Tan movement led by Phan Chau Trinh from 1905 to 1908, and by the anti-tax rebellions that occurred in 1908, with disastrous results for the local scholars. (One of our interviewees is a grand-daughter of Phan Chau Trinh. Another is the grand-daughter of a large landowner, from the same district as Tran Quy Cap. The Quang Ngai women all come from Duc Pho district, another area where there was a strong anti-tax movement in 1908, as well as an organized uprising in 1930-1.) For this population the French did not represent modernity, but brutal oppression. The Diem period was also a time when their families were targeted, as all of them had relatives who had regrouped to the North. The resistance to the French and the Diem government in these areas led to fierce resistance to the US presence from 1965 on. Thus their colonial and post-colonial experiences blended into one long battle against foreign powers. But neither James Scott's view of a moral peasant wanting to return to a communal past, nor Cold War views of communists being stirred up by a foreign ideology account for the behavior of these women. They were open to change, but until 1975 this was only offered to them by force.

Jason Gibbs (San Francisco Public Libraries)

"Capitalist Music Brings Jail: Love Songs in Ha Noi During Viet Nam's American War"

On February 4, 1971 the New York Times printed a short wire service story entitled "Capitalist Music Brings Jail." This article concerned eight men in Hanoi who had been imprisoned in 1968 and brought to trial and sentenced in 1971 for disseminating "yellow music" (nhac vang). Yellow music was a term that Vietnamese imported from The Peoples Republic of China denoting music that was variously described degenerate, pessimistic, illusory, or reactionary, but, in fact, referred to any music that did not extol the mission of the state, its revolution, and its struggles.

This paper closely will look at this case focusing on the case of Nguyen Van Loc, one of the eight men imprisoned for performing this criminalized music. I will examine at the motivations of these musicians and their listeners in their defying the cultural directive of the North Vietnamese government. I will also discuss the Vietnamese songs that led to their imprisonment in the context of Hanoi's musical environment in the 1960s. Finally I will consider the reception of this music and these musicians in contemporary Vietnam.

This paper is about Hanoians who resisted the uniformity of North Vietnamese song of that time. They were concerned that the music they had enjoyed and learned before the 1954 liberation of Hanoi would be lost and forgotten. They also wanted their country to remain current with international popular music culture. While only these eight musicians were imprisoned many other Vietnamese secretly shared their interests and secretly listened to, played, and sang banned music.

Wynn Wilcox (Western Connecticut State University)

"Existentialism in Saigon Intellectual Culture"

Among the eclecticism and diversity of the intellectual marketplace in 1960s Saigon, an interest in existentialism—both in literature and in philosophy—is a common theme that stands out. In the writings of Bùi Giáng, Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, Thế Phong, and Tam Ích and in popular scholarly journals and literary reviews such as *Bách Khoa*, *Văn Học*, *Thứ Tư* and *Văn*, one finds analysis and excerpts of the works of Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and especially Jean-Paul Sartre and André Malraux. This paper considers the reception of these figures in detail, and suggests

three main reasons for their appeal. First (and perhaps less important), an endorsement of existentialism offered Saigon intellectuals a way to reject the totalizing ideological systems provided by Marxism-Leninism, anticommunism, or modernization theory, since the existential project allowed them to reject the primacy of rational systems for explaining the world. Existentialism allowed them to define themselves against a received vision of northern intellectuals and also against the prevailing political winds in Republic of Vietnam and the United States. Secondly, the emphasis on existentialism reflected the continuing orientation of Saigon writers toward political and intellectual developments in France, in particular during and after the student revolution strikes of the summer of 1968. Finally, existentialism offered Saigon intellectuals a way of explaining their chaotic and ambiguous wartime situation by offering the satisfying potential that their good faith actions might make meaning out of the seemingly random and occasionally unspeakably violent events of South Vietnam in the 1960s.

This paper engages with at least two of the themes suggested in the workshop's description: "varieties of dissidence under authoritarian, violent regimes, from organized protests, intellectual, literary and artistic expressions, to 'every-day resistance,'" as well as "the range of revolutionary-nationalist visions, particularly in the southern part of Viet Nam, pre- and post-1975." Existentialism was at least indirectly a form of dissent against prevailing labels of "communist" and "anticommunist" ideology. And though existentialism failed to offer any revolutionary nationalist vision, the fact that the vision of existentialists rejected a kind of revolutionary nationalism is significant for a discussion of this theme. It is also of note that intellectuals and artists with neutralist inclinations were sometimes also existentialists.

Duy Lap Nguyen (University of California, Irvine)

"Over-consuming Imperialism: South Vietnamese Urban Resistance to American Occupation during the War in Viet Nam"

This paper argues that, during the Vietnam War, the formation of a national, Republican subjectivity was undermined by the very techniques of nation-building deployed by the American government, in order to create the conditions for a new nation-state in the South. Rather than winning over the rural and urban populations in the South to the Republican cause, American military assistance and economic aid created a mass of new urban consumers, dispossessed from the war-torn countryside, who resisted American neo-imperialism on its own terms, so to speak – through the useless consumption of ever-greater quantities of consumer durables, in the form of theft, incompetence and official corruption.

Recent scholarship on the Vietnam War has emphasized the need to re-evaluate the assumption that the Republic of Vietnam was simply a political puppet of the American government. Philip Catton, in his recent study of the nation-building techniques employed by the Diem regime, for instance, argues that the RVN was a far more autonomous political actor that historians have generally recognized. This argument, I would argue, however, simply reverses the prevailing prejudices, while remaining squarely within the bounds of the dichotomous framing in which the question of the political sovereignty of the RVN has usually been posed: was the Republic a puppet or a political agent? This paper seeks to call this dichotomy into question by examining official corruption, political apathy and urban crime in South Vietnam as apparently non-political forms of political agency, in which the American occupation was opposed by the over-consumption of its economic assistance, practices which, as Gabriel Kolko has argued, played a far larger role in the final American withdraw than the rural insurgency lead by the National Liberation Front.

Chuong-Dai Vo (University of California, San Diego)

"The Politics of Literary Criticism and the Making of Modern Viet Nam: The Transition from a Command Economy to Globalization"

My paper will present the first chapter of my dissertation, "The Politics of Literary Criticism and the Making of Modern Vietnam: The Transition from a Command Economy to Globalization." Overall, the project analyzes the discourse of literary criticism in post-1975 Vietnam up to the beginning years of

Đổi Mới as a site for debates about the relevance of socialist realism as a mode of knowledge production and the search among writers and intellectuals for other ways of generating critical and creative work. As the country began the process of reconstruction, some Vietnamese writers and intellectuals pushed for an active and concerted engagement with new forms of literary criticism and creative production, including influences from foreign countries other than the Soviet Bloc. Others, however, fiercely fought to hold onto established understandings of intellectual and creative work. I argue that these various positions speak to power struggles for institutional support at home and mixed responses to the cultural currents that came with the transnational flow of capital, labor and ideas and their effects on the methodologies and arenas of knowledge production.

This project offers insight into how writers and intellectuals in Vietnam repositioned themselves and their institutions in the struggle for knowledge production as the country began re-integration into a global world order. I analyze the political maneuverings, discursive strategies and deployments of metaphoric language in Vietnamese literary criticism written from the mid 1970s to 1990s, during the transition period from war-time revolutionary mobilization to nation-building and the official announcement of Đổi Mới in 1986.

In my paper, I show that the discourse of contemporary Vietnamese literary criticism was established through the reiteration of personal attacks, the language of “sin” [toi loi] and the selective historicizing of the Party’s successes. This created a discourse of literary criticism that writers and intellectuals in the post-1975 era would have to contest and appropriate as they tested and pushed the boundaries of literary creativity and intellectual debate. I argue that these debates were about the right to narrate the truth and anxieties about images of national integrity as the country’s move toward globalization was picking up speed.

This paper is concerned with the production of epistemologies and how they are always already interconnected with political, social and economic forces, in this case the reconstruction of Vietnam and the move to integrate into the global world order. I suggest that the relationship between writers and intellectuals associated with the state’s definition of the role of literary criticism and those opposing it was a complicated, overlapping one rather than a clear-cut opposition.

Khai-Thu Nguyen (University of California, Berkeley)
"Luu Quang Vu and the Performance of Reform in Doi Moi Vietnam"

This paper focuses on Luu Quang Vu, one of the most famous playwrights of 20th century Vietnamese spoken drama who has come to represent a relatively explosive period of Vietnamese theater during doi moi. The state policy of Doi moi, or "renovation," began in 1986 when political, diplomatic, and economic transformations in Viet Nam accompanied changes in the cultural arena; the December 1987 Resolution 5 of the Central Committee's Cultural Commission accompanied the cultural policy of socialist realism with a policy of "creative freedom" and "free circulation" of works that are not "reactionary." In this period, Luu Quang Vu’s plays dominated the theaters with direct and bold social critique, leading many to designate him as an emblem of doi moi itself. This paper explores the artist’s relationship to the state’s policy of doi moi to analyze the nature of dissent in the doi moi era. Was Luu a spokesperson for the state’s policy, a rebel against government policy (who was allegedly killed in a government conspiracy in the form of a car accident), a playwright who was “politicized” as an “example” of state renovation, or a visionary with his unique views of change? Luu’s ambivalent relationship to the communist party (as a soldier in the anti-American war, who was then kicked out of the army, who became the only playwright of the period to be given the Ho Chi Minh Prize), contributes to a body of work representing a mixture of rebelliousness against, critique of, and advocacy for state policy. At the same time, the state’s negotiation with Luu Quang Vu simultaneously as dissident and state model reflects a doi moi project struggling between memory, self-critique, radical change, preservation, socialism, capitalism, and democratization. The paper shows the ambivalent nature of dissent in doi moi in which to survive the artist dances in different performative costumes between state advocate and rebel (or model dissenter), while the state wavers between disapproval, disavowal, and appropriation of the artist, through a doi moi policy that strengthens state power with the very performance of dissension.

This paper is the result of my fieldwork in 2006-2007 on postcolonial performance in Vietnam as a Fulbright-Hays and Pacrim Research Fellow.

This paper will engage the larger themes of the conference by exploring the varieties of dissidence under an authoritarian system that loosens binaries between dissent and authority by showing that one often performs by relying on the other. By exploring Luu Quang Vu's plays in detail, the paper will also offer insight into the experience of postcoloniality in doi moi Viet Nam in which a collapse of anticolonial and socialist paradigms result in a condition of ideological uncertainty and mistrust that Luu attempts to resolve through a call towards morality.