

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.