

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.