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Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam

Edited by Jonathan D. London

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

The *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam* is a comprehensive resource exploring social, political, economic, and cultural aspects of Vietnam, one of contemporary Asia's most dynamic but least understood countries. Following an introduction that highlights major changes that have unfolded in Vietnam over the past three decades, the volume is organized into four thematic parts:

- Politics and Society
- Economy and Society
- Social Life and Institutions
- Cultures in Motion

Part I addresses key aspects of Vietnam's politics, from the role of the Communist Party of Vietnam in shaping the country's institutional evolution, to continuity and change in patterns of socio-political organization, political expression, state repression, diplomatic relations, and human rights. Part II assesses the transformation of Vietnam's economy, addressing patterns of economic growth, investment and trade, the role of the state in the economy, and other economic aspects of social life. Parts III and IV examine developments across a variety of social and cultural fields through chapters on themes including welfare, inequality, social policy, urbanization, the environment and society, gender, ethnicity, the family, cuisine, art, mass media, and the politics of remembrance.

Featuring 38 essays by leading Vietnam scholars from around the world, this book provides a cutting-edge analysis of Vietnam's transformation and changing engagement with the world. It is an invaluable interdisciplinary reference work that will be of interest to students and academics of Southeast Asian studies, as well as policymakers, analysts, and anyone wishing to learn more about contemporary Vietnam.

Jonathan D. London is an associate professor of political economy at Leiden University, the Netherlands. His recent publications include *Welfare and Inequality in Marketizing East Asia* (2018), *Politics in Contemporary Vietnam* (2014), and *Education in Vietnam* (2011).

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Routledge
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To my friends and family.
And to the people of Vietnam – past, present, and future.

CONTENTS

Contents

FIGURES

Figures

TABLES

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It has been my honor and privilege to edit the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam*. I wish to thank the publisher and its series editor, Dorothea Schaefter, for inviting me to take on the project in the first place and for her kind support and trust throughout. As it happened, the volume's completion took several years, unfolding against the backdrop of continuity and change in Vietnam and of changes in my own life, including a timely move from Hong Kong to Leiden, in the Netherlands, in 2016. From the beginning, the source of my interest in editing this volume has been my desire to advance existing understandings of contemporary Vietnam.

I wish to thank each of the contributors to this volume for their excellent contributions and, equally, for their exceptional patience. I have benefited from the support and practical advice of the small number of friends and colleagues who have advised me from the conception of this project up to its submission, including Pamela McElwee, Edmund Malesky, Hy Van Luong, and Ann Marie Leshkowich. I wish to thank David Brown for his helpful feedback on two of my contributions to this volume. Ngo Phuong Le provided valuable editorial support. I wish to extend special thanks to Benedict Kerkvliet, Jonathan Pincus, Helle Rydstrom, Oscar Salemink, and Gerard Sasges for the advice and support that they provided me over the course of the project's gestation and at various crucial moments. I wish to thank my friends, Ngo Vinh Long and Vu Quang Viet, for contributing to my learning. Special thanks to Viviane Brachet-Márquez for her feedback on various drafts of my own contributions of this volume. Finally, I wish to thank my family for their love and support.

I wish to acknowledge those who have assisted me in my path as a student and scholar of Vietnam. I first visited Vietnam in 1990 on an academic tour with the Norwegian peace researcher, Johan Galtung. I decided to study Vietnam further in 1992, as a first-year PhD student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, with support from Russel Middleton. I never turned back. In 1995 and 1996 I began language studies. And in January 1997 I departed for Canberra, Australia, to learn about Vietnam's recent social history from David Marr and Ben Kerkvliet, as well as Adam Fforde and (less directly but crucially) Melanie Beresford. Later that year I returned to Vietnam for the first time since 1990 and found a country experiencing rapid changes. I remained there for three years, mostly in Hanoi and Quang Nam province, before returning to Canberra as part of efforts to make sense of my field research. I continued these efforts from 2001 to 2004, splitting time between Madison and Hanoi. Throughout my time as a student in Vietnam I received help from innumerable scholars. Among these, I remain most

grateful for the kind and generous support of Bùi Thế Cường and Tô Duy Hợp. I learned loads from friends and neighbors in Hanoi, at the corners of Hàn Thuyên and Hàng Chuối.

As a professor starting out at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and, subsequently, at the City University of Hong Kong, my Vietnam research was facilitated through several research projects with the United Nations, including particularly memorable and satisfying projects with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Viet Nam, then led by Jesper Morch. It was around this time that I became an avid Vietnam blogger and my Vietnamese language blog on politics, *Xin Lỗi Ông*, became something of a (very small) sensation, garnering a modest but significant readership, who took time to assist me, challenge me, and sometimes call me names. One marker of my career occurred in 2014, in Hanoi, when Vietnam's authorities invited me to leave the country after giving a brief speech to an association of local bloggers in which I affirmed that Vietnam's constitution does indeed afford free expression. By 2016 I was able to return to Vietnam regularly, and I believe the authorities know that, while I maintain deep concerns about human rights, I am and will always remain an erstwhile friend of Vietnam and its people.

Some 32 years after my first trip to Vietnam I type these words with a certain satisfaction. My journeys in the study of Vietnam have brought me to all parts of the country and afforded me opportunities to interact with, listen to, and learn from people from diverse backgrounds. I cannot claim to fully understand Vietnam. Actually, no one can. I can, however, state with confidence that I have learned a great deal about the country and that I understand it better today than I once did. Most importantly, I know that the contributions to this volume will contribute to improving understandings of contemporary Vietnam, which was and is this volume's principal aim. Mostly, it is my hope that the people of Vietnam, today and in the future, will find this volume and its individual contributions to be interesting and of some use to them in making sense of their own unique and precious country.

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Jonathan D. London
Hanoi, June 11, 2022.

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HOW TO STUDY CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM?

Jonathan D. London

Following a tumultuous and violent 20th century defined by struggles for independence and national unification under the banner of socialism, Vietnam has emerged in the 21st century as a consolidated and globalizing market-Leninist social order reflecting relational and institutional features specific to Vietnam and its historical path to the present. In recent years interest in Vietnam has surged alongside the country's changing economic fortunes and increasing accessibility. Yet understanding Vietnam remains formidably difficult, particularly if we desire to understand the country in its full complexity. Written as the introduction to the most wide-ranging scholarly survey of contemporary Vietnam yet published, this essay proposes ways of studying Vietnam as an historically emergent, continuously evolving, multifaceted, and internally variegated social order or social whole.

Addressing the fields of politics, economy, welfare, associational life, environment, and culture, this volume provides in-depth explorations of aspects of the country's transformation. Comprising 38 essays written by leading Vietnam scholars, the volume provides an extraordinarily wide-ranging scholarly examination of social life in the country and, as such, will be of value as a source of information and insight for a diversity of readers, whether they be scholars, students, policy analysts, and others interested in Vietnam's rapid and profound transformations. As this volume attests, the study of contemporary Vietnam is today a cumulative undertaking involving both citizens of Vietnam and interested outsiders, reflecting diverse interests, intellectual traditions, and analytical standpoints. Indeed, the diversity reflected in this volume reminds us that there is no one right way to study Vietnam.

Contemporary Vietnam at a glance

We can begin by considering contemporary Vietnam's basic features and establishing salient dimensions of its contemporary transformation. Given the more complete picture offered by the essays in this volume, I will offer only a basic sketch, outlining the country's demographic features and patterns of economy, social institutions, and politics. As of 2020, Vietnam's population stood at roughly 100 million, compared to roughly 60 million in 1986, and was projected to reach 120 million by 2050 before gradually declining thereafter. At present, 70 percent of the country's population is under 35 years of age. Rapidly declining fertility rates will soon bring to an end Vietnam's demographic bonus and trigger a rapid rise in the country's dependency ratio

and in the costs associated with sustaining an expanding older population.[1] Increasing incomes and enhancing economic and social security through the further development of social policies have thus emerged as key and pressing challenges.

Contemporary Vietnam's social and political institutions reflect its history, in particular, the rise to power and evolution of the Communist Party of Vietnam (or CPV), Vietnam's dominant organization and political force. Some aspects of contemporary Vietnam's institutions are traceable to the country's ancient, classical, colonial, and anti-colonial pasts. Others are traceable to the second half of the country's conflict-ridden 20th century, when national partition divided the country and more than three decades of war killed and injured millions, while also visiting traumas on Vietnam's people and lasting damage to ecosystems and the built environment.

While the roots of Vietnam's institutions have deep historical roots, the party has fundamentally shaped every aspect of public life through its dominance of politics and society from independence until the present day. Through decades of war, a devastating international economic embargo that lasted into the 1990s, economic crisis, reform, and re-engagement and integration with the regional and world economies, the CPV has retained control and in many respects strengthened its hegemonic position. From the time of its founding nearly a century ago, the CPV has proclaimed its historical indispensability and attendant claim to be the sole legitimate representative of Vietnam's people. According to the CPV's leaders, the party must never relinquish its monopoly of power, whereas critics within and outside the CPV view the party stalwarts' unwillingness to countenance change as the greatest threat to Vietnam's prospects. Loved by many and loathed by others, the CPV continues to shape material conditions, relations, institutions, and ideas within the country more profoundly than any other actor or social force.

The transformation of Vietnam's economy has received the most international attention, but changes in other aspects of political, social, and cultural life are equally profound. With respect to the economy, contrasts with Vietnam's recent history are instructive. The first decade of Vietnam's post-war period was consumed by an unsuccessful attempt at Stalinist central planning in an agrarian country largely cut off from trade and international finance. Among Asia's poorest countries as recently as 1985,[2] Vietnam has, since the 1990s, been one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Unlike market transitions in Eastern Europe, changes in Vietnam's economy unfolded gradually, with central authorities often following rather than leading the process. The party of Stalinist autarky and heavy industrialization has slowly reinvented itself as an enthusiastic proponent of foreign direct investment and ever deeper engagement in global value chains. Economic growth and improving living standards became the main source of regime legitimacy for a younger generation with no memory of the American War, let alone the decades of anti-colonial struggle during which the CPV rose to power. Indeed, living standards have increased significantly, if unevenly, across all regions of the country. Overall, Vietnam's movement toward a more market-based economy has played out in ways that have reinforced rather than undermined the CPV's dominance and the legitimation of its rule.

Though Vietnam is a major exporter of agricultural commodities, fish, and shellfish, the country has seen phenomenal growth in industry and services, especially after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. Urbanization and internal migration have been exceptionally rapid and are probably underestimated in official statistics. The rapid growth of industry and movements of populations from rural to urban and peri-urban areas have contributed to a wide range of social, ecological, and institutional changes. Rural-to-urban and rural-to-rural migration has created a national labor market and relaxed the grip of local authority and identity. At the outset of the 1990s, the primary means of transportation was the bicycle. A decade later the country was inundated with motorbikes. And today the country's cities are choked with millions of motorbikes and increasing numbers of automobiles. Improvements in infrastructure

and communications have been equally striking. In 1993 Vietnam had less than one telephone per 100 people, among the lowest rates in the world, as well as zero internet; today it counts 141 cell phone subscriptions per 100 citizens, while the internet reaches above 70 percent of its population.[3]

Yet change has been uneven and contested. Patterns of inequality have been complex. Rural-urban inequality has declined with respect to access to services, while income and asset inequality within rural and (especially) urban areas has tended to increase. Despite Vietnam's emergence as a leading export platform in garments, footwear, and electronics, labor force informality has remained stubbornly high. Gender norms have proven resistant to change despite high rates of female labor force participation. Domestic violence is still among Vietnam's most serious and stubborn social problems. Poverty and deprivation are still high in ethnic minority regions, and encroachment on forested areas by commercial logging and farming has created an ecological crisis. Civic, associational, and family life have all been subject to competing pressures, many of which are explored in this volume, as well as aspects of culture and routine social life.

The CPV continues to dominate across all social fields, yet one of the most intriguing features of contemporary Vietnam has been the significant expansion of space for individual choice and autonomy, albeit within the limits of single-party rule. The country's movement toward a more market-based economy and substantively capitalist social relations have been attended by a culture of mass consumption. All of these changes have expanded the scope for individual choice and have apparently reduced the levers by which the CPV can exert direct administrative control. The practice, for example, of seeking party approval for marrying this or that person has faded. While party authorities maintain an interest in families' class backgrounds and histories in some regions, this is no longer as prominent a feature of social life as it was in the two decades following 1975, and has even lessened in comparison to the 1990s. Equally striking is the recovery and expansion of various forms of secondary association, including the proliferation of online clubs, civic groups, non-governmental organizations, and spontaneous meetups outside the sphere of the party and state. While the CPV continues to regulate and restrict speech, long-suppressed traditions of social criticism and political expression have gathered force, both within and outside the ambit of the CPV.

Struggles over the regulation of speech, ideas, and information in Vietnam are a salient feature of social life. In a conversation at a conference in central Vietnam's Quảng Ngãi province in April 2013, a leading official from the CPV's central (i.e., national level) Propaganda Committee related to me the party's firm conviction of the importance of the flow of ideas within limits, and he emphasized the benefits of this approach in comparison with the firewalling strategy employed in mainland China.[4] This has also generated challenges. Facilitated by near-universal internet availability, Vietnam's people are increasingly engaged politically, and the country and party are more pluralist than the party's anti-reformist elites care to admit. More recently, the central party has sought to clamp down on online speech and has demanded cooperation of service providers and foreign-owned operated platforms. The CPV also employs a small army of internet monitors and trolls to police online speech.[5]

Vietnam has seen far-reaching changes in its relations with the world. Border crossings of all sorts are increasingly possible and extend well beyond diplomatic relations and internet connections. After decades of international isolation, routine social life today exhibits generic features of globalizing modernity, even as globalizing processes have been refracted by the country's unique institutional features. Intercourse with the wider world, while still regulated, is more fluid. Barriers to communication with the wider world, while still present, are more porous. Vietnamese people are more internationally mobile than they have ever been, even as the CPV and foreign states work assiduously to manage flows of people and capital in and out of the country.

The ways in which Vietnam has globalized has generated uneven distributions of benefits, costs, risks, and opportunities. The ability of Vietnam's citizens to travel, work, and study abroad has increased markedly. But the conditions under which they do so varies enormously. In 2019 Vietnam's households spent more than $US3 billion on overseas education.[6] In that same year, 39 Vietnamese migrants died in the suffocating heat of a sealed shipping container during its transshipment from Calais and Dover, sending desperate text and voice messages home to their children, elders, and spouses with their final breaths: "I am sorry. I cannot take care of you. I am sorry. I am sorry. I can't breathe. I want to return to my family. Have a good life."[7] However contingent, processes of globalization hold great promise for Vietnam and its people. Indeed, the manner in which Vietnam interacts with its region and the world will figure centrally in shaping the country's ongoing transformation.

Ways of studying contemporary Vietnam

To understand Vietnam and to appreciate its complexities we require a multidisciplinary approach invested in the aim of making sense of various aspects of change and their inter-relations. This suggests an appreciation both of the value and of the limitations of disciplinary approaches and an openness to traversing and, where merited, rejecting conventional boundaries between the humanities, the social sciences, and non-academic fields. Scholars who have entertained the question of how to study Vietnam have typically and sensibly done so in a topically delimited way. Ben Kerkvliet (2001), for example, proposes an approach for analyzing "political life" across various social fields through the analysis of the mutually constitutive relation between Vietnam's state and its social environment. Adam Fforde (2017) suggests that we understand Vietnam as a political economy, usefully identifying some of the country's emerging political economy features. International organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) suggest we understand Vietnam as among "the next generation of emerging markets" (IMF 2015). In their edited volume, Hue-Tam Ho Tai and Mark Sidel (2012) propose ways of understanding the relation between state, society, and the market, particularly in relation to property, power, and values. These approaches have merits.

What I will suggest here, and what this volume indicates, is the promise of a more encompassing approach still. Proceeding from the forgoing sketch of contemporary Vietnam's features, I will propose ways of studying contemporary Vietnam that take into account how the country is embodying and expressing a multiplicity of aspects, including history, politics, economy, social and environmental conditions, features of associational life, and various dimensions of culture. Exploring contemporary Vietnam across these aspects may contribute to understanding of the country as a constantly evolving social whole. More ambitiously, it may be seen as a necessary and useful step toward building a theoretical and analytical synthesis aimed at discovering the relations and processes through which the country's defining institutional features have emerged and evolved across time and place.

Vietnam as history

One approach to the question of how to study contemporary Vietnam is through inquiry into its historical lineages. How far back we trace these paths depends on the subjects of our inquiry and our particular interests and proclivities. We might consider Vietnam according to a periodicity comprising a succession of ancient, classical, and colonial periods and beyond these periods of anti-colonialism and war culminating in the 1970s and 1980s. Beyond war, the latter half of Vietnam's 20th century also corresponded with ultimately unsuccessful efforts to institute

a state-socialist social order. Vietnam's history since the 1980s can similarly be understood as entailing the reconstitution of the CPV's rule on the basis of a more-market based economy. Whichever way we proceed, studying contemporary Vietnam always entails reflection on patterns of continuity and change and the ruptures that have marked the country's historical trajectory, institutional evolution, and contested memory.

Goscha (2016) provides an overview of Vietnam's history that may serve as a companion to the present volume. Two points gleaned from Goscha and other historical scholarship bear emphasis, as they help connect Vietnam's past to its present. The first of these points is the historical ambiguity and relatively recent emergence of the idea of Vietnam. As it is presently defined geographically, "Vietnam" dates back only to the early 19th century, as invoked by the Nguyễn Dynasty. It was only significantly later, in the context of 20th-century anti-colonial struggle, that the CPV seized on the notion as a way of creating and facilitating the growth of nationalist and patriotic sentiment as a mobilizing strategy and, later, as a permanent ruling ideology.

The second point is the complex relation between local and external forces in Vietnam's historical formation and evolution. Contemporary Vietnam is, first and foremost, the product of human agency by Vietnam's people; but this does not diminish international factors and specifically the manner in which relations of cooperation and contestation with hostile external forces have shaped Vietnam from past to present (Taylor 2013). As Taylor, Goscha, and others have noted, while French colonialism centered on the exploitation of Vietnamese land and labor, the process of settler colonialism and expansion of territorial control predated the French. The direct and indirect participation of segments of Vietnam's population in the French colonial project elicited a counter-movement aimed at the overthrow and eventual annihilation of the traditional elite strata. Tensions between traditional institutions and elites and revolutionaries shaped Vietnam's response to imperialism and eventually saw the emergence of the CPV as the dominant social force. In their separate accounts, historians David Marr (1984, 1997) and Hue-Tam Ho Tai (1996) traced the activities and ideas of anti-colonial intellectuals like Phan Bội Châu, Phan Châu Trinh, Nguyễn An Ninh, and Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Ho Chi Minh) in the rise of Vietnamese nationalism and the eventual rise to power and evolution of the CPV.

Extending from the early 1960s to 1975, the American War was Vietnam's most devastating conflict, both in terms of loss of life and the destruction of economic infrastructure and the natural environment. Crucially, the war was both an international war and a civil war between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and its southern, US-supported rival state, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), which was itself was established in 1950 and which was accorded legitimacy, along with the DRV, as the result of the 1954 Geneva Accords. The massive escalation of the war after 1965 by the Johnson administration is one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century. Having already lost 500,000 people as a result of France's protracted and futile effort to reassert its authority over its former colony (1946–1954), Vietnam suffered another estimated 3 million casualties during America's decade-long intervention. The US military dropped 1.4 million tons of ordinance, twice the total amount deployed in World War II by all sides in that conflict, and sprayed defoliant chemicals on more than 3 million hectares of forest, compromising the health of an estimated at least 4 million people, including up to 1 million today. Millions more were injured or displaced. How the world's wealthiest, most powerful country could justify unleashing destructive forces on this scale in a poor Asian country was difficult for many to fathom at the time. The advent in 1972 of US–Soviet détente and the US–China rapprochement may have paved the way for US withdrawal, but the military stalemate in Vietnam did not bring about these outcomes. Strategically, US intervention in Vietnam was a failure, and a costly one for both countries.

Misjudgments and strategic errors continued on both sides after the end of the conflict. The United States responded petulantly to the collapse of the RVN and national unification, imposing a trade embargo and reneging on commitments made under the Paris Accords to provide economic aid. The CPV, for its part, chose ideological purity over pragmatism, launching an unsuccessful collectivization drive in the newly integrated south and crushing the southern commercial classes. Urban people were sent to so-called "new economic zones" in the highlands, and more than 1 million people were sent to political re-education camps. Hundreds of thousands fled the country overland and by sea. The flow of refugees increased with renewed conflict, this time with Cambodia and China, which was precipitated by Beijing's strident backing of the Khmer Rouge regime, deepened the economic crisis, and intensified the country's international isolation, leading to Vietnam's membership in Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) and closer ties with the Soviet Union. The outflow of refugees in 1978 and 1979 reflected not only pressures on ethnic Chinese Vietnamese but, more importantly, corrupt schemes whereby local police organized fake identification (complete with Chinese last names) in exchange for large cash payments. The conflict in Cambodia would ultimately result in the deaths of more than 100,000 troops and prompted Beijing to launch an invasion across Vietnam's northern border, killing tens of thousands more (Chanda 1986). Relations with Beijing were normalized in 1991, and with Washington, DC, only in 1995.

By the 1980s, Vietnam was among the world's poorest countries. The party had achieved the cherished national aspirations of independence and unification but had failed to deliver prosperity or even a minimum standard of economic security. The official line, repeated in press accounts and donor reports, cites the CPV's Sixth Party Congress 1986 and the embrace of renewal, or Đổi Mới, as the turning point in Vietnam's economic transformation. Scholars of the period, for example, Beresford (1989; Beresford *et al.*, 1993), Fforde and De Vylder (1996), and Vickerman (1986), describe a gradual process in which local experimentation and resistance to central control gave way to grudging acceptance of a greater role for market allocation. In his path-breaking (Vietnamese language) account, Huy Đức (2012) details these dynamics while also demonstrating how intra-elite competition stalled and undercut the strategic coherence of Vietnam's movement toward a market economy and its gradual integration into the regional and world political and economic orders (see, also, Luong 2003; Elliott 2012). Indeed, the effects of elite competition that unfolded in the 1980s have shaped patterns of economic organization up to the present, as several of the analyses in this volume show.

Though not principally focused on history, the chapters in this volume each attest to the importance of these events for an understanding of Vietnam's present. For the purposes of this volume, then, contemporary Vietnam refers to Vietnam today and to processes of institutional change that have unfolded in the country since the 1980s. Writing from the perspective of 2021, Vietnam's classical, colonial, wartime, and post-war pasts would appear to be swiftly receding into history. Yet contemporary Vietnam's social institutions, norms, and cultures are still and always best understood with an appreciation of their historical roots. In this volume, chapters on themes as varied as education, cuisine, religious traditions, the private sector, and journalism all point to the ways in which this is so. As Vietnam moves into its future, its history is continuously being retold, reformulated, and even reinvented, as contemporary actors use history as a resource for making meaning and making change.

Vietnam as politics and power relations

To study politics in contemporary Vietnam is to inquire into the features and dynamics of the power relations and how social power is distributed, exercised, acquired, contested, reproduced,

and transformed. Such a view reflects an understanding that politics and power relations permeate all aspects of social life and that, as such, the analysis of politics includes but is by no means limited to the sphere of formal political institutions or procedures.

While the CPV need not lie at the center of studies of politics in contemporary Vietnam, the CPV is Vietnam's dominant organization, and a nuanced understanding of the party's features is essential. The CPV seeks to rule Vietnam through the apparatuses of an all-encompassing party-state. Formal institutional attributes of the CPV party-state are established in Vietnam's constitution (last amended in 2016) and innumerable formal documents, as has been amply detailed in the literature (see London 2009 and especially Croissant and Lorenz 2018). The constitution itself reflects a multifunctional organizational and institutional complex designed to govern across all social fields. Article 4 of the constitution establishes the CPV as Vietnam's leading political force, and other sections restate this principle. Organizationally, the party-state comprises five distinct but operationally interwoven domains. These include (1) the party organization, (2) a nominally representative party-dominated legislative sector, (3) a government bureaucracy appointed and managed by the party, (4) party-subordinated legal and inspectorate systems, and (5) party-run mass organizations. Party-run security agencies pervade and encase the entire apparatus. The party organizes its activities through its own network of organizations and through the activities of party cells embedded in most places of work and all areas of residence.

Ideology is important to the party and the manner in which it functions. But there is also a need to appreciate differences between ideals and practices. Throughout its history, the party has used its claim to be the sole legitimate representative of the democratic aspirations of Vietnam's people to justify its permanent monopoly of political power. The CPV remains avowedly socialist in its orientation, and its economic and social policies are indeed broadly redistributive (more about this later). And under the CPV's rule, although social relations in the economy are substantively capitalist, party-dominated circuits of capital accumulation and opportunity hoarding are key drivers of social inequality (London, this volume, Vu ed. 2022). At times the lifeworld of the party appears as a kind of political religion, replete with the systematic use of symbols to control, steer, and influence popular consciousness.

To study the CPV as Vietnam's dominant organization is to explore the qualities, sources, and limits of its powers across different social fields and contexts. The party's influence is pervasive. While its membership is roughly 5 percent of the population, party members' family ties mean that 15 to 20 percent of the population have direct ties to a party member. In practice, the party's political settlement functions as a sprawling redistributive coalition to which ordinary Vietnamese have varying degrees of access (Gray 2018; London 2020). Power within the party appears decentralized and fragmented at some moments and strongly centrally coordinated at others. Mann's (1986) classic distinction between despotic power (of a handful of individual leaders) versus infrastructural power (power exercised through the system) is useful in thinking about Vietnam's politics. The party's membership is more concentrated in the Red River Delta, north central, and northwest compared to other regions, but the party machinery is robust everywhere.

While Vietnam and the party are nominally ruled through formal organizations and in adherence to formal institutions (e.g., laws and policies), the latter frequently represent a shell within which transactional politics unfold among individuals on the basis of coercion, cooperation, reciprocity, and exchange and often on a clientelist basis. The party's practices diverge from the formal institutions it has set in place. The principles of rule of law, the separation of powers, and freedom of expression and association are encoded in the constitution, but these provisions are not fully realized in practice. Party members and those with party ties are able to

leverage their superior access to and command over opportunities, resources, and information to the benefit of their families and patron–client networks. The party exercises control over the country's formally representative legislative bodies, government, bureaucracy, courts, mass media, and thousands of state-linked organizations, including enterprises, schools, and hospitals. The party utilizes mass organizations (together with the mass media) for purposes of mobilization and moral suasion and its formidable security apparatus to discipline and punish dissent. In Chapter 2, I provide an overview of the party and explore how it has shaped Vietnam's institutional evolution across the fields of politics, economy, and social policy.

Contributors to this volume explore various aspects of the party-state. Focusing on Vietnam's national assembly, Paul Schuler (Chapter 3) explores features of political representation and relationship between the party and the assembly in principle and practice. In (Chapter 4) Ben Kerkvliet explores the manner in which the party addresses public political criticism, showing that while the party mainly disallows political opposition, it takes a selective approach to punishing and imprisons political critics. One of the key questions in contemporary Vietnam concerns the status of civil society, a term that the party itself views circumspectly. In his contribution to this volume, Andrew Wells-Dang (Chapter 5) traces the development of civil society and advocacy networks. The party-state's coercive power is enforced through large-scale security, police, and military apparatus that is subordinate to the party and which encases the party and virtually all aspects of social life in the country. In this volume, Carlyle Thayer (Chapter 6) explores the organization and functions of this crucial aspect of the party-state apparatus. While the CPV has permitted the expansion of individual freedoms, the party's record on civil and human rights remains poor. In his contribution to this volume Gisle Kvangin (Chapter 7) traces recent developments.

To study Vietnam as politics and power relations is also to attend to continuity and change in features of the country's relation to the wider world. In recent decades, the CPV has redefined the country's relation to the world. Addressing this theme, Le Hong Hiep (Chapter 8) shows how the CPV's posture in the international sphere has been to maintain Vietnam's national independence while preserving its political dominance at home. Hanoi has used long-standing ties to Moscow to procure weapons and has obvious political affinities with the communist parties of China and Cuba (Brundenius and Le 2014; Chan and Unger 1999). But Vietnam's diplomacy is guided by pragmatism more than old allegiances. Somewhat ironically, Vietnam's security and economic interests in Asia align most closely with the United States. While China remains a vitally important trading partner, and while the countries' ruling parties retain important political affinities and ties, China's expansionist tendencies pose ongoing direct threats to Vietnam's independence and relations to the wider world. Writing on this theme, Tuong Vu (2014) has traced the controversial subject of the CPV's China ties. A revised and updated version of his analysis can be viewed at VietnamHandbook.org.

Vietnam as economic aspects of social life

Vietnam's transformation from least developed to one of the fastest-growing economies in the world is remarkable. As detailed by Rama (Chapter 9), sources of growth included dramatically improved incentives in agriculture and the rapidly accruing gains from international trade. Over the last three decades, foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade have transformed the country into a leading site for the employment of semi-skilled, low-cost labor and an emerging tourist destination. In their contribution to this volume, Prema-chandra Athukorala and Trung Kien Nguyen (Chapter 10) trace the evolution of FDI and exports over the late two decades. Vietnam's deepening ties with countries in East Asia are impressive. For example, by 2020, Korea,

Japan Taiwan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries accounted for over 70 percent of Vietnam's foreign capital stock and, combined, for more than 1,400 foreign invested projects (compared to roughly 500 for Hong Kong and China combined and 100 for the United States).

In the scholarly literature on Vietnam's economy, Vietnam has been variously characterized as a transitional economy, a newly industrializing East Asian economy, a frontier market, and a "next generation" emerging market. And it is true that the country's growth is expected to remain steady at high or (possibly) very high levels for the next decades. Still, the temptation to label Vietnam as "little China," the new Asian Tiger or Dragon, or a BRIC-in-waiting (Brazil, Russia, India, China) – as journalists, aid donors, foreign investors, diplomats, and academics tend to do – stands as an obstacle to an appreciation of distinctive features of the country's contemporary political economy. What Beresford and Fforde (1997) pointed out two decades ago remains the case: Vietnam's economy is *not* best understood as a process of "top-down reforms." An implication of this view is that Vietnam's growth ought to be understood not primarily as an instance of "policy success," but rather as a disorderly and sometimes chaotic process of economic transformation unfolding in the context of ad hoc and post hoc reforms that variously accelerated and stalled movement toward a more market-based economy. The Vietnam analyst David Brown is of the view that Nguyen Xuan Phuc's term as prime minister (2016–2020) signaled the return of effective policy. In 2021, party secretary Nguyen Phu Trong engineered Phuc's move to the position of state president, with Phạm Minh Chính taking over the prime ministerial reigns.

Similarly, comparisons to China are informative but the differences between the two countries' experiences are even more so (Malesky and London 2014). As in China, Vietnam's transition from central planning to capitalism was not accompanied by the collapse of the Communist Party, with the result that its transition to a market economy has unfolded more gradually than in the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe. But it is questionable whether Vietnam or China are usefully characterized as transitional: these are, in key respects, consolidated market economies, albeit of an unusual market-Leninist sort (London 2017). Further, unlike China, where economic reform began as centrally endorsed experiments within a stable economic environment, Vietnam's economy on the eve of reforms was anything but stable, and it would be more accurate to say that central planning had never been fully implemented. Thus, to portray Vietnam as following an orderly transition from planning to the market – a narrative shared by the Communist Party and western aid donors, each for their own reasons – is to impose order retrospectively on what was an uneven and fiercely contested series of nested conflicts, the outcome of which was given ex-post political and legal legitimacy in recognition of new political realities and the impossibility of reversing course.

In other respects, Vietnam's industrialization shares more similarities to its Southeast Asian neighbors than the VinGroup empire of billionaire and party-loyalist Phạm Nhật Vượng; there are to date no Samsungs, Foxconns, or Huaweis, and VinGroup itself may be a one-off sensation. While Vietnam's economy has seen a rapid structural transformation, the manner in which this has unfolded has reflected a haphazard speculative kind of pattern facilitated by fuzzy property rights and corruption, animated by motorization and exploding use and capacity of information and communication technologies, and yet also frustrated by institutional constraints and infrastructural bottlenecks. While there has been a great deal of talk about "Industrialization 4.0," building a smart economy, the structure of the economy in 2021 primarily reflects growth in services (formal and informal), labor-intensive manufacturing, construction, and a growing but still repressed private sector. By 2021, even in the context of the pandemic, some observers grew more optimistic about the outlook, detecting the development of backward linkages from big FDI investors, as well as innovation in the information technology (IT) sector. Indeed,

by 2020, Intel, Samsung, Apple, and other large investors began investing in manufacturing processes that required more than simple assembly activity. Whatever the case, the continued large-scale flow of FDI into Vietnam has reduced pressures for reform, thus undermining the structural transformation of the economy, even as rapid growth continues.

And herein lies a problem. While Vietnam stands to benefit from institutional reforms aimed at enhancing state effectiveness, expanding and nurturing the private sector, and promoting powerfully the diversification of the economy, powerful incentives and interest smilitate against such changes. Contributions to the present volume illustrate some of these dynamics. In Chapter 11, Jonathan Pincus addresses the theme of state effectiveness and observes how processes of commercialization and decentralization have at times undermined the coherence and efficacy of state policy. A notable difference between China and Vietnam is the comparatively smaller scale of Vietnam's private sector. In his contribution to this volume, Vu Thanh Tu Anh (Chapter 12) explains the trajectory of Vietnam's private sector and its implications for the growth and performance of Vietnam's economy. Over the last three decades, the CPV has promoted decentralization measures as part of efforts to reform government and perhaps more importantly for reasons of political expediency. The impacts on patterns of economic change have been complex, far reaching, and controversial. In Chapter 13, Edmund Malesky takes up this theme.

Vietnam's economic transformation has wide-ranging effects on livelihoods, affecting not only economic growth and the organization of production but also conditions of employment and the spatial configuration of the economy. As recently as the 1990s, agriculture employed 70 percent of the adult workforce. By 2020, some 35 percent of employment was in services, and more than 20 percent in manufacturing, compared to 36 percent in agriculture. Within the space of two decades, the practice of working in a globally linked enterprise or the threat of having one's community cleared for a domestic- or foreign-invested business development project went from zero to commonplace. As always, gendered aspects of economic life are helpful in gaining a sense of the economy's social bases. In addition to being the principal source of labor in the agricultural sector and figuring centrally in the development of the country's large informal economy, women in Vietnam also have very high rates of labor market participation. In 2019 women accounted for 47 percent of the labor force, though women occupied less 25 percent of overall management roles. Reflecting a dynamic seen across middle- and low-income countries, women accounted for 67 percent of those employed in foreign invested enterprises.[8]

Grasping the manner in which Vietnam's economic transformation has affected the livelihoods and sensibilities of communities, families, and individuals and how it has affected deeper structural features of economic aspects of social life in the country is a distinct challenge. In her contribution to this volume, Angie Ngoc Tran (Chapter 14) shows how the globalization and transformation of Vietnam's economy have been attended by complex changes in the development of its industrial relations regime. Addressing the controversial question of land, Nguyen Van Suu (Chapter 15) traces the evolution of land tenure, with a particular emphasis on the north of the country. Steering clear (as a Vietnam-based academic) of such politically charged cases as the Đồng Tâm incident of 2019,[9] his analysis nonetheless highlights the nature and ramifications of developments in this field. In Chapter 16, Ann Marie Leshkowich focuses on experiences in urban areas of the south, exploring how the making of market society can affect notions of personhood and strategies of navigating economic change and the construction of identities. An appreciation of Vietnam's history underscores the presence of continuities amid these changes and indeed raises questions about whether and to what extent Vietnam's transition to a market economy represents a clean break from the past. Writing on this theme, Gerard Sasges (Chapter 17) demonstrates that many of the patterns observed in contemporary Vietnam's economy can be traced to the classical, colonial, anti-colonial, and state-socialist periods.

Vietnam as socioeconomic conditions, institutions, and patterns of associational life

Understanding contemporary Vietnam requires careful attention to continuity and change in social conditions and the institutional arrangements and practices that sustain social and associational life. Living conditions have improved significantly, and in some measures of health and education are superior to wealthier countries. Still, much of the population remains vulnerable to poverty, a fact that was confirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing measures and interruption to supply chains brought about a sharp rise in income poverty (UNDP and UN Women 2020). Economic growth has also generated resources for the expansion of health and education systems (London 2011) and the extension of basic infrastructure to rural areas, including remote regions. The CPV's political commitment, as reflected in high levels and redistributive character of public budgeting, remain important to the organization's political support and subjective assessments of its legitimacy. Increasingly, social services are financed by user fees, a practice promoted under the banner of "societalization." Co-payments, fees for extra services, and contributions (for example, of parents to their children's schools) have commercialized public services, resulting in a widening gap between access to and the quality of social services enjoyed by the rich and poor.

In its economic growth, urbanization, rural transformation, and the commodification of social life, Vietnam has experienced the reduction of certain forms of social inequality and the reproduction and intensification of others. Official statistics, including those produced by donors and nongovernment organizations, suggesting that levels of social inequality are modest and stable do not stand up under serious scrutiny. The expenditure surveys on which they are based systematically exclude migrants and others living in substandard housing, a group that has grown rapidly with industrialization and urbanization. The rich and many categories of luxury expenditure are similarly undercounted (Pincus and Sender 2008). Asset inequality has intensified over the last two decades amid bonanza-like patterns of urbanization and concentration of urban and rural land ownership.

Changing patterns of welfare and inequality in Vietnam reflect both rapid improvements in living standards and the proliferation and (often) intensification of inequalities around income, assets, political affiliations, gender, ethnicity, location, and other markers of difference. In Chapter 18 I join with Jonathan Pincus to examine welfare and inequality and provide an overview of trends in three key fields of social policy: social protection, education, and health. Analysis shows that Vietnam has seen rapid, if uneven, improvements in living standards across all regions. Some socioeconomic gaps – such as between urban and rural areas – have narrowed whereas others – such as inequalities of income and wealth – have intensified.

Education and health care are particularly worthy of study. Globally, Vietnam's performance on basic education makes it a contemporary outlier, having achieved expansions in average years of schooling and results in assessments of learning that far outpace all other countries in its income group. By contrast, the country's performance beyond the lower-secondary level has been mediocre by comparison. The scale of higher education in Vietnam has seen rapid expansion, but the quality of higher education (including post-secondary and technical and vocational education) remains a major weakness (Nguyen and Tran 2018). In their contribution to this volume, Diep Phan and Ian Coxhead (Chapter 19) explore how features of the education system tend to restrict education beyond the lower-secondary level, particularly for children from low-income households.

In the field of health, Vietnam's record of expanding quality care is similarly mixed. On the one hand, life expectancy is significantly greater and levels of maternal and infant mortality

much lower than other countries in its income group. The country faces persistent challenges, however, including the commercialization of public health and its deleterious effects on well-being and social solidarity, and new health risks, including noncommunicable diseases as cancers; heart conditions; diabetes; and deaths, illness, and injuries stemming from traffic accidents, hazardous working conditions, and environmental and food-borne toxins. In this volume (Chapter 20) Tran Khanh Toan provides a comprehensive overview of contemporary Vietnam's health system. While the capabilities of Vietnam's state in the health field remain uneven and associational life is subject to controls, Vietnam's early successes in combating the devastating COVID-19 virus of 2020–2021 shows evidence of a highly capable state and, not least, a sense of trust and collectivism absent in most (including many advanced) countries.

Exploring patterns of welfare and inequality in the fields of education, health, and social protection is useful for charting Vietnam's progress and for appreciating the country's distinctiveness. The contributions to this volume acknowledge the great gains Vietnam has made while also noting that the country could and should be performing better than it does. Specifically, while the CPV has achieved considerable progress in improving the accessibility of basic services, there has been a broader movement toward the commodification and commercialization of social life that is contributing to the intensification of inequalities that undermined both the well-being of Vietnam's population and the country's long-term prospects. While Vietnam is indeed developing a welfare state, the extent to which that welfare state contributes to or reproduces and intensifies inequalities will hinge on a political determination to live up to the frequently accounted aim of promoting quality services for all.

Patterns of welfare, inequality, and environmental degradation are closely related to urbanization and rural transformation, the impact of which has registered differently across regions and socioeconomic groups. Vietnam is urbanizing rapidly, and much of the countryside already has a peri–urban feel. Fifty-story apartment buildings and gated communities are multiplying around, and often within, Vietnam's largest cities, transforming the built environment and the human experience. When modest and sometimes decrepit older housing stock is replaced by mega structures, long-time residents are uprooted. Changes are also underway in the countryside as urbanization, changing patterns of production, environmental degradation, and other factors transform rural livelihoods. In their contribution to this volume, Eric Harms and Danielle Labbe (Chapter 21) trace patterns of urbanization in the south and north, respectively.

Economic growth and well-being are tied to the transformation of nature. Economic growth in a context of haphazard and poorly enforced regulation has resulted in intense pressure on the environment, the costs of which have fallen disproportionately on the poor. Climate change is a serious threat to the country's economic and social progress. At current rates of growth, Vietnam will be an upper-middle-income country by 2050, but as many as 20 million inhabitants of the Mekong Delta could be displaced by rising sea levels and floods (Fawthrop 2019). Central parts of Vietnam will face an increasing incidence of typhoons and severe flooding and landslides. Deforestation, toxic waste, choking urban pollution, and unsafe food and agricultural practices remain threats to public health and quality of life. In 2021, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City had some of the world's worst air pollution. Vietnam was one of the 10 countries most affected by air pollution and among the top five affected by climate change. In 2018 the Mekong Delta was identified as among world's major sites of plastics contamination, and 2019 saw the contamination of a major source of Hanoi's fresh water.

Environmental concerns, while they have gained stature in public and policy debates, have often been trumped by business ventures and state businesses in particular. Overall, it is widely accepted that Vietnam has decent environmental laws but does not enforce them well. Will it enforce them? At present, the movement toward a greener set of policies and practices seems to

be fueled mainly by economic realities. There is no certain direction. It is widely agreed that Vietnam has excellent wind and solar potential. Yet plans to build dozens of coal-fired power plants by 2030, for example, remained on track until 2020, when several projects were canceled only for financial reasons. In June 2019, a PetroVietnam subsidiary confirmed that it would lead a long-planned dam project near Luang Prabang, Laos, contradicting Hanoi's own previous objection to hydroelectric power projects on the Mekong mainstream (Culp and Strauss 2019). But now it appears to be pulling out, albeit for economic reasons.[10] The CPV's insistence on silencing critics of its lackluster performance on environmental matters does not bode well for efforts to promote accountability to environmental laws. Nga Dao's contribution to this volume (Chapter 22) explores Vietnam's ecological crisis in greater depth.

The impact of rural transformation on livelihoods has varied across regions. While changes are salient, continuities can also be observed. Writing in 2012, Prota and Beresford traced increasing landlessness in the Mekong River Delta to class differences around control over and access to resources and ties to political elites and market networks. In a recent study of economic change in the Red River Delta, Nguyen et al. (2020) observe rural families' widespread insistence on maintaining rice land, even given the laborious and time-consuming demands of rice cultivation and its low economic returns. In the context of plentiful off-farm employment opportunities, families reported a mix of considerations, from hedging against economic risks to maintaining families' rice farming heritage. Dynamics have differed in the south, where landlessness had become more widespread. Writing in this volume, Hy Van Luong and Phan Văn Dốp (Chapter 23) detail changes unfolding in the lowlands of the Red River Delta, while Philip Taylor (Chapter 24) finds elements of cosmopolitanism in features of life among ethnic minorities in the rapidly transforming Mekong Delta. Vietnam's population comprises 54 ethnic groups. In her contribution to this volume, Pamela McElwee (Chapter 25) explores the current status of Vietnam's ethnic minorities, highlighting the tensions and contradiction between the CPV's emphasis on solidarity and inclusivity and the persistent and vast overrepresentation of ethnic minorities among Vietnam's poor.

To study contemporary Vietnam is to explore continuity and change in the social relations that animate family life and intergenerational relations, an evolution that shapes gender relations and women's status, as well as aspects of sexuality and identity. Writing from within the Vietnam Academy for Social Sciences, sociologist Nguyen Huu Minh (Chapter 26) provides an overview of salient features of family in the context of rapid social change.

Analysis of gender, the family, and sexualities is a strong theme in Vietnam studies and is well represented in the current volume. Analysis of the family and of gender relations provides insights into continuities and ruptures in societal norms. From this perspective, the family can appear simultaneously or variously a source of nurturance, a mechanism of inequality, a site of struggle, and a proximate determinant of life chances. Here, the volume features several contributions. In Chapter 27 Nguyen Thi Huong and Helle Rydstrom examine the status of women and the evolution of feminist thought. Then, in Chapter 28, Rydstrom inquires into the relationship between masculinity and violence. Addressing the nexus of gender and kinship, Tine Gammeltoft (Chapter 29) explores how kinship can reflect distress and dependencies experienced by women.

Scholars and policy analysts have examined how processes of social transformation have affected sex, sexualities, and women's status in the context of Vietnam's distinctive market-Leninist version of neoliberalism. Two works in English of note in this regard are Nguyen Vo's (2008) *Ironies of Freedom* and Hoang's (2015) *Dealing in Desire*. Beyond the world of scholarship, Vietnam has seen major advances in research and advocacy around issues of gender, reproductive health, sexuality, and domestic violence. The pathbreaking work of independent

researcher Khuat Thu Hong is especially noteworthy in this regard. Today, Vietnamese scholars are addressing such previously under-researched and taboo themes, as is reflected in the brilliantly titled research article "Hư hỏng" ["Depraved" (Do et al. 2017)], which addresses parental perceptions of teenagers' sexuality in urban Vietnam. In the current volume, two contributions offer insight on other aspects of sexuality and gender that are infrequently addressed. Exploring a subject that is pervasive but rarely subject to scholarly analysis, Nguyen Khanh Linh and Jack Harris (Chapter 30) examine extramarital relationships through the lens of masculinity. In Chapter 31 Paul Horton and Helle Rydstrom provide an analysis of LGBTQ identity in Vietnam in relation to heteronormativity.

Vietnam as cultures in motion

Culture may be understood in a variety of ways, and its study can take innumerable directions. Whether it is examined from the perspective of shared and contested traditions, norms, and values, to artistic expression or aspects of politics and statecraft, consumption, popular culture, and the construction of memory, the study of culture can take innumerable directions. And the manner in which globalizing processes have shaped cultural trappings and patterns of everyday life resists simplification. While Vietnam's cultures reflect Chinese and East Asian norms more broadly, many aspects of its culture are unique. Local and global influence are apparent in the manner in which culturally mediated processes of marketization have unfolded. To cite two salient, if contradictory, illustrations, cultural change in contemporary Vietnam over the last two decades has seen the emergence of status-driven mass consumption, on the one hand, and countervailing efforts to institutionalize "Ho Chi Minh thought" and even "Ho Chi Minh religion" (Ngo and Quijada 2015; Werner 2015), on the other. The country has also seen salient changes in features of art and art production, political culture (as reflected in political journalism), popular television, and cuisine:

As in all countries, patterns of economic transformation have affected patterns of food production. Vietnam is a net food exporter, but undernourishment remains prevalent among some ethnic minority groups living in the remote upland regions. The nation's emergence as a major exporter of farmed fish and shellfish has transformed rural and coastal ecosystems. Globalization has affected food consumption, but Vietnamese cuisine has – at least until now – withstood the onslaught of globalized fast food, even as patterns of food consumption have veered toward Southeast Asian norms, reflected in perilously high levels of consumption of sugar, salt, and artificial preservatives. Between 2009 and 2015, diagnosed cases of diabetes doubled.[11] Christopher Annear and Hack Harris (Chapter 32) observe aspects of continuity and change in Vietnamese cuisine, its public presentation and consumption, and its surging global popularity. In contrast to the Vietnam of the 1980s, contemporary Vietnam is increasingly rich and polluted, and the spectacular popularization of the motorbike that unfolded at the turn of the century is now being challenged by the automobile, raising major problems of road rights and pollution. In Chapter 33, Arve Hansen examines the nexus of motorbikes, cars, and capitalism and the questions it raises for Vietnam's development from the past to the present and the future.

In Chapter 34, Chung Vu Hoang surveys developments in religious life and organizations. Although the CPV strictly regulates religious organizations, religion and spirituality are nonetheless salient features of social life. Beyond institutionalized religion, conventions of ancestor worship and regular observance of death anniversaries are important features of everyday life for virtually all Vietnamese. Communication with spirits is a standard practice, even among the country's political elite. Organized worship includes Buddhism, Christianity, a number of minor religions, and, not least, political religions of the CPV, including but not limited to the

state-propagated personality cult of Ho Chi Minh. The monetization of religion is a fascinating aspect, as business and many of the country's most powerful political elites maintain personal teachers and spiritual guides to help them navigate the vicissitudes of daily life in politics.

Vietnam has also seen changes in the production and consumption of art and in patterns of mass media. As detailed by Bui Kim Dinh in this volume (Chapter 35), expansion of personal liberties that attended Vietnam's opening to the wide world and its transition to a more market-based economy created conditions for the rapid expansion of a market for art both outside and within Vietnam. This has given rise to new tensions in the CPV's long-running efforts to manage artistic representation of social life in Vietnam. Since the 1920s, Vietnam has maintained a lively print media scene.

One of the most interesting features of contemporary Vietnam has been the expansion and diversification of spaces of communication. In recent years Vietnam has seen an uptick in public interest in politics, facilitated by and reflected in the lively political discourse accessible to the Vietnamese online. While perspectives on the politics vary, online debates are fueled by the fact that many features of contemporary Vietnam violate commonly held aspirations and values of its population. In separate chapters, Nguyen-Pochan Thanh Phuong and Nguyen Thu Giang (Chapters 36 and 37) explore developments in the fields of journalism and popular television. Culture is, of course, hardly independent from politics and in respects always reflective of politics.

The year 2025 will mark 50 years since the end of the U.S. War and nearly 40 years since the formal announcement of *Đổi Mới* reforms. It will mark 71 years since the partitioning of Vietnam that preceded the country's descent into the Second Indochina War. The year 2025 is also the centennial of the founding of the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League, the grouping of anti-colonial youths that would later become the CPV. Finally, it will also mark the 100-year anniversary of the death of Phan Châu Trinh, who is still lauded by reform advocates today. In his contribution to this volume, Oscar Salemink (Chapter 38) shows that to study politics in Vietnam is to question the country's political evolution over the last two centuries and the production of historical memory.

Contributions to an understanding of Vietnam

In this chapter I have proposed basic orientations for studying contemporary Vietnam. In particular, I have developed the argument that those who study the country should endeavor to explore its features from past to present and across multiple fields, as only by doing so do we stand a chance of understanding contemporary Vietnam as a dynamic and historically emergent social whole. Correspondingly, the remainder of the volume is divided into four parts, addressing politics, economy, the composite theme of social conditions, social institutions and associational life, and culture. Addressing these themes, the 37 chapters to follow will assist our understanding of contemporary Vietnam and the conditions, sensibilities, and experiences that distinguish it in the world. Additional materials as well as a database on Vietnam research can be found at VietnamHandbook.org.

Notes

1 www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/overview#:~:text=Vietnam%20is%20experiencing%20 rapid%20demographic,to%20120%20million%20by%202050.
2 Citing the World Development Indicators, the ILO (2019) reports that in 1985, Vietnam was the eighth poorest country in the world as ranked in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) among 149

countries with available data. For a good analysis of the 25 years following the war, see Beresford et al. (2003).

3 London BBC 2013 www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23605050; www.jumpstartmag.com/southeast-asias-biggest-internet-economies-part-5-vietnam/ Telephone data is from the archive of the *CIA World Factbook*.

4 This conversation took place at a conference on 29–30 April 2013. I will not name the said official.

5 www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-43-placate-the-young-and-control-online-discourse-the-vietnamese-states-tightrope-by-dien-nguyen-an-luong/ On internet monitors see www.bbc.com/news/technology-42494113

6 Pham T.M.T. 2018 Bộ trưởng Giáo dục: Người Việt chi 3–4 tỷ USD cho du học mỗi năm https://ndh.vn/thoi-su/bo-truong-giao-duc-nguoi-viet-chi-3-4-ty-usd-cho-du-hoc-moi-nam-1235985.html

7 www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/oct/09/essex-lorry-deaths-vietnamese-migrants-called-relatives-while-suffocating-court-hears; "These were the words of Nguyễn Thọ Tuân, one of the 39 victims: Tuân đây, anh xin lỗi. Anh không chăm sóc mẹ con em được nữa. Anh xin lỗi. Anh không thở được. Anh phải đi rồi. Mẹ con em phải sống cho thật tốt nhé; state officials visited the family several months later, offering support collected from Vietnamese across the country. www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wG5z_Uw4S4&ab_channel=H%C3%A0HuyKh%C3%A1nh

8 According to the ILO: www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/–asia/–ro-bangkok/–ilo-hanoi/documents/publication/wcms_774434.pdf

9 As detailed by David Brown: www.asiasentinel.com/p/vietnams-dong-tam-incident-the-curtain.

10 See my July 2020 report, *www.asiasentinel.com/p/threat-of-further-big-dams-on-th*

11 Ngoc, N. B., Lin, Z. L., & Ahmed, W. (2020). Diabetes: What Challenges Lie Ahead for Vietnam?. *Annals of global health*, *86*(1), 1. https://doi.org/10.5334/aogh.2526

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PART I

Politics and Society

2

THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF VIETNAM

Consolidating Market-Leninism

Jonathan D. London

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is contemporary Vietnam's dominant organization. Functioning through its sprawling party-state, the CPV has shaped Vietnam's institutional evolution more than any other actor or social force. Since the 1990s, the CPV has used its Leninist political organization to shape a market-based regime of accumulation that is oriented to commodities production for the world market, supportive of limited socialist redistribution, and functional to the party's continued political monopoly and dominance across all social fields.

In this chapter I trace the evolution of the CPV, distill its organizational features, and explain its role in the making and consolidation of contemporary Vietnam's social order. Situating the CPV and contemporary Vietnam historically, I suggest that contemporary Vietnam under the CPV is appropriately understood as the latest moment in a sequence of emergent and ultimately transient social orders, each defined by distinctive social relational and institutional properties. Addressing the organization of the CPV's power, I provide a concise overview of the CPV's party-state, a sprawling, dynamic, and distributive apparatus of rule that the party has sought to continuously develop, adapt, and use as a means of projecting, reinforcing, and extending its comprehensive monopoly of power. Finally, I explain the party's role in the making and consolidation of Vietnam's contemporary social order which, I argue, is best understood as a market-Leninist order that is defined by specific combinations of relational and institutional features. I identify and trace the evolution of these features across the fields of politics, economy, and the neglected sphere of social reproduction – which encompasses the fields of social policy and the family and other activities that affect welfare and inequality.

Formed in the context of anti-colonial struggle and communist internationalism; battle-tested through six successive decades of insurgent, revolutionary, and anti-imperialist military conflict that killed and traumatized millions before achieving its ultimate goal of national political unification; isolated internationally under conditions of severe poverty for two decades subsequently; and rattled but unbowed in the face of the collapse of state-socialist states and communist parties across Eastern and Central Europe, the CPV has, since the 1990s, used its Leninist political organization to guide the formation of a market-oriented and increasingly globalized accumulation regime that has supported accelerated economic growth and significant, if uneven, improvements in living standards while also contributing to the emergence of market-based inequalities and worrisome levels of environmental degradation. Various limits to its powers notwithstanding, the CPV remains dominant. Indeed, roughly a century on from its

initial formation, the CPV today appears likely to rule Vietnam for decades to come – a prospect that increases our need to understand this organization and its historical and contemporary dynamics and features. And so, rather than asking questions about whether the party will survive, my aim is to contribute to understandings of the party's role in shaping emergent patterns of social and institutional change in Vietnam and its implications for the party and present and future generations of Vietnam's people.

The CPV and contemporary Vietnam in historical perspective

We can make sense of the CPV and its role in shaping contemporary Vietnam by viewing the party at present as the latest version of an organization with a history tracing back to the 1920s. And by viewing contemporary Vietnam as the latest moment in an historically transient sequence of social orders, with each order distinguished from that which preceded it by specific and preponderant combinations of principles, institutions, and ideas governing routine social life.[1] Doing so yields the following schematic interpretation of contemporary Vietnam's emergence and institutional evolution over the *longue durée*.

Since the classical period, Vietnam has seen the serial formation, consolidation, and decline of a sequence of large-scale and ultimately nationally scaled social orders, each gradually and more or less comprehensively overtaken by emergent waves of social and institutional change. Up to 1975 these included a series of dynastic orders shaped by proto-states that varied in their socio-spatial scale and institutional coherence that sometimes existed alongside and at other times in conflict with one another up until the early 19th century, when the Nguyen Dynasty in 1802 first proclaimed the notion of Vietnam approaching the country's present territorial boundaries; an extrinsically induced French-dominated colonial order that endured between 1858 and 1945 that, by dint of its institutional designs and extractive ambitions, lent force to the notion and realization of Vietnam as a nationally scaled social order while also eliciting anti-colonial resistance from groups including but not limited to the CPV; and a subsequent period, running from 1946 to 1975, of protracted social conflict between the CPV and rival states which entailed national partition and the emergence of rival political regimes and corresponding social orders, both parallel and adversarial efforts at state formation and societal transformation in the north and south of the country under conditions of total war. The CPV's evolution and the effects of its rule need to be understood in this context.[2]

From anti-colonialism to anti-imperialism and socialist revolution: the rise of the CPV

In tracing the party's evolution from an insurgent force to a dominant party-state, we can begin with an examination of the circumstances of its emergence and then trace continuity and change in the interests, rules, practices, ideas, and dynamics that have prevailed within the ranks of the party and in its relations to conditions, actors, and institutions in its broader social environment – that is, within Vietnam and its broader regional and global context.

The CPV was established in 1925 as the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League and was formally established as the Indochina Communist Party in 1930 in Kowloon, Hong Kong, with the explicit goal of liberating Indochina from colonial rule and carrying out socialist revolution.[3] Over the course of the 1930s, the party pursued dominance in Vietnam's emerging anti-colonial struggle and narrowly avoided outright annihilation as scores of its leadership were either killed or imprisoned.[4] By the early 1940s, however, under a charismatic leader, Ho Chi Minh, the party had regained its vigor, establishing its front organization, the Viet

Minh, in 1941 and expanding its anti-colonial operations even as a war-aggravated famine in 1944–1945 resulted in anywhere from 400,000 to 2 million deaths. Scholars attribute the party's endurance and ultimate effectiveness in securing its dominant position to the strengths of its clandestine organization and increasing military capabilities, the deep appeal of its message of national self-determination and social justice, its effectiveness and mercilessness in eliminating political rivals, and broad – if spatially and demographically uneven – support from the country's population.

In 1945, recognizing its possibility to win power, the party swiftly filled the vacuum that followed Imperial Japan's surrender. But Ho Chi Minh's independence declaration of 2 September was largely ignored.[5] Employing tried and tested Communist Party tactics, the party formed a popular front organization (the Viet Minh), which it skillfully expanded and used between 1946 and 1954 to build international support, carry out and expand armed resistance aimed at defeating France's (Allied aided) efforts to re-establish its colonial dominance, undermine the French-sponsored State of Vietnam (SOV), and establish social control under its authority across the varied social and physical geography of the country's north.[6]

In 1954, based on its own efforts and with extensive material and technical support from China's People's Liberation Army, the CPV, acting as the Viet Minh, decisively defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu. That set the stage for the Geneva Conference, which resulted in the partitioning of the country at the 17th Parallel and formal recognition of both the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, in the north, under the party's clandestine authority (as the Labor Party), and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the south. (The latter, under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem, was the successor state to the French-sponsored SOV.) From the outset, the agreement met with only approval among its principals. Elections stipulated to take place within a two-year time frame never occurred. Acting under the cloak of the Viet Minh Front, the CPV moved some, but not all, of its forces to the north of the country. Meanwhile, beginning in 1953, the party employed coercive and violent tactics to carry out land reforms modeled on the Chinese Communist Party's methods. Involving some 50,000 party personnel, the land reforms resulted in substantial redistribution. In the heated rhetoric of the post-WWII Cold War, some claimed "a bloodbath" that resulted in hundreds of deaths; today the best estimates suggest deaths ranged in the range of 15,000 to 25,000; substantially more than claimed by some party authorities (Holcombe 2020; Vo 2015). Deaths included many by execution, carried out in the context of mob violence based on judgements concerning class designations that were orchestrated by party members and rendered on the bases of variously substantiated and false claims, as the party subsequently partly admitted. In 1954, amid social tumult and escalating domestic and international tensions, more than 800,000 persons migrated from the north of Vietnam to its south, prominently including large numbers of Catholics, members of the merchant class and large landowners, and anti-communist intellectuals.

By 1955, US forces began progressively replacing French forces, while the CPV gradually ramped up its insurgent war. Increasingly, the party was led by General Secretary Le Duan, who would dominate the CPV's politics for three decades. After the United States began large-scale troop deployments in 1965, the country steadily descended into conditions of total war. For Vietnam's people with a living memory of this era, including those within and outside the CPV, perspectives on the party took form through innumerable geographically and temporally differentiated prisms of a war experience that divided the country and made regions, localities, and even families bitterly contested arenas of violent conflict. Against formidable odds and through continuous traumas and millions of deaths, the CPV ultimately succeeded in defeating its foreign and domestic foes and uniting a largely rural nation of (then) 48 million under its de facto authority in 1975. Today, Vietnam's population stands at double this figure.

The rise and decline of a state-socialist order, 1954 (1975)–1989

The state-socialist social order that took form under the CPV's wartime authority in the north from the 1950s and on a national scale after 1975 is of particular interest, as it was from within the crumbling foundations of this order that contemporary Vietnam's social order took form.[7]

The CPV gained political dominance in the north and later in the south by mobilizing and compelling political support from peasants and petit-bourgeois elements while methodically eliminating domestic and foreign threats to its political monopoly. Its rise to power culminated in 1975 with the achievement of a nationally scaled CPV-dominated communist corporatist political settlement and the formation of what Gray (2018) has rightly characterized as a sprawling redistributive coalition. Beginning in the north of the country in the 1950s and nationally after 1975, the party-state put into place a comprehensive set of rules and compliance procedures governing social life across all social fields, always through organizational and ideological devices of a recognizably Leninist character. Vietnam's political settlement during this period is appropriately understood as a communist corporatist political settlement in that it centered on the mobilization and incorporation of various strata of the population (administrators, peasants, soldiers, workers) into a lasting base of political support and effected a stratified clientelist regime of citizenship.

In politics, facing the formidable challenges of material scarcity, decrepit infrastructure, and spotty information and communications, the party gradually established and consolidated its monopoly of power by applying a mix of rules and compliance procedures backed by threats and use of coercive means. And it embarked on a perpetual process of state formation and state building centered on the creation and enforcement of comprehensive institutional designs across all social fields.[8] The result was an interinstitutional regime that, while leaving elements of preexisting social and cultural institutions in place, represented a process of fundamental and, in important respects, revolutionary social change across the fields of politics, economy, social policy, and culture. In the sphere of economy, the party endeavored to transform the accumulation regime through the elimination of private property, the collectivization of production means, and the use of central planning as a means for allocating capital. In the sphere of social welfare and social reproduction, the CPV went about building up a modest but universal system of essential social services, spanning education, health, and other fields, while also organizing the economy in a way meant to extract savings from agriculture and non-remunerated domestic labor for the support of what was envisaged to the expansion of a modern urban workforce and the age of a Vietnamese "socialist man."[9]

As scholarship on the period has demonstrated, the institutional features of this resulting state-socialist order were not only, or even primarily, the result of the designs, intents, and actions of the party and its institutions, but instead reflected the party's variable powers and their limits across time and place and multiple social fields. Wartime conditions, Vietnam's postwar poverty and isolation, and policy failures undermined the CPV's effectiveness. The decline of Vietnam's short-lived state-socialist order reflected the progressive erosion of its institutional foundations. The erosion of the state socialist order stemmed from the failure of the state socialist economic institutions that the CPV instituted to facilitate capital accumulation. This failure owed not only to the devastating effects of war and international isolation and the decrepit state of the country's infrastructure but also to systemic inefficiencies in the planned economy itself, ranging from poor incentives and bottlenecks to weaknesses in the state's technical competencies in the fields of production and management and the design and implementation of policies and weaknesses in the state's extractive and allocative capacities.

The collectivization of production in the wartime north had proved minimally effective for stabilizing food production under emergency conditions, but proved incapable of sustaining

long-term productivity growth. Outside of agriculture, enterprises were doomed by insufficient investment, technological barriers, poor micro-level incentives, and a host of inefficiencies that characterized enterprises in planned economies elsewhere. By the middle 1980s, in conditions of poverty, international isolation and ineffectual currency-price-wage reforms, the economy faltered, fueling hyperinflation and intensifying struggles for influence in the party's elite ranks, particularly after Le Duan's death in 1985. Efforts to sustain the failing economy took the form of a combination of ad hoc, post hoc, reactive, and piecemeal adaptations in formal rules and structures often initiated as part of efforts to contain already institutionalized (and sometimes formally illegal) practices at the grassroots.

The making of market-Leninism, 1989–present

By the late 1980s, Vietnam had descended into an acute fiscal crisis that undermined the basic functioning of the state. Famine gripped the 21 provinces of northern Vietnam in 1988.[10] And yet, beyond various ad hoc and reactive economic reforms, consequential movements toward a more market-driven economy were taken only in 1989 and 1990. By this time, owing to the worsening fiscal crisis, the education and health sectors had sustained major shocks, exemplified by plunging school enrollments, months-long delays in the payment of paltry salaries, declining morale among health and education sector workers, and, after 1989, increased reliance on financial "contributions" from households in the form of various formal and informal fees. Taken as a whole, Vietnam had by 1989 experienced a political breakpoint, understood as a decisive shift in the logics and exercise of power. And yet this breakpoint occurred through a slow process, extending from the hyperinflation and leadership transition of 1985 and 1986 to the slow adoption of largely reactive marketizing reforms in 1989 and 1990, accelerating only with the global crisis of state socialism beginning in 1989 and an acute fiscal crisis of the state.

The subsequent making and consolidation of contemporary Vietnam's market-Leninist social order would occur through a still more protracted process. It would be shaped in crucial ways by relations of competition, cooperation, and accommodation that would unfold within the elite ranks of the party over the course of the 1990s and into the 21st century, a process hugely consequential to the formation and transformation of Vietnam's party-state, the CPV's sprawling apparatus of rule. In advance of a discussion of these dynamics, it will be useful to have a solid understanding of the enduring features of this party-state, a discussion of which I will now turn to.

Understanding the party-state

The CPV endeavors to govern Vietnam through a sprawling party-state apparatus modeled on formal organizational structure and principles developed in the Soviet Union under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin and put into use in countries where communist parties held power. Ideal typical features of this state-dominated and deeply authoritarian "socialist system" have been distilled by Kornai (1992), among others. In contemporary Asia, more or less explicitly Leninist party-states are seen in mainland China, North Korea, and Vietnam. Singapore under the People's Action Party and, until the late 1980s, Taiwan under the Kuomintang, as well as Laos, Cambodia, and Burma also stand out as examples of instances of communist parties that have more or less successfully employed organizational principles of a Leninist party-state to rule. In countries ruled by communist parties, the institutional evolution of party-states was closely associated with efforts to institute revolutionary state-socialist orders based on the collectivization of means of production and comprehensive central planning. However, as was made clear by Lenin's New Economic Policy (1918–1928), and later in Taiwan and Singapore,

and still later in China and Vietnam, Leninist principles of political organization are compatible with different forms of economy. Indeed, tracing the evolution of the party-state in Vietnam demands a processual rather than static analysis that construes the party-state as a collective entity and corporate actor animated by an evolving set of social relations and interests unfolding within it and in relation to its ever-shifting social environment. Only in this way can we grasp the forces bearing on social and institutional change.

The hallmark of the Leninist party-state, in contemporary Vietnam and other contexts, is the assertion and enforcement of the complete and (by design) permanent political monopoly of the vanguard party and its domination of social life and organizations across all fields, including the ideological domain. Whether instituted by domestic forces (as in Vietnam) or imposed from without (as in Eastern Europe), the initial formation of the party-state went hand in hand with efforts at full-scale social revolution, i.e. the wide-ranging overthrow and replacement of prevailing social institutions and their replacement with institutional forms designed to promote a social order based on principles of rational redistributive modernization, i.e., socialism. The strategies and tactics for pursuing these goals are established in party documents and in the scholarly and policy literature. Writing on this subject in 1952 for the Rand Corporation, a contractor for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and University of California sociologist Philip Selznick characterized the "Bolshevik" party-state as an "organizational weapon,"[11] a characterization that would appear sensible insofar as such states were designed to gain and exercise political power to restrict dissent and eliminate all rivals. Notwithstanding that China and Vietnam's party-states have shaped the development of market-oriented economies, these countries' ruling parties remain Leninist.

From the past to present, Leninist party-states have exhibited several salient features. The first of these is that institutions and compliance procedures set in place across the fields of politics, economy, social policy, and culture reflect and reinforce the party's dominance. Second, these institutions and compliance procedures generate and reproduce a hierarchical configuration of political-class relations along with attendant patterns of social inequality. Notably, in the market context, the circulation of capital and the determination of life chances are effectively routed through party structures. The result is a hierarchical corporatist regime of citizenship constructed on the differential incorporation of various groups and segments of the population into the ruling group and its political settlement (Mann 1987). Under these circumstances, class and status reflect differences in relations to the party and its levers of state administration and not simply, or even mainly, the economy (Szelenyi 2016).

Finally, in practice, there exists an inevitable gap between the institutional designs that define the party-state's formal organization and the (informal) institutionalized practices that characterize its actual operations and their effects. While party-states' actively enforce their rules, a vast amount of activity that takes place in and around the party-state occurs on the basis of informal practices that become institutionalized rules. Research on institutions suggests that in capitalist and state-socialist economies alike, individuals and organizations frequently seek to evade formal laws and always appear to be one step ahead of regulators, at once challenging formal institutionalized rules and propelling processes of institutional change.[12] Absent the rule of law, the evasion of formal rules in party-states takes on a different character, as instances of unaccountable grand corruption in China and Vietnam illustrate (Ang 2020; Tromme 2016).

The organization of power

Formal features of the CPV party-state are established in Vietnam's constitution (last amended in 2013) and innumerable formal documents (see London 2014; Croissant and Lorenz 2018,

as well as VietnamHandbook.org/CPV).[13] Article 4 of the constitution establishes that "the Communist Party of Vietnam – the vanguard of working class, working people and Vietnamese nation, the faithful representative of their interests, grounded on Marxist Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought, is the leading force of the state and society." This principle of party leadership is restated at multiple points in the constitution. Notably, the armed forces are, first and foremost, accountable to the party.

The party-state encompasses five distinct, functionally integrated and operationally interwoven organizational domains. As shown in Figure 2.1, these include (1) the Party organization proper, (2) a formally representative party-dominated legislative sector, (3) a party-appointed and -managed government and bureaucracy, (4) party-subordinated legal and inspectorate systems, and (5) and party-run mass organizations. Three additional points bear emphasis. The first is that while the party organization proper is a distinctive domain, the party is present and effectively controls all components of the governing apparatus. In the Vietnam context, it does not therefore make sense to speak of any unit of the party–state independently of the party. Second, though not visible in Figure 2.1, public security, police, military, and defense units pervade the entire apparatus and, in effect, encase the population in the formal institutions and practices that define the party-state. Third, as indicated by arrows in Figure 2.1, in terms of formal principles of authority relations, the party displays both-bottom up and top down-elements. In reality, the party functions as a mainly top-down (i.e., hierarchical) entity, even as its ability to shape behavior within its ranks and in its broader social environment varies.

As highlighted in Figure 2.1, the CPV's party organization forms the party-state's backbone and indeed functions as its backbone and central nervous system, with reach that extends throughout every component of the apparatus.[14] Lines in Figure 2.1 indicate direct links to the party organization's hierarchy, which occurs through the presence and comprehensive oversight of party cells. Indeed, the party's branches and cells and activities extend further still, through committees, cells, and party work that are present across all social fields and in all party-state linked organizations.[15] Boxes with light gray text in Figure 2.1 are either descriptors or depict formal elements that lack real meaning, such as the presence of "all eligible voters" above the National Assembly and its chair.

As seen on the left side of Figure 2.1, Vietnam is divided into four levels of administrative authority, from the central level, to the province/city level, to the district/ward level, down to the commune/precinct level. Vietnam's territorial administration is divided into 63 provinces (including Vietnam's five largest cities),[16] roughly 705 districts and urban wards, and roughly 10,599 communes (GSO 2021). Below the lowest level of bureaucratic administration lie smaller socio-spatial units that, while not following a unified labeling regime, form a key part of the party-state apparatus. These include innumerable thousands of rural hamlets (variously called *thôn, xóm, làng, bản,* and *buôn, ấp*) and urban settlement clusters (*tổ dân phố*). While these residential/administrative areas fall below the lowest rungs of the state bureaucracy and its executive body (namely, the commune- and precinct-level People's Committees, they are, through the routine work of party cells, party committees, and other party work, an integral and vital part of the party-state's administrative and security functions and of the party's rule.

The party organization in principle and practice

The party is a hierarchical organization; its actual operations reflect centralized and decentralized aspects. Like all parts of the party-state (and indeed all kinds of organizations everywhere),

Levels and units of Administration

Central level

Province level
63 provinces, incl. four major cities

District level
705 rural districts & urban wards

Commune level
10,599 rural communes & urban precincts

Villages, Neighborhoods
Accountable to embedded party cells or subject to party, police surveillance

Vietnam's Party-State

• Convened on quinnenial basis, *Party Congresses* formally approve party platforms and elect the Party Central Committee; in practice Congresses' platforms and representatives are determined through opaque processes controlled by the party secretariat and handful elite at the Party's pinnacle

• The *Party Central Committee* is in principle the CPV's highest leadership organ, in practice the Politburo and its elite members are more powerful

• The Party General Secretary is the CPV's most powerful individual followed by the President, Prime Minister, and Chair of National Assembly

Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF)

> 40 mass organizations, openly led by party, e.g., Women's union, labor union, peasants' union, professional associations, youth, children's, religious bodies, writers, artists associations.

VFF Mass Organizations

VFF Mass Organizations

VFF Mass Organizations

Non-state organizations, incl. firms, NGOs
Accountable to embedded party cells or subject to party, police surveillance

Communist Party of Vietnam Party Congress
~1,500 representatives

Communist Party of Vietnam Party Central Committee
175 members

Party General Secretary

Politburo ☆
18 members

Party Secretariat

Party Inspectorate

All eligible voters

Central Party Committees
Eight Party committees, e.g., ideology, organization, internal affairs, foreign affairs. The party Inspectorate is formally at this level but is depicted separately to illustrate a point (see text).

Party organization

Party organization

Party organization

~5.2 million party members

National Assembly

National Assembly Chair
483 Representatives, screened by party bodies, elected by citizens in compulsory voting
~96% party members

People's Councils

People's Councils

People's Councils

~ 92 million non-party member citizens
Roughly 1 in 5 with direct ties to party members

State President
(Ceremonial, diplomatic)

Prime Minister

Government & Bureaucracy
22 functionally defined ministerial agencies e.g., planning, finance, education, health, military, public security

People's Committees
Functionally defined provincial departments

People's Committee
Functionally defined district bureaus

People's Committee
Functionally defined local cadres

Boundaries of state bureaucracy

Compliance Mechanisms
All government, state, state-owned, state-managed, and state-linked organizations and many non-state organizations are led by party members and are accountable to CPV cells embedded within them. The Party organization penetrates beyond the boundaries of the administrative state into residential area and places of work. Vietnam's vast military and security forces are sworn to defend the CPV and pervade and encase the entire party-state

Representative agencies and personnel stationed in more than 190 countries and territories around the world

Courts/Inspectorate

State Owned Enterprises (SOEs), State linked equipted firms (SLEFs)

Public Service Delivery Units (SDUs)

Provincial SOEs, SLEFs

Provincial SDUs

Courts/Inspectorate

District SOEs, SLEFs

District SDUs

Courts/Inspectorate

Commune SOEs, SLEFs

Commune SDUs

Penal Institutions

Foreign organizations and firms
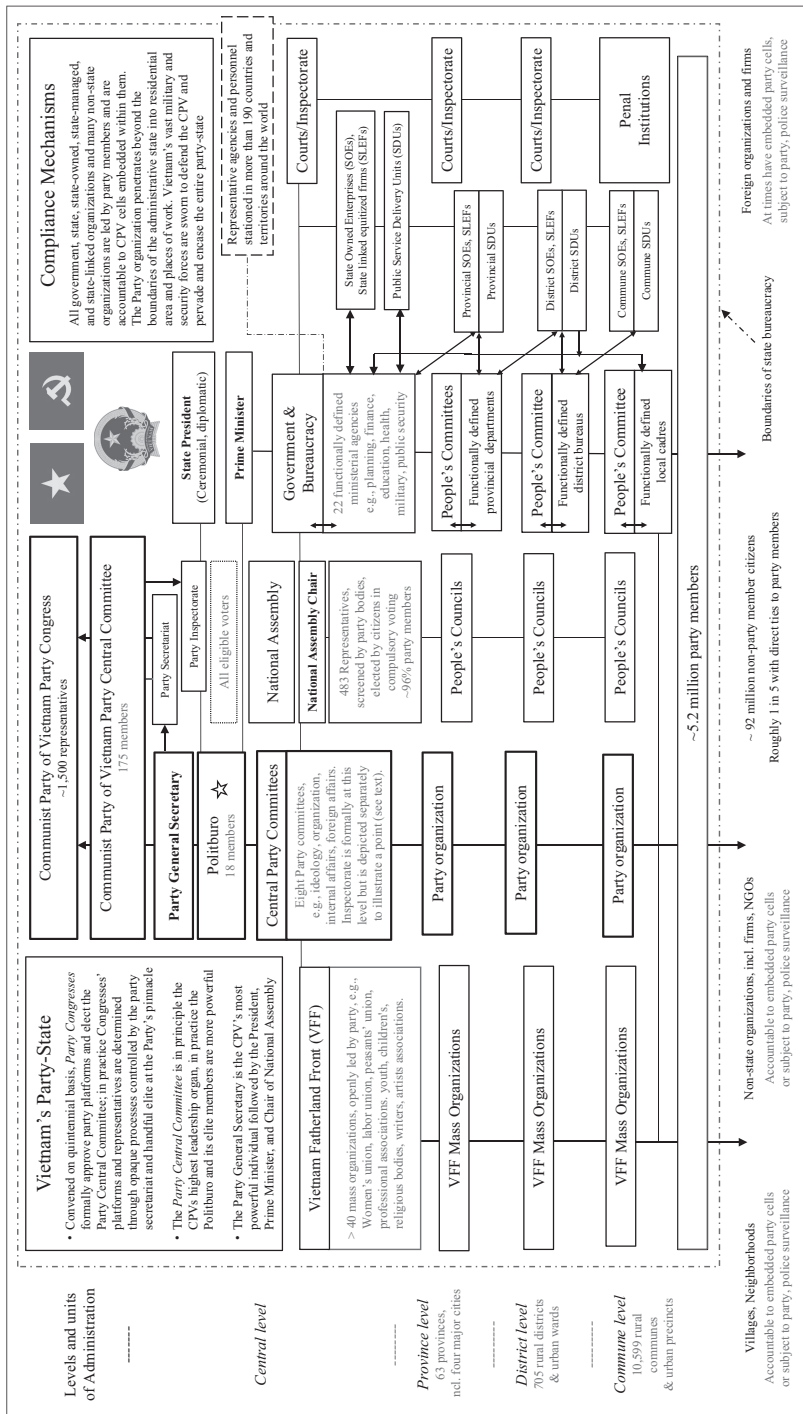At times have embedded party cells, subject to party, police surveillance

Figure 2.1 The organization of the Communist Party of Vietnam's party-state

formal rules governing the organization (reflected in the party code) cannot fully describe its actual features, as various forms of informal relations and institutionalized rules and practices act within the shell of formal rules to shape the CPV's party organizational life and the character of its multifarious relations to the general population. Attention to the informal relations and rules that pervade the CPV are essential to its analysis, even as doing so requires a broader picture of the party organization and structure.

Returning to Figure 2.1, Vietnam's Politburo (*Bộ Chính Trị*), identified in the figure by a gold star, is the party's and Vietnam's most powerful political body. The Politburo is chaired by the party's general secretary, who is the party's and Vietnam's most powerful individual.[17] In principle, the party Congress is at the top of the party's hierarchy, followed by the party's 175-member Central Committee (CC) and its executive body, the Party Secretariat. Notably, however, the party inspectorate is appointed by the general secretary–controlled Party Secretariat via the Party Central Committee rather than the Party Congress. Thus, up until the present the party lacks even a quasi-independent level of accountability, a point observers have underscored as a limitation on the party's efforts to combat widespread corruption (Viet 2006).

The Party Congress is convened every five years, while the CC meets periodically between congresses in plenums. The Politburo is formally accountable to the CC and the Party Congress, but in practice the Politburo (and the general secretary in particular) dominates and oversees the selection of the members of both bodies. As in China and Cuba, Vietnam's Party Congresses are largely rubber stamp affairs. Within the Politburo, the four highest-ranking members by position are known informally as Vietnam's "four pillars" (highlighted in yellow in Figure 2.1). These include, in order of power, the general secretary and those appointed to the positions of state president, prime minister (i.e., head of the government), and chair of the National Assembly. The remainder of the Politburo typically comprises a mix of military and police officials, ideologues, government ministers, the party secretaries of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and so on. In recent years, the representation of military and police leaders on the Politburo has increased.[18]

The CPV prides itself on a consensus-based approach. In reality, the historical pattern within the Politburo and CC has been characterized by a mix of competition and cooperation, with periodic episodes of intense competition among individuals, competing factions, or centers of power. The Politburo is indeed a deliberative body, but one whose members vary in terms of their power and stature and are indeed formally ranked. Since 1950 the Politburo's size has ranged from 13 to 19 members (as compared to just 6 persons at the founding Congress in 1945). Since the death in 1985 of party general decretary and strongman Le Duan, power within the Politburo has been shared, though by no means evenly. At times the Politburo has fielded a standing committee, comprising the most powerful few of its members. Crucially, retired Politburo members have at times influenced Politburo decision-making processes, particularly those officially recognized as consultants (*cố vấn*). As we will observe later, this practice turned out to be consequential for patterns of the party's evolution since 1985. The standing committee and consultant role were eliminated in 2001 amid a storm of controversy (more about which later), but its contributions to the intensification of coalitional politics, patron–client relations, and the phenomenon of fiefdoms within the party have endured (Vu 2006). Subsequently, successive party elites have replicated this pattern, seen most clearly in the tenure of the controversial former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, a self-styled populist, and his rival, Nguyen Phu Trong, the CPV's current general secretary, who has held his position since 2012, making him Vietnam's longest-serving general secretary since Le Duan.

Two features of the Politburo and its relation to the party's elite organs bear emphasis. First, while the party's general secretary is formally charged with steering the Politburo's agenda,

decisions taken by the Politburo are often reached collectively, if not by strict consensus. The dispersion of power among its members and its deliberative features have often resulted in a political decision-making process that is often characterized as slow and reactive rather than agile and proactive, a perception aggravated by the absolute secrecy with which the Politburo conducts its affairs. Second, while the Politburo is the most powerful body, it is not always been wholly a free agent. At the central level, such bodies as the party CC and even the (party-controlled) National Assembly have shaped the Politburo's deliberations and decisions through regular inputs. (Arguably, Party Secretary Trong has reversed this pattern.) Still, CPVs 175-member CC undertakes substantively deliberative and accountability functions through party plenums that are held two or three times annually between congresses. The central committee assists in drafting and approving party resolutions. On occasion the CC has expressed dissatisfaction with decisions taken by the Politburo and has, on two occasions, vetoed Politburo decisions. The distribution of power within the CPV's elite ranks is nonetheless comparatively diffuse, reflecting elite dynamics distinctive from those observed in China.

The significance of the party's ubiquitous presence cannot be overstated. The notion that governmental or bureaucratic agencies enjoy moments or degrees of autonomy from the party is true within limits. Ultimately, however, all spheres of the party-state and all organizations within it are comprehensively subordinated to and suffused by the party as a political organization. This means that each province, each district, each commune, each organizational unit, and each neighborhood in Vietnam is, in respects, governed by the party structure, through its hierarchies and local party work. This is achieved through the presence of party leaders within organizations and party cells (*chi bộ đảng*) that meet regularly to promote agencies' compliance with central party norms. In principle, the party leads, the state carries out, and the people inspect. In principle, the party organization serves as a conveyer belt transmitting aspirations of the people to more central authorities for democratic deliberation. In practice, it is the party acting as a top-down party-state that seeks to dominate decision making across all social fields.

Activities and membership

The party's organs and cells are embedded at all levels of jurisdictional authority. The party's political activities take place both alongside and within the party-state's legislative, governmental, bureaucratic, legal, and military and security branches, as well as state-owned, -managed, or -linked organizations, including schools, hospitals, mass organizations, religious organizations, and so on. Thus, alongside, and indeed within, all corners of Vietnam's party-state, routine matters of administration are accompanied by a parallel and perpetual process of "party work." Local party members regularly attend party meetings, participate in ideological fortification sessions, and join in various kinds of mobilization and security functions. Party work is subject to party hierarchies of power but also to networks of personal influence whose power is brought to bear on political decisions. The party deploys a range of formal norms and routines to display, maintain, defend, reproduce, and extend its power. The party is integrated formally through a bureaucratic labyrinth whose currency is a never-ending series of resolutions, reports, circulars, instructions, and appeals (MacLean 2013).

By 2021, the CPV counted more than 5.2 million members. But this figure understates the party's ubiquity and influence. If we consider the total number of persons with direct family links to a CPV member, the number of persons with direct links to the party approaches or exceeds 20 million, approximately a fifth of the country's population. Hence, while the party monopolizes power, it is inclusive in this specific, if limited, respect. Indeed, since assuming power in the north of the country in the 1950s, the CPV may be understood as a sprawling

and expanding form of communist corporatism, in that it cultivated and won political support, loyalty, and deference by mobilizing and incorporating its members into hierarchical structures of formal authority, status, and privilege (Stromseth 1998).

Three features of the party's membership bear emphasis. First, as mentioned in the introduction of this volume, while the party's legitimacy was initially founded on anti-colonial struggle, anti-imperialist war, and revolutionary socialism, most of the country's population and the party's membership was born after 1986 and is connected to the past by party lore rather than direct experience. Second, although the CPV controls and enjoys significant support across all regions, the party's membership has been and remains unevenly distributed geographically, however. Specifically, party membership remains most concentrated in the north-central, Red River Delta, and northwest mountainous regions and least concentrated in the south central, southeast, Central Highlands, and Mekong River Delta regions. The variable regional density of party membership lends different regions different feels. Finally, while sworn to defend the party, and while subject to party norms and compliance procedures, the CPV's 5 million members vary considerably in their life experiences and normative orientation. Though we lack an evidentiary basis to assess this aspect of the party, students of contemporary Vietnam will recognize this statement as fact.

Prevailing relations and the malleability (within limits) of ruling ideas

Ideas and institutions do not exist independently of social relations, but ideas and institutions can shape and affect social relations. Vietnam's party-state reflects this reality. The CPV dominates social relations across all social fields and rules on the assertion and presumption of its own historical indispensability. The CPV controls who can rise to positions of power according to the notion that it alone can, should, and will determine and represent the people's democratic aspirations. The party exercises power according to Leninist organizational principles whereby the organs and cells of the party pervade and dominate all corners of the body politic, comprehensively subordinating social life to the party's specified aims. Party discourse and symbols (including Leninist iconography) pervade in all public spaces, especially in the halls of state agencies, schools, and state-linked organizations, which are regularly festooned with banners amplifying party messages. In the age of the internet, loudspeakers remain a feature of routine social life, with daily broadcasts of party messages, anthems, and rules of conduct.

From past to present, the party has sought to enthuse its members with principles of Leninist vanguardism, an aim pursued through routine functions of party cells, training schools, and specialized agencies. The party's Central Committee on Propaganda and Ideology is one of its most important units, tasked with promoting loyalty to the party and acceptance of its ideas, both within its ranks of the party and in the broader population. The party's ideological organs monitor speech and thought within the party and population. Perpetual promotion of the party line and its subjective legitimacy occurs through a variety of means, including regular "party work" in places of work and residence, use of the mass media and education system, and ritual veneration of the party at public events and ceremonies in ways that many observers liken to a kind of political religion (Dror 2016).

Some observe that widespread collapse of state-socialist regimes after 1989 permitted or required the party to move away from its past (often) rigid identification with the ideological positions of the "socialist camp" (Vu 2016) in favor of a more pragmatic approach. And, as with China, it is widely (and, in my view, incorrectly) assumed that ideology is somehow less important than in the past. With respect to ideology, the party-state's most enduring features has been its consistent, if changing, embrace of Leninist doctrine, aspects of Marxism, and

various self-styled trappings of Ho Chi Minh thought, along with a steady feed of nationalism and patriotism (see, for example, MHA 2020). Across the country and around the clock, the state-supervised media broadcasts examples of what it means to be a civilized citizen (Bradley 2004). During a nationwide campaign in the 2000s, neighborhoods and families conforming to party ideals and metrics were issued banners or certificates confirming their status of "cultured villages, neighborhoods" (*làng văn hóa, khu dân cư văn hóa*) or "cultured families" (*gia đình văn hóa*) at events held in party-run cultural centers (*nhà văn hóa*) (Huynh 2005). In the education system, students are subject to comprehensive indoctrination; the children of the elites along with high-performing students are channeled into the party system. There is, in other words, an official culture of conformity that the CPV as an organization promotes continuously through a variety of channels, all day and every day.

As in any state, political rituals are an important aspect of social life in Vietnam. The party relentlessly promotes its legitimacy via diverse means. Party-friendly political messages are unremittingly broadcast across a range of media outlets, from loudspeakers to social media and state-run text messaging apps. Those within Vietnam's party-state live lives suffused by party ideas and symbolism. The party's Ideology Committee plays an active and high-profile role in regulating public discourse and the mass media (see Nguyen-Pochan this volume).

No less than its formal institutions and organization, the mix of ideals, representations, and symbols that attend the CPV's rule are essential to understanding its character. From top to bottom, party members carry out their word with the notion that the party is and will always be the sole legitimate representative of Vietnam's people, and that the party's (presumptively) superiority morality (*đạo đức*) makes it uniquely capable of leading the country. Indeed, the CPV presents itself as the sole legitimate representative of Vietnam's people and the guardian of Vietnam's independence. The party's leadership role is real. On a practical level, functional agencies and all levels and local units of governments are charged with dispensing their activities and budgetary priorities in accordance with the spirit of the party's resolutions. Across all fields, local party-state organs are expected to comply with and embrace party dictates indicating the need to prioritize specific policies. How and to what extent this occurs varies, and central party dictates sometimes bow to local practices.

The claim that the central party is a mainly a paper tiger is plain wrong. The presence of a centrally guided and perpetual political process (operating through the party cells) is evident in all sectors and is followed up from the center through various compliance, enforcement, and inspection mechanisms. In the education system, for example, the party's activities sometimes (though by no means always) operate as a force countervailing against bureaucratic mediocrity and encouraging (even not always achieving) enhanced accountability to the party's education policy goals. Party structures and processes are employed at all levels to hold schools, principals, and teachers account, an element absent in the education systems of most countries (London 2021). This does not, of course, negate major problems in Vietnam's education system.

Over the course of its history and up to the present, the CPV has employed the assertion of its indispensability as a gag, cudgel, and ideological straitjacket,[19] enforcing its view that the party alone should decide how reality, history, and socialism should be correctly understood. An important corollary of these ideas is the widely promoted belief that any existing or potential political opposition must be eliminated and that the country is under constant threat of "peaceful evolution" (*diễn biến hòa bình*), a term attributed to US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles during the 1950s and which Vietnam's and China's communist parties continue to assume guides US foreign policy. The combined result is that life in Vietnam unfolds within an ambient sense of political paranoia, a sense that is actively encouraged by many within the party, who are indeed incentivized to and effectively rewarded for keeping this paranoia live.[20] Notwithstanding

this and the conservative impulses of most of its elite members, beliefs and normative orientations within the party reflect diversity. Independent and especially critical thinking, however, is mainly concealed and regularly disparaged and disciplined in the announced interests of normative conformity and stability. This can be seen in the punishment of dozens of many long-time party members over the course of decades. Notably, today it is corruption rather than ideological impurities that is the more frequent basis of censure.

Representation, government, bureaucracy, legal system, mass organizations, and security

Vietnam's system of formally representative political bodies is organized to provide fora for political deliberation, ostensibly ensuring the democratic essence of Vietnam's political system. This organizational domain includes, at its pinnacle, the National Assembly and, at lower levels, province-level, district-level, and commune-level People's Councils. In formal terms, the National Assembly is charged with drafting and passing laws, while provincial-, district-, and commune-level People's Councils are charged with guiding policy formation at local levels. In practice, those "elected" to the National Assembly (every five years) and to local People's Councils (on a periodic basis) are vetted and selected by party agencies at various levels of political authority. Local election boards are managed by the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), which can effectively bar undesired candidates (Thayer 1995). Those seeking a place on the ballot for the National Assembly that do not win approval of the party still stand little chance. Nonetheless, Vietnam's formally representative political bodies nonetheless play an increasingly important and active role in projecting a sense of government accountability (McElwee 2006; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Schuler in this volume).

Vietnam's government is appointed by the party and ratified by the party-controlled National Assembly. The government is headed by the prime minister, his deputies, and government ministers. As of 2020, Vietnam counted 22 ministries and four ministerial-level organizations. Though administrative agencies are not directly administered by the party, they are interpenetrated by the party apparatus at all levels of governance. At lower levels of authority (e.g., provinces, districts, and communes), People's Committees serve as the executive agency of local authorities. People's Committees are appointed by formally representative bodies called People's Councils, which are closely related to and regulated by the provincial party organization (tỉnh ủy). Functional agencies of the state (e.g. internal affairs, education and agriculture) are organized horizontally at different levels of authority and governed vertically, from the central level, through the provinces, districts, and communes. An important feature of this political administrative system is that local offices of ministries are doubly accountable (or subordinate) – to their local people's committee on the one hand and to their higher-level functional organization on the other, as is indicated by the arrows in Figure 2.1. And, as will be noted later, after two decades of decentralization, province-level party leaders exert as much or more power in the party's national-level CC than do ministers. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) and state-linked enterprises and firms (SLEFs) are linked to various functional arms of the state at various levels, as shown in Figure 2.1.

According to Vietnam's constitution, all legal matters in Vietnam are to be decided strictly by law. According to the CPV slogan, "The Party leads, the state implements, and the people inspect." In fact, Vietnam's legal and inspectorate systems are managed from behind the scenes by the party (on the right side of Figure 2.1), while the mass organizations (on the left side of the figure) are openly led by the party and charged with promoting the party line. Mass organizations are organized under the umbrella of the Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc (most commonly

translated as the VFF). Under the front itself are incorporated more than 40 organizations, representing various professions and sectors. The largest and highest profile among these are the Women's Union, the Communist Youth League, the Peasants Union, the General Confederation of Labor, and the Students' Union. In principle, these organizations' primary roles are to promote and ensure faithfulness to the party line and to discourage party faithful from straying from party ideals. In practice, they are perhaps more important in their promotion of social activities in places of work and residence. Indeed, within organizations as diverse as local banks, universities, and foreign invested firms, these organizations lend their members a sense of participating in a social and, at moments, political collective. However, local affiliates of these organizations vary widely in their orientation. Further, active participants in these organizations frequently represent a small and at times privileged share of a given enterprise or community. In foreign invested firms, for example, members of the labor union take on the character of a labor aristocracy and are sometimes more aligned with managers than those toiling on the shop floor.

The party-state deploys a large military and sprawling security apparatus. Indeed, Vietnam is said to have among the highest levels of military and security personnel per capita in the world (see Thayer, this volume). Critics note that Vietnam's defense and public security agencies are sworn to defend the party first and the nation second and complain the large (some say bloated) size of the country's security forces places a drag on the country's development, as these agencies and their personnel are perceived to be costly to sustain while also having outsized power, influence, and access to economic opportunities. Among branches of government, the military and Ministry of Public Security (police) are among the most influential (see Thayer, this volume), and the public and political security forces play indispensable roles in the functioning and maintenance of the CPV's party-state. Writing in this volume, Carlyle A. Thayer details the role of these agencies in carrying out state repression, detailing the agencies and individuals involved and tactics employed to detect, discourage, and punish dissent. (As of May 2021, the rights advocacy group The 88 Project, which the CPV counts as a terrorist organization,[21] listed 236 imprisoned dissidents and activists.)[22] He notes that, at times, political leaders have manipulated military and police in support of their own factional interests.

And yet, the party has been and remains a complex organization that is, through its ranks, animated by diverse interests, motivations, and sensibilities. For example, a significant (if ultimately unknowable) number of party members have expressed concerns about the large size of Vietnam's public security agencies (BBC 2020).

The making and consolidation of a market-Leninist order

Since the late 1980s Vietnam has seen the emergence and consolidation of a market-Leninist social order reflecting relations, institutions, practices, and ideas specific to contemporary Vietnam and fundamentally different from those that had prevailed hitherto. The way this social order took form was hardly inevitable, as it depended centrally, if not solely, on features of the party's evolution and its effort to govern in the context of rapidly changing conditions in its domestic and geopolitical social environments. The formation of Vietnam's market-Leninist social order was affected by events and processes in the broader global order, but was not determined by them. Such events and processes as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of neoliberal globalism have been crucial, but not determinative, of Vietnam's institutional evolution. Nor can the party's role in shaping its evolution and Vietnam's social institutions be understood in voluntarist terms. While reflecting elements of intentionality and cohesiveness, the CPV's evolution as an organizational actor has been and continues to be animated by diverse and at times conflicting motivations.

The reconstitution of Vietnam's political settlement

Over the last four decades the CPV has presided over the making and consolidation of a market-Leninist order. Within it, Leninist political institutions have remained the vital integrative force, supplying the formal and informal rules and compliance procedures that govern politics, structure economic activity, and regulate social reproduction, while also shaping patterns of social inequality. In contrast to Eastern Europe, Vietnam did not experience the demise or even the profound decay of the Leninist political institutions. Instead, they have been fortified as they have guided and, where necessary, adapted to the ongoing transformation of the country's social institutions. This can be seen in the functioning of the party-state at the grassroots or "street level," where we observe continuities in certain aspects of the country's political, organizational, and institutional features but also in the context of markets, the proliferation of party-centered neo-patrimonialism, and clientelism in which opportunities for capital accumulation and access to essential services are routed through party-linked organizations and clusters of informal social networks.

Elite politics in a changing context

In late 1986, at its 6th Party Congress, the CPV formally indicated its intent to pursue reforms under the banner and agenda of "Renewal," or *Đổi Mới*. Since 1986, the party has represented the 6th Congress as the moment at which it came to embrace fundamental institutional reforms. Following the party line, most foreign accounts have also represented 1986 as a sort of critical juncture, paving the way to market reforms. Subsequent scholarship and an increasing body of evidence suggest a crucially different interpretation of its significance, namely, that while the 6th Party Congress indeed marked a momentous shift in Vietnam's elite politics, the Congress marked only the "beginning of the beginning" of a protracted period of elite competition and a correspondingly belated, halting, and at times chaotic process of institutional change in which top-down reforms frequently followed and responded to changes on the ground. Only by 1989, for example, did the CPV take decisive steps to promote a more market-based economy.

Spanning the tenures of five successive general party secretaries and eight party congresses, the period from 1985 to 2020 began with the seismic events of Le Duan's death and the 6th Party Congress, in 1985 and 1986, respectively, followed a protracted period of competition, cooperation, and accommodation that has centered more on the promotion of specific interests within the party than a coherent vision for Vietnam's future. The twists and turns of the political currents that shaped this period did not neatly coincide with the party's political calendar. The key to understanding the party's evolution is found in in-depth analysis of intra-elite relations, which can only be hinted at here. Initially damaging and chaotic responses of elite party members marked the "unravelling" of Vietnam's state-socialist economy in the 1980s, in particular, in petty infighting that continued into the 1990s. A clientelist pattern of politics was established that has haunted Vietnam ever since.

The argument I am advancing here is that the CPV's communist corporatist political settlement endured, or rather was reconstituted amid fundamental changes in the relational, institutional, and ideational bases of the party's rule. The proliferation of decentralized clientelist networks since the 1990s has propelled political careers and created a decentralized process of interest group politics. Jousting among rival groups has often undermined crisp, timely decision making and has foreclosed the possibility of a coherent vision of the country's future. In contemporary Vietnam, a market-Leninist variety of communist corporatism has combined organizational and ideational elements of Leninist socialism with influence peddling, systemic opportunity-hoarding, and wealth-seeking neo-patrimonialism.

State formation

State formation and transformation have been integral to the evolution of Vietnam's market–Leninist order. Basic relational and institutional features of social life have been refashioned in the sphere of politics, in the relations between the state and economy, and in the principles and institutions governing social reproduction. Vasavakul (2019) has construed processes of state formation in Vietnam in the 1980s as a third wave of state building. While some scholars have characterized the CPV's political development as a process of decay and decline (Vu 2010; Fforde 2017, Fforde and Homotova 2017), the durability of the CPV over the course of its 30 to 40 years of market–based governance is clear (London 2021, Nguyen 2019). Rather than emphasize its decay or even resilience, it is useful to appreciate the CPV's powers and its limits through an analysis of the qualitative features of its efforts to reshape the country's institutions (Fforde and Homotova 2017; London 2013b).

The core institutions of the Leninist political organization have been maintained, notably the Communist Party's structures and institutions, as well as a vast array of administrative and representative institutions, mass organizations, police, and public security agencies (Gillen 2011). Despite the widely hyped inclusion of private entrepreneurs, party actors and institutions continue to dominate and guide non–party institutions. With respect to ideology, the proverbial straitjacket has been loosened, but not removed. As Wallerstein noted, between 1923 and 1989, Marxism–Leninism served as a malleable philosophy custom–fitted to the needs of communist parties at different historical junctures. But politics in Vietnam is more than this. Leninism in Vietnam today is not only a set of ideas or formal institutions but also a set of historical experiences, institutionalized discourses, and contemporary manifestations that show signs of decay but also of resilience and renewal.

Ideology and historical representation

From its origins, the CPV's claims to legitimacy have rested on the presumption of its historical indispensability and unique ability to defend the nation and promote the interests of its laboring classes, a notion frequently reinforced by CPV claims to be the latest in a line of illustrious predecessors dating back to the Hung Kings (Salemink 2013). That the party regards itself with reverence is hardly surprising. Given the CPV's modest origins, the trials of its unlikely rise to power, and the awesome violence brought to bear on Vietnam and its people in pursuance of and in the course of ultimately unsuccessful efforts aimed at the party's defeat, it is understandable that narratives of triumph and national liberation remain central to party's self–image. More controversial questions concern the ultimate significance of the party's wartime triumphs and whether and to what extent they have set Vietnam and its people on an emancipatory path. In the international arena, the party has, from its beginnings, conceived itself as belonging to a worldwide socialist movement (Vu 2016), a position it rigidly pursued into the 1990s. Some 30 years after the demise of the Soviet Union, the CPV remains avowedly socialist and counts Cuba as its closest ideological ally. And yet, paradoxically, in East Asia, its foreign policy interests are at present arguably more aligned with the United States than with any other country.

In the context of its gradual embrace of a market–based economy, the CPV has instituted an economy based both on substantively capitalist social relations and significant socialist redistribution, resulting in forms of inequality that defy simplification. It has backed away from opposition to private property and embraced foreign investment but is also committed to providing a basic floor of essential services to the citizenry. Still, the CPV's announced commitment to social equity and justice is called into question by widening inequalities of income, assets,

and opportunity and the commercialization of nominally public education and health services. Soaring real estate prices and increases in the costs of energy, food, and other essential commodities along with raging consumerism frequently lends the country a decidedly capitalist feel. Social inequality and economic insecurity have remained and at times have intensified, even as average living standards have improved.

Although the party has somewhat relaxed the limits it had set on individual expression, it still draws on a fusion of left-wing political culture and lore, nationalism, and drummed-up references to "hostile forces" to legitimize an atmosphere hostile to dissenting voices. To this end, it uses rituals in an ad hoc manner. It monopolizes public discussions through the education system and media platforms. The management of memory is key in this regard (Salemink, this volume). Although the CPV's claim to legitimacy as a "liberation force" remains a common trope in party rhetoric, very few of Vietnam's citizens today have experienced the wars. In the present era, it is the perceived lack of resistance against China in the South China Sea/East Sea (see Tuong 2014) that threatens to delegitimize CPV rule.

The CPV's strongest claim to political legitimacy is Vietnam's economic growth, sustained at circa 5% for a quarter-century. Younger Vietnamese now expect a better life than their forebears. As a research collaborator pointed out,

> Many of my friends are Party members but not believers. They become members when they move up in the ranks and want to become eligible for leadership positions. That is not simply the pursuit of self-interest, oftentimes they feel that they can do a better job than other candidates (and frankly, I often agree) and that a leadership position gives them a platform to change things for the better – within certain limitations, of course.

As Vietnam changes, neighborhood loudspeakers blaring party messages no longer reach all Vietnamese, but in an age in which the internet and globalization have permitted an opening of Vietnam to the world, new channels of party suasion have been formed. Today as before, no person in Vietnam can escape the party's daily reach. Following Lenin, Vietnam's students are urged to "learn, learn more, learn forever" to cultivate socialist consciousness and trust in the party. All Vietnamese are challenged daily to emulate the idealized virtues of Hồ Chí Minh. Thus, parallel to its use to promote a growing redistributive economy (socialism), Leninism also takes the form of a series of organizational techniques and technologies deployed for purposes of political control.

Economy: transforming the accumulation and fiscal regimes

The emergence and institution of an increasingly market-based economy entailed changes in Vietnam's property regime – including its regime of accumulation – and its fiscal or redistributive regime. It also entailed the movement of production firmly from production for the plan to production for the domestic and world markets. In navigating these changes, the CPV sought and largely succeeded in maintaining ownership or de facto control over much of the economy, especially foreign direct investment (FDI), ceding only the fields of small-scale businesses, small-scale agriculture, and the informal services sector to non-party members and the general population. With respect to patterns of routine social life, changes in Vietnam's property and fiscal regimes signaled not only the redefinition of the formal economic rights and responsibilities of the party-state vis-à-vis its citizens but, no less important, transformations in class relations as well as profound changes in economic incentives, opportunity structures, and economic

practices across all sectors. As we will observe, emergent patterns of socioeconomic inequality have reflected regionally uneven growth, the use of fiscal policy to mitigate this unevenness, and, most notably, the degree to which processes of capital accumulation are routed through party-centered circuits of power.

The making of market-Leninism

Scholars of Vietnam's economy have rightly cautioned against construing Vietnam's economic transformation as a top-down process of reform, especially given that change in the country's economy has often emerged from the bottom up (Fforde and De Vylder 1996). Indeed, economic policies and reforms have often taken the form of post hoc efforts to contain or steer conditions already established on the ground. But this is not the whole story, for it is clearly the case that the party and its pattern of politics have shaped the restructuring of the economy. The challenge taken up here is to state in concise terms how this transformation has occurred and why.

When market reforms were adopted, they took the character of emergency measures in the context of acute shortages and mounting fiscal crisis. This was the spirit of enterprise reforms and, more fundamentally, dual-pricing agricultural output contracts finally adopted in late 1988 and implemented beginning in January 1989, whereby farmer were permitted to dispose of output in excess of their obligations to the state at more market-competitive prices. Contrary to representations that prevailed for more than two decades, Nguyen Van Linh remained a force against reform throughout his tenure. Ironically, it was 80-year-old Truong Chinh, overseer of the CPV's botched land reforms, who pushed hardest for marketizing agricultural reforms, only to die falling down stairs before their implementation. Subsequently, it would be Vo Van Kiet, as chair of the council of ministers and prime minister, who would most energetically champion economic and foreign policy reforms.

But Kiet, too, faced constant limits. Indeed, as has become increasingly clear, the 6th Congress itself produced no immediate momentum for economic reforms. On the contrary, party general secretary Nguyen Van Linh remained committed to the preservation of socialism, while his successor Do Muoi and the clutch of senior advisors lagged in their acceptance of reforms while promoting their own personal political and economic interests at the expense of coherent policy. Thus, from the late 1980s the CPV embarked on an improvizational and frequently chaotic path of extrication from a failing state-socialist economy. Importantly, alongside the chaos, the party has maintained a regionally redistributive fiscal policy wherein centrally collected revenues are reallocated from the nation's richest provinces to central units and the poorer provinces as "balancing payments" and budgetary transfers, according to various norms. Malesky, Abrami, and Zheng (2011) have attributed this to Vietnam's more fragmented and pluralistic political leadership as compared to China's.

That Vietnam "succeeded" in achieving a stable trajectory of market-based growth and industrialization over subsequent decades is due in considerable part to vastly improved incentives, incremental policy changes, expanding domestic demand, and increasing integration with regional and world markets. Changes the party instituted in rules governing land tenure, enterprise law, and foreign investment in the late 1980s and mid-1990s accelerated processes of marketization, as detailed by Rama in this volume. Entering the 1990s, the party sought to craft formal designs for the promotion of a "multi-sector commodity economy with a socialist orientation." Remarkably, these processes of economic change were shaped by decentralized dynamics; unlike Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, or even China, Vietnam, until very lately, has mainly lacked a pilot agency capable of steering industrialization in any meaningful sense.

The main thrust of party "strategy" has been to develop and maintain complete control over the commanding heights of the economy and over all other significant sites of capital accumulation, to largely control and extract benefits of foreign investment and trade, while ceding mostly petty trade to the general population. The party's efforts in this direction are evident in the formation of general holding companies, the maintenance of state-owned firms, and a profoundly opaque process of "equitization" in which state assets are transferred to politically connected persons. Efforts to transform state holding companies into Chaebol-like firms resulted mostly in lackluster results, billion-dollar bankruptcies, and inefficient use of scarce loan capital. In retrospect, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and his allies were overconfident of their ability to build dynamic, world-beating enterprises.

In the context of political and administrative decentralization and equitization, Vietnam has seen the development of a state business class that is effective in routing capital through informal networks to exploit market opportunities for personal gain. The result is a pattern that has certain resonances with the colonial period, when elites also used their positions to generate wealth (Cheshier 2010). The party has effectively suppressed the development of an independent bourgeoisie in a favor of a kind of corporate national bourgeoisie (described in another context by D.G. Becker 1983), albeit of a sort beholden to the party. While varying in their capacities, wealth, and influence, party members effectively hold a license to cultivate clientelist networks. At their most successful, business elites have shaped policy formation; sought, and, won access to cheap capital; and exploited inevitable policy gaps and regulatory lags to generate super-profits, as is the practice in most identifiably capitalist countries.

The forging of a qualitatively distinctively market-Leninist political economy has thus entailed both the development and subordination of market institutions (Vu 2014; Fforde and Homotova 2017), even as the decentralized commercialization of the state has elicited misaligned patterns of public investment (Painter 2008). However haphazardly, the processes described earlier have resulted in the formation of a capital accumulation regime in which a distinctively Vietnamese corporate national bourgeoise with loyalty to the party exploits its preferential access to opportunities in an expanding and globalizing market economy. By and large, party-state policies have been driven mainly to build constituencies and patron–client relations rather than conform to a coherent developmentalist plan. Whether this pattern will persist is among the most important questions one can ask about the political economy of Vietnam.

Consolidating market-Leninism

As Khan (2018) writes, beyond coercive domination, "the holding power of organizations" – such as the CPV's power in this instance – "is not just based on economic capabilities, or on whether they include 'elites' . . . but primarily on their organizational capabilities, the capacity of their leadership to mobilize and enthuse, and their skill in identifying and rewarding the right people through formal or informal networks." That seems to describe the consolidation of market-Leninism as it has unfolded in Vietnam, particularly between 2002 and 2016. During this period, dynamics of the political settlement created conditions and incentives for province-level developmentalism and the cultivation of informal networks across all areas of the economy. Inevitably, there were excesses and missteps. A particularly ill-advised decision in 2005 to allow provincial autonomy in public works decisions led to the construction of redundant airports and seaports all along Vietnam's coast. With a flimsy industrial base and limited innovative capacities, provincial economic developmentalism tended to favor speculative investments over productive ones, financially risky big-ticket items, economic redundancy across provinces, and all manner of pernicious corruption (Harvard Vietnam Program 2008).

Alongside this, the country's weakly regulated banking sector continued to provide loan capital in ways that effectively crowded out private investment. As Vu shows in this volume, with certain exceptional cases, Vietnam still lacks a substantial private, or even quasi-private, enterprise sector.

In the international development literature, Vietnam is viewed as a country that has performed exemplarily in promoting economic growth and reducing poverty on the basis of international trade and FDI (Athukorala and Nguyen, this volume). But not all aspects of the country's economic performance have been impressive. As Vu Quang Viet reminds us, after 30 years of reforms, Vietnam in 2020 has barely reached the lower middle income country bracket in per-capita gross domestic product (GDP). The foreign-invested sector remains primarily a low-wage, low-skill export platform for Korean, Taiwanese, mainland China, and other regional investors. Analysts frequently cite poorly developed innovative capacities, multiple infrastructural bottlenecks, and shallow forms of industrialization, all of which have reflected, until very recently, the broad absence of backward linkages from export-oriented (and frequently foreign-invested) manufacturing to domestic suppliers. This has further deepened Vietnam's reliance on imported intermediaries and technology. In this context, Vietnam has also seen the rapid expansion of services ranging from formal sector (including foreign invested) service activities, such as finance, insurance, real estate, tourism, retail commerce, and food and beverage, operating on a variety of scales, to informal service sector activities, ranging from food hawking and scavenging to sale in grey goods. The expansion of illicit trade and activities has also been substantial.

Outside of the exceptional case of such well-connected billionaires as Phạm Nhật Vượng and Nguyễn Thanh Hà, Vietnam has not yet seen the development of a thriving indigenous private (or in Vietnam parlance "non-state") sector (Vu, Chapter 11 of this volume), owing to the hoarding behavior of the party-state instead of the commercialization of the state (see Pincus in this volume). In this context, large-scale patronage networks have reoriented from the old SOE sector to the more agile state-linked, billionaire-run, private domestic firms, such as VinGroup, SunGroup, FLC, and Hoang Anh Gia Lai, with concentrations in real estate (Hayton 2020).

Critics have alleged this pattern reflects the party-state's lack of a coherent vision, a failure of strategy, and a free-for-all. The relative absence of forward and backward linkages across various sectors of the economy reflects minimal industrial deepening. The result is an economy which, while expanding, drawing in foreign investment, and permitting expansions in income, shows few signs of realizing a trajectory of industrialization and economic sophistication approaching levels observed, for example, in China. Recently, some observers have reflected greater optimism. For example, in a personal communication, the Vietnam observer David Brown emphasized headway made during the tenure of Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc toward better integrated development planning and a gradual deepening of the foreign investment sector (particularly electronics) to include higher technology, more value-added, and perceptible integration of domestic suppliers into supply chains (but at the expense of Chinese firms).

Welfare and social reproduction: principles of market-Leninist citizenship

Over the last four decades the CPV has presided over fundamental changes in arrangements and practices governing welfare. Specifically, alongside changes in features of economic institutions and in productive activities conventionally understood to fall under the purview of the "economy" and economic production, Vietnam has seen changes in vast social infrastructures

(spanning social policies and the family unit) that sustain, support, and reproduce labor power for participation in social life and the market. These are evident in changing patterns in family life, where nurturance and care are geared to and commodified by the expanding market; in the creeping marginalization of associational life; and in the sphere of social policy, where the provision and payment for education, health care, and social protection follows new principles.

A welfare regime refers to the interdependent way welfare is created and allocated across multiple institutional spheres, including state, family, community, and, not least, the market economy, as well as the effects of these arrangements and practices on patterns of social inequality and stratification (Esping-Andersen 1990; Gough *et al.*, 2004; Wood and Gough 2006). In Vietnam, changes in patterns of welfare have reflected not only welfare gains in the context of rapid economic growth, urbanization, and the expansion of social policies but also patterns of social inequalities. While some inequalities (e.g., urban/rural inequalities) have moderated, others (e.g., access to state power) have persisted, while still others (market-based inequalities) have intensified, reflecting Vietnam's distinctive market-Leninist brand of communist corporatism. This has led, in effect, to the persistence of a stratified citizenship regime in which those with access to political and economic capital are doubly blessed and those without are doubly cursed. Though hardly unique to Vietnam, its features in Vietnam take on quite specific features.

From state-socialist to market-Leninist welfare regime

Since the 1980s Vietnam has seen dramatic improvements in well-being, as reflected in measures of income, education, access to health care, average life expectancy, and various indicators of living standards. Changes in Vietnam's welfare regime initially unfolded in a somewhat chaotic manner, as the collapse of the state-socialist economy in the late 1980s eviscerated the already flimsy fiscal regime on which education and health care services provisioning depended. Social protection by the state, mostly a token and reserved for only a small fraction of the needy population, remained almost wholly a matter for families and communities. In parts of the country, communities saw the rapid breakdown of services provision, forcing education and health professionals to go months without already paltry wages. In the face of these challenges, the party responded by promoting policies under the banner of societalization (xã hội hóa), an expediently vague campaign designed to channel ever-increasing resources from "society" into the education and health sectors (London 2014). It is also the case that, during this period, international donors, including the World Bank, provided aid that shored up the country's preventive health system. The challenge, then, for the party and the World Bank, was to institutionalize a mix of payments that would put education and health services on a more solid financial footing.

By the middle to late 1990s, the education and health sectors, in particular, depended increasingly on "voluntary," and under-the-table payments that became and have remained institutionalized features of social services provision and payment in Vietnam. By the late 1990s, Vietnam had developed a complex system of formal and informal co-payments that reflected a mixture of socialist redistribution and out-of-pocket payments. While fiscal transfers permitted the central state to support the gradual expansion of services, private out-of-pocket payments accounted for up to 70% and as much as 80% of total spending on health and 50% in education. In ideological terms, the CPV has maintained that as the state alone is incapable of financing services on a universal basis, household payments are warranted, even for nominally public services. In practice, societalization has been effective as a strategy for resource mobilization, but it has also led to the effective commercialization of essential services provision, so that it has been inefficient with respect to the CPV's stated goal of increasing access to quality services for all. At

its worst, societalization has effectively excluded much of the population from access to services beyond a bare minimum level. At its best, Vietnam's emergent welfare regime combined elements of a basic floor, as advocated by international donors, with "you get what your pay for" beyond that (London 2013a, 2021).

By 2001, as Vietnam's economic growth gathered pace, the CPV undertook to expand the scale and scope of education, health, and social protection policies while at the same time further developing societalization policies (more on this later) and maintaining its tolerance (and tacit support) for large-scale informal payments. In the education sector, the CPV devoted efforts to expand access to basic education on the primary and lower-secondary levels, even as reliance on out-of-pocket payments frequently generated inequalities of access to quality education on a scale that various charities could not hope to redress (London 2011). Upper secondary education tended for many of the best students to present barriers rather than open paths. Higher education enrollment grew rapidly without a political commitment to quality. In the health sector, societalization policies increasingly promoted "autonomization" schemes whereby health services providers (mainly public hospitals) were encouraged to generate their own sources of income (London 2013a). Conditional on meeting certain criteria, public hospitals were permitted to reorganize services, solicit outside investments, and market such lucrative services as diagnostic imaging and "services on demand." As such, in both education and health, the naked cash nexus increases contributed to a tiered system of services provision in which access to political connections and money purchased access to superior services. By the 2010–2020 period, however, health insurance had expanded significantly and played an increasingly important, if only partially effective, role in curtailing profit-seeking overprovision of services.

From state-socialist to market-Leninist citizenship

Since its founding, the CPV has professed a commitment to principles of social justice and social policy universalism. Under conditions of protracted war and its protracted aftermath, the CPV proved unable to deliver, as economic shortage all but foreclosed the universal provision of services. While virtually everyone in Vietnam lived in poverty, the state socialist system nonetheless promoted a stratified citizenship regime reflected in wide gaps in living standards across regions and between citizens based on their differential relationship to the party.

Overall, the welfare regime that has evolved in the context of rapid improvements in levels of income and well-being has promoted a variety of market-Leninist corporatism characterized by a mix of socialist, Leninist, and capitalist principles. Within this welfare regime, the CPV's broadly redistributive fiscal policies have permitted improvements in the accessibility of services to most strata of the population, but access to services beyond a basic level are frequent on "play to play" principles. As such, locations within and to the party-state apparatus and the superior access of those with party affiliations and/or cash to the best services generate a stratified citizenship regime (London 2014). For example, as in most countries, Vietnam's education system functions as a kind of social stratification machine, more frequently reproducing, and even intensifying rather than disrupting, societal patterns of institutionalized inequality – including both political and market-generated inequalities. In the southern half of the country, families seen as tainted by wartime associations with the RVN still face exclusion from some social programs and some forms of employment.

As for the contents of market-Leninist citizenship, the CPV expects its citizens to support their livelihoods across multiple institutional spheres through participation in the state, the market (as wage labor in the formal or informal economy), the household, and various forms

of community. Millions of Vietnamese support their livelihood through employment by and in the party-state apparatus. Another large share of the population is employed in formally market-based and substantively capitalist social relations. The CPV depends on the productive and protective functions of households which are, as in most countries, differentiated by gender and frequently oppressive and exploitive of women. With respect to community, the CPV seeks to exert its dominance down to the neighborhood level, effectively controlling, managing, and ultimately frustrating and exhausting the varieties of informal secondary association that emerge in that context. Vietnam's citizenry, according to the CPV's idealized representations, can support their livelihoods on the basis of this institutional mix or state, market, family, and party-regulated community and should live in freedom and happiness even as it is widely known that connections within the party-state apparatus plus cash substantially determine life chances.

In summary, the CPV remains socialist to the extent that it embraces substantial use of redistributive policies. When redistribution occurs through an incompletely accountable system of public governance within which commercialism, corruption, and nepotism are entrenched, the prospective benefits for those in need can be diminished on a systemic basis (Markussen and Ngo 2019).

The CPV and the promise and perils of socialist humanism

Focusing on developments since the 1980s, this essay explains the CPV's evolution as an organization and how the party, acting as a party-state, has shaped Vietnam's institutional evolution. Through these pages, I have argued that contemporary Vietnam is best understood as an instance of a consolidating market-Leninist socialist order, distinguished by its preponderant combination of Leninist principles of political organization, its market-based and often substantively capitalist relations and institutions of capital accumulation, and a welfare regime that rests on a formidably complex and at times corrupt mix of public and private modes of provision and payment. This has resulted in an inequality regime in which one's status and life chances are shaped largely through one's relation to the party-state apparatus.

I have suggested that the CPV today be understood in processual terms, as the latest iteration of an organization with a history tracing back to 1925 and that contemporary Vietnam ought to be understood as the latest in a sequence of social orders tracing back to antiquity. I have sought to illustrate how the CPV has shaped contemporary Vietnam's social relational and institutional features far more than any other actor or social force. With respect to the recent evolution of the party-state, I have related how it endeavored to navigate the collapse of its state-socialist planned economy and reconstitute its political settlement on the basis of a substantially market-oriented and capitalist form of economy that has become increasing integrated into the processes, relations, and institutions of the 21st-century world market. In developing this account, I have argued that the reconstitution of Vietnam's political settlement since the 1990s has reflected movement from a communist corporatist political settlement based largely on revolutionary mobilization towards a communist corporatist political settlement based on principles and practices of neo-patrimonialism, in which access to political capital and patron–client relations structure opportunities and life chances.

A formidable challenge in representing the CPV historically and in its contemporary manifestation is conveying the mix of motivations and ideas reflected in the party's membership and the diverse ways in which the party and its party-state are understood and experienced among the diverse ranks of the population from which the party's membership springs and which it endeavors to dominate and rule. Over the last four decades, the CPV has indeed navigated

major changes in Vietnam's social institutions. While aspects of party rule such as corruption suggest "institutional decay," other aspects of the party rule – such its redistributive fiscal policies and promotion of broad access to basic services – reflects effectiveness. Indeed, over the course of the last four decades, Vietnam under the CPV has experienced the emergence of a number of important trends. These have included massive expansions in capital accumulation, substantial redistribution of wealth across provinces, significant improvements in living standards, urbanization, and mass consumption, in addition to environmental degradation, the continual denial of basic human rights, and, not least, the development of a communist corporatist neo–patrimonial regime of inequality in which an individual's relations to the party condition his or her opportunities and life chances within a bustling market economy.

Nearly a century on since its founding, the Communist Party of Vietnam is a deeply entrenched organization that dominates social life in Vietnam across virtually all social fields. The party is likely to remain Vietnam's dominant organization for decades to come. In 2025 the party will observe the 100th anniversary of the founding the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League, a small group of anti-colonial youth with visions of national self-determination and socialist revolution. The year 2025 will also mark the death of Phan Chau Trinh, the reformist anti-colonial intellectual whose vision of a country based on enlightened humanism was deemed to be too tame by Ho Chi Minh and the CPV more broadly. Over the course of its long history, the CPV has made good on many of its promises, including the achievement of national independence and, more recently, the promotion of an increasingly prosperous society. However, the path the party has pursued has produced profoundly mixed and at times detrimental effects. If we peer deeply into the CPV and the party-state's recent history, we observe a party animated by a plurality of sensibilities, impulses, and commitments. From the perspective of Vietnamese anti-colonialism, the contemporary CPV's professed commitments to distributive justice and social fairness have been undermined by the political–class inequalities that have attended the party's rule and, ironically, the systematic denial of many basic human freedoms. Whether the CPV and Vietnam's people can forge a path to still greater prosperity and equity and to human emancipation and flourishing within their own country remains the question.

Notes

1 In the case of Vietnam, the heuristic of social orders confronts the complexities of Vietnam's history, for the very idea of Vietnam as a country with borders similar to those prevailing today dates back only to 1802. See Goscha (2016).

2 In English, the author who has best singly captured this history is very likely Alexander Woodside. See also Christopher Goscha's work.

3 In the presence of a handful of members, including (again), Ho Chi Minh as the presiding comintern officer.

4 As recounted in Vu, T. 2016. *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology*. Cambridge University Press.

5 Marr 1997.

6 The French established the SOV in 1949 as a nationally scaled entity claiming authority of the entire country under the titular leadership of Vietnam's last emperor, Bảo Đại.

7 Analysis of the short-lived sociopolitical order that formed in the south of Vietnam under RVN is beyond the scope of this chapter.

8 Detailed accounts of the processes of state formation and transformation that make up this history are provided elsewhere (see, in particular, Vasavakul 1997).

9 This vision of a new socialist man has survived in Vietnam to the present, as is seen in the Institute of Human Studies.

10 According to the Hiệp hội Lương Thực Việt Nam.

11 Selznick, P. 2014. *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics* (Vol. 18). Quid Pro Books.

12 For a good treatment of institutional evolution, albeit focused on wealth countries, see Streeck, W. and Thelen, K.A. eds. 2005. *Beyond continuity: Institutional change in advanced political economies*. Oxford University Press.

13 https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/tranlation_of_vietnams_new_constitution_enuk_2.pdf

14 The Vietnamese translation of backbone as "life bone" (xương sống) is evocative in this respect.

15 While non-governmental organizations and foreign companies may be exempted from having party units, large organizations are encouraged to form internal party units, while foreign companies are subject to monitoring of a comprehensive set of regulatory and surveillance agencies that are themselves agencies of the party-state.

16 That is, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Haiphong, Danang, and Can Thơ.

17 In this sense Vietnam does not have a personal dictator in a way observed in the People's Republic of China and Democratic People's Republic of Korea or, for that matter, the former Soviet Union, with the protracted reign of Le Duan (general secretary from 1960 to 1985) being the notable exception.

18 Le Hong Hiep, this volume.

19 Wallerstein and Gao (2012 in Thayer, this volume) have explored this in the China context.

20 To give one illustration, in recent years the party has banned the use of the term "civil society" (*xã hội dân sự*) in any and all official documents, including all forms of press. In 2018, a circular distributed to local security agencies in a central Vietnam province warned of the need to guard against non-violent civil society groups, equating them with terrorist organizations.

21 https://nhandan.vn/binh-luan-phe-phan/ve-mot-so-hoat-dong-loi-dung-xa-hoi-dan-su-614221/

22 https://nhandan.vn/binh-luan-phe-phan/ve-mot-so-hoat-dong-loi-dung-xa-hoi-dan-su-614221/

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3

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Paul Schuler

Representative institutions are organizations that aggregate and promote the interests of citizens. Therefore, while virtually all states *claim* to be democratically representative and feature nominally representative institution, understanding the nature of representation requires examining how those institutions operate in practice. Vietnam's potentially representative institutions include the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), as well as legislative institutions, oversight institutions, and mass organizations. Vietnam's representative institutions may also include the increasing number of civil society organizations and informal institutions formed outside the formal bounds of the party.

How well do these institutions represent the interests of citizens in practice? Recent scholarship suggests Vietnam's representative institutions are more open and substantively representative than in the past. Addressing these claims, this chapter surveys Vietnam's formal and informal representative institutions and assesses the quality of political representation in the country. The chapter begins by examining the theoretical bases of representative politics in Vietnam. It then examines the formal design and functioning of the country's nominally representative institutions, including those within and outside the party apparatus. The following analysis suggests that while Vietnam's institutions have become more representative, their activities remain overwhelmingly tilted towards the interests of the party. This chapter explains how and why this is the case and its implications for efforts to understand and theorize Vietnam's politics.

Political Representation Under Single-Party Rule

Is genuine political representation possible in a single-party system like Vietnam's? Political representation requires two components. Paraphrasing Pitkin (1967, p. 209), the first component of representation means *substantively* acting in the interests of the represented. The second component is that the institutions must be inclusive in the sense that no groups are systematically excluded from representation (Urbinati and Warren, 2008, p. 395). This conceptualization of representation is useful for two reasons. First, it allows for the theoretical possibility that an unelected regime can represent all groups in society as well as or better than would be the case in a regime with competitive elections. For example, a regime could in theory engineer its political and legislative institutions such that all relevant groups are given a say in decision

making and that the resulting policies better approximate their desires than policies generated by competitive electoral regimes.

Second, it also allows for the possibility that systems with competitive elections may fail to generate democratic representation in practice. This is precisely the argument that informs Lenin's and Mao's concepts of representation, which insist that bourgeois democracy, because it suppresses workers' interests, can never be representative and will not advance the public's true interests. For this reason, Lenin advocated the creation of a vanguard party of revolutionaries that would rule in the interests of the working class (Lenin, 1987, 1929). Mao's concept of the mass line generally goes further, suggesting citizens must be consulted in policy formulation and involved in holding local officials accountable (Frakt, 1979). Logically, Lenin's and Mao's model of representation in theory could deliver democratic representation as well as or better than multiparty democracies.[1] To explore this possibility, the section that follows surveys Vietnam's representative political institutions, which are largely based on Leninist theory but which also reflect movements toward greater inclusivity. This sets the stage for the third section, which entertains the question of whether, how, and to what extent Vietnam's representative institutions advance the "true" interests of the Vietnamese public.

Institutions of Political Representation in Vietnam

This section reviews Vietnam's representative institutions, which include the CPV, mass organizations, legislative institutions, "grassroots democracy" institutions,[2] civil society organizations, and informal institutions.

The Communist Party of Vietnam

The most important representative institution in Vietnam is the CPV, Vietnam's only legal political party. As Chapter 1 in this volume has discussed the party's organization, this chapter will only highlight aspects most relevant to its representative function, such as membership rules and promotion procedures.

In terms of inclusiveness, although the CPV emphasizes its representation of working-class interests, it currently claims to represent all Vietnamese citizens. In practice, the CPV has waxed and waned in its level of inclusiveness. Initially, due to the exigencies of fomenting revolution, the party was relatively inclusive. With the onset of World War II, the party allowed landowners, former colonial elites, and even members of competing nationalist parties (Vu, 2015). Following the war, the party officially disbanded while secretly overseeing and controlling the development and activities of an outwardly pluralist popular front organization, the Viet Minh. The party's expansionary period came to an end in the late 1940s when it systematically purged many with bourgeois backgrounds, marginalized and eliminated opposition parties, and instituted anti-landlord land reforms (Vu, 2015).

From that point, one can trace the party's evolving representative role through the verbiage used in the various state constitutions. The 1959 constitution highlighted the party's leading role in establishing socialism – and implicitly emphasized its representation of the working class. The exclusion of the bourgeoisie was made concrete in the 1980 constitution, which first introduced Article 4 establishing the vanguard role of the party in leading the state and society in the name of the working class. The leading role of the party and its explicit representation of the working class meant that business owners were not allowed into its ranks. As such, the CPV at that time only represented a portion of the population, thus violating standard democratic notions of representation.

After the 1980 constitution, the explicit exclusion of the private sector softened. In the 1992 constitution, for example, Article 4 was changed such that at least rhetorically, the party represents the working classes *and* the entire nation. This inclusionary tone was further broadened in the 2013 constitution where the party is now both the vanguard and the representative of the entire nation and not solely the working class. These rhetorical changes were matched by substantive changes to the party's membership policy (Stromseth, 2003). In 2006 the party allowed existing members to engage in business, and in 2011 it allowed business members to join the party (Koh, 2012).

Aside from business and the working class, the party does formally represent a number of other groups. The groups with the most explicit formal representation by virtue of their position within the party-led Fatherland Front include labor, women, farmers, retirees, war veterans, and other professional groups.[3] While a later section and Andrew Wells-Dang's chapter will deal more fully with these groups and the mass organization system that they fall under, it is worth emphasizing here that the party, at least formally, aims to represent these groups through the corporatist structure.

The Party Leadership Structure

The representativeness of the CPV is also determined by its leadership structure. The leadership of the CPV is particularly important to its representative function because the party relies on democratic centralism as its operating principle. By this, we mean that in its idealized form the party organization is to function as a conveyer belt, in which party cells transmit the democratic aspirations of the people from the grassroots to the party's Central Committee. In principle, internal deliberations and debate are part of this bottom-up process. However, such debate is barred once the leadership has come to a decision. In practice, democratic centralism tends to privilege the views of the leaders, and as such the range of interests represented in the party's leadership institutions is critical.

The leadership structure in the CPV is dominated by the Central Committee and the Politburo, which is a smaller subset of the Central Committee. For both institutions, promotions are largely determined by officials who held similar posts previously. Therefore, the outgoing Politburo and Central Committee heavily influence the identity of the following groups by virtue of their ability to nominate the candidates that the Party Congress will choose from (Le, 2015; Schuler and Ostwald, 2016). This gives them great control over the groups and policy perspectives that will be represented in practice.

In terms of representation in the Central Committee, the vast majority of its members in the post–*Doi moi* era is made up of career party officials, bureaucrats, military officials, and provincial leaders. Only a small percentage of the Central Committee comes from Vietnam's representative bodies such as the National Assembly and the mass organizations that are explicitly designed to represent groups in society. On the Central Committee, the members of the mass organizations that are included are the heads of the Farmers Union, the Women's Union, the Federation of Labor, and the Fatherland Front umbrella organization that these groups are part of. Interestingly, despite the growing involvement of the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) in policymaking, the VCCI chair is still not a Central Committee member. This is interesting because VCCI is the group explicitly designed with representing business interests.

What does the representation of party and state bureaucrats in the party leadership mean? In the absence of voting data, which is unavailable, it is difficult to link institutional background to interests. However, Manion's work on China provides some clues. She shows that at the local level when citizens have input into party nominations, the selected nominees are more likely

to have local ties and the trust of citizens (2014). If we extend her findings to the national level in Vietnam, this would suggest that those selected to leadership positions in the party are more likely to represent – at best – technocratic, government interests more than local, parochial interests. This bias towards elite, party interests versus grassroots interests is perhaps one reason why former Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, despite having a larger public profile and perhaps popularity with citizens, was unable to secure the general secretary position in 2016 (Schuler and Ostwald, 2016). Indeed, comparative work from China shows that too strong a linkage to citizens may in fact *inhibit* the prospects of promotion within the party because of the threat posed by popular individuals (Gueorguiev and Schuler, 2016). In short, the strong top-down influence in leadership selection should lead to substantive differences in how the party performs its representative role.

To summarize the party's role in representation, the party's inclusion of business owners make it at least rhetorically possible for it to represent all of Vietnamese society. In terms of its actual membership and appointment procedures, its selection remains heavily top-down and includes mostly bureaucrats and career party employees. Therefore, the extent to which the party represents different groups in society depends on its own initiative. If party members are to be pressured to represent interests that they might otherwise neglect, the channels are likely to come through the National Assembly system, grassroots democracy institutions, civil society, or informal channels.

The National Assembly and People's Councils

The National Assembly system refers to the National Assembly and People's Councils at the provincial, district, and commune levels. Vietnam's legislative system is relatively more open than China's in that its assemblies at all levels feature direct elections with more candidates than seats. How representative are these assemblies in practice? The ability of a legislature to represent depends on two factors: its membership and its institutional power. Without a membership accountable or responsive to most groups in the country, it cannot be representative. Without power once elected, it cannot represent. To address these dimensions, the discussion that follows reviews key features of the electoral system before detailing the authority held by local People's Councils and the National Assembly.

Electoral System

The procedures for the National Assembly and local-level People's Councils elections are broadly similar. Both are ultimately subject to the controls of the party machinery. Opposition parties are banned. However, there is some limited competitiveness built into the electoral system. First, there are more candidates than seats. Second, non-party members and self-nominees are allowed to run. Despite its competitive features, the openness of this system is sharply limited by the Election Law, which stipulates a five-step vetting system that all candidates (party or non-party members) must complete. This ultimately gives the party control over the ballot, which it has used to bar certain candidates from running. For example, the outspoken former Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Đặng Hùng Võ and prominent dissident and self-nominee Cù Huy Hà Vũ were prevented from appearing on the ballot in 2007. The effect is that the vast majority of self-nominees are weeded out before the final ballot is set (Malesky and Schuler, 2009). Additionally, party-preferred candidates are often advantaged in their election campaigns by running in districts with weak opponents (Malesky and Schuler, 2011). The strict vetting power of the party combined with a lack of interparty competition and

strategic placement of preferred candidates against weaker candidates strongly limits downward accountability as a source of influence on the representativeness of the delegates.

However, in theory the party could generate representation if it selects or approves candidates that represent all cross-sections of society. Formally speaking, the party attempts to do just that. During the first phase of the vetting process, the party sets a structure for how many slots each party, state, or mass organization institutions will have. Subsequently, the relevant organizations are tasked with nominating a set number of individuals to represent their institution. After this list is compiled, the Fatherland Front organizes meetings with employers and voters to assess the level of confidence in those candidates. Finally, the election boards at the relevant levels settle on a final list of candidates.

In terms of descriptive representation, the National Assembly is more representative than the CPV Central Committee. About 25 percent of the National Assembly have been women since 2007 compared to about 8 percent for the Central Committee (Munro, 2012). There are also more ethnic minorities, with about 17 percent between 2007 and 2011 compared with 10 percent for the party Central Committee (Elliot, 2012, p. 310). Finally, the National Assembly includes more business owners, mass organization members, and non-party members than the Central Committee. Therefore, in a *descriptive* sense, the National Assembly *looks* relatively more like the population it represents than the party leadership.

People's Councils

Looking like the population is not enough for a legislative body to be representative. It must also have real power. What do Vietnam's legislative institutions do? I start with the People's Councils, which operate at the provincial, district, and commune levels as the country's local legislative bodies. At each level they have the formal authority to select People's Committee chairs, deputy chairs, and department heads. They also approve local socioeconomic plans and monitor their implementation. At the provincial level they also have additional budgetary powers compared to lower-level councils. This is a reflection of the fact that the People's Committees at this level have more power than lower-level People's Committees (Vasavakul, 2014).

Despite these impressive formal powers, a number of constraints limit their effectiveness in practice. A major constraint on the extent to which People's Councils can exercise their representative and supervisory roles is their lack of full-time membership. People's Councils generally have fewer full-time members as a percentage of their membership than the National Assembly The autonomy of People's Councils is further constrained by local party influence through embedded party committees (Vasavakul, 2014). This creates a complicated web of accountability that subjugates the People's Council more to the will of the local, unelected government and party leadership rather than the electorate. The weakness of the People's Councils was exposed when an experiment to remove them at the district level seemed in many studies to actually *improve* governance (Malesky, Nguyen and Tran, 2014) – an experiment that was eventually scrapped (Vũ, 2015).

The National Assembly

Turning to the National Assembly, among Vietnam watchers it is conventional wisdom that although the National Assembly is officially the highest organ of state power, its power is sharply constrained by the party. Despite the general agreement, commentators debate how much autonomy and influence the assembly has in practice. For example, after the National Assembly tabled a government proposal in 2010 to build a multibillion-dollar high-speed rail line,

observers differed in how to interpret its actions. Koh's analysis at the time typifies the debate: "Observers are calling the move unprecedented . . . [but if] push came to shove, discipline would still be enforced to ensure that there were enough votes to back the project" (2010).

The National Assembly shares many of the same powers and limitations as the People's Councils. Like the People's Councils, it is in charge of electing and monitoring government officials such as the prime minister, president, and government ministers. It has the power to query government officials in written form or directly in query sessions. In terms of legislation, it must approve all laws. It is also tasked with approving or amending the constitution, which it has done on several occasions. At the same time, its autonomy is limited by the fact that more than 90 percent of the assembly is made up of party members, who according to principle of democratic centralism, face pressure to toe the party line.

National Assembly delegates also face limitations in their ability set the legislative agenda. These limitations all stem from the overwhelming influence of the National Assembly Standing Committee. While delegates and government officials can propose legislation, the Standing Committee ultimately approves the schedule of laws to be heard on the floor of the assembly. The Standing Committee also decides which ministers will appear before the assembly in the query sessions, must approve any independent commission to investigate wrongdoing within the government, and are responsible for introducing the list of nominees for government positions and legislative leadership positions.

The extreme hierarchy within the assembly gives the party a crucial source of leverage in directing the activities of the legislature. The hierarchy has come under some criticism, with some suggesting that the power of the Standing Committee should be curtailed (Lâm, 2013). Nevertheless, the 2013 constitution largely retained the standing committee's extraordinary powers.

With all these limitations in mind, the National Assembly has some unique features compared with People's Councils that make it potentially more powerful. First, the body has more full-time members. Compared with 1992, where less than 5 percent of the delegates were full time, almost 30 percent of the delegates since 2011 are full time. Its committee system has become more institutionalized. The legislature now has ten committees with some full-time staff members. The leadership of these committees, which typically includes a chair and three to five deputy chairs, can meet between full sessions of the National Assembly. On some laws the leadership of the committees will participate in the law drafting committees, although almost no laws are proposed and drafted by the legislature.

Finally, the assembly has some unique oversight powers. The assembly conducts two query sessions per year, which last three to five days per session. While local People's Councils also conduct query sessions, the national-level query sessions are unique in that they are publicly televised. The public nature of these sessions stand in stark contrast to the oversight powers of China's National People's Congress, where no public query sessions are held. An additional oversight power that was granted to the legislature was the power to conduct confidence polls in elected leaders on an annual basis. Instituted in 2012, the measure was widely seen as part of General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng's anti-corruption campaign initiated early in that year to challenge Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng. The confidence poll is akin to a vote of confidence, with some notable differences. First, delegates can choose from three options: low confidence, confidence, or high confidence. Second, candidates receiving a large number of "low" confidence votes are not dismissed. Only officials earning 50 percent low confidence votes two times in a row are invited to resign. Even then, the official is not required to do so. So far, two polls have been conducted and no official has earned more than 50 percent votes of low confidence.

Given the institutions at the National Assembly's disposal, how does it carry out its role in practice? First and foremost, the assembly takes a secondary role compared to the party in setting policy. Several key debates from the past decade highlight this subservience. While a number of delegates opposed the decision to merge Ha Tay (*Hà Tây*) and parts of other provinces with Hanoi, ultimately party pressure ensured that the measure proceeded. The legislature has also been prevented from publicly debating a response to China's incursions into the South China Sea. Finally, despite proposals to change the name of the party or eliminate Article 4 from the constitution, these proposals were never considered within the assembly during the debates over the 2013 constitution. Outspoken delegate Dương Trung Quốc[4] highlighted the frustration felt in some quarters regarding the weakness of the legislature during a debate on the new constitution on June 4, 2013. In that speech, he pointed the finger at party control over collecting the opinions of citizens and dictating the legislative agenda:

> One can say during this debate that we can witness a relatively high degree of consensus . . . that the constitution is merely an institutionalization of the Vietnam Communist Party's political platform. . . . Therefore, it is not necessary for me to raise important issues that cannot be changed such as the political regime, the name of the country, the leading role of the party, the nature of the armed forces, or the people's ownership of land.

His expressed frustration seems to echo Koh's analysis that the party can control the legislature when it wishes.

At the same time, this insight also provides a clue as to when the legislature can be assertive. In particular, when there are cleavages within the party over a particular policy, the legislature can spring into life. This is because during instances where the party has not achieved consensus, delegates are less constrained by internal party diktats. This is potentially the reason that the legislature was able to reject the proposed high-speed rail link in 2010. Unlike other controversial measures such as the bauxite mine or the Hanoi merger, the high-speed rail line did not have explicit backing from the Politburo (Malesky, Schuler and Tran, 2011).

In another important comparison, research also shows that the National Assembly is willing to discuss hot-button issues in society when they are salient (Schuler, 2018). Indeed, in recent years the legislature has featured limited debate over issues such as Vinashin, the fish kill, inflation, and natural disaster responses at points in time when those issues were hot topics. However, what this study also shows is that such timely representation is limited only to issues controlled by the *government*. On other issues more tightly controlled by the party, such as foreign affairs and defense, the legislature remains silent.

In sum, when considering the profile of the body, its membership, and its selection methods, the National Assembly is probably Vietnam's most "representative" institution. However, the party's overwhelming ability to bend it to its will means that the legislature is only likely to act in a "surprisingly" assertive manner when the party is divided. As such, its representative role is important, but far short of what might exist in a context with multiple parties.

Mass Organizations

An additional important set of representative institutions includes Vietnam's mass organizations administered under the umbrella of the Vietnam Fatherland Front. The most prominent of these institutions are the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor, the Vietnam Farmer's Union, the Vietnam Women's Union, the Hồ Chí Minh Communist Youth Union, and the

Vietnam War Veterans' Association. A key distinction between the mass organizations and other organizations – and the reason why they are not construed as civil society – is that they are subordinate to and are operated and financed by the party and the state. As a result of their funding and institutionalized roles, these organizations maintain a nationwide presence and can be found at all levels of governance. At the same time, they are also heavily influenced by the state, which can compromise their genuine representation of the groups they purport to represent.

A further difference between mass organizations and civil society organizations is that its members are explicitly granted seats in both party and legislative institutions. The leaders of the Farmers' Union, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor, and the Women's Union are all Central Committee members, while the head of the Fatherland Front is a member of the Politburo. Both mass and professional organizations are tasked with nominating their members candidates for seats in the National Assembly, although their numbers have been decreasing in the past two assemblies. Also important is the role of the Fatherland Front in vetting, approving, and rejecting nominees for the National Assembly election.

Professional organizations are the second type of mass organization in Vietnam that, while enjoying greater independence from central party and state organs, nonetheless are politically subordinate to the party and state. Groups falling under this category are broad, ranging from the VCCI to the Vietnam Union of Arts and Literature. Of these umbrella organizations, the Vietnamese Union of Science and Technology is often cited as a particularly important, given its diverse membership. Within these umbrella organizations, there can be a number of smaller organizations. For instance, VCCI includes in its membership more narrowly focused organizations such as the Vietnam Textile and Apparel Association and the Vietnam Software Association (Stromseth, 2003). Professional organizations are distinctive because while they generally do not receive funding from the state, they are officially registered and recognized by the state. This means they may be included in offering opinions on laws and in some cases invited to help draft them. VCCI, for example, has lobbied on behalf of businesses for a wide range of laws, including most recently advocating for the passage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Stromseth, 2003). Their official status also allows them to conduct research projects for the government (Vasavakul, 2003). Additionally, members of some of these organizations are National Assembly delegates.

As to their representativeness, many scholars dismiss mass organizations. Thayer summarizes the role of mass organizations as "extensions of, if not agents of, the state" (Thayer, 2009, p. 6). One study of Vietnamese civil society does not even include them, presumably because they are too close to the party and state to be seen as part of civil society (Taylor et al., 2012). The Vietnam General Confederation of Labor is singled out as particularly non-representative as it is not accepted by any international labor organizations as an authentic trade union (Clarke and Pringle, 2009), which is why Vietnamese workers typically organize strikes through unofficial means (Cox, 2015). At the same time, given their formal role, any study of representation should not completely dismiss them.

Civil Society Organizations

A discussion of representation must also consider the role of civil society (see Wells-Dang's chapter for a more detailed discussion). For some, civil society in Vietnam does not exist per se, owing to the CPV's pervasive control of all formal organizations. There are, in practice, however, a variety of formal self-identified social and civil society organizations that function with substantial autonomy from the party and state. The civil society groups that exist maintain a better claim to represent than mass organizations. Indeed, there are some notable examples of groups that have taken aggressive stands on salient issues. Citing the ability of civil society

to work with other ad hoc groups, scientists, or disgruntled government officials, Morris-Jung details the role played by domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in mobilizing opposition to the bauxite mines (2015), while Wells-Dang tells a similar story regarding opposition to development of Reunification Park in Hanoi (2010). These authors convincingly suggested that such movements would likely not have formed prior to *Doi moi*.

However, given the context they operate in and the ability of the state to shut them down, civil society organizations are likely to practice a large degree of self-censorship in order to avoid trouble. The examples provided earlier are noteworthy because they are exceptional and not typical of normal advocacy work. Indeed, Morris-Jung notes that one of the key workshops that caused the bauxite issue to emerge into public consciousness was largely unintended and unusual: "Although these workshops can often be overly formalized and staid affairs, the frankness and intensity of discussion that emerged in Dak Nong (*Đak Nông*) were unusual" (Morris-Jung, 2015, pp. 70–71). The implication is that most workshops held between NGOs, civil society organizations, and government officials are comparatively torpid. As such, while some civil society organizations will on occasion push boundaries, the party and the government can largely operate free from pressure by organized civil society organizations when formulating policy.

Informal Non-sanctioned Secondary Associations and Media-Led Representation

Closely linked to the discussion of civil society are the roles of informal associations in generating representation (Wells-Dang, 2014), often in combination with social media and indirectly through state media. A large number of studies, mostly relying on case studies, show how informal groups are pushing the envelope and challenging party control over the political narrative (Wells-Dang, 2010, 2014; Thayer, 2009; Morris-Jung, 2015; Labbe, 2015; Cox, 2015; Marston, 2012). This work follows research in everyday forms of resistance, where disenfranchised citizens make claims through non-institutional means (Scott, 1990; Kerkvliet, 2005). It also fits in with newer theories of democratic representation that focus on non-electoral forms of representation such as citizen representatives or self-authorized representatives (Urbinati and Warren, 2008). As with other forms of representation, the main question for this form of representation is the degree to which it generates inclusive, effective representation. To show the role of such informal representation in practice, this section will consider the controversy over bauxite mining in the Central Highlands.

The bauxite controversy centered around a long-planned project to allow a Chinese state-run aluminum processing company to cooperate with a Vietnamese state-run company to mine for bauxite – the primary raw material used to produce aluminum – in Vietnam's Central Highlands. In 2001, General Secretary Nông Đức Mạnh reached an agreement with Chinese counterparts to develop bauxite in that region. However, facing some opposition from the Politburo, it was not until a leadership transition after the 2006 Party Congress that consensus built within the leadership to push forward with the project. In November 2007, Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng signed a series of decrees allowing initial groundbreaking to begin on two of the proposed sites.

The proposed mines faced opposition for two reasons. First, bauxite processing has the potential for enormous environmental destruction. Indeed, a spill in Hungary in 2010 made international news for polluting that country's waterways. Given that the Central Highlands sits above the heavily populated lowland regions of Vietnam, a spill in Vietnam could be especially destructive. The second source of controversy centered on China's involvement. The project

would be jointly operated by a Chinese state-run company and employ Chinese labor, thus aggravating nationalistic sensitivities in Vietnam.

What makes this episode so fascinating from the perspective of representation in Vietnam is how the issue evolved from one where only a small group of scientists opposed to the project to a national-level debate involving some of the country's leading dissidents, the National Assembly, and war hero Võ Nguyên Giáp. Given the supposedly tight controls on Vietnamese civil society, the media, and collective action, how did the issue spin out of control? More importantly, does the episode suggest informal groups and opposition can provide a substitute for more open electoral politics?

Morris-Jung's careful analysis of the controversy's spread provides insight into the increasing space afforded informal groups, but also their limitations. In his recounting, he suggests that the controversy was largely controlled and the project seemed to be proceeding until January 2009 when Võ Nguyên Giáp penned his first open letter to the leadership opposing the project. Prior to that point, the civil society group that led the initial wave of opposition to the project, CODE, had largely been sidelined and consultation was shifted into the hands of VUSTA: "CODE staff began to feel that the bauxite controversy has become too heated and risky for the organization" such that "VUSTA started bring these debates back into the government's fold" (Morris-Jung, 2015, p. 76).

With Võ Nguyên Giáp's intervention, which was publicized by *VietnamNet*, public intellectuals, online bloggers, and even the National Assembly began to scrutinize the project to a greater degree. Eventually, the controversy forced the project to be downsized, although it went forward nonetheless. The ability of these public intellectuals to pressure the party, some of whom also organized to propose changes to the constitution, shows that the increased space for civil society, a freer media, and the possibility of online collective action played a role in bringing the issue to the fore. This constellation of actors is similar to those groups authors use to explain success in challenging the government on less controversial issues such as the Reunification Park development plan.

At the same time, as observers of the incident point out, the controversy and ultimate effectiveness of the opposition were greatly dependent on elite intervention in the form of Võ Nguyên Giáp (Marston, 2012; Morris-Jung, 2015). Given Võ Nguyên Giáp's unique position in Vietnam as someone who commanded great respect throughout the country but was also politically protected by his past service to the party, the bauxite scandal is hardly a representative case. Outside his intervention, which of course is no longer possible since his passing in 2013, it is not clear who else in Vietnam would be able to play a similar role. This raises the important question as to whether the bauxite controversy represents a growing norm in Vietnam or if it is a notable exception. Without allies within the party, can informal groups bring other issues to the fore?

Grassroots Democracy Institutions

A final set of institutions important to the quality of representation includes the so-called grassroots democracy institutions. These institutions involve the non-partisan representation of citizens in overseeing local politicians, public works projects, and the development of laws. They are named for the decree issued by the National Assembly Standing Committee in 1998 in the wake of protests in Thai Binh (*Thái Bình*) Province (Fritzen, 2006; Nguyen, 2017). These institutions encompass a broad array of mechanisms embedded in a number of laws such as the Budget Law, the Law on Anti-Corruption, or the Law on Laws, designed to ensure transparency. They are consistent with what theorists of representation call "citizen representatives"

(Urbinati and Warren, 2008). In holding government officials accountable under the auspices of single-party rule, they are also consistent with Mao's mass-line representation.

The village election system is one notable grassroots democracy institution. Village leaders in Vietnam are not official state employees and do not receive state benefits. However, they have important duties in terms of collecting public opinion in their villages and neighborhoods and transmitting these views to higher-level officials. Where in the past, village leaders were simply local notables, since the 1998 Grassroots Democracy Decree they are elected. In theory, each election should have more than one candidate, who are selected in a meeting with constituents held by the local Fatherland Front chapter (UNDP, 2006).

Although work is sparse in Vietnam on the impact of the elections, work on village elections in China suggests that they improve public service delivery and increase public support for the party (Manion, 1996; Zhang et al., 2004). Other work supports this notion, but cautions that it might generate long-term risks for the regime (Sun, 2014). In Vietnam, the more limited evidence suggests that they are popular among citizens in some areas. However, there is anecdotal evidence that they only selectively pass on the views of citizens and that the mostly male heads ignore female concerns (UNDP, 2006). What seems clear is that what influence these heads have is mainly in terms of advocating for citizens for local-level projects and public service delivery. To the extent that they can influence national-level issues, it is mainly through ensuring that their constituents are made aware of opportunities to participate in national debates.

Another set of grassroots democracy institutions includes accountability mechanisms for infrastructure projects and public spending. In the wake of the 1997 Thai Binh protests, the party publicly concluded that the protests were the result of grasping local officials (Nguyen, 2017). As such, the grassroots decree created People's Inspection Boards and Community Investment Supervision Boards. These bodies were intended to oversee commune People's Committees as well as any project using state funding within the commune jurisdiction. In practice, what evidence there is of these institutions suggests that their influence has so far been modest. Between 2010 and 2015, annual survey results show that only about 35 percent of villagers are aware of a People's Inspection Board in their commune and only about 18 percent are aware of a Community Investment Supervision Board (UNDP, 2016). Furthermore, those that do exist may not be completely independent of the officials they are meant to oversee. Some research suggests that boards are mostly made up of Fatherland Front members, who themselves depend on local officials for their appointments (Vietnam Development Report, 2010).

An additional form of grassroots democracy involves provisions in an increasing number of laws that require citizen participation. For example, the Law on Laws requires that draft laws are made open to public comment. Similar provisions are included in the Budget Law and the Law on Anti-Corruption. Here, too, analysis suggests these provisions have mixed effects. In practice, the laws give the party great discretion over who is invited to participate in the meetings. For example, the Law on Laws does not require that all citizens be consulted, but rather only those with a direct stake in the legislation. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report assessing patterns of participation shows that by far the greatest determinant of participation in meetings on laws is party membership (UNDP, 2016). Non-party members are extremely unlikely to attend such meetings. Of course, it is not clear whether this is because non-party members are disinterested or because non-party members are not invited. However, it does speak to uneven levels of participation among citizens.

The growth of grassroots democracy institutions suggests that there is potentially greater ability to generate political representation at the local level. At the same time, even there, these institutions are often formalistic and again privilege the views of those connected to the party. Although they may play some positive role in ensuring that village leaders reflect the views

of constituents, other forms of participation appear subsumed within the local elite power structure. Furthermore, even if the institutions work according to the highest ideals of political reformers, they are still unlikely to affect national issues, as they are largely designed to hold local and not central officials accountable.

Leninist Representation Lives On

Vietnam's ruling Communist Party has stated its intent to represent the democratic aspirations of all Vietnamese but also the necessity of the party for ensuring these aspirations are realized. Using the most widely accepted conceptualization of democratic representation within political theory but also taking seriously theories of representation central to Leninism, this chapter has discussed who is actually represented in Vietnam's representative institutions. Understanding whether and to what extent Vietnam's representative institutions have become more or less substantively representative can assist in an understanding of contemporary Vietnam.

Following Lenin and Mao, Vietnam's leaders claim that single-party systems will better represent the public's true interests than multiparty democracies dominated by bourgeois interests. On paper, all groups in Vietnam may now find representation in the party and in the legislature. Where the party systematically excluded bourgeois from political representation, business owners are now officially allowed to join the party and have a number of professional organizations such as the VCCI to represent their interests. "Social organizations" outside the state are now permitted within limits.

Some observers see progress. While the party remains a closed organization, it has selectively extended membership to business owners. While the National Assembly remains subordinate to the party, it broadcasts its deliberations on live television. Finally, while Vietnam's mass organizations remain instruments of party rule, they have made selective attempts to consult with stakeholders and citizens outside the party. Outside the party, formal and informal civil society organizations and groupings have proliferated and have found increasing, if not unlimited, space to represent citizens' claims. Some suggest that Vietnam's polity is indeed increasingly representative or representative in ways consistent with Vietnamese values (Gainsborough, 2005, p. 59). Others assert that the country reflects elements of a "rice roots democracy" (Wells-Dang, 2010).

At the same time, more skeptical accounts highlight the important limitations to this increasing scope (Thayer, 2009). Vietnam is still a single-party system, and appointments to all organized representative institutions – from civil society organizations to the National Assembly – are ultimately controlled or vetted by the party. Therefore, while the voices in the government and legislature may not sing exactly the same tune in public as they once might have, ultimately dissent is rare and the preferences of the party leadership win out. Whether or not this is desirable depends on whether one thinks open debate and freely selected representation are dangerous for society or incompatible with Vietnamese culture. However, this is a normative question that the CPV leadership has so far answered in the affirmative and has enforced its will accordingly.

Notes

1 It is important to note that, as originally formulated, neither Lenin nor Mao supported fully representative systems, as both leaders explicitly excluded the bourgeois.
2 Grassroots democracy institutions include local institutions such as People's Inspection Boards, Community Investment Supervision Boards, and village elections.
3 Although this translation of the Vietnamese term *Mặt trận tổ quốc* is gendered, I use it due to its familiarity.
4 Dương Trung Quốc is one of the few non-party members in the Vietnamese National Assembly (VNA).

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4

PUBLIC POLITICAL CRITICISM IN VIETNAM, 1990s–2018

Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet

Foreign commentaries have often stated that the Vietnamese Communist Party, which has ruled all of Vietnam since 1975, tolerates few or no citizens who criticize its policies, actions, or form of government. That was a prevalent assessment by government officials and human rights organizations in the United States and Europe in the 1990s, and it continued into the 2010s. Some scholarly studies said much the same.

Considerable scholarship, however, shows that such a depiction may have been reasonably accurate earlier but became invalid. Until the early 1990s, public political criticism in Communist Party–ruled Vietnam was scarce, and when it occurred, authorities quickly snuffed it out. Since then, however, Vietnamese citizens in many sectors of society publicly spoke out on political topics ranging from working conditions and land use to the entire political system. Meanwhile, government authorities, despite harsh repression against some critics, did not stop public protest and dissent and often tolerated and responded positively to citizens' complaints.

This chapter synthesizes the public criticisms by workers, peasants, religious groups, anti-China demonstrators, and pro-democracy advocates; the main reasons for such discontent; and the actions of Vietnamese government authorities.

Workers

Strikes were the most well-publicized form of workers' protests between 1995 and 2018. Some strikes had fewer than two dozen participants, and several had a couple hundred; most, however, involved thousands of workers. In one of the largest strikes, 80,000 workers from a factory in Ho Chi Minh City poured into the streets in March 2015. The number of strikes increased, from 50 to 70 per year in 1995–2000 to an average of 120 annually in 2001–2005, 477 during 2006–2010, and 490 in 2011–2015. The increase was broadly in line with a growing number of enterprises that were entirely or partly foreign owned and had been established in Vietnam after government authorities began in the early 1990s to attract investors and companies from around the world. About 70 percent of reported strikes occurred in these enterprises. The remainder were in Vietnamese privately owned businesses and state-owned companies.

The vast majority of strikes were about wages and mistreatment of workers. The most common demand regarding wages was that they be raised. Even though wages did increase from time to time, they lagged far behind the rising costs of living. Often workers in the late 1990s

and early 2000s insisted that employers should pay them at least the minimum wage stipulated by Vietnamese law. Later, a common plea was employers should pay more than the minimum wage, which was insufficient for workers' basic needs.

A second major demand by protesting workers was that employers should treat them properly. Workers objected to employers slapping, kicking, and punching them; swearing at them; and calling them nasty names. They also opposed employers' regulations that limited workers' use of bathrooms, punished anyone who conversed while working, and fired pregnant employees. Another common complaint was factory owners and managers frequently required employees to work 12 and 14 hours a day for six, sometimes seven, days a week with little or no additional pay. Such practices not only violated Vietnam's labor code, which stipulated an eight-hour work day and increased wages for overtime, but practically turned workers into slaves.

Underlying workers' demands about wages and treatment was a claim to decent living conditions. Low wages, long work days, and other employment adversities meant most factory workers lived in tiny rooms and apartments, often sharing bed spaces, cooking facilities, and bathrooms with others; spent over three-quarters of their income on the bare essentials of life; and had little or no time for rest and relaxation. Living this way, workers often said, is inhumane.

Virtually all strikes targeted factory owners and managers, but several also criticized trade unions and government policies. Those unions were the only organizations authorized by the government to represent workers, yet they neither led nor organized strikes and often tried to prevent them. Union leaders, strikers frequently claimed, were beholden to company owners and not attuned to workers' needs. Regarding government policies, many strikes for higher wages in 2005–2007 were directly primarily at pressuring national authorities to raise minimum wages and make companies pay accordingly. In 2013–2015, protesting workers demanded improvement in the content and implementation of the national social insurance program to which employees and employers are supposed to contribute.

Most strikes were peaceful, consisting mainly of participants congregating outside their workplaces while awaiting answers from management and government officials to their demands. A few spilled onto streets, blocking traffic. On several occasions since 2006, strikes in one factory prompted walkouts in nearby enterprises, which in turn stimulated still more strikes. Most strikes had minimal organization and planning; some erupted spontaneously, triggered by particularly egregious actions of company officials against employees. Strike leaders typically emerged during the protests themselves and became spokespersons for their fellow workers. Strike participants often contacted journalists, who published articles and photographs in newspapers and internet sites about workers' complaints and goals.

Strikes often brought positive results for workers, at least temporarily. Companies typically decided rather quickly to address workers' demands rather than let work stoppages drag on. Vietnamese government authorities also frequently urged companies to resolve the disputes. Trade union officials, too, frequently pressured employers to make concessions to strikers. The concessions in numerous cases, however, were not durable. Conditions improved for a while but then deteriorated, resulting often in new strikes. Hence several companies had more than one walkout within a space of only a few years. In some cases, employers' concessions were mixed with their hostile actions against individual strike participants, usually well after work had resumed. Companies found or invented reasons to dismiss employees they suspected of having instigated labor disputes.

Government authorities' responses to strikes were rather forbearing. None of the strikes conformed to laws regulating them; thus all were illegal. Yet government officials did not criminalize the strikes or the strikers. Instead, they typically sided with the workers, blaming labor disputes primarily on companies for violating employment laws and workers' rights. In response

to workers' protests, authorities also improved policies regarding minimum wages and the country's social insurance system. Only when a few workers attempted to establish labor organizations independent of government-authorized trade unions did authorities become extremely repressive, arresting and imprisoning the founders.

One reason for authorities' tolerance of illegal strikes is that they were primarily about employment conditions, not about the political system. Nor were they well organized, and in most cases they were confined to company premises. Also important is that the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) sees workers, along with peasants, as the main sectors of its constituency.

Peasants

Urban wage laborers comprise a modest percentage of Vietnam's population. Far larger, about 50 percent, is the nation's rural population. Rural people, too, since the mid-1990s became politically vocal. Millions complained in letters and petitions sent to government authorities. Over 70 percent of their complaints were about land. Some of these villagers, particularly those in minority ethnic groups, sought to recover land taken from them by settlers who had moved into their territories during recent decades. Most demanded an end to government agencies and property investors confiscating their fields.

In the late 1980s to early 1990s, agricultural land in Vietnam was allocated rather equitably to farming households. Rather than ownership, each household received use-rights to land for 20 to 50 years, depending on the location and type of crops. The government may cancel use-rights and take the land for purposes of national defense, national advancement, and economic development. In 2001–2005, the government took nearly 400,000 hectares of agricultural land; by 2010 the total rose to nearly 800,000 hectares, affecting some 9 million farming people, or about 10 percent of the country's population. A significant proportion of these people objected to the confiscations, the low compensation paid to them for their land use-rights, and the corrupt local officials carrying out the confiscations. When their written complaints were not adequately addressed, angry villagers often resorted to public protests, which became numerous in many parts of the country in 2005–2018.

A typical pattern was that people in the same village or neighborhood whose land was being taken jointly complained to local authorities. Getting no relief, they continued to protest, sometimes for years, by sending letters, petitions, and other documents to higher levels, often to national officials. They also demonstrated, sometimes for days, in front of local, district, and provincial government offices. If reasonably close to cities, they protested there at government buildings and in parks. Demonstrations were usually peaceful, often people quietly sitting and standing while holding placards, photos, and patriotic symbols such as the national flag and large photos of Hồ Chí Minh. Protesters regularly contacted Vietnamese news media; by 2005–2006 they were also reaching out to foreign media, the United Nations, and other international entities. Many arranged for their materials to be put on the World Wide Web. Sometimes they asked lawyers to help them.

Generally, protesters from different villages did not jointly demonstrate, partly for fear that large demonstrations would exceed what authorities would countenance. Occasionally, however, they collaborated, forming demonstrations with hundreds, sometimes even more than a thousand, participants. A major example occurred in Ho Chi Minh City in June and July 2007. Hearing that Vietnam's prime minister and president as well as National Assembly delegates were going to meet in the city, villagers from several provinces began to gather outside prominent government office buildings there. Through texting and mobile phone calls, word spread to many other villages from which more upset people traveled to join the growing protest. For 27 days,

over 1,000 villagers, mostly women, from the Mekong delta and rural areas of the city camped outside the office buildings. They pleaded for national authorities to resolve their complaints, most of which concerned land confiscations. Enduring hunger, hot weather, rain, and weariness, they stood, sat, and slept on sidewalks. They made banners and posters; and they painted slogans and key demands on white t-shirts, which they wore, gave away, and sold to passersby. They talked to curious passersby and gave interviews to journalists. Dozens at a time marched in the streets, carrying their banners, Vietnamese flags, and portraits of Hồ Chí Minh to TV station and newspaper offices and through downtown and residential areas, advertising their campaign and soliciting support. As the demonstration grew in size and longevity, authorities' tolerance gave way to intimidating, detaining, and arresting some protesters and then, July 18, sending waves of police forces using batons and tear gas to force remaining protesters to leave.

Land confiscation was the central issue for most protesting villagers; their understandings of democracy, fairness, and justice helped them to justify their stance. They frequently claimed that local authorities were abusive, unresponsive to their complaints, ignoring the people they are supposed to serve, and thus undemocratic. They argued that authorities contravened laws and regulations about land confiscations, compensation, and other matters. Many also insisted that it was wrong to take land from families who had served and died for their country and the very government now mistreating them. Such disregard for people's sacrifices, they argued, was vulgar and immoral. Village protesters also rejected laws authorizing the government to unilaterally confiscate farmland. If they must surrender their fields, they demanded the right to negotiate a fair price. And such a right included the possibility that they could ultimately decide not to sell. Landholders, they claimed, are entitled to refuse to sell regardless of price, not only because they hold use-rights but because they need the land for their livelihood, they simply prefer to farm, or their family shed blood for the country in order to have land.

Land protesters typically took their complaints to national offices expecting favorable reactions there. To an extent, their expectations were realized. Beginning in 2000, the central government sent problem-solving teams to places that generated persistent petitions and demonstrations against confiscations of fields and house lots, low compensation, and other land issues. Those teams often found merit in villagers' claims, as did studies by national agencies. Largely in response to peasants' criticisms and protests, national authorities revised land laws and regulations regarding land confiscation, compensation, and assistance to affected people. Broadly speaking, those changes provided more opportunity than previously for compensation amounts to approach market values and be determined by negotiations between land-use holders and developers.

Alongside national authorities' favorable responses to land protesters were unfavorable ones, especially violently evicting several families from their fields and homes, dispersing demonstrators, and arresting some. Also, national authorities did not devise an effective method for resolving persistent disputes. They typically referred such cases back to provincial and district authorities to settle, even though those officials' actions had caused villagers to appeal to national authorities in the first place. Many local authorities were not well versed in the complicated and even contradictory rules and regulations for reclaiming land and compensating its users. At the same time, local officials were often eager to attract investors with projects that would diversify local economies. Key to getting investors was land available at a low cost. This helps to explain why some authorities, instead of aiding discontented villagers and thereby avoiding protests, minimized compensation payments and ignored or dismissed villagers' demands to retain their fields. Numerous opportunities for local authorities to benefit personally from land confiscation and compensation arrangements also help to explain why they frequently shunned villagers' claims.

Religious Groups

Land has also figured in protests by religious groups, particularly Roman Catholics. Claiming the government had illegally refused to return land confiscated in earlier times or in recent years, religious leaders and followers in major cities and numerous towns across Vietnam demanded the property be returned to them.

Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, Muslims, Hòa Hảo, and Cao Đài leaders and followers also publicly claimed that authorities tried to stop religious organizations. Despite constitutional and other legal provisions supposedly protecting freedom of religion, these critics contended, the Vietnamese government uses police brutality, unlawful detention and arrest, persistent harassment, and administrative tools to stifle religious activities.

To protest such treatment, religious individuals and groups prepared petitions, wrote letters, and issued public statements that often circulated through the internet. Vietnamese citizens also created websites that chronicled the criticisms and protests of religious organizations. Frequently religious activists called on foreign governments and the United Nations to pressure Vietnamese authorities to abide by Vietnam's laws protecting religious freedoms. Besides written criticisms, religious groups also demonstrated, sometimes for days on end, often in groups of a few dozen but occasionally much larger.

One of the largest demonstrations since the mid-1990s occurred in July 2009 when an estimated 200,000 Catholics participated in coordinated protests across several dioceses in central Vietnam. The demonstrators congregated at churches to pray while holding placards and banners summarizing their grievances. Their immediate demands were that authorities must release the several Catholics detained by police a few days earlier in the city of Dong Hoi, Quang Binh (*Đồng Hới, Quảng Bình*) province; stop harassing and beating others sympathizing with those who had been arrested; and allow the construction of a church. Police said the detained people and others had been disturbing the peace; protesters said those people had been merely attending church services and praying. The site of that praying was Tam Tòa, which had been contentious for several years. It had the ruins of a church that Americans had bombed in the 1968 and was the location where Catholic leaders had long wanted to build a new church. Local authorities, however, repeatedly prohibited that and forbid people from praying there. The ruins and surrounding area, authorities had decided, must be preserved as evidence of American war crimes. Catholic officials repeatedly insisted that the site must be returned to the local diocese. They suspected Vietnamese government officials were intent on preventing Catholics in Dong Hoi from having a place to worship. Government officials had offered alternative places for a new church, but all were highly undesirable to church leaders – some of the areas were under water and impossible to build on.

The discontent lingered for weeks, spawning numerous additional demonstrations and several clashes between religious followers and police in Dong Hoi and elsewhere. Eventually government authorities released all detained parishioners but continued to prohibit any new church at Tam Tòa.

Vietnamese laws allow religious organizations and practices but also require authorities to regulate them. When religious followers were detained or otherwise punished, government authorities typically explained the reasons pertained not to religion, but to violations of laws against disorderly conduct and other matters. Police frequently targeted certain religious groups, among them some evangelical Christians, not because of the groups' religious beliefs, authorities insisted, but because they spread propaganda against the state, urge the overthrow of the Communist Party government, and in other ways violate Vietnamese laws. Religious groups are required to register with specified government agencies, and most religious organizations

in Vietnam did register. But some were not registered, either because the government refused their application or the organization objected to the requirement. In either case, an unregistered religious organization was violating the law and hence its followers were vulnerable to government persecution.

China Critics

In early 2005, several Vietnamese publicly condemned Chinese police for killing Vietnamese fishermen who had been fishing within Vietnam's territorial waters but in areas claimed by China. Thereafter, thousands of people in Vietnam criticized the Chinese government, military, police, and other officials for abusing Vietnamese citizens, encroaching into Vietnamese territory within the East Sea (what China calls the South China Sea), occupying atolls and islands belonging to Vietnam, and exploiting Vietnam's natural resources. Several critics, among them prominent scholars and retired government officials, concluded that China is Vietnam's gravest external military, political, and economic threat. Some believed Chinese leaders' long-term aim is to make Vietnam its satellite, even to take over the entire country.

Usually linked to criticisms of China were condemnations against the Vietnamese government, particularly its top leaders, for seemingly countenancing Chinese actions. According to many critics, blatant Chinese violations of Vietnam's sovereignty scarcely faze Vietnamese government leaders. Numerous critics concluded that Vietnamese leaders are more interested in preserving a close friendship with their communist comrades in China than in protecting Vietnam. Some protesters speculated that corruption is a significant reason for Vietnamese authorities' passivity. Officials at many levels of the Vietnamese government, according to this analysis, receive payments, kickbacks, bribes, and other benefits from Chinese government agencies and investors.

Critics wrote letters, essays, articles, and blogs that castigated Chinese transgressions and urged Vietnamese authorities to act. Vietnamese fishermen continued to defy Chinese efforts to prevent them from fishing in the East Sea and called on Vietnamese authorities to protect them while they fished. Thousands of citizens signed petitions addressed to Vietnam's top leaders that condemned China's blatant violation of Vietnam's sovereignty and accused the VCP government of being compliant. Several critics launched campaigns to boycott Chinese products sold in Vietnam. One group made hats, buttons, coffee cups, and T-shirts featuring brightly colored "No-U" insignias, meaning opposition to the U-shaped line Chinese authorities drew on maps to denote the East Sea area they claimed belongs to China and no other country. In Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, anti–China protesters even formed "No-U" soccer teams.

The first reported large demonstrations against China occurred in December 2007. On two successive Sundays, hundreds of Vietnamese peacefully marched along downtown streets in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi carrying banners and placards denouncing recent Chinese incursions into Spratly and Paracel islands. Those islands, chanted the demonstrators, belong to Vietnam. Blogs sites announced the demonstrations and helped to mobilize participants. Another demonstration was attempted later that month but police stopped it.

Between 2007 and 2018, anti–China protests erupted numerous times, frequently triggered by Chinese authorities' hostile actions in Vietnamese waters and atolls in the East Sea. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, where most such protests occurred, had 15 between early June 2011 and late December 2012, each usually with hundreds of participants. Thereafter, several demonstrations had thousands of Vietnamese.

On May 11, 2014, for example, about 2,000 people in Ho Chi Minh City, 1,000 people in Hanoi, and dozens in some other cities and towns marched to condemn China for establishing

in April a large oil exploration rig in Vietnamese waters. That Vietnamese authorities had only meekly objected to the Chinese action also riled the protesters. Earlier the oil rig had prompted protests by small groups of Vietnamese; on April 23 one protester, a member of a Buddhist association, even immolated herself. Helping to mobilize and coordinate the May 11 demonstrations were 20 civil society organizations. Two days later, hundreds of workers demonstrated near Chinese and Taiwanese enterprises in and near Ho Chi Minh City; the number of protesters soon grew to an estimated 19,000 people marching and chanting anti-China slogans. Some bashed and burned factory properties. Government officials may have stood aside to allow the May 11 protests, but they forcibly stopped these workers' outbursts and decisively stifled nationwide demonstrations that various groups had planned for May 18.

Starting in April 2016 and continuing for more than a year, thousands of people, many of them fisherfolk and peasants, demonstrated numerous times in several provinces along Vietnam's central coast. Large protests also occurred in Hanoi and other cities. Besides the families and friends of people directly affected, the demonstrations attracted many environmentalists, human rights advocates, China critics, and religious groups. At the outset, the protesters' main demand was to shut down a Taiwanese-owned steel plant in an area of Ha Tinh (*Hà Tĩnh*) province reserved for Chinese companies. The plant's industrial waste had killed millions of tons of fish, contaminated beaches, and caused other environmental disasters in Ha Tinh and neighboring provinces. Soon protesters also demanded compensation to villagers who had lost their livelihoods, an investigation of alleged corruption by Vietnamese authorities who authorized the area used by Chinese manufacturers and who ignored those companies' transgressions, and the release of demonstrators arrested by police. The steel plant eventually admitted fault and promised to stop the pollution and allocate US$500 million to compensate affected villagers. That amount, many victims and their supporters insisted, was tiny compared to the damage done.

In June 2018, tens of thousands of citizens on foot, in trucks and cars, and on motorcycles and bicycles poured into downtown Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and other cities and towns, causing huge traffic jams. The demonstrators' main target was legislation pending in the National Assembly to create three special economic zones that, according to widespread speculation, would be leased to Chinese enterprises for 99 years. All three planned zones would be in sensitive strategic areas: one at the southern end of the country; a second along Vietnam's central coast; and the third in the far north, near Vietnam's border with China, creating a virtual arc encompassing Vietnam and controlled by Chinese.

University students were among the most ardent anti-China protesters between 2007 and 2018. Joining them in most demonstrations and other public criticism against China and the Vietnamese government's reactions were lawyers, teachers, professors, researchers, writers, small business owners, clerks, workers, and peasants. Numerous Communist Party members, retired military officers, and former government officials were also outspoken, especially in letters addressed to Vietnam's national leadership. In July 2014, for instance, 61 party members, several of whom previously held high positions in the Communist Party and government, signed an open letter to the party's Central Committee leadership urging it to loudly and clearly oppose China's violation of Vietnam's land and ocean territory and file charges against China in international courts.

Authorities' reactions to the anti-China demonstrations, blogging, petitioning, and other activities ranged from repression to toleration and responsiveness. During many protest marches, police intimidated, beat, and detained participants. Some demonstrators were eventually imprisoned. Numerous protests occurred, however, with little police interference. Officials harassed and occasionally arrested some anti-China bloggers, but did little to hinder others. To people who wrote strongly-worded petitions against China and Vietnam–China relations, officials

usually paid little mind, neither heeding nor detaining them. Occasionally, citizens' critiques and demonstrations against China and Chinese actions appeared to push authorities to defend Vietnam's sovereignty more vigorously. Government leaders' most obvious positive response to anti-China protests was to set aside their plan to make those special economic zones that had angered thousands of Vietnamese in 2018.

Democratization Advocates

In the mid-1990s, several Vietnamese began to openly question the wisdom and viability of the VCP-dominated political system. Twenty years later, public criticism of the government had evolved into a vigorous pro-democracy movement. The evolution was organic; the movement had no center or dominant organization or clearly identified leader or even a single set of leaders. Although many critics and organizations were in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, other cities also had pro-democracy advocates.

Initially, a few dozen individuals, in letters to authorities and in essays, condemned the spread of corruption and tight restrictions on human rights. By 2001–2003, many more people publicly criticized the regime and increasingly acted together rather than just individually. Then, during 2006, a flurry of overtly political and very public organizations emerged. Three among them were new political parties seeking to challenge the Communist Party. Another organization, Bloc 8406, formed in late April, pressed for the liberties advocated in the "Declaration of Freedom and Democracy," which had circulated in pro-democracy advocates' first major use of the internet to solicit support across the country and was quickly signed by over 1,000 citizens. Also in 2006 several internet-based political magazines emerged that featured news and essays that could not be published in government-authorized media outlets. Marking another phase in the democratization movement's expansion was the surge in politically pointed blogs and other websites originating from within Vietnam. A few had begun in 2006–2007, but the big leap in politically critical websites in Vietnam occurred between late 2008 and late 2010. Thus public political life in Vietnam soon teemed with bloggers, websites, petitioners, networks, and organizations criticizing major public policies, key institutions of the state, and the entire form of government.

How many Vietnamese openly promoted democracy is unknown, but the number who signed petitions in 2013–2014 endorsing multiparty elections and other democratic institutions indicate that there were over 14,000. Of those, probably a couple thousand regularly devoted substantial time to the democratization movement. They had various occupations, among them lawyers, writers, journalists, teachers, researchers, scientists, computer technicians and programmers, physicians, clerics, farmers, and laborers; they also include students and retirees.

Some reasons for the spread since the mid-1990s of public dissent against the government have to do with expanding opportunities and growing discontent. With the broadening market economy since the late 1980s, citizens gained wide latitude to decide where and how they live, where to work, what schools to attend, what to buy and sell, and how to produce. Also communication technologies since the mid-1990s greatly enhanced opportunities for people to expand their knowledge, form networks, and monitor government officials and agencies. In the early 1990s, few Vietnamese had a television; an even tinier number had a telephone. By 2012–2014, however, the vast majority of households had TVs, telephones were ubiquitous, and 40 percent of Vietnamese had access to the internet. These technologies significantly improved Vietnamese people's awareness of events far beyond their immediate surroundings and made it much easier for democracy advocates to prepare and distribute petitions, essays, and other materials.

Meanwhile, the Vietnamese state became less able and/or willing to maintain the tight grip it previously had over society. The market economy and improved living conditions had

boosted the government's legitimacy but also had reduced its control over people's lives, interests, information, and thinking and had contributed to the emergence of an increasingly varied civil society. Government authorities, while often anxious about this situation and debated how to manage it, generally embraced this outcome as a necessity for Vietnam's development. They also became more mindful of foreign scrutiny. Having concertedly cultivated good relations with countries and associations around the world, especially those touting democratic institutions and processes, national authorities could not afford the Vietnamese state being deemed an absolutely repressive authoritarian regime.

Discontent with the political system, as expressed in the writings and other actions of democracy advocates, stressed three topics. One was corruption, which critics contended had become so entrenched that only fundamental changes in how the country is governed could eliminate it. The absence of democracy was a second prominent theme in regime critics statements and activities. They cited the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the standard which Vietnam should follow. Especially crucial are freedom of press, speech, association, religion, and trade union formation. The third topic was national pride. To regime critics, Vietnam is embarrassingly underdeveloped, especially compared to most of its neighbors. Meanwhile China, taking advantage of Vietnam's weaknesses and leaders, greatly compromises Vietnam's national security.

Most public advocacy for democratization in 1995–2018 was done through petitions, essays, and other writings. Occasionally, however, people marched in the streets to press for human rights and related matters. In front of police stations, courthouses, and prisons, people demonstrated to defend and praise individuals who were detained, on trial, and jailed for championing free speech and other rights. The largest public outburst pertaining to democratization were the tens of thousands of citizens in June 2018 who protested in numerous towns and cities against new laws to prevent people from using the internet to circulate information deemed by officials to be anti-state or anti-government. Their demonstrations comingled with protests against special economic zones in Vietnam for Chinese enterprises. The merging of those two waves of discontent that month created the largest display of political discontent in Vietnam since the country's reunification in 1975.

Virtually everyone in the democratization movement endorsed non-violent methods to change the political system. Yet there were at least four different approaches about how to do that, the place and role of the VCP in the process, and the relationship between development and democracy. One urged those party members who know the present system is unsustainable to take the lead in implementing human rights provisions already in Vietnamese law, open existing elections to many political parties, and set Vietnam on a path to democracy. A second emphasized building organizations that will confront and dismantle the VCP so as to quickly establish a multiparty democratic political system. Such democratization must come first, insisted this confrontational cluster, before the country can develop further. A third approach urged engagement with the authorities at all levels so as to press for social–economic advancement. As the country's development accelerates, advocates of this approach argued, democratization will evolve. A fourth stressed expanding and strengthening civic, social, and community organizations in which people learn democratic practices. That in turn will eventually democratize the political system.

Government authorities' actions toward pro-democracy advocates mixed intimidation and repression with toleration. In newspapers, radio and television programs, and the internet, officials frequently publicly denounced and, in the opinions of many victims, slandered critics of the regime. Some dissidents, authorities alleged, were in league with outsiders, often overseas Vietnamese, seeking to overthrow the Communist Party's government. Authorities

accused dissidents of being unpatriotic and dismissive of the huge sacrifices their forebears had made in order to liberate Vietnam from colonial rule, defeat aggressors, and secure the nation's independence. They also claimed that dissidents use their activist persona to make a living from the contributions they receive from relatives, friends, and supporters, especially those living abroad.

Going beyond verbal intimidation, authorities bugged and cut many dissidents' phone lines; blocked their mobile phone numbers; hacked their e-mail accounts; tracked their internet usage; and confiscated their files, books, letters, and computers. Officials also subverted and sometimes managed to shut down permanently pro-democracy organizations, websites, and other internet locations. Security police often tracked critics' movements, recording whom they met, when, where, and sometimes what was said. While walking or riding their motorbikes, several regime critics were attacked with clubs or rammed by speeding drivers. The attackers, said the victims, were likely thugs employed by the police or other government agencies. Authorities often detained regime critics, sometimes only a few hours, frequently for several days, before allowing them to go home. Numerous democratization advocates were jailed. Imprisonment was especially pronounced in 2007–2010 and 2016–2018.

Several democratization advocates, however, suffered modest government intimidation or repression. Authorities paid them little attention. Numerous democracy advocates who were intimidated were never detained or imprisoned. And most who were incarcerated, later, after being released, resumed their pro-democracy activities without being re-arrested. In short, authorities tolerated some critics more than others, and some at certain times more than at other periods.

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5

CIVIL SOCIETY AND ADVOCACY NETWORKS IN VIETNAM

Andrew Wells-Dang

A diverse array of formal and informal social organizations, associations, and networks has formed in Vietnam since the 1990s, comprising a domestic civil society with varying degrees of linkage to the state. This development has occurred within, around, and in spite of a political structure that apparently offers little space for non-state actors. The Communist Party–led regime in the north after 1954 and nationally from 1975 aimed at achieving a corporatist-type system of "mono-organizational socialism" (Thayer, 1995), in which mass organizations and other associations reported upwards to party leadership. This aspiration was never fully realized, however, and in the early years of *Doi moi*, Vietnamese society began to show signs of limited pluralism (Kerkvliet and Porter, 1995).

The first contemporary Vietnamese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) formed in the early 1990s around the same time that international NGOs such as Save the Children, Oxfam, and Church World Service began to re-establish representative offices. Early Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs), including the Research Center for Gender and Development and the Rural Development Services Center in Hanoi, as well as the Social Development Research Consultancy in Ho Chi Minh City, were led by academics or former government officials with sufficient connections to enable them to register with supervisory state agencies. Numbering at least a hundred, they acted like independent organizations, setting their own agenda and raising funds to act (Sidel, 1996; Kerkvliet, 2003). The 1997 Grassroots Democracy Decree and the party's stated principles of "people know, people discuss, people execute and people supervise" formed enough of an institutional basis for civil society to develop (Bach, 2002).

A second generation of VNGOs began to form in the early 2000s, driven by younger founders – predominantly women – who had studied overseas or worked with international agencies. Compared to the social service and research focus of earlier NGOs, these second-generation VNGOs were more inclined to engage in advocacy or community organizing, activities that redefined the boundaries of possible political action (Kerkvliet et al., 2008). Yet activist NGOs remain in the minority, with significant differences in organizational styles and operating environments in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Wischermann, 2010). Drawing in part on pre-1975 experience, southern NGOs have taken a more voluntary, charitable approach with expertize in social work methods, yet face greater obstacles to legal registration than their northern colleagues (Taylor et al., 2012). The most significant geographic cleavage, however, is between the cities and countryside: although many urban NGOs carry out projects in rural provinces,

VNGOs based outside of main cities are few and far between. This pattern reflects the urban focus of recent socioeconomic development, the benefits of proximity to government and international donors, and complex registration requirements that favor leaders with higher educational qualifications and political connections.

The newest generation of Vietnamese civil society has broken the NGO mold. Influenced by opportunities on the Internet and in social media, many start-up groups have organized virtually, sometimes choosing to remain unregistered. Virtual or informal civil society includes student volunteer groups, charitable associations, and community-based self-help groups, as well as a plethora of political discussion forums on Facebook and numerous blog sites (Wells-Dang, 2014; Kurfürst, 2015; Bùi, 2016). Both organizations and individuals have joined into various forms of networks and coalitions that do not have status under Vietnamese law but which are often able to operate either informally or via the registered status of one or more members.

In numerical terms, the expansion of organized civil society in the past two decades has been remarkable. In 2000, a survey found 322 issue-based organizations in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Wischermann, 2003). By 2005, 800 science and technology organizations were registered (CIVICUS, 2006, p. 34). In 2010, there were an estimated 1,700 VNGOs, of which 600 were registered under the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA) (Thang, 2010). Other Vietnamese NGOs have registered with umbrellas such as provincial Unions of Science and Technology Associations (USTAs), the Southeast Asian Research Association of Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh City Educational Psychology Association, HCMC Child Welfare Association, universities, and research institutes. At the same time, the number of social-political and professional associations − what can be termed "government-organized NGOs" or GON-GOs − is also increasing. At the end of 2014, government sources stated that there are now 52,565 social organizations of all types: mass, professional, and community organizations at all levels from the nation to the commune (National Assembly Legal Committee, 2015, p. 1). And according to research cited by a former Ministry of Home Affairs official, there are more than 200,000 unregistered community-based organizations throughout the country, which operate effectively and violate no laws (Nguyễn, 2016, p. 6).

This rapid growth belies the common perception that Vietnam's economy is changing more rapidly than society and politics. Looking at VNGOs alone, starting from a (generous) estimate of 200 organizations in 1995, their numbers have risen at an annual rate of over 12% − nearly double the rate of annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth. Notably, the expansion of VNGOs and other social organizations has taken place without a new Law on Associations or substantial changes in the legal framework. After more than 30 drafts since the 1990s, the latest version of the proposed Law on Associations was withdrawn from National Assembly consideration in late 2016 after numerous delegates objected to inconsistencies and new restrictions in the draft.

Neither the numbers of registered organizations nor the legal framework by themselves tell very much about the qualitative features of civil society: this requires more in-depth research. The first national-scale study of civil society in Vietnam was conducted by a mixed Vietnamese-international team recruited by the international alliance, CIVICUS (2006). The study described civil society as "emerging" on four indices of structure, environment, values, and impact: all four criteria were rated low to moderate, with values and structure evaluated by the team as moderately positive, while environment and impact were more limited. The CIVICUS study has not been repeated since.

In 2015, a group of researchers affiliated with the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE), a Hanoi-based NGO, carried out a civil society space assessment aiming to provide a more internal perspective (Lê et al., 2016).[1] Similar to CIVICUS, the research

group assembled a series of indicators and questions grouped around common themes, in this case values, capacity, state regulation, and impacts. In place of an expert panel, the iSEE team collected perception data from 152 organizations and individuals around the country, including both registered and unregistered forms of civil society. The respondents evaluated all four indices of civil society space as below average, with state regulation scoring the lowest at barely two points out of five; yet 61% of respondents stated that the space for civil society expanded during the prior three years (2012–15). These findings underscore the challenges of a qualitative assessment in a context where the forms and concepts of civil society vary significantly among respondents, as well as in the society at large.

Conceptualizing Civil Society

"Civil society" is a contested term in any language. It can be used to refer to a type of non-profit organization (Salamon and Anheier, 1997); an arena of action separate from the state, market, and family (Cohen and Arato, 1992); or a political movement advocating democratic reforms and regime change (Alagappa, 2004). Most of these international definitions of civil society share some basic characteristics: autonomy, voluntarism, non-profit making, and non-violence (Anheier et al., 2003, p. 8). Many also presume the presence of democratic political institutions. Many of these characteristics do not "travel well" (Sartori, 1970) to social reality in Vietnam.

Contemporary Vietnamese concepts of civil society began from a Marxist origin, reflecting the predominance of Marxist–Leninist social and political theories. When donors and international NGOs began to refer to the concept in the 1990s, its meaning shifted, leading at times to a disconnect between the intentions of aid projects and their government counterparts (Salemink, 2006). Initially two Vietnamese terms were used, *xã hội dân sự* (which might be rendered literally as "civilian society") and *xã hội công dân* (or "citizens' society"), but over time the first term became preferred and is now considered the Vietnamese equivalent for "civil society".[2] Vietnamese party-state discourse, however, avoids the term *xã hội dân sự* in official or public documents, replacing it with phrases such as *tổ chức xã hội* or *tổ chức nhân dân* (social organizations, people's organizations) that are viewed as less sensitive, assuming that these organizations are kept under state control. "Civil society" is still considered by some state agencies to be politically suspect and linked to "peaceful evolution" (*diễn biến hòa bình*) and "color revolutions" (e.g., Dương, 2012), even as other officials have discussed and debated civil society openly.

Of the various international understandings of civil society, the one that has found the greatest resonance in Vietnam is that of a "third sector" distinct from the market and the state. For instance, agricultural expert Đặng Kim Sơn (2007) speaks of "three hands" of the state, market, and community joining to contribute to rural development. This way of thinking has "infiltrated" academic circles and even the Communist Party (Bùi, 2013, p. 79; Vũ, 2008; Nguyễn, 2009) and is often linked to the transition to a market economy. Bùi Hải Thiêm (2013) cites an article in the *Communist Review* (*Tạp chí Cộng sản*), the party's leading theoretical journal, arguing that civil society should be seen as the "third cornerstone" alongside the market economy and the state (Trần, 2008). The idea of civil society as a sector is consistent with reformists' views that to carry *Doi moi* reforms further, the roles of the state need to reduce while those of the market and civil society should increase (Nguyễn, 2008, p. 29).

Yet the concept of a discrete civil society "sector" does not apply easily in contemporary Vietnam. All registered social organizations are legally and practically linked to the state: as the CIVICUS study put it, organizations are "entangled with the state and each other" (CIVICUS, 2006, p. 36). Most Vietnamese NGOs are financially independent and are able to make their own programming and personnel decisions, but their legal status depends on the approval of

a state-backed "umbrella organization", such as VUSTA.[3] According to Decree 93 (Government of Vietnam, 2009), all projects involving foreign funding must legally be submitted to government agencies for approval.[4] Furthermore, a significant fraction of NGO directors and founders are themselves party members and/or retired government officials, particularly in the first generation of VNGOs, while other civil society actors move back and forth from the state sector (or, less frequently, the business sector) in a process of "changing hats" (Wells-Dang, 2012, p. 170). Some of the most prominent activists and dissidents can be found in this category. Indeed, activist intellectuals' links to the state give them degrees of legitimacy, access, and influence that an unconnected actor would not easily attain.

For those applying a sector-based approach to civil society in Vietnam, the largest conceptual issue is whether or not to include the party-sponsored mass organizations (*đoàn thể*, or officially, *các tổ chức chính trị – xã hội*, "political-social organizations"), such as the Vietnam Women's Union and Farmers' Union.[5] If one includes mass organizations as part of civil society, as the CIVICUS study and most international donors do (e.g., European Union, 2014), then the density of organizational membership in Vietnam looks high by global standards. If mass organizations are excluded, as in the 2015 iSEE assessment, the voice and influence of civil society appear much lower. Data from the national PAPI survey[6] indicates that reported membership in mass organizations rose from 38% in 2011 to 42% in 2014, while membership in non-political community organizations, such as parent–teacher associations, sports clubs, and religious groups, increased from 8% to 13% over the same period (Wells-Dang et al., 2015, pp. 11–12).

Mass organizations are clearly not autonomous and are not convincingly voluntary either: many citizens join because of their identity in a certain social category, in order to receive social benefits provided through the mass organizations, or because membership is expected by local authorities and social norms.[7] Yet mass organizations do perform representative and associational functions, even as the costs and limitations they impose on the state and society go largely unquestioned (Nguyễn et al., 2015). In cases of local land disputes, for instance, local chapters of mass and professional associations have occasionally mediated and intervened on behalf of petitioners (Oxfam and OPM, 2012). VUSTA has done the same on environmental disputes such as the Sơn La dam. Yet these examples of mass and professional associations engaging in advocacy appear to be the exception rather than the rule.

Uncritically classifying state-sponsored associations as "civil society" stretches the concept beyond coherence, yet a strict application of the criteria of autonomy and voluntarism would risk missing parts of the arena of citizen action in Vietnam. Even the apparently uncontroversial characteristic of civil society as non-profit making is not always applicable. Some VNGOs and even government institutes, following the lead of international development contractors, operate as de facto consultancy firms for donors and governments. On the other hand, a growing network of social enterprises and start-up businesses involves youth volunteers in charitable and environmental causes. Which of these is a more credible expression of civil society? Clearly the second, although the criterion of non-profit making still has general relevance: social enterprises should by definition be reinvesting their profits into the community.

These examples of difficulties in translating international characteristics of civil society to the Vietnamese context have led observers to propose alternative approaches based on types of action, rather than innate properties of a type of organization (Hannah, 2007; Wischermann, 2010; Wells-Dang, 2012). In this alternative view, "civil society is what civil society does" (Hannah, 2007, p. 89): efforts by citizens to join together in collective action for a shared social purpose, regardless of whether the actors are individual activists, staff of a social organization, journalists, or even (at times) government officials. Often, then, the commonly encountered term "civil society organization" is misleading. There are no organizations in Vietnam that can

automatically be considered part of civil society and no civil society sector that can be cleanly distinguished from the state, market, and family. Some NGOs can and do play important roles in civil society, to the extent that they engage in shared collective action, but civil society action is entirely conceivable without any NGOs, or with NGOs only in supportive or secondary roles. An action-centered concept of civil society shifts the focus of analysis from organizational structures to what various actors do, whether social movements, online activism, or volunteer networks.

Indeed, expressions of informal civil society action have developed rapidly in contemporary Vietnam, alongside the growth in registered social organizations. Several examples stand out. In March to April 2015, a broad-based citizens' movement emerged in Hanoi to protest against the city government's decision to cut down over 6,700 large trees along major streets (Lê et al., 2015; Vũ, 2017). Multiple strands of the movement, using different tactics, succeeded in stopping the tree cutting but not in holding government officials to account. In the same time period, 90,000 workers at the Pou Yuen footwear factory outside Ho Chi Minh City went on strike in protest against proposed changes in the Law on Social Insurance that would delay payments until retirement age. This spontaneous, worker-led action had even faster results: within days, the government promised to amend the law (Lê Tuyết, 2015; IndustriAll, 2015). In central Vietnam, the "Save Son Doong" campaign has organized since 2014 to stop construction of a cable car in a World Heritage cave (Visser, 2017; Nguyễn, 2017; Save Son Doong, 2017), with a persistent online presence that has drawn national and international attention to the site.

Increasing access to the Internet was a major factor in each of these actions, but whether or not the online space is filled depends on citizens' actions. As iSEE's civil society space assessment concludes:

> One of the main causes [for the perceived increase in civil society activity] is that the wide use of the Internet and social media have made people more knowledgeable, thus giving them better chances to express their voices and connect with each other. In addition, the establishment of new free-standing groups, even oppositional ones, has pushed the boundaries, thus expanding the civil space. The transformation of NGOs through policy advocacy, social movements, and especially the development of volunteer youth and charity groups has created much new space. The transformation in cooperation, coordination and mutual respect amongst civil society groups has increased operational effectiveness and formed the conditions for civil society space to be expanded further.
>
> *(Lê et al., 2016, p. 14)*

Some of the actions of informal civil society are explicitly anti-governmental in intent, comprising a growing "political civil society" (Thayer, 2009; Kerkvliet, 2015) that operates more virtually than directly. Such activities are known in Vietnamese by the term *lề trái*, the "left margin", which might be best rendered in English as "dissident". Other civil society activities are equally political, in the broad sense of concerned with public decision-making and allocation of resources, but work through established channels of cooperation and engagement with government, media, and NGOs. Still other activities are based more on a collective identity among participants, such as religious faith, gender identity, or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) status, rather than aiming to change any public policy (Wyndham, 2015). Even these identity-based activities can be considered political, in that they challenge social norms and build community groups that are largely outside of the state system.

The Emergence of Advocacy Networks and Social Movements: Four Vignettes

All of these civil society actions in Vietnam (and worldwide) frequently take the form of networks or coalitions. Civil society networks form based on existing personal or virtual ties among core participants, who can include individuals, organizations, or a mix of the two (Wells–Dang, 2012, p. 25). Some networks are formal in the sense that they have clearly defined membership, leaders, and sometimes written by–laws or a physical headquarters – although, as noted earlier, networks cannot have formal legal status in the current Vietnamese system. One type of (usually formal) network is the multistakeholder advocacy coalition, which includes participants from both within and outside state agencies and forms for a particular policy advocacy purpose (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Some coalitions have arisen from existing civil society networks, while others are convened by an international donor or government agency. Other networks are informal, operating virtually or intermittently, sometimes without an agreed name, just "the group working on a particular issue". While informal networks are by nature less institutionalized and longer–lasting than their formal counterparts, they have been shown to be at least as effective in attaining their immediate objectives (Wells–Dang, 2012, pp. 175–178).

The Vietnam Rivers Network and Anti-Dam Activism

The Vietnam Rivers Network (VRN, *Mạng lưới Sông ngòi Việt Nam*) describes itself as "an open forum whose membership comprises a broad set of actors concerned with river protection and sustainable development in Vietnam, including NGO's representatives, researchers, academics, government officials, local communities and individuals" (VRN, n.d.). The network began as the initiative of several Vietnamese NGOs and government-affiliated scientists in 2005 and has grown gradually in membership and influence since. As of 2018, the network has approximately 300 members, who are mainly individuals; overall membership has doubled since 2010. From 2005 to 2012, VRN was coordinated by a team hosted at the Centre for Water Resources Conservation and Development (WARECOD) in Hanoi; coordination then shifted to the Hue-based Center for Social Research and Development (CSRD). At present, the network is governed by a five–person management board representing the north, center, and south of Vietnam, plus a seven–person advisory board and two full-time staff (VRN, n.d.).

A core group of activists within the wider membership of VRN, including NGO staff, researchers from government institutes, and retired officials, has formed an advocacy task force focusing on hydropower. This core group spearheaded opposition to the Đồng Nai 6/6A dams (which would have taken land from Cát Tiên National Park, in violation of the Law on Environmental Protection), leading to the projects' cancellation by the government in 2013. As part of the regional Save the Mekong coalition, VRN has also been influential in changing the Vietnamese government's position from support to criticism of mainstream Mekong dams (Wells–Dang, 2013), though this has not prevented Laos from proceeding with construction of the Xayaburi and Don Sahong hydropower projects.

In structure, VRN is a formal multistakeholder coalition with an informal advocacy team at its center. The network is NGO-led, but inclusive of supportive government officials, media, and communities affected by hydropower projects. In its advocacy efforts, VRN leverages the contributions of all of these component parts to influence other state actors. The network is an exemplary expression of civil society action that includes actors both within and outside the state.

Advocacy Coalitions on Land Rights

Given Vietnam's large rural population and limited supply of arable land, access to agricultural and forest land is one of the highest-priority issues in public opinion, as measured by media coverage, survey data, and the incidence of land-related protests and disputes (Oxfam and OPM, 2012). Vietnamese citizens made over 1 million land-related complaints to the government and National Assembly in the decade from 2003 to 2012 (*Tuổi Trẻ*, 2012). However, organized civil society has only begun to focus on land rights advocacy since approximately 2010.

The first civil society network on forest land issues was formed by a group of VNGOs in northern and central Vietnam who were long-term grantees of a Dutch intermediary donor, Inter-Church Cooperation (ICCO). Network members included a university research center and several successors to an independent-minded first-generation VNGO, Towards Ethnic Women (see Gray, 2003). In 2012, the network attracted additional sponsorship from the US-based McKnight Foundation and from the Coalition Support Program, an initiative of the UK Department for International Development implemented by the international NGO Oxfam.[8] The following year, however, several original members withdrew from the group to set up a separate community-based network termed LandNet. The remaining members expanded their coalition to include additional VNGOs and link to media and government allies. By 2015, the "Forland" Coalition demonstrated notable advocacy successes in reforming policy towards state-owned farms and forest enterprises (Brook et al., 2015, pp. 22–30).

Revision of Vietnam's Land Law in 2013 offered a significant opportunity for civil society input. In mid-2012, Oxfam and a group of VNGO and research institute partners began to conduct community consultations with more than 3,000 households affected by the Land Law. This partnership led to the establishment of the Land Alliance (Landa), a coalition including Vietnamese NGOs, research institutes, media, and government "champions", including a former vice-minister of environment and National Assembly delegates. Landa's recommendations influenced the postponement of the Land Law and contributed to provisions on citizen monitoring, limits on land expropriation, and land tenure for ethnic minorities (Wells-Dang, Phạm and Burke, 2016, pp. 6–7).

Following passage of the Land Law, however, Landa's focus and sense of urgency declined, and some of the alliance's 19 members had difficulties working together. The existence of several related, and sometimes competing, land networks led some observers to confuse and misrepresent the actors and issues involved (Hirsch et al., 2015, p. 14). The experiences of LandNet, Forland and Landa demonstrate that strong internal capacity as well as well-formed advocacy strategies are necessary for successful civil society action.

The Campaign Against Bauxite Mining

Concerns over government plans to exploit bauxite ore in nine provinces in south-central Vietnam led to an unprecedented civil society campaign in 2008–09. The debate over bauxite mining became a litmus test of civil society involvement in the policy process (Wells-Dang, 2014) and heralded a new, more oppositional style of Vietnamese politics (Thayer, 2009; Morris-Jung, 2015). It was also the first instance of activism in Vietnam carried out largely via the Internet.

In late 2007, having learned about bauxite mining plans, the VNGO Consultancy on Development, or CODE (which was also one of the original members of the forest land network), held the first of a series of policy dialogues that brought together scientists, journalists, and government officials to discuss environmental and social impacts of the proposed projects. As Morris-Jung (2015, p. 70) describes, these scientific workshops "turned discreet local discussions

into a raucous national debate". Attention soon shifted to the role of Chinese investors and the entire structure of decision-making within the party-state.

By late 2008 and early 2009, three distinct networks of bauxite activists worked in parallel. In addition to CODE's circle, a second network operated within the state, centered around the legendary General Võ Nguyên Giáp, who became an outspoken opponent of bauxite plans. Third, a group of bloggers and activists in central Vietnam started an online petition opposing the bauxite projects and developed a series of websites to post news and opinions. The subjects covered on the bauxite websites quickly expanded to become a clearinghouse of critical opinion about Vietnamese politics and society (such as subsequently posting an alternative multiparty draft of the 2013 constitution). The online petition attracted over 2,700 signatures, mostly from activists who never met each other in person. The virtual organizing strategy proved highly effective in attracting support from throughout Vietnam and overseas, and in retrospect can be seen as the start of the contemporary protest movement against perceived Chinese influence and aggression.

In April 2009, the government responded to the bauxite controversy by blocking websites and halting media discussion for 18 months. However, bauxite websites have stayed online through registering multiple windows in Vietnam and overseas, and after 2010, domestic media coverage again began to spread. Although the ambitious mining plans were never publicly shelved, their scale was drastically reduced to two smaller "pilots", of which only one (in Lâm Đồng province) is currently operational. In 2015, the Vietnam Mining Coalition, with support from Oxfam, held a bauxite update workshop in Hanoi, after permission to organize the workshop in the Central Highlands was withdrawn. This neatly delineates the extent and limits of civil society's space to advocate on what remains a controversial topic in public policy.

Organizing for Gay and Lesbian Rights

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons have traditionally lived in the shadows in Vietnam. While violent repression of the sort driven by religious extremism in some parts of the world has been absent, societal stigma and discrimination against the LGBT community remains high. In the early 2000s, as Internet technology became more widespread in Vietnamese cities, LGBT people began to establish online forums or chat rooms where they could meet and talk privately. What is now a vibrant LGBT movement emerged organically from this modest beginning (Wyndham, 2015).

The first Vietnamese NGO to engage with the LGBT community is iSEE. Founded in 2007, iSEE identified sexual and ethnic minorities as two distinct excluded groups in Vietnamese society. Contrary to their initial expectations, iSEE's movement-building activities among ethnic minorities have been slow and protracted, while organizing in the LGBT community has proceeded rapidly. In 2008, iSEE convened a face-to-face meeting among the coordinators of five LGBT online forums around the country. This modest meeting, with fewer than 10 participants, signaled "the birth of the LGBT movement and their move from online to in-public" (Wyndham, 2015, p. 4). In 2011, a counterpart NGO was formed in Ho Chi Minh City, called Information, Communication, and Sharing (ICS). Among them, iSEE and ICS now share coordination of loose movement structures in multiple provinces, including local LGBT associations and university Gay-Straight Alliances.[9]

Public campaigns have been an important part of the LGBT movement since its launching. In Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, organizers have held annual "Vietpride" events and marches since 2012. A coordinated 2013 campaign called "Tôi Đồng Ý" (I agree) mobilized over 70,000 people to attend public events. Celebrities, such as a Miss Vietnam beauty queen, signed on in support of same-sex marriage. According to iSEE, many local LGBT communities have

organized themselves and participated in different public activities in their provinces. Different from conventional public policy advocacy, these events targeted public opinion and media portrayals of LGBT people. In the process, they mobilized thousands of gay and straight participants to join the movement, which took on a joyful and celebratory character.

Subsequently, the LGBT movement turned its attention to the Law on Marriage and Family under consideration in the National Assembly. Although the final law, passed by the National Assembly in November 2014, did not legally recognize same-sex marriages, it removed language prohibiting them and ended enforcement measures, reflecting a notable change in the government's position. The Civil Code, revised in 2015, now permits sex reassignment surgery and recognizes intersex people (who are neither male nor female). In iSEE's words, these were "significant steps to protect LGBT rights in Vietnam". Wyndham notes (2015, p. 9) that in the process, iSEE has become a de facto spokesperson for LGBT issues that is consulted by the government. By conducting its own research and organizing, the LGBT movement, including both organizations and many individuals, has effectively taken the policy-making initiative into their own hands – a change that has implications for many other areas of social and political change.

Discussion: Advocacy Strategies and Media Outreach

Formal networks working on hydropower, land rights, and other issues use a combination of advocacy strategies to affect public policy formulation and implementation. Where opportunities exist, network members draw on established channels of "embedded activism" (Ho and Edmonds, 2008) with government ministries, mass and umbrella organizations such as VUSTA, and the National Assembly. To add leverage and find their way around blockages in the government system, networks rely on the official and online media and, to a lesser extent, on direct outreach to local communities.

The new style of movement organizing, by contrast, is highly dependent on the Internet and social media.[10] Facebook, which has an estimated 64 million users in Vietnam, equal to 3% of all subscribers worldwide (Hà Phương, 2017), has become the most important and influential outlet of information. Mainstream journalists frequently rely on issues debated on Facebook to develop stories in the print media. A majority of the 18,000 journalists licensed by the state have active personal Facebook accounts, as do a number of government leaders themselves. With the rise of the blogosphere, the initiative in social mobilization has shifted away from state-linked agencies and media to independent voices. VNGOs are also affected by the new landscape of online social movements and have to adapt their advocacy strategies in response. Many first- and second-generation VNGOs have been slow to establish a presence on social media, which can be viewed as an obstacle to enhancing their public role.

The importance of the media in effective network advocacy cannot be overstated. Print, broadcast, and online media are the only reliable way for civil society actors to affect public opinion, as well as one of the best ways to reach government officials. Enterprising journalists, even those working in state-owned media, are ready to amplify citizens' voices on newsworthy issues, even if it is not always possible for journalists to be publicly identified as members of an advocacy coalition. Members of networks such as VRN and Landa have written or been interviewed in hundreds of newspaper articles, blog posts, and television documentaries, most of which remain available (and searchable) online for years afterwards. Although network activities can result in a large volume of media exposure, however, it is often hard to show a direct link from this coverage to concrete policy influence.

Vietnamese civil society actors' use of community-based advocacy methods has increased compared to previous analyses (Wells-Dang, 2013), but embedded and media techniques are

still the primary tools in advocates' repertoires. This can be explained, on one hand, by the relative openness of central-level Vietnamese state agencies to recommendations and dialogue of an "expert" or "scientific" nature, and on the other hand, by a reluctance (even paranoia) on the part of some local government and security forces to permit local organizing or community mobilization outside of official structures. In particular, most NGOs and research institutes find it difficult or impossible to connect to dissident voices in civil society, such as land protestors, since their organizations' registrations and project approvals depend on relationships with authorities. The anti-bauxite mining campaign was a rare example of civil society action that effectively combined resources of both registered and unregistered groups.

Conclusion: What Is Vietnamese About Civil Society?

In a 2016 New Year's analysis for the BBC's Vietnamese-language service, a panel of commentators offered an upbeat outlook for civil society (BBC, 2015). Compared to the past, civil society is engaging in more issues related to governance and human rights, not just traditional topics such as poverty reduction. Respondents credited the 2013 constitutional revision, despite its limitations, as having opened up space to discuss new laws on associations, access to information, and demonstrations. In the words of critical intellectual Nguyễn Quang A,

> I think there haven't been any dramatic changes in the past few years, but gradually I can see that people in positions of authority, such as in the National Assembly and in the executive branch, more and more of them understand that civil society isn't only oppositional . . . it's a necessary factor in social development, and a factor that can help this country solve many critical social problems.
>
> *(BBC, 2015)*

Not all observers shared this sense of optimism. Respondents to the civil society space assessment led by iSEE cited concerns that fewer new organizations are being established than in the past decades, due in part to declining funding from international donors. Others noted the continuing arrests of prominent political bloggers during the period leading up to the 2016 Communist Party Congress (Lê et al., 2016, pp. 117–118). In some periods, space for civil society in Vietnam has appeared to expand, but this expansion is not consistent or irreversible, as state policies and actions are a countervailing force that conditions some of the contours and extent of civil society's possibilities. State attitudes swing like a pendulum between more open and more repressive tendencies, meaning that the line between what is allowed and what is too "sensitive" is changeable (and to an extent negotiable). The 2015 iSEE assessment concluded that although state management of civil society remains a disenabling factor, the existing space is chiefly determined by civil society capacity: if capacity increases, a more enabling environment will follow, even if policies remain the same (Lê et al., 2016, p. 11).

This conclusion was quickly put to the test, as momentum built in 2016 for passage of a Law on Associations that would provide a firmer legal basis for registered civil society and remove inconsistencies in existing sub-law decrees. VNGOs and activists throughout the country submitted recommendations to the Ministry of Home Affairs drafting team and to National Assembly delegates with particulars on how the draft law could be improved. Instead, in October 2016, about a month before the scheduled vote, National Assembly leaders replaced the previous draft with a more restrictive version that complicated registration procedures and strictly limited foreign funding to associations. This action produced vociferous opposition from the Hanoi-based People's Participation Working Group (an informal network of VNGOs,

international donors, and individuals), academics, and retired officials (PPWG, 2016; *Vietnam News,* 2016). Nearly 90% of National Assembly delegates then supported a move to postpone the law indefinitely, which may have been the intent of the restrictive draft in the first place (Thúy Hạnh, 2016). Thus, the legal basis for civil society in Vietnam remains as uncertain and incomplete as before. As with many of the other examples of civil society action described in this chapter – the Hanoi tree movement, Son Doong cave, or bauxite mining – the cancellation of the proposed Law on Associations underlines how Vietnamese networks and coalitions have proven strong enough to stop certain negative outcomes, but not influential enough to bring about desired positive changes in laws or society.

What (if anything) is particularly Vietnamese about the patterns of civil society action and advocacy presented in this chapter? Many features of Vietnamese civil society have close parallels in other countries, both in Asia and beyond. Use of the Internet, for instance, is a common practice of social and political activists worldwide; it takes on particular salience in Vietnam, however, due to a high rate of literacy combined with state ownership and censorship of print and broadcast media. Similarly, the model of multistakeholder advocacy coalitions is not specific to Vietnam: indeed, the term originated in America and western Europe. In a sociopolitical context in which the state has, until recently, monopolized policy making, the idea of organized cooperative advocacy activities among multiple actors within and outside the state is newer and more challenging.

The continuing legal and extra-legal barriers to civil society action in Vietnam are real and should not be downplayed. In addition to an incomplete legal framework, cumbersome registration and approval processes, harassment, and surveillance, civil society actors face internal limitations in fundraising and operating capacity. These can be understood as partly the result of state policies to restrict civil society and partly due to long-term social and cultural attitudes, such as philanthropic giving, regional and urban-rural divides, and levels of social trust and cohesion. Yet in spite of all these obstacles, Vietnamese civil society has not only survived but began to thrive in both organized and informal expressions.

The forms that civil society action has taken constitute a creative, adaptive response to often adverse conditions. If networks could legally register and fundraise freely, no doubt some of them would do so; absent these rights, participants prefer to remain connected virtually and informally. If the political system were more open to independent voices, perhaps some civil society actors would seek elected office; given the paucity of such opportunities, active citizens use other means of influence. With low capacity and confidence in the judicial system, citizens express grievances over land rights via the media and Internet instead of in the courts. In this sense, civil society action in Vietnam is a "second-best" measure to find a way around blockages in the formal system. With far less influence than the party-state, civil society actors cannot hope to solve institutional contradictions in the regime; they can only succeed at incremental changes on technical issues, or perhaps prevent some of the most ill-conceived economic development projects from going forward.

Yet from a comparative international perspective, the challenges that civil society faces in Vietnam are not entirely different from those elsewhere. State restrictions, capacity gaps, and corrupt institutions are common features in most Asian countries and can be found to some extent even in the richest democracies. There are few, if any, environments in which "first-best" political solutions are apparent. If we view Vietnam not as an isolated case of single-party rule, but rather as a dynamic society in the midst of far-reaching and as yet undetermined changes, then the contemporary experience of civil society actors can offer relevant lessons for movements, activists, and organizations with some degree of comparable conditions. Although the direct impacts of civil society advocacy up to now have been modest, their longer-term

influence on politics and society could exceed their present status. If current trends persist, Vietnamese civil society will be a field of increasing innovation in coming years.

Notes

1 The iSEE civil society space assessment was funded in part by Oxfam, and the author of this chapter acted as an advisor and editor for the report; its contents, however, are entirely the work of the Vietnamese research team.
2 These terms, like most abstract Vietnamese words, have Chinese origins. Modern Chinese has even more variation in terms for "civil society"; the most frequently used is the equivalent of the term *xã hội công dân* that has not been widely accepted in Vietnamese.
3 The other main "umbrella organizations" are the Vietnam Union of Literature and Arts Associations (VULA), Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO), and the Vietnam Cooperative Alliance. These are among 28 "special" social-professional associations (*hội đặc thù*) that receive state subsidies (Nguyễn et al., 2015, p. 18).
4 If Decree 93 is applied strictly, it is not enough for the umbrella organization to approve: all "relevant ministries" must also (including Public Security). In the case of advocacy projects, this gives the line ministry targeted by an advocacy campaign a de facto veto over project approval.
5 A list of the major mass organizations also includes the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, the Veterans' Association, and the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor. Interestingly, the Vietnamese government officials drafting the Law on Associations face the same dilemma of whether the mass organizations should or should not be subject to the law.
6 PAPI is the Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index, implemented annually by CECODES (a VNGO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Viet Nam Fatherland Front; see http://papi.vn. This data, based on an annual panel survey of approximately 14,000 citizens in all provinces, is more reliable than previous research such as the World Values Survey (see Dalton, 2006). The author of this chapter has worked as an evaluator and occasional advisor of PAPI since 2014.
7 For instance, a commune official in a central Vietnamese province reported proudly that 100% of adults in the commune were members of at least one mass organization (personal interview, March 2015).
8 The Coalition Support Program has facilitated learning and sharing activities among six existing and new advocacy coalitions in the fields of environment, agriculture, and health, in addition to funding (or co-funding) advocacy campaigns on particular policy issues of high public concern. The author served as team leader of the Coalition Support Program from 2012 to 2014 and has worked as an advisor to the program since then.
9 Some of iSEE's and ICS's campaign activities are funded by a European Union grant implemented by Oxfam in Vietnam, to which the author has acted as an advisor.
10 "Social media" refers to interactive forms of information and communication technologies that involve users in generating and exchanging content (but may not actually provide chances to socialize).

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6

THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY AND PUBLIC SECURITY IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Carlyle A. Thayer

Much of the academic literature on Vietnam's political system focuses on the role of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), its affiliated bureaucratic agencies and mass organizations, and state–society relations. By comparison, the role of Vietnam's military and public security agencies is understudied. Addressing this gap, this chapter discusses the roles of Vietnam's People's Army (VPA) and the Ministry of Security (MPS) in Vietnam's politics, economy, and society. Its departure point is that observation of these two large-scale institutions, while part of and subordinate to the broader CPV party-state, have a significance in their own right and warrant attention in any analysis of contemporary Vietnam. The role of the military and the MPS are examined in turn.

The Role of the Military

The VPA was founded in 1944 and is widely known for its military success in defeating French colonialism, resisting US military intervention, overwhelming the Republic of Vietnam and reunifying the country, and overthrowing the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. Less well known is that the VPA, from its inception, was assigned a second task: economic production. The VPA carried out these two strategic tasks during wartime and peacetime. For example, in the decade following reunification in 1975, army units of corps (binh đoàn) size were assigned to new economic zones, state farms and forests, hydroelectric and water conservancy projects, road building, and oil and gas exploration (Thayer 2000b, 98).

During the conflict in Cambodia, VPA main forces grew in size from 615,000 in 1978 to 1.26 million in 1987 to become the fifth largest standing army in the world. In 1987, Vietnam initiated a major strategic readjustment of its armed forces (Thayer 1995). VPA units were withdrawn from Cambodia in 1989, and over the next six years Vietnam carried out a program of demobilization reducing the VPA main force to less than half a million (Thayer 2000a). The section that follows reviews the structure of the Ministry of National Defence and the VPA's role in national defense and building socialism in the period after 1986 when Vietnam adopted a national reform program known as đổi mới, or renovation. Four major roles are examined: political, economic, social, and national defense.

Structure

The Ministry of National Defense (MND) is headed by a minister, who holds the rank of general. He is assisted by six deputy ministers. The MND overseas the operations of the army, navy, air defense/air force, border guard, and cyber command. It is divided into six components: General Staff, General Political Department, General Department of Logistics, General Department of Technology, General Department of Defence Industry, and General Deptartment of Defence Intelligence. The VPA is organized territorially into seven Military Regions whose vertical command structure extends from the regional command to provinces/cities and districts (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2019, 115).

The VPA totals 482,000 active duty personnel, including 412,000 in the army, 40,000 in the navy, 30,000 in the air defense/air force, and 40,000 in the paramilitary Border Guard. In addition, Vietnam has reserve forces totaling approximately 5 million, including the People's Self-Defence Force in urban areas and People's Militia in rural areas (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2021, 308–310).

Political Role

According to CPV statutes, the VPA is placed "under the absolute, direct leadership of the party in all respects. . .. The Party leads and builds the VPA and Vietnam People's Public Security Force to make them firm and strong politically, ideologically and organizationally (Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam 2020a)." In 1992, the state constitution was amended and the VPA was given the additional duty of defending "the socialist regime." The draft Political Report to the Thirteenth National Party Congress, reaffirmed that the CPV will "continue to maintain and strengthen the absolute and direct leadership and centralized and unified management over defense, security and armed forces in all aspects" (Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam 2020b).

Over two-thirds of the officer corps and nearly all commanders above company level are members of the CPV, and they form a separate party organization within the military. The all-army party organization congress selects senior military officers to serve on the CPV's Central Committee, where the military is accorded bloc representation.

Military representation on the Central Committee averaged 10 percent over the period from the 1986 Sixth National Party Congress to the Thirteenth National Party Congress in 2021. Military representation on the Central Committee also increased at every National Party Congress from 7.3 percent in 1986 to 12.8 percent in 2021. The military was accorded to two seats on the Politburo from 1986 to 1996 and one seat from 2001 to 2016. In 2021, Generals Phan Van Giang and Luong Cuong were elected to the Politburo. Giang is the Minister of National Defence, and Cuong is the head of the General Political Department and member of the party secretariat (Thayer 2021b).

The VPA officers also participate in Vietnam's government at all levels from local to district, provincial, municipal, and national. Military officers stand for election to the National Assembly where they are allocated roughly 10 percent of the seats. Military deputies serve on the National Assembly's policy committees and executive organs, including the National Defence and Security Committee. The CPV maintains control over the VPA through the Central Military Party Committee (CMPC) chaired by the CPV secretary general. The senior military representative serves as deputy chair. The other members of the CMPC are drawn from civilian and military officers on the party's Central Committee.

Military intelligence units play a role in domestic politics. Under the terms of Decree 96/ND-CP (September 1997) Vietnam's military intelligence is charged with collecting news and

documents related to national security with special attention to foreign countries, organizations, and individuals, at home or abroad, "who plot or engage in activities aimed at threatening or opposing the Communist Party of Vietnam or the Socialist Republic of Vietnam" (Nguyen Nam Khanh 2004 quoted in Thayer 2014, 138). The Ministry of National Defence's General Directorate II regularly monitors domestic telephones, facsimile transmissions, post, email, Internet, and mobile phones. In March to April 2001, military intelligence unit A10 of the General Directorate II was implicated in wire-tapping the telephones of senior party officials. Party Secretary General Le Kha Phieu reportedly used A10's dossiers to influence factional infighting on the eve of the Ninth National Party Congress. Phieu was not re-elected.

In 2010, General Directorate II reportedly used its sophisticated electronic equipment to identify anti-China and other political activists (Crispin 2009). It then conducted a series of denial of service attacks on *Thông Luận*, a political commentary website, and *Dòng Chúa Cứu Thế Việt Nam*, a Catholic website, that were traced to IP addresses belonging to Viettel, a company owned by the MND (Human Rights Watch 2010). In May 2010, Lt. Gen. Vu Hai Trieu, deputy director of General Directorate II, announced at a press conference that his unit had "destroyed 300 bad internet web pages and individual blogs."

In January 2018, the VPA's General Political Department issued Directive 47 authorizing the creation of an information warfare unit tasked with identifying and calling out posts on social media that criticize Vietnam's one-party regime (Pearson 2021). Force 47, as the unit has become known, comprises thousands of active-duty military personnel who are encouraged to set up Facebook accounts to post pro-regime blogs and to criticize and report those who post "wrong views." Facebook reportedly has an estimated over 60 million Vietnamese users and is the main platform for political dissent.

Economic Role

In March 1989, as part of the đổi mới process, the Council of Ministers issued Directive 46 that put military-run enterprises and companies on the same legal footing as state-owned enterprises under the profit and loss accounting system. Military enterprises were authorized to open foreign currency bank accounts, form legal associations, and enter into joint ventures with Vietnamese or foreign partners.

Nine major VPA economic construction units were converted into legal entities – corporations (công ty) and general corporations (*công ty tổng cục*). Four giant military-run general corporations stood out as being especially successful in the new marketplace: Truong Son Construction General Corporation (12th Corps), Tay Nguyen Corporation (15th Corps), Thanh An Construction and Assembly Corporation (11th Corps), and the Flight Service Corporation.

Newly registered military-run enterprises continued their involvement in large-scale construction projects such as the Yali, Pha Lai, and Vinh Son power projects; the Vung Tau oil and gas exploration zone; the Truong Son north–south highway; and the Haiphong export-processing zone. Military enterprises also continued to build houses, hotels, roads, bridges, and ports. Military enterprises managed coffee, tea, and rubber production; produced cement and asphalt; mined coal, tin, and precious stones; caught and processed seafood; and used helicopters to transport workers to offshore rigs (Thayer 2000b).

The commercial activities of diverse military-run enterprises were breathtaking in scope. Army factories began manufacturing commercial goods such as jute polishers, hydraulic presses, lathes, detonators, electricity meters, transformers, automobiles, buses, and heavy trucks. Other army enterprises ventured into services such as construction, ship and plane repair, joint stock commercial banks, hotels and nightclubs, real estate development, and consultancies

(information technology, accountancy, international law, and environment). Military enterprises also produced goods for the domestic market, including paper, ready-made garments, raincoats, electric fans, bicycle and motorcycle parts, oil cookers, fluorescent bulbs, televisions, radio-cassette recorders, and computers (Thayer 2017).

Because army enterprises enjoyed tremendous advantages in land-use rights, disciplined labor, and strategic location, they quickly expanded their economic activities to commercial production. As a consequence, the number of military-owned enterprises rapidly proliferated. By 1991, the VPA's main force officially registered 60 corporations and general corporations which subcontracted operations to more than 200 primary-level enterprises. Local militia units reportedly set up at least 160 additional enterprises.

The rapid expansion in the number of military-owned enterprises and the diversity of their activities led to a two-and-a-half-decade effort by the CPV to consolidate and reduce their number, make them more efficient and competitive, divest them of purely commercial enterprises, and curtail the military's involvement in production carried out by civilian enterprises. Four distinct waves of reform were launched from the mid-1990s to the present (Thayer 2019). During the first wave from 1995 to 1996 the number of military-owned enterprises was reduced from 335 to 193 then halted due to the Asian Financial Crisis.

A second wave of reform was launched in May 1988 with the objective of improving the efficiency of military enterprises by dissolving loss-making companies, rationalizing the commercial activities of other enterprises, and prohibiting the military from setting up new commercial ventures. At that time, 100,000 regular army personnel were employed in military-run enterprises, or roughly one-fifth of the standing army. The second wave lost momentum due to the Asian Financial Crisis.

In January 2007, the CPV Central Committee adopted a resolution directing the army to divest itself of all commercial enterprises that they currently owned and operated (Thayer 2000b). The plenum's resolution specified, however, that the VPA could retain ownership and control over companies that were directly related to national defense and security. In April 2008, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung issued instructions for the divestiture of 113 military-owned enterprises. The third wave quickly fell victim to the Global Economic Crisis and procrastination by the military. By 2009, the military equitized 32 enterprises and divested all state capital from 10 joint stock companies while retaining ownership over 98 enterprises.

In June 2018, the National Assembly initiated a fourth wave of reform when it amended the Law on National Defense to end the military's ownership of purely commercial enterprises and to level the playing field between military and civilian enterprises to bring them under the same laws. The Ministry of National Defence drew up plans to restructure military enterprises with dual defense and economic functions and is presently reducing their number from 88 to 17, including 29 enterprises that were focused on trade, construction, and services (Thayer 2019).

Social Role

The VPA undertakes multiple social roles that bind it to Vietnamese society outside the economic sector. The Vietnam Veterans' Association, comprising one and half million members, is a constituent of the influential Vietnam Fatherland Front, a party-led umbrella group that oversees mass organizations in Vietnam.

First, Vietnam has a system of national conscription dating to the late 1950s. Under the terms of Decree No. 83/2001/ND-CP on Military Service Registration, all medically fit males and women who hold professional skills aged between 18 and 25 are required to register with the offices of the military command at the commune, ward, or district where they reside. New

recruits must serve for 18 months, while persons holding technical qualifications or who join the navy must serve for two years. New recruits are given six months basic training and then assigned to units that engage in national construction through road building, planting trees, or other infrastructure projects. Conscripts aged between 26 and 27 are assigned to the reserves.

Nearly a million men reach military age each year. Vietnam has few problems in meeting its manpower requirements due to a long list of exemptions, including deferments for students, and the relatively small size of the regular army. However, due to the competing demands of the country's market economy, the VPA has found it difficult to attract educationally qualified individuals.

Second, the VPA is charged with conducting an extensive program of compulsory defense education for high school and university students, government officials, community leaders, and religious dignitaries. In May 2001, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai signed Directive No. 15/2001/ND-CP on Defence Education in senior high schools; vocational training schools; colleges; universities; and schools belonging to administrative agencies, political, and social organizations. A high-powered Central Council for Military Education manages the implementation of national defense education policy. Both the Ministry of National Defence and Ministry of Education and Training are given responsibility for carrying out the national defense education program.

Defense education is compulsory for students in senior high school and above. Each school year over 3 million students from nearly 3,000 schools and universities attend national defense education courses. Textbooks and study documents are jointly prepared by the Ministry of National Defence, the CPV Organization and Personnel Commission, and the Ministry of Education and Training. In addition, the VPA General Political Department and the CPV Ideology and Culture Commission organize annual training courses on national defense for more than 100 leaders, editors and journalists from central press agencies.

Third, the VPA has responsibility for managing economic defense zones (khu kinh tế-quốc phòng) in remote border areas deemed to have strategic importance. In 1998, the prime minister issued Decision 135/1998/QD-TTG that directed each military region to establish economic defense zones to promote economic activity and national defense in strategic areas. Army construction units opened thousands of hectares of new land for the production of rubber, coffee, wet rice, fruit, and industrial crops as well as livestock breeding. Army units also planted new forests and constructed roads and road and dykes, industrial processing plants, schools, cultural centers, sports complexes, and amusement facilities.

The VPA also was assigned the task of assisting the relocation of families from highly populated provinces to the economic defense zones. The VPA was charged with mobilizing the population in these areas and "building political bases," thus reinforcing ties between the military and society. Border Guard troops not only constructed new schools and provided the teachers for an estimated 80,000 pupils but also conducted an anti–illiteracy campaign among the general population by working closely with community elders and religious leaders. The VPA initiated the Army and People Healthcare initiative, with the concurrence of the Ministry of Public Health, and conducted various social welfare programs.

By late 1999, 13 economic defense zones had been set up in strategic areas along borders with China, Laos, and Cambodia. By the end of 2013, an estimated 84,000 families had been resettled. In 2019, the number of economic defense zones rose to 28 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2019, 125–127). As a result of its active involvement, the VPA actively participated in local government decisions and, in effect, acted as an arm of the government in remote areas.

Fourth, the VPA and its resources are called on to assist local authorities during natural disasters, such as floods. In 2019, the VPA Navy and Vietnam Coast Guard were tasked with working with local coastal communities to prevent illegal, unreported, and unregistered fishing. And

in August 2021, the VPA in Military Regions 7 and 9 were called upon to assist local officials in enforcing strict lockdown regulations to combat the delta variant of COVID-19. Military personnel played a major role in delivering food to families forced to stay at home.

National Defense Role

The fourth major role of the VPA is national defense. Due to changed strategic circumstances in the mid-to-late 1990s, such as Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and technological developments, the VPA undertook programs to enhance military professionalization; modernize naval, air, and ground forces; and build a modern national defense industry. After 2014, an anti-corruption campaign initiated by CPV Secretary General Nguyễn Phú Trọng uncovered corruption by retired VPA officers working in military-owned enterprises. The national defense role of the VPA itself has recently seen three major sets of developments.

First, in December 1999, the National Assembly adopted a new Law on Officers of the Vietnam People's Army. This law was the most important development in the professionalization of the VPA since its founding in 1944. For the first time, educational requirements for officer entry into the VPA, further continuing education and training standards, age and time in grade, and requirements for promotion from one rank to another were made compulsory. The curriculum at command and staff colleges was expanded to include new subjects in the social sciences, humanities, sciences, and technology.

Officers were now required to attend military schools, whose requirements for admission were raised to reflect a greater stress on formal educational attainment. Officers had to attend a military school for each rank they aspired to. Battalion commanders had to attend one of the regional Infantry Officers' Schools, while regimental commanders had to attend the Da Lat Military Academy. Divisional commanders had to attend the National Military Academy in Son Tay. At the senior level, military officers were required to attend the Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy in Hanoi. After 2000 all officers were also required to obtain a university degree or its equivalent to remain in uniform. Regimental and divisional commanders were required to earn postgraduate degrees in specialized fields, such as politics.

There was now a clear career path for promotion within each service, and junior members of the VPA could now expect greater upward mobility and improved prospects for promotion and assignment. Officers who failed to meet the selection criteria for promotion to the next rank within a designated time period were retired. For example, for those pursuing a command and staff career, an officer had to first become a corps commander before qualifying for Military Region deputy commander. Only commanders of Military Regions could become deputy chiefs on the general staff.

As the new law was implemented, it was designed to eliminate the bloated rank structure at senior levels. The number of officers holding the rank of general was limited to 150, down from a high of 400 during the Vietnam War. Commanders of Military Regions would hold the rank of lieutenant general, while the highest rank of general (*Đại Tướng*) was reserved for the Minister of National Defense, the Chief of the General Staff, and the head of the General Political Department.

Second, Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea in the 1990s motivated Vietnam to embark on the modernization of its naval and air defense/air force to develop capabilities to respond to likely contingencies in the maritime domain. VPA force modernization took place in two phases (Thayer 2018). During the first phase, from mid-1990 to the end of 2005, Vietnam began upgrading its legacy of ex-Soviet aircraft and naval vessels and gradually acquiring new naval and air platforms and weapon systems.

During the second phase, Vietnam moved from refurbishing and upgrading existing stocks to acquiring "big ticket" platforms such as missile attack craft, frigates, enhanced Kilo–class submarines, multirole jet fighters, advanced radars, modern air defense and ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) systems, coastal defense missiles, new armored fighting vehicles, and main battle tanks. Between 2012 and 2016 Vietnam was the tenth largest importer of arms globally (Thayer 2018).

The expansion of the military's role in Vietnamese society led to several high–level corruption cases involving senior military officers. In 2018, for example, a retired colonel and four associates working at the Defence Ministry's Thai Son Joint Stock Company were charged and convicted of "abuse of power in the performance of official duties" by violating public asset management rules. In April 2019, five high-ranking military officers, including an admiral who was a former Deputy Minister of National Defence; two admirals; a lieutenant general; and colonel, were convicted of mismanagement of naval land (Thayer 2021b).

Third, Vietnam developed its national defense industry in tandem with the force modernization of its three armed services. Three developments are noteworthy. The first development was the promotion of defense industries with a dual civil–military application in electronics, computing, and telecommunications. The Military Electronics Telecommunications Company, or Vietel, was the flagship of this effort.

The second development was the expansion and upgrading of Vietnam's shipbuilding industry (Thayer 2018). In early 2008, Vietnam and Russia signed a contract for the delivery of several naval and coast guard ship-building kits and related weapon systems. These kits were assembled in Vietnam at the Hong Ha shipyard in Hai Phong and Ba Son shipyard in Ho Chi Minh City. The Hong Ha shipyard successfully produced Vietnam's first 400-ton TT-400TP–class gunboat that was commissioned in 2012; three other gunboats of the same class were commissioned between 2012 and 2014. At the end of 2016, Vietnam successfully assembled six *Tarantul*-5 (*Molniya*–class) guided missile fast attack craft at the Ba Son shipyard.

In 2015, the original Ba Son shipyard was sold off. A new Ba Son shipyard was constructed in Ba Ria–Vung Tau. It has the capacity to build ships displacing 500 to 2,000 tons and repair naval ships displacing up to 5,000 tons. In October 2016, the National Assembly approved a long-term modernization program for the Vietnam Coast Guard that included the domestic construction of eight 1,500-ton TT-1500 offshore patrol vessels, four 2,200-ton DN 2000-class cutters, and four 4,300-ton Damen DN 4000-class multirole patrol vessels. These ships are being built at the Song Thu Shipyard in Da Nang with support from the Damen Group of the Netherlands.

The third development was the co–production of missile systems through offset agreements involving technology transfers. In February 2002, the Russian defense enterprise LOMO reached an agreement with Vietnam to assist in the transfer of technology so Vietnam could produce the Igla (SA-18 Grouse) low–altitude surface-to-air missile. Four years later, Russia and Vietnam reached agreement on technical assistance in the production of *Yakhont* (SS–N–26 Strobile) ship-to-ship missiles. In February 2012, it was announced that Russia and Vietnam would co–produce three versions of the Kh-35 Ural-E (SS–N–25 Switchblade) antiship missile to be deployed on aircraft, helicopters, and ships and fired from coastal batteries. Vietnam's request for a license to produce the Russia and India–manufactured BrahMos antiship cruise missile is pending. Currently, Vietnam's national defense industry is capable of maintaining and repairing existing stocks of naval and air weapons and platforms, depot-level reverse engineering of aircraft spares, assembling patrol boats from kits, constructing patrol boats and larger ships, co–producing a variety of missiles through technology transfer, and manufacturing indigenous unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

Corruption has been an increasing concern in Vietnam and the country's military sectors are hardly immune. In 2014, the CPV's Central Steering Committee for Anti-Corruption, headed by Secretary General Trọng, set up teams in seven government ministries, including the Ministry of National Defence, to identify irregularities in contracting. In December 2014, the Ministry of National Defence issued a directive to uncover corruption in procurement and related activities (Grevatt 2014).

The first serious case of corruption in the military was uncovered in 2018. It involved a network headed by retired Colonel Dinh Ngoc He and four associates who were employed by the Thai Son Joint Stock Company under the Ministry of National Defence. He served as the company's chairman. In 2018, all five retired officers were convicted of "abuse of power in the performance of official duties" by violating public asset management rules (Thayer 2021b). In April 2019, the CPV's Central Inspection Committee published the names of government officials slated to be disciplined for corruption (Grevatt 2020). The list included five high- ranking military officers: Admiral Nguyen Van Hien, former Deputy Minister of National Defence and Commander of the People's Navy; Vice Admiral Nguyen Van Tinh; Rear Admiral Le Van Dao; Lt. Gen. Nguyen Hoang Huy, Commander of Military Region 9; and Colonel Truong Thanh Nam. All five defendants were convicted of mismanagement of naval land. In late 2019, the Ministry of National Defence issued Directive 102/CT-BQP to "reorganise and improve" the acquisition process of military equipment for the VPA. The directive aimed "to prevent corruption in defence procurement, accelerate acquisitions, introduce cost savings and promote competition" (Grevatt 2020).

Ministry of Public Security

The MPS (*Bộ Công An*) is the lead organization responsible for national security. It is accorded block representation on the CPV Central Committee. At the Twelfth National Party Congress in 2016 five MPS officers were elected to the 200-member Central Committee. This number rose to six officials who were elected to the 180-member Central Committee at the Thirteenth National Party Congress in 2021. The Minister of Public Security is accorded a seat on the Politburo. In 2016 at the Twelfth National Congress, for example, To Lam, the Minister of Public Security, served on the 19-member Politburo. In addition, the former Minister of Public Security, Tran Dai Quang, was elected state president. To Lam was re-elected to the Politburo at the Thirteenth National Congress in 2021.

Structure

The MPS currently comprises six General Departments: Police, Security, Strategic Intelligence, Education and Personnel, Logistics, and Science and Technology. The General Department of Police is primarily a law enforcement agency and is estimated to have 1.2 million officers nationwide (Thayer 2008, 303). The General Department of Security has responsibility for collecting information and advising on policy related to national security, political and economic security, cultural and ideological security, immigration control, and international terrorism. The General Department of Strategic Intelligence focuses on Vietnam's "enemies both foreign and domestic" and has responsibility for collecting and processing information to identify external threats to national security, including international terrorism. In addition, the People's Armed Security Force (*Công An Vũ Trang Nhân Dân or PASF*), established in 1959, operates primarily in rural areas at district and, in some cases, village level. It is charged with responsibility for dealing with ordinary crime, illegal political activity, and insurgency. The PASF may be

viewed as an extension of party control at the local level where it comes under the direction of the People's Committee.

Domestic Role

This section analyzes the everyday operations of security officials with the general public, including monitoring and surveillance, harassment and intimidation, and arrest and detention (Thayer 2014).

Monitoring and Surveillance

Vietnam's security forces employ a widespread territorial surveillance network that includes the use of informers. The MPS's General Department of Public Security is organized territorially with offices in all of Vietnam's 59 provinces and five municipalities (Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Can Tho, Da Nang, and Hai Phong). Public Security officers are also assigned at district and city ward levels.

The MPS takes its authority from Vietnam's Bộ luật Hình sự, or Criminal Code, first adopted in 1999 and amended in 2015 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2015). The Criminal Code contains catchall prohibitions that criminalize non-violent political dissent and protest. For example, Article 79 prohibits "carrying out activities, establishing or joining organizations with intent to overthrow the people's administration." The penalty for conviction ranges from 12 to 20 years, life imprisonment, or capital punishment. Article 79 has been used to arrest individuals who belong to groups that advocate peaceful change. Article 88 proscribes

> a) propagating against, distorting and/or defaming the people's administration;
> b) propagating psychological warfare and spreading fabricated news in order to foment confusion among people; c) making, storing and/or circulating documents and/or cultural products with contents against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The penalty for violating this article ranges from 10 to 20 years in prison. Article 245 bans "fomenting public disorder." There are various penalties for infringing this article, the most severe of which is imprisonment from two to seven years. Under Article 258, a person can be charged with "abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State, the legitimate rights and interests of organizations and/or citizens." The punishment for transgressing this article ranges from six months to seven years imprisonment.

The General Department of Security has a specialist unit, A42, equipped with sophisticated electronic technology (Verint, Silver Bullet P-GSM, and Cellebrite Universal Forsenic Extraction Device) to hack into the Internet and to monitor mobile phones (Karinol 2005; Hayton 2010, 122; Yaron 2021). A specialist unit within the MPS was involved in unprecedented cyber attacks in April to May 2010 directed against independent blog sites critical of the government. More than two dozen websites and blogs maintained by Catholic land activists, political discussion forums, opposition political groups, and environmentalists concerned with bauxite mining were targeted. In addition, direct massive denial of service attacks launched from Vietnam were directed against offending websites and overseas Vietnamese computer users who accessed these sites. For example, distributed denial of service attacks from December 2009 to January 2010 caused the website *bauxiteVietnam.info* to crash (Thayer 2020c, 2021a).

In 2010, MPS hackers penetrated a number of Internet sites that were critical of the government and posted fabricated messages (Viet Tan Party 2010). The affected sites included *Osin* blog and *DCVOnline*, a news and discussion site. Hackers accessed the discussion forum

x-cafevn.org's database and posted the login names, emails, locations, and IP addresses of over 19,000 users on the Web. Investigations by Google and McAfee concluded that "these attacks were the latest example of *hacktivism and politically motivated cyber attacks*" (Human Rights Watch 2010). Google's security team concluded that the cyber attacks were directed "against blogs containing messages of political dissent. Specifically, these attacks have tried to *squelch opposition to bauxite mining efforts* in Viet Nam."

In 2012, the OceanLotus Group was established in Vietnam with links to the MPS. It was later designated by cyber security specialists as APT32, or an advanced persistent threat. In 2019, APT32 was implicated in mass digital surveillance and attacks that targeted dissidents, the media, human rights and civil society activists, non-governmental organizations, and foreign journalists living in Vietnam and overseas (Thayer 2020c, 2021a).

In July 2017, the MPS was implicated in a serious overseas incident in Germany when its agents kidnapped a Vietnamese fugitive, Trịnh Xuân Thanh, who fled Vietnam to avoid trial for corruption. The kidnapping took place despite the fact Vietnam issued a warrant for his extradition through Interpol. MPS agents have been implicated in kidnapping Vietnamese dissidents from Cambodia and Thailand.

Intimidation and Harassment

Once MPS monitoring and surveillance had identified an individual or a group deemed to be violating the Criminal Code, the MPS's bureaucratic routine would have included opening a file and systematically entering information on what an individual had said or done in public, including posts on blogs and Facebook, and compile a list of associates. Next, MPS officials would call on the person of interest for "working sessions" to discuss the information in their files. The purpose of these interrogation sessions is to intimidate the individual into ceasing "anti-state activity." If the individual was uncooperative, MPS officials would call on family members, friends, and work colleagues to advise them that the person under suspicion was a bad person and they should dissuade him or her to stop anti-state activities. If the suspect persisted his or her file would be sent up the chain of command for action.

During this period the MPS also often carried out acts of harassment. Such acts included cutting telephone service; refusal to grant permission to travel overseas; confiscation of passports; repeated visits by security officials to the homes of individuals concerned; pressure on employers to sack the individual concerned; public denunciation by neighbors; raids on homes and confiscation of electronic devices; long working sessions to interrogate activists; vilification in the media; and the use of violence by gangs of plain-clothed police, army veterans, revolutionary youth, and others.

The sheer number of individuals and groups who attract the interest of the MPS, and their largely ephemeral nature, makes it problematic to draw up a comprehensive taxonomy (Thayer 2009). The following list is illustrative of the types of groups and individuals who have been the persistent targets of regime repression.

Independent Religious Groups

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, founded in 1964, refused to join the state-sponsored Buddhist Church after 1975; Redemptorist Order of the Catholic Church, whose priests carried out protests in 2007–2009 to recover church land expropriated by the state after 1954; Hòa Hảo Buddhist activists; and ethnic minority Degar Protestants who worship in private homes in the Central Highlands and seek autonomy from the state (2008–2010).

Single Issue Advocacy Groups

Informal groups or movements that emerge from time to time to protest about a specific issue of concern such as the environmental damage caused by bauxite mining by Chinese companies in the Central Highlands (2009), chemical poisoning of fish by Formosa Plastics (2016–2019), Build Own Transfer toll roads, draft laws on Special Administration and Economic Zones and Cyber Security (2018–2019), and issues arising from land confiscation and evictions by the state. Two brief case studies that follow illustrate how environmental and land rights activists are repressed in Vietnam. The first case study involves members of the Ân Đàn Đại Đạo Buddhist sect founded in 1969 that grew into a community of several thousand followers and 14 temples in Phu Yen province. The sect's properties were expropriated by the state after 1975. As a result of the opening of Vietnam's economy after 1986, the sect began to revive by promoting ecotourism. In February 2012, the MPS arrested 22 sect adherents who were members of the Council for the Laws and Public Affairs of Bia Son, named after a mountain in Phu Yen. The MPS alleged that ecotourism was a cover for anti-government activity and accordingly charged the council members with violating Article 79 of the Criminal Code for "carrying out activities, establishing or joining organizations with intent to overthrow the people's administration" (Nguyen and Lipes 2019). At a trial held in January 2013, the council's leader was sentenced to life in prison, while the other defendants were given terms of between 10 and 17 years. The defendants argued that they only worked to protect the environment and to teach and practice their faith (Radio Free Asia 2019).

The second case study, the Dong Tam land dispute in 2017, stands out as one of the most violent and prolonged land rights disputes in Vietnam. Dong Tam village, My Duc district, lies to the south of Hanoi. The cause of this crisis lies in a series of decisions made by the Ministry of National Defence since 1980 to transfer nearly 210 hectares of land from My Duc district to the military. Farmers in Dong Tam village were ordered to transfer 47 ha. of the total amount. In 2007, the military returned 47 ha. to Dong Tam, but the land was never returned to its original owners. Instead, the My Duc District People's Committee permitted several farmers to build on and sell access rights to this land. In 2015, the VPA General Staff issued an order for the transfer 50 ha. of land to Viettel, a military-owned telecommunications general corporation, for military purposes. This order reignited the land dispute issue and sparked continuing protests by Dong Tam villagers in 2016–2017.

In April 2017, Hanoi Municipal Police arrested four villagers involved in the protests. This provoked a violent response by hundreds of villagers who seized and held hostage about 40 local officials. They also built barricades to defend themselves. The events of April resulted in the intervention of the Hanoi Municipal People's Committee to diffuse the situation. Eventually an agreement was reached to drop charges against the four arrested villagers in exchange for the release of hostages. A stalemate ensued. On 9 January 2020, a combination of 3,000 police and security officials mounted an early morning assault on Dong Tam village to end the impasse. This provoked a violent response by villagers that resulted in the deaths of three public security officials in a petrol bomb attack and the fatal shooting of an elderly retired village official. The three deceased policemen were given posthumous honors by President Trọng. Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc attended their funeral.

In June 2020, the Hanoi People's Procuracy issued indictments on 29 persons for their role in the 9 January violent confrontation. Three defendants were charged and convicted of murder at a trial held in September; the remaining defendants all received jail sentences of varying length. Defense lawyers claimed they were prevented by the police from meeting with the defendants. Defense lawyers also alleged that the prosecution failed to provide evidence prior to the trial.

Nineteen defendants indicated they were beaten by police while in pre-trial detention. Family members were permitted to observe the trial at the courthouse.

Political Civil Society Activists

This classification includes a wide range of associations and individuals who seek to advance social justice and the rule of law under Vietnam's constitution and Vietnam's adherence to international conventions that it has ratified, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Examples of political civil society groups, with their founding date, include the People's Democratic Party of Vietnam (2004), Bloc 8406 (2006), Vietnam Progression Party (2006), Vietnam Populist Party or Đảng Vì Dân (2005), 21st Century Democratic Party or Đảng Dân chủ thế kỷ 21 (2006), Independent Workers' Union of Vietnam (2006), United Worker-Farmers Association (2006), Vietnam Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights (2006), Club of Free Journalists or Câu Lạc Bộ Nhà Báo Tự Do (2007), Committee for Human Rights (2007), Lạc–Hồng Coalition (2007), Phan Chau Trinh Cultural Foundation (2007–2019), Vietnamese Bloggers Network (2013), Vietnam Citizens' Association or Hội Dân Oan Việt Nam (2014), Association of Independent Journalists or Hội nhà báo độc lập (2014), and the Constitution (Hiến Pháp) Group (2017).

The leaders of all these political civil society groups have been arrested, detained, and convicted under various articles in Vietnam's Criminal Code, or in the case of the Phan Chau Trinh Cultural Foundation, disbanded because of harassment and intimidation.

High-Profile Bloggers

Vietnam's economic transition has led to the spread and penetration of the Internet. In 2018, there were about 54.7 million users in Vietnam with a penetration rate of 57 percent. In 2021, Facebook was estimated to have nearly 66 million users, or two-thirds of Vietnam's total population (Rees May 2021). YouTube is also popular. The Internet has led to the creation of virtual networks of commentators and bloggers who have taken to social media to question and criticize government policy on all matter of issues from corruption, human rights, failure to protect democratic rights in the constitution, environmental issues, to South China Sea disputes and relations with China.

A number of social media commentators have attracted a virtual following and developed a high media profile. They have been subject to harassment, intimidation, and detention by the MPS. Reporters Without Borders ranked Vietnam 175 out of 180 in its 2020 World Press Freedom Index (https://rsf.org/en/ranking). The following vignettes provide a sample of bloggers who have faced state suppression.

Nguyễn Văn Hải created a personal blog in 2007 and began writing about ordinary people and social justice in Vietnam under the pen name Điếu Cày (peasant's pipe). He joined with colleagues to found the Club of Free Journalists. He persisted in blogging despite being harassed by the MPS. He was arrested in April 2008, convicted of tax evasion, and sentenced to 30 months imprisonment. On the day before his term expired, he was charged and detained under Article 88 of the Criminal Code for conducting propaganda against the state and sentenced to 12 years in prison. In 2014, he was released from prison and deported to the United States.

Lê Công Định was a lawyer involved in high-profile human rights cases (including Nguyễn Văn Hải) who called for political reform in Vietnam. He was arrested in June 2009 and initially charged under Article 88 for conducting propaganda against state. In December this charge was

changed to the more serious offense of attempting to overthrow the state. Dinh was tried and sentenced to five years in prison. He was released early in 2013.

Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức is a pro-democracy activist who posted articles online criticizing Vietnam's one-party state. He was arrested in May 2009 and convicted the following year under Article 79 for plotting to overthrow the government. He was sentenced to 16 years in prison. Thức has repeatedly appealed to the People's Supreme Court to reduce his sentence to reflect revisions made to the 1999 Criminal Code in 2015. While in prison Thức conducted five prolonged hunger strikes in August 2018, July 2019, February 2020, December 2020, and April 2021. Thức's plight led to international appeals to U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris to raise his case on her visit to Vietnam in August 2021

Nguyễn Ngọc Như Quỳnh is a political activist who began blogging in 2006 under the pen name of Mother Mushroom (Mẹ Nằm). Her blogs were critical of corruption, human rights violations in Vietnam, Chinese bauxite mining in the Central Highlands, and Chinese activities in the South China Sea. In 2013 she was one of the founders and coordinator of the Vietnamese Bloggers Network. Quỳnh was subject to harassment and physically assaulted. She was arrested in October 2016 and detained until June 2017, when she was tried and convicted of conducting propaganda against the state. She was released in October 2018 and exiled to the United States.

Bùi Thanh Hiếu, an advocate for social justice, human rights, and a critic of the government, is one of Vietnam's most popular bloggers who has been writing under the pen name Wind Trader (Người Buôn Gió) since 2005. His blogs have touched on bauxite mining, Catholic land disputes, and Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. Hiếu was briefly detained by the MPS in August 2009 for "abusing freedom and democracy to infringe on the interests of the state." In 2013, he took up a scholarship to study in Germany and has remained there ever since. Hiếu continued his blogging until February 2020, when he announced he would cease posting Wind Trader because of harassment of his family. It was later revealed that OceanLotus conducted four spyware attacks on Hiếu between February 2018 and December 2019.

Phạm Đoan Trang, journalist, author, publisher, and democracy activist, is one of the most prolific and active high-profile bloggers in Vietnam with an international reputation. She transitioned from a career as a journalist working for state-owned newspapers to an independent journalist, blogger, and publisher. In 2007, Trang first came to public attention when she published on Sino-Vietnamese relations and published a book on Vietnam's LBGT community. Her troubles with the MPS began in 2009 when she once again publicly criticized Vietnam's policies towards China. Trang was arrested in August and questioned by security authorities for nine days. She was later fired from her job at VietNamNet. This pattern of harassment was repeated throughout her subsequent career, including periods of house arrest.

In 2010, Trang established a blog devoted to legal matters, *Luật Khoa Tạp Chí*. She also became a co-founder of the Liberal Publishing House and published a history of blogging in Vietnam. She was arrested in August 2012 for taking part in an anti-China protest. In 2012–2013 she became active in writing about human rights violations and constitutional reform. In May 2016, MPS officials intercepted Trang and prevented her from attending a scheduled meeting with President Barrack Obama who was visiting Vietnam.

In 2017, Trang published *Politics for Everyone* (*Chính Trị Bình Dân*), her ninth book. She was detained early the next year by the MPS and questioned about this book and her political views. In August 2018, she was assaulted by police during a raid on a café where a dissident singer was performing. After the raid, Trang was taken to a secluded location and beaten so badly that her face was disfigured. In 2020, Trang was one of five co-authors of a report on the violent clash at Dong Tam village. Because of continued harassment, police abuse, and arrest of colleagues she resigned from the Liberal Publishing House. On 6 October 2020, Trang attended the 24th annual

US-Vietnam Human Rights Dialog. Two days later she was arrested and charged with "making, storing, distributing or disseminating information, documents and items against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam." As of September 2021, Trang has not been advised of her trial date.

Cù Huy Hà Vũ is a Vietnamese legal scholar who became a government critic and a dissident. Vũ rose to fame in June 2009 when he filed a lawsuit against Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng for granting a Chinese company the rights to mine bauxite in the Central Highlands. The following year Vũ filed two more lawsuits against the prime minister for issuing a directive prohibiting lawsuits against government officials. Vũ also opposed Article 4 in the constitution declaring the CPV the only legal political party in Vietnam. In November 2010, Vũ was taken into custody on charges of "propaganda against the state," and the following year he was sentenced to seven years in prison. In April 2011, Vũ was convicted at a trial and sentenced to prison for seven years. Three years later Vũ was released and deported to the United States. In the decade from 2011 to 2021, there has been a steady increase in the number of persons arrested, tried, convicted, and imprisoned in Vietnam for peaceful expression of their views, particularly on the Internet. In 2013 alone at least 36 persons were sentenced to prison on charges of attempting to overthrow the socialist state. All of the individuals concerned espoused non-violent means. According to a report by Reporters Without Borders published in December 2014, Vietnam imprisoned the third highest number of netizens of any country in the world.

In January 2019, Vietnam's Law on Cyber Security came into force. The law requires technology companies with users in Vietnam to set up offices and store data in Vietnam and disclose user data to the MPS and other government ministries without a court order (Thayer May 5, 2019). According to yearly reports by Amnesty International (2014, 2016, 2018, 2020), the number of prisoners of conscience increased from 75 in 2014, to 84 in 2016, to 98 in 2017, to 173 at the end of 2020. Human Rights Watch estimated that there were more than 130 prisoners of conscience in 2020 (Human Rights Watch 2021). It is noticeable that an estimated 40 percent of arrests in 2019 involved online activists, whereas in previous years the majority of those arrested were persons who took part in public protests or were involved with banned civil society groups. Estimates for 2020 vary from 170 prisoners of conscience to 240, of whom 36 were convicted in 2019 alone (Agence France Presse 2021). Twenty-three political civil society activists were arrested during the first seven months of 2021, of whom 20 have been sentenced to prison.

In sum, there has been a marked rise in peaceful public protests on a variety of issues in Vietnam since the 1990s aided and abetted by the Internet. But there has not been the emergence of a coherent opposition movement. Over the past two decades there has been no marked improvement in human rights as defined as civil and political rights. Rather, there has been a constant drum beat of unrelenting regime repression of advocates of religious freedom, human rights and democracy, political civil society activists, journalists, and bloggers.

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7

HUMAN RIGHTS IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Gisle Kvanvig

Vietnam has ratified the majority of the core human rights treaties (OHCHR, 2018e) and has inscribed human rights into its constitution and several areas of legislation but struggles to practice what its laws and international commitments promise. Vietnam, like so many other countries, has what is known as an implementation gap. Briefly described, the implementation gap in human rights refers to how states ratify human rights treaties and implement compliant laws but fail to realize the respective rights in practice. Since the mid-1980s Vietnam has made remarkable progress –particularly in social and economic rights – lifting millions of people out of poverty. Albeit limited, degrees of pluralism in the political, social, and cultural spheres of Vietnamese society emerge periodically. Certain sectors of Vietnamese society, for example, civil society and academia, have shown sporadic changes towards a more liberal orientation, whereas progress in legal and political reform is lagging behind. Lacking reforms pertaining to civil and political rights seem to undermine the progress made in social and economic rights. Somewhat simplistically explained, bad governance hampers further advancement in environmental protection, health care, education, and other public services. Despite signs of progress, Vietnam's human rights performance has taken a turn for the worse since 2015. Hai Thiem BùI (2014) describes Vietnam as caught between socialism and neo-liberalism. A state emanating a second world, Soviet style, political and legal structure seeks to manage the adverse effects of capitalism. As of 2020 a total of 266 human rights activists are imprisoned, 2019 saw at least 14 people put on trial for their political activities, and access to the internet and social media is increasingly monitored and limited. Vietnamese authorities have succeeded in gaining control over the operations of major global search engine and social media companies services, and there is little hope to be drawn from the international community's engagement with Vietnam on human rights issues. Few countries raise rights issues in dialogue with the government, and if they do, it is difficult to see why the Vietnamese government should pay much attention since free trade agreements, and cooperation in business, finance, and defense continue unabated. This chapter cannot do the many victims of human rights violations in Vietnam justice. Readers who are interested in the nature and details of the violations can access the many reports published on the subject by organizations such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, to name a few that frequently report on the situation. What this chapter attempts to do is shed some light on why Vietnam's human rights performance waxes and wanes. This is admittedly a complex

undertaking, and a single chapter can by no means claim to present a complete picture of what goes on inside Vietnam's implementation gap.

A question of will?

When we seek to explain why there is an implementation gap, we commonly invoke the notion of a lack of political will. The notion of political will, however, is too vague to carry any explanatory power. Rather than asking who in Vietnam *wants* to implement human rights, we should ask who *can* implement human rights? By design, the constitution, and hence the political structure, lacks the necessary separations of power for internal checks and balances to take place. Consequently, neither governance nor human rights can be properly addressed, and foreign and domestic policy in these areas are siloized and seem disconnected. There is, for instance, an interesting contrast between Vietnam's engagement with the international human rights regime and the domestic sphere of implementation. The comparatively neat and orderly proceedings before the United Nations Human Rights Council belie the complex and at times messy dealings of the legal, political, and practical implementation of human rights in Vietnam. The chapter starts by examining Vietnam's performance vis-à-vis the international human rights regime and continues by taking a closer look at the implementation of human rights domestically. The constitutional amendment process serves as an inroad into examining the actors that engage with human rights issues in Vietnam, their dynamism, and the networks they make up. The case of the death penalty for corruption illustrates that the international system assumes an aspired symmetry and reciprocity by states that domestic politics in Vietnam do not correspond with. Based on an examination of these issues, the conclusion seeks a more precise description of what the implementation gap in Vietnam looks like. One note of caution is warranted. Although Vietnam is less mysterious than it used to be, we should be careful not to mistake our insight for an understanding that even privileged Vietnamese observers do not claim to have. As the saying goes: if you think you know what is going on, you are not well informed.

Sovereignty, the international human rights regime, and Vietnam's implementation gap

Human rights are state-centric, and ratifying human rights treaties is a sovereign state privilege that resides within the realm of states' international sovereignty. Implementing human rights is a state duty that takes place within the confines of domestic sovereignty. Human rights are inherently contentious and contested. They interfere with political order and economy and hence sovereignty. Georg Sørensen (2001) argues for developments in statehood where the modern sovereignty game is based on non-intervention and reciprocity. Non-intervention is the right to conduct state affairs without outside interference, while reciprocity suggests an aspired symmetry between states based on equal opportunity for giving and taking for mutual benefit. Reciprocity is a challenge for postcolonial states because they lack the capacity to fully play by the rules (Jackson, 2007; Kvanvig, 2016; Sørensen, 2001). Vietnam is a postcolonial state, and the asymmetry Sørensen describes is interesting to consider within the confines of the international human rights system, which does seem to assume both aspired symmetry and reciprocity. We cannot describe the entire human rights system in detail here, but a brief outline is warranted.

In addition to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) adopted in 1948, there are ten core human rights instruments, of which the perhaps most well known are the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); the Convention on the Rights

of the Child (CRC); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW); and the Convention Against Torture (CAT). The ten instruments consist of nine treaties and the optional protocol to the CAT (OHCHR, 2018b, 2018c). Each United Nations (UN) member state is subject to review under a mechanism called the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). In addition to the state under review, stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) are invited to report. The state receives recommendations from other member states and the stakeholders that are compiled into a comprehensive UPR report. It is important to note that states cannot reject recommendations. If they are not accepted, they are noted. Vietnam has gone through three UPR cycles in 2009, 2014, and 2019. During the 2019 review, Vietnam claimed to have fully implemented 159 and partially implemented 16 of the 182 recommendations accepted in the 2014 review.

Although Vietnam signed and ratified its first human rights treaties in the early 1980s (ICCPR and ICESCR), a more consistent international engagement with human rights began in 1993 when Vietnam attended the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (Bruun and Jacobsen, 2000).[1] Prior to the Vienna conference, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders in advocating Asian values during an ASEAN meeting in Bangkok (Bruun and Jacobsen, 2000).[2] The Asian values argument presented during the Vienna conference stated that human rights must be defined in accordance with the national and cultural context. This was an argument against the universality of human rights, which sparked controversy and criticism of cultural relativism. Following the Vienna conference in 1993, the Vietnamese leadership experienced its first human rights mass protest involving more than 40,000 Buddhists in Hue and an unprecedented number of articles on human rights in the media. For a short while there was speculation that the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) would embark on democratic reforms, but that hope was short lived. The leadership took action and tightened controls on the press, banned meeting forums and civil society organizations, and jailed dissenters (Bruun and Jacobsen, 2000).

Vietnam had ratified the CRC in 1990. After the Vienna conference they did not ratify another convention until 2001, when they ratified the optional protocols to the CRC. In 2015, Vietnam ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Convention Against Torture. It has yet to ratify the conventions on Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED), and the international Convention for the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW). Vietnam has, as such, ratified most of the human rights treaties, but has not accepted the optional protocols and individual complaints mechanisms attached to the conventions they have ratified. Vietnam reported to the cycles of the UPR in 2009, 2014, and 2019 and has reported timely on all the conventions they are party to with the exception of the ICCPR. The first report on ICCPR was submitted in 2001, the second was submitted in 2017 and was 13 years late (OHCHR, 2018a). With regard to how Vietnam has performed in the UPR, it is interesting to observe that Vietnam has accepted and noted recommendations on the same topic. The devil is in the details, and there seems to be a pattern where potential acceptance of recommendations on behalf of Vietnam has to do with how the recommendation is formulated. Two recommendations Vietnam consistently note concern ratification of all optional protocols and issuing a standing invitation to OHCHR Special Procedures. A number of the optional protocols deal with individual and independent complaints mechanisms. A standing invitation to all Special Procedures means that all special rapporteurs are invited to visit whenever convenient or deemed necessary. The last special rapporteur to visit Vietnam was the special rapporteur on the right to food, which took place in 2018 (OHCHR, 2018d).

In 2012, ASEAN launched the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD), which Vietnam is party to. However, the AHRD is flawed and non-binding, as it adheres to the ASEAN way and its principle of non-interference. During the negotiations on the AHRD, Vietnam allegedly sided with states such as Singapore and Malaysia in advocating for derogations and exceptions on the basis of public morality and national security, to name two arguments used. This pitted Vietnam against Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines whose representatives argued for an AHRD in keeping with the UDHR (Kvanvig, 2016; Renshaw, 2013; Baik, 2012; ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, 2012). That the political situation in the ASEAN region has changed since then is an understatement. Thailand is under semi-autocratic rule, and President Duterte's rule in the Philippines has been less than exemplary with regard to human rights. What for a brief moment looked like progress in Myanmar lost its momentum.

In addition to its multilateral engagements, Vietnam maintains bilateral human rights dialogues with the European Union (EU), Australia, Switzerland, the United States, and Norway. The international human rights system with its treaties, institutions, mechanisms, protocols, and routines appear to be well organized. Methods and theory govern its proceedings, and there is an element of predictability to them. The concepts of reciprocity and symmetry inform the human rights system in particular ways. For one, it is assumed that states are system like units. States' financial capacity to meet human rights standards is commonly accepted as unequal, and human rights fulfillment is measured according to minimum standards. However, as the next section illustrates, states also have differing political capacity to implement human rights. What is more, reciprocity and assumed symmetry presupposes trust, and Vietnam is inherently distrustful of the international community. Given centuries of war with China, France and the United States and a complicated history with its ASEAN neighbors, it is not hard to understand that there is an element of distrust on behalf of the Vietnamese towards the international community. Carlisle Thayer (2015) argues that the central concept governing Vietnamese foreign policy is that of "struggle and cooperation". This has traditionally been used to describe Vietnam–China policy but can be extended to the wider international community. The next section focuses on what happens when, figuratively speaking, state delegations go home from Geneva. The apparent consensus expressed vis-à-vis the United Nations disintegrates upon impact with domestic politics.

Human rights implementation: legislation and policy

To argue that Vietnam's international engagement with human rights is solely window dressing is a mistake. The ratifications of treaties and the human rights dialogues represent a complex but nevertheless genuine engagement on the part of certain constituencies in Vietnam. When turning to the implementation of human rights standards in Vietnam, it is worth keeping in mind that the constituencies that have won hard-fought victories to secure ratification face opposition on each singular minimum rights standard when turning their attention to implementation. Observers have noted the rise of diverse networks promoting human rights. It is difficult to determine the novelty of the phenomenon. It seems more likely that it has increased in visibility and scope, and perhaps particularly in the aftermath of the 11th Party Congress of the CPV in January 2011. In the past such networks were visible mainly during the constitutional amendment processes, whereas with the 2013 constitution they remained active beyond the duration of the process. The constitutional amendment process leading up to the 2013 constitution provided some interesting insights and perhaps breakthroughs.

In 2013, for the first time, it was possible to convene a workshop on human rights in the constitution involving the National Assembly–appointed constitutional drafting board, the

ministries of public security and justice, Vietnamese and overseas academia, the UN, and Vietnamese NGOs. In the past it had been difficult to assemble such a diverse range of Vietnamese and overseas actors. The pluralism such a cross-section of expertize and opinion brought to the table was both challenging and refreshing (NCHR, 2012–2014). Mark Sidel (2009) provides a rich study of the constitutional amendment, processes from 1946 to 2010. His work illustrates the fierce debates, criticisms, and disagreements over constitutional reform. Issues such as the separation of power, rule of law, the independence of the courts, and several key rights issues have been subject to debate for decades. We cannot do the consecutive constitutional processes justice here but will narrow the focus to the 2013 constitution.

Vietnam's 2013 constitution states that the people are the masters of Vietnam and that all state powers belong to the people (IDEA, 2013). However, the articulation of the political structure in the constitution and the primacy given to the leadership of the CPV (Article 4) obscures popular sovereignty and separation of powers. Both may have granted the people access to remedial justice against the state. The constitution does not describe what form of political participation outside joining the party is available to the people, and checks and balances are alluded to only with reference to mutual control and oversight between the executive, legislative, and judiciary, all of which are defined as state bodies and controlled by the CPV. With regard to the explicit mention of human rights, the 2013 constitution, unlike previous constitutions, has a separate chapter on human rights. However, it maintains and strengthens derogations and claws back clauses that reduce the effect of the human rights chapter (Giao, 2013). The constitution places great emphasis on citizens' duties vis-à-vis the state and each other. It is worthwhile pursuing the question of to what extent the emphasis on duty represents an expression of Confucian legal thought or authoritarianism. Chapter 2, article 14 in the Vietnamese constitution states that human rights shall be restricted on grounds of national defense, national security, social order and security, social morality, and community well-being. This translates into what human rights NGOs have termed draconian and vague provisions in the penal code, in particular paragraphs 79, 87, 88, 89, 91, and 258 (HRW, 2014). When dealing with the constitution in Vietnam, however, one has to distinguish between the document and the process. As one drafter of the 2013 constitution remarked, the end result would be boring, but the discussions to be had were interesting and would impact on a future constitution (NCHR, 2012–2015).

Despite the outcome, the process leading up to the 2013 constitution provided some interesting indications of how the politics surrounding legal reforms may have changed. It was revealed that the members of the drafting board and various sub-committees perceived of themselves as less influential than in the past. Their explanations alluded to special interest groups having overtaken the established party hierarchy (NCHR, 2012–2015). During the process there were several draft constitutions that were not made public. These drafts allegedly entailed formulations on the separation of power and the rule of law in terms of a constitutional court and enhancing CPV accountability to the law.

Following the adoption of the 2013 constitution, the Vietnamese National Assembly embarked on a process of legislative reform. Laws on demonstration, access to information, the criminal code, criminal procedural code, and others were to be either introduced or amended. The same constituencies as in the constitutional amendment process engaged in the battle over legislation. One former National Assembly member described the legislative process as fragmented and opaque. According to his description, a drafting committee is formed by the standing committee of the National Assembly in accordance with the law on promulgation of legal documents (MoJ, 2008). Who will be on the committee is subject to contestation. When the committee starts drafting the proposed new legislation, each member consults their respective

patronage. The number of people having a say in the new legislation grows exponentially. The result is that hundreds of people will have been informally consulted on the drafts, rendering the process opaque and largely unaccountable (NCHR, 2012–2015).

How the process has changed can perhaps be understood in relation to how power structures change with decentralization and how this has impacted upon transparency and accountability (Gainsborough, 2010; Jandl, 2014; Malesky, 2014). Pluralism in the field of human rights in Vietnam is visible in terms of an expanding and engaged civil society, competent and vocal academia, the growth of social media, and public debates in traditional media. Perhaps equally as important as diversity is genuine disagreement among the advocates for greater human rights, both structurally and substantively. This provides for healthy debate about priorities, the implementation of rights, and governance and government. Overall, such changes have brought diverse sets of opinions to the public domain and hence increased transparency about law and policy. Another way of looking at how power structures in Vietnam have changed is that in the past alliances to advocate particular reforms were formed within the party, whereas alliances more recently seem to be formed as an extension of the party. Depending on their interest and agenda, policy and lawmakers will seek support from the business community; the military; police; or, for that matter NGOs, CSOs, and academia (NCHR, 2012–2015).

Civil society is a contested term in the Vietnamese context. Official government circulars have warned local units of government and the press not to use the term "civil society" (xã hội dân sự). There is also a long-standing debate about whether Vietnam can be said to have a civil society or not. Here, civil society is used broadly to include all groups of citizens that unite to pursue common objectives. This means that we have to bear in mind that they represent diverse loyalties, interests, convictions, and courage in their pursuit of the rights agenda.

Human rights advocacy in Vietnam

The opportunities for human rights advocacy in Vietnam expand and contract. The early 1990s offered a brief window of opportunity for advocacy that was firmly shut following the 1993 Vienna world conference and the accompanying demonstrations. It was not until the 11th Party Congress in 2011 and the process leading up to the 2013 constitution that a diverse constituency of human rights advocates became more vocal again. For a while, the fact that Vietnamese authorities did not make a clean sweep of the human rights community sparked claims of pluralism unleashed in Vietnam (Bùi, 2014). This, however, ended around 2016 when the authorities yet again tightened its grip through a campaign of harassment, house arrests, and convictions of human rights defenders and activists on charges that appeared to be trumped up (Amnesty USA, 2018). Despite the relative leniency demonstrated by the authorities during the brief period from 2011 to 2016, they continued to arrest and convict prominent human rights advocates and defenders such as the lawyer Le Quoc Quan (Front Line Defenders, 2018). In addition, they had continued to revise and introduce new laws, regulations, and decrees that widened their powers. Examples include Decree Number 72 introduced in 2013, which preceded the Internet law of 2018 (Phan, 2018). Decree 72 restricted, among other activities, the quoting and sharing from press agencies and websites of government agencies (Palatino, 2013). Another example includes the NGO law of 2012, which places severe restrictions on civil society's opportunity to organize and conduct activities (Vietnam Law Magazine, 2012). Upon its introduction, Vietnam joined around 60 countries around the world in what has been perceived as a global crackdown on civil society (Sherwood, 2015).

What precisely governs these cycles of expansion and contractions is difficult to ascertain. However, some parameters are worth observing. The first is that sensitivities seem to increase in

the runup to, and aftermath of, CPV party congresses. The second and related point concerns CPV infighting such as the fierce and long-standing rivalry between the former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. Alexander Vuving stated that ''Trong is a Confucian, who is loyal to his principles, while Dung is a capitalist, who is loyal to his profits'' (2017, p. 422). Such power struggles have far-reaching implications because they involve expansive networks of patronage, private business interests, and control over state-owned enterprises. When the party is perceived to struggle with achieving consensus, it seems to revert to protecting the smallest common denominator, which is the survival of the party. When it enters into protection mode it will crack down on dissent and pursue challenges to its primacy. The years since the 2016 party congress have witnessed the CPV in full combat mode, pursuing dissidents, activists, and individuals thought to be former Prime Minister Dung's allies. Many of the constituencies that engaged in human rights advocacy prior to 2016 continue to exist. However, faced with continuous intimidation, all but those willing to pay the price of liberty have grown quiet. That the CPV under Trong's leadership is deliberately pursuing the patronage of Dung is open to contestation. Nevertheless, under the auspices of an anti-graft and corruption campaign spearheaded by Trong, a number of high-ranking officials thought to be Dung's supporters have been convicted (Murray and Pham, 2017). What is more, the pros and cons of the anti-corruption campaign are contested within the human rights community. It all depends on who you ask and whether they see the campaign as genuine or politicized. One observer sees the campaign as an attempt to centralize power in Vietnam, which is an interesting perspective to pursue. One should also take into account that there are reasons to believe that the constituencies engaging with human rights are larger and more robust than in the 1990s. Since then, numerous Vietnamese have returned from studies and work abroad and taken ideas, networks, and practices with them that have helped expand and diversify debates and contestations, and civil society with it. How long the current crackdown will last we cannot know. Rather than speculate, it is more interesting to examine what happened in the years 2011–2016. This period provides interesting insights into the potential future resilience of human rights advocacy in Vietnam.

When reading the reports of major human rights NGOs, the reader easily gets the impression that those who promote human rights in Vietnam are dissidents, bloggers, activists, and journalists that openly oppose the state. Other groups such as Vietnamese NGOs are mentioned, but their status seems unclear and is subject to suspicion, particularly within overseas Vietnamese communities. They are often portrayed as co-opted government agents and/or less deserving of attention because they chose a path that involves differing degrees of cooperation with Vietnamese authorities. During a side event to Vietnam's UPR hearing in 2009 Phạm Chí Dũng, a Vietnamese journalist, made an explicit point to the international NGOs and Vietnamese overseas community.[3] He stated that they had to begin supporting advocates for human rights in Vietnam other than the dissidents, bloggers, activists, and journalists they see are frequently imprisoned. What Phạm Chí Dũng was pointing to was the much more complex reality of relations, coordination, and collaboration between a very diverse set of human rights actors in Vietnam. In 2020 Phạm Chí Dũng was convicted on charges of engaging in activities aimed at overthrowing the state and was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The expanding literature on civil society in Vietnam seems to follow the same growth pattern as civil society itself. Andrew Wells-Dang (2014) and Ben Kervliet (2014) have both written extensively and in great detail about categories of dissenters and civil society groups. Their research concludes that Vietnamese authorities' tolerance toward dissent is greater than many assume and that both organized and informal civil society activity is expanding. The networks involved in the UPR reporting, advocacy during the constitutional amendment process, and

annual events such as human rights day involved a spectrum of actors ranging from dissidents to security officers.

With regard to achievements, 60 NGOs and community groups under the auspices of GPAR, GENCOMNET, and CIFPEN drafted and submitted a stakeholders report to the second reporting cycle under the UPR in 2014. This was the very first stakeholders report written by Vietnamese organizations working in Vietnam (J6, 2014). It was a welcome addition to the reports submitted by NGOs operating from overseas, and a contrast to the first UPR reporting cycle in 2009 when such reports were absent. The report pulled no punches and offered recommendations on the freedom of thought, expression, assembly, property rights, and advocated reform of the paragraphs of the criminal code that curtail human rights and fundamental freedoms, and many other topics. The pride and effort that went into drafting the report should not be underestimated.

We have to choose our words carefully when describing the networks that engage with human rights in Vietnam so as not to give an impression of a holistically designed and coordinated campaign. What we are observing is perhaps better described as a combination of formal and informal actors that sometimes form a network. The organized way in which the networks are presented belies the considerably more chaotic environment it describes. It is also important to note that there are real and serious divisions among the various actors that engage with rights issues. Somewhat simplified, there is a divide between those advocating democracy and those that express concerns over the negative aspects of neo-liberalism and capitalism in relation to democracy. This is not necessarily a weakness, as it makes for healthy debate internally. What seems to be important is their capacity to overcome differences in opinion when necessary.

The dynamic between the various constituencies engaged in human rights may be described as follows. Dissidents, such as the intellectuals behind Petition 72 who drafted an alternative constitution for Vietnam, organize provocative campaigns that provide space for less controversial actors to take a more conciliatory approach to Vietnamese authorities (BùI, 2013). These actors are primarily organized within registered and unregistered NGOs. Bloggers and journalists report on both sets of an actor's activities and contribute to generating publicity and awareness. In some limited instances, NGOs and CSOs run media campaigns, organize local meetings, and engage in advocacy with the National Assembly through the submission of documented inputs for discussions on both sensitive and less sensitive rights issues. The documented inputs have been gathered through the NGOs and CSOs extended networks nationally, which provide a point of contact with villages, minority groups, lawyers, local politicians, central politicians, mass organizations, overseas Vietnamese organizations, and local activists. Some of the legal and political arguments are "peer reviewed" and quality assured by Vietnamese academics, as well as coordinated with like-minded CPV members who will draw on them in debates. In this process there are continuous points of contact with the security apparatus residing under the Ministry of Public Security both centrally and locally. In a country like Vietnam, this is not suspicious – it is unavoidable.

A frequent question about civil society in Vietnam concerns why some activists are arrested and others not despite advocating the same issues. There is no definitive answer to this question yet (Kervliet, 2014). However, the processes described here provide some hints that may be worth closer examination. Security officers that are lenient towards or sympathetic to certain members of the NGO and CSO community provide them with a modicum of protection. The degree of protection varies depending on the security officer in question. It seems highly unlikely that the authorities in Vietnam are unaware of the networks and dynamism between them. With reference to Kerkvliet (2014), leniency from certain security officers may form part of the authorities' tolerance of dissent. This section has examined a constituency within

society that is limited in numbers, but nevertheless diverse, active, vocal, and effective. This constituency has exploited the decentralization of power that reforms associated with doi moi facilitated. We tend to attach positive connotations to pluralism and decentralization, but these are descriptive and not normative terms. Accordingly, both may have adverse effects. The next section provides an example of how decentralization and pluralism impacts upon the authorities' drive to combat corruption.

Corruption and human rights in Vietnam

In 2017, Vietnam became embroiled in a diplomatic dispute with Germany that threatened progress toward a free trade agreement with the EU (the agreement was concluded in 2020). Germany alleged that Vietnamese authorities – Cold War style – kidnapped a former Petro Vietnam executive, Trịnh Xuân Thanh, in Berlin in August 2017. In January 2018, he was sentenced to life imprisonment (Nguyen and Pearson, 2018). Two observations gleaned from the many discussions of this event are of particular interest here. The first is that General Secretary Trong pulls no punches in his fight against corruption; the second is that Thanh was not sentenced to death. In reverse order we start with the death penalty.

The implementation in law and policy to secure enhanced compliance with the ICCPR on the death penalty provides an interesting case study in Vietnam. The amendments to the laws on the death penalty undertaken in the period 1999–2009 reduced the number of offenses that were death penalty eligible from 41 to 22, and the revised penal code adopted in 2018 displayed a further reduction to what has been perceived as 15 death penalty–eligible crimes. The discussions on the death penalty provide some interesting insights. The main argument presented by the Vietnamese authorities for upholding the death penalty is that the population approves of it. However, there is little available evidence to back up this claim that meets with academic standards for surveys and statistics (Dien, 2015).

There is an alternative, but unsubstantiated, explanation for the potential support for the death penalty that appeared in discussions among Vietnamese experts. It is included here not for its veracity, but because it illustrates the complex thinking on Vietnamese politics and the perverted incentives perceived to be at play by people familiar with internal workings of the processes. One source thinks that eventually the death penalty will only be eligible for two crimes: drug trafficking and corruption. The case made for the death penalty for corruption is interesting. When General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng was elected, it was partly on an anti-corruption platform. He is thought of as one of the cleaner politicians in Vietnam, and hence a good figurehead for a drive to clean up the party. However, since Trong is so clean he has no network and thereby little influence. As such, some observers interpreted the selection of Nguyễn Phú Trọng as a publicity stunt rather than a serious effort to halt rent-seeking behavior on behalf of party members. In this view Trong was selected precisely because he had little power to introduce effective reforms. This leaves one option to illustrate the seriousness of the CPV vis-à-vis the people in combating corruption: the death penalty. Vietnam is rife with such speculation, and we have to be careful not to mistake innuendo for facts. However, from time to time cases of corruption are reported on in the media that make speculation of the kind described understandable. One such case was the Vinalines corruption case.

In 2014, the Vinalines Chairman Dương Chí Dũng received the death penalty for corruption. One month later he appeared in court as a witness in his brother's corruption trial. His brother Dương Tự Trọng, a former police officer, was accused of tipping off Dương Chí Dũng and thereby aiding his flight to Cambodia, where he was later apprehended. Dương Chí Dũng's testimony implicated the deputy minister of public security in what was described as

an extensive network of corruption that, allegedly, even involved famous Vietnamese gangsters. Thus ended the show trial to underscore a CPV drive to combat corruption. Despite already having received the death penalty, the state would open legal proceedings against Dương Chí Dũng for openly disclosing state secrets (Stout, 2014). One common interpretation of the case was that Dương Chí Dũng's arrest should be understood in relation to infighting in the CPV, and particularly between the general secretary and the prime minister, since Dương Chí Dũng was perceived to be an ally of Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng. Such cases are an embarrassment to the authorities. Rather than showing off their diligence and integrity, they were exposed. Perhaps not surprisingly, a proposed new rule governing the death penalty for corruption was proposed in 2015 and adopted as part of the penal code in 2018. According to the penal code, subjects convicted on corruption charges may avoid the death penalty if they return 75 percent of what they earned from their corrupt practices (Tuổi Trẻ, 2015; Vi, 2017). Precisely how the 75 percent will be calculated is unclear; what seems clear is that the death penalty in Vietnam is not simply a matter of moral convictions.

Mind the gap

The question posed in the introduction was who can implement human rights in Vietnam, and the examples studied here on the constitution and the death penalty illustrate a domestic sphere that has autocratic and arbitrary features. There are clear "do not cross lines", such as the primacy given to the CPV, but there is room for negotiation. However, which negotiations will bear fruit, how, and to what extent is unpredictable, and in the aftermath the process remains opaque and to a large extent unaccountable.

That the political structure in Vietnam's 2013 constitution does not adequately articulate political participation, checks and balances, the rule of law, or separation of powers reflects the subordination of constitutional principles to party imperatives, including the supreme authority of the CPV. In between these constitutional gaps, we find the arbitrary practice of human rights implementation.

What precisely the implementation gap in Vietnam consists of remains elusive, but this chapter has hopefully shed some light on what goes on "in the gap". A different approach to articulating the implementation gap is to return to the notion of symmetry and reciprocity. The expectations and assumptions that govern the notion of states as system-like units capable of acting symmetrically and reciprocating does not adequately reflect state diversity in terms of the capacity within the states' political system to achieve the consensus necessary to realize human rights. This is not an excuse for human right violations, but a challenge to the assumptions that underpin the international human rights system. A question that continues to be asked about Vietnam is when it will change. Although not expressed in those terms, the question implies democratization. It may be time to consider that Vietnam already has changed and that what we are observing is how those changes are playing out. When, or if, Vietnam will become a democracy according to western standards is a different matter altogether. Vietnam is a different country than it was a decade ago, but human rights activists continue to be pursued. The CPV's anti-graft campaign and turn toward communist orthodoxy may be little more than a thin veneer that obscures the continued rent seeking behavior of state officials. Uncertainty surrounding the future CPV leadership generates insecurities within the state that exacerbate fragile reform initiatives and hampers progress.

Despite the limited space for human rights engagement, the Ministry of Public Security and the Peoples Police Academy have, until recently, engaged in international cooperation on anti-torture and investigation and interviewing techniques (NCHR, 2017). Human rights

education, albeit heavily monitored, is being offered in several universities, either mainstreamed into the curriculum in law schools or as a stand-alone master's degree in human rights such as the one available at the School of Law, Vietnam National University in Hanoi. An emerging generation of Vietnamese scholars residing within academic institutions in Vietnam have begun publishing on human rights internationally in peer-reviewed journals and books. Their contribution to the study of human rights in the constitution and legislation, labor rights, and CPV responses to civil society and corruption, to name some topics, is proving invaluable to both academic and policy debates. The emergence of an increasingly vocal, articulate, and competent civil society along with the gradual diversification of the media, especially the social media under less control by the state, is generating a public sphere that puts pressure on the authorities. Among the achievements are greater transparency in policy and legal debates and also real changes to legislation. Few seem to doubt the authorities' capacity for violence, but there exists what perhaps may be described as a mutual understanding; that CPV and government legitimacy depends on negotiated outcomes with multiple stakeholders, including human rights advocates. As mentioned in the introduction, Vietnam is less of a mystery these days than it used to be, but Vietnamese politics continue to obscure the clarity needed to announce that we are indeed well informed.

Notes

1 Vietnam ratified the Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1982), the International Convention on Civil and Political rights (1982), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1982), and the International Convention on the Elimination All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1982), (OHCHR, 2018).
2 Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995.
3 Phạm Chí Dũng was prevented from traveling to Geneva by Vietnamese authorities and delivered a video address via Skype. He was arrested in late November 2019.

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8

VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY

Structure, Evolution, and Contemporary Challenges

Le Hong Hiep[1]

Since the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) adopted its policy of renewal, or *Doi Moi (Đổi Mới)*, in 1986, it has used foreign policy as an essential tool for facilitating the implementation of its domestic agenda. As the CPV considers its foreign policies the extended arm of domestic ones, it has consistently sought to make use of external relations to enhance the country's national security and prosperity, and, ultimately, to strengthen the party's rule. Understanding Vietnam's foreign policy is therefore necessary for one to fully appreciate the transformations that Vietnam has undergone over the past decades, especially since *Doi Moi* was adopted.

This chapter seeks to provide an overview of the making of Vietnam's foreign policy, its transformations under *Doi Moi*, and some of its contemporary challenges. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first reviews key drivers, objectives, principles, and actors involved in the making of Vietnam's foreign policy. The second assesses the transformations in Vietnam's foreign policy under *Doi Moi* by examining major political and policy documents released by the CPV and how these changes have been translated into actual developments of the country's foreign relations. Finally, the chapter examines two major contemporary foreign policy challenges of Vietnam: how to handle the South China Sea disputes and its relations with China and the United States.

The Making of Vietnam's Foreign Policy

Key Drivers, Objectives, and Principles

Unlike democratic countries where government changes may lead to foreign policy shifts, Vietnam's foreign policy is fairly stable thanks to the continuity maintained under the country's one-party system. As "the force leading the state and society", the CPV single-mindedly dictates Vietnam's foreign policy, and the country's foreign policy is therefore also the foreign policy of the party. On the one hand, the stability and predictability in Vietnam's foreign policy lends it credibility, and thus the international community's confidence in its external commitments. On the other hand, the convergence of national interest with the CPV's interest in foreign policy making renders it impossible to determine how much each weighs in the country's actual policies. In certain cases, the party's ideological considerations and regime security concerns may

interfere to dictate the country's foreign policy in ways that can't be fully accounted for by national interests (see, for example, Co, 2003; Le, 2013a).

Balancing between national interests and regime interests therefore remains one of the major challenges for the CPV in terms of foreign policy making. Developments in the country's foreign policy over the past three decades, however, show that pragmatic considerations of national interests have now become the most important factor shaping the country's foreign relations. To be more precise, while the CPV's ideological considerations still matter in certain cases, their importance in the making of Vietnam's foreign policy has somewhat declined. Such a shift started when *Doi Moi* was accelerated in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Palmujoki, 1999; Thayer, 1994a) and became more pronounced since the early 2000s. The evidence for this trend can be found, among others, in Vietnam's hardened stance towards China over the South China Sea disputes as well as its rapprochement with the United States in recent years.

At its 12th National Congress in 2016, the CPV stated that it sought "to carry out a foreign policy of independence, sovereignty, multilateralization and diversification of relations, proactive and active international integration; to firmly maintain a peaceful and stable environment, create favourable conditions for national construction and defense; and to elevate Vietnam's status and prestige in the region and the world" (CPV, 2015). According to the party, such a foreign policy would be conducted on the fundamental principles of "international law, equality and mutual benefit" and "independence, autonomy, peace, cooperation and development". It should also be noted that Vietnam has long maintained the non-alignment principle in its foreign policy, which is embodied in the so-called "three no's principle". Specifically, Vietnam will not seek military alliances, will not allow foreign bases on its soil, and will not use a relationship with one country against another (Ministry of Defence, 2004, p. 5).

Vietnam's Foreign Policy Actors

As the CPV dominates Vietnam's political system, the country's foreign policy is made at its discretion. Most important foreign policy decisions will be made collectively by the party's Politburo. However, to enhance the legitimacy of its decisions, the Politburo may table certain important issues to the party's Central Committee for discussion and decision through voting. For example, at its 14th plenum in January 2016, the CPV's 11th Central Committee voted to endorse Vietnam's ratification of the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (TPP). The collective making of Vietnam's foreign policy has both pros and cons. While the practice ensures a high level of consensus among the party leadership and the bureaucracy, and thus the prospect of smoother implementation of major decisions, it also obscures the accountability of decision makers, especially when such decisions lead to devastating outcomes. Following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, for example, Vietnam missed several opportunities to normalize its relations with the United States due to its insistence on U.S. war reparations as a condition for normalization. The decision later proved to be a miscalculation, and the delayed normalization with Washington put Hanoi in a disadvantaged strategic position in dealing with Beijing as well as the Cambodian issue. However, no specific leader was held accountable for such an outcome.

The decisions made by the party's Politburo and Central Committee, however, are normally based on inputs and policy recommendations provided by relevant ministries. Depending on the issue in question, one of the ministries will act as the coordinator in charge of collecting recommendations from other ministries to shape the party's position on the issue. For example, issues related to foreign trade will normally be coordinated by the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT), defense issues will be handled mainly by the Ministry of Defence (MOD), and the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) will take care of general diplomatic relations with foreign countries as well as international organizations.

Among ministerial agencies involved in Vietnam's foreign policy making and implementation, the MOFA is the key actor. The ministry was established on 28 August 1945 with about 20 staffs (MOFA, 2015, p. 33). By 2015, the ministry had evolved into a full-fledged and modern agency of about 2,400 employees, most of whom are well-trained professional diplomats. Under the ministry, there are currently 31 functional departments and a network of 71 embassies, 22 consulates-general, and four permanent missions to international organizations (MOFA, 2015, p. 362). Unlike other ministries, the MOFA does not operate a vertical system of local units. However, it is in close contact with departments of external affairs of provinces and municipalities in certain functional areas, especially border, economic, and protocol affairs.

In terms of policy-making procedure, the MOFA normally has to draw on consultations with various governmental organizations, such as other relevant ministries, intelligence agencies, the military, and the CPV's Commission of External Affairs.[2] Depending on the issues under consideration, the list of stakeholders may be expanded. For example, when it comes to South China Sea issues, the ministry normally has to consult PetroVietnam and the Directorate of Fisheries, especially for technical inputs. In other cases, the ministry's policy recommendations are based on in-house research and analysis done by its own experts, including those working at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, the training and research arm of the ministry.

As the CPV exercises collective leadership, individual diplomats and policy makers tend not to play a prominent role in the making of Vietnam's foreign policy. However, in the earlier stages of the republic, due to the nascent nature of the state apparatus in general and the MOFA in particular, some individual leaders did play an essential role in the making and conduct of Vietnam's foreign policy. For example, President Hồ Chí Minh, who also acted as the first foreign minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), was the architect of the republic's foreign policy in the period 1945–46 as well as during the First Indochina War. During the Second Indochina War, other individuals such as General Secretary Lê Duẩn also played an important role in shaping the DRV's foreign policy (Nguyen, 2012). After the wars, and especially since *Doi Moi* was adopted in 1986, the party gradually returned to the collective and consensus-based foreign policy–making model, with individual leaders having a less decisive role. As such, foreign ministers are just part of the party's innermost foreign policy–making circle, although ministers who are also Politburo members normally wield greater influence on the policy making than those who are not.

That said, when it comes to controversial or divisive issues, some researchers have argued that Vietnam's foreign policy is sometimes negotiated between two competing camps within the party: conservatives and reformists (see, for example, Vuving, 2004). As most important decisions are made collectively by the Politburo and the CPV Central Committee, it's difficult to identify and measure the relative weights of the two camps in the outcome of any particular policy debate. However, the labels "conservative" and "reformist" may still be useful to describe certain segments of high-ranking party officials who favor specific policies. Accordingly, conservatives tend to consider the preservation of regime security as the top foreign policy mandate. Therefore, they typically take a cautious approach to economic liberalization and favor stronger ties with China over Western countries. In contrast, reformists seek further economic liberalization and stronger relations with the West – although ideally at a minimum risk to regime security. So far, while conservatives seem to be more influential when it comes to ideological and internal security matters, reformists seem to take the lead on the economic front, especially when the CPV is feeling the pressure for further reforms to buttress the country's economic performance – the vital basis of the party's legitimacy (Le, 2012). This explains some of

Vietnam's recent bold foreign policy decisions, such as the embrace of the TPP, which requires Vietnam to allow the establishment of independent labor unions.

The Evolution of Vietnam's Foreign Policy Under *Doi Moi*

Since 1945, Vietnam's foreign policy has evolved through different phases corresponding to developments in the country's internal conditions. The country's foreign policy objectives are therefore shaped and implemented mainly in accordance with its domestic goals. For example, during the early years of the republic, its main diplomatic goals were to gain international recognition and to prevent France from recolonizing the country. During the two wars against France and America, Vietnam's diplomacy focused on mobilizing international support for its war efforts in order to unify the country and to re-establish peace. After 1975, Vietnam's diplomatic efforts turned to mobilizing international resources to facilitate the "building of socialism" across the whole country and to end its international isolation and economic embargo, especially after Vietnam sent its troops into Cambodia to unseat the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979.

Since 1986 when the CPV adopted market-based economic reforms under the banner of *Doi Moi*, Vietnam's foreign policy has again taken a decisive turn as the party sought to create favorable external conditions and to attract foreign resources for the cause of *Doi Moi*. Towards these ends, Vietnam had to undergo a major foreign policy overhaul, which required the party to renovate its foreign policy thinking. The exercise, however, proved to be a lengthy and onerous one.

Prior to the CPV's Sixth National Congress in 1986, the party had long shaped its worldview through the ideological prism (see, for example, Palmujoki, 1997, 1999; Porter, 1980, 1990; Thayer, 1984). Such ideological considerations remained prevalent in the foreign policy sections of the CPV's political reports to its Sixth National Congress in 1986. They were also translated into practical terms. For example, at the congress, the CPV stated that it considered Vietnam's relationship with the Soviet Union as the "cornerstone" in the country's foreign policy; strongly supported "the heroic struggle of the people and the working class in advanced capitalist countries"; and expressed its deep sympathy and solidarity with national liberation movements in Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere (CPV, 2006, pp. 434–439).

However, the CPV's ideology-based foreign policy proved to be detrimental to Vietnam's national interests. In the Cold War context, the CPV's emphasis on relations with the socialist bloc obviously narrowed Vietnam's relations with Western and non-socialist countries. Meanwhile, Vietnam's prolonged engagement in Cambodia since the late 1970s, which was based partly on the CPV's wish to establish a friendly communist state in Cambodia, turned out to be an economic and political suicide pill for Vietnam. The undertaking of the "international duty toward Cambodian people", as the CPV maintained, put excessive strains on Vietnam's war-torn economy. The policy also caused Vietnam to suffer from widespread international diplomatic isolation, which laid tremendous obstacles to Vietnam's efforts to revive its moribund economy.

Until the late 1980s, Vietnam remained heavily dependent on socialist countries, especially the Soviet Union, for its foreign economic exchanges. By 1986 when *Doi Moi* was adopted, socialist countries accounted for 83.3 percent and 67.1 percent of Vietnam's imports and exports, respectively (Mya, 1993, pp. 214–225). Such a heavy dependence on socialist countries for external trade not only limited Vietnam's ability to increase its total foreign trade turnover but also exposed the country to serious risks that might disrupt its economic development. For example, in 1991 when the Soviet Union disintegrated, Vietnam's trade with the socialist bloc contracted dramatically, forcing Vietnam to increasingly look to non-socialist countries for substitute import as well as export outlets.

Consequently, by the late 1980s, the CPV's top priority was to open up and diversify the country's external relations in order to take advantage of foreign resources, such as markets, capital, and technologies, to boost economic growth. Toward these ends and despite its official rhetoric, by around its sixth congress in 1986, the CPV began to step up efforts to retune the country's foreign policy towards the "diversification and multilateralization" of international relations beyond ideological considerations. On 9 July 1986, for example, the CPV Politburo passed Resolution No. 32 that sought to articulate changes to Vietnam's foreign policy. The top foreign policy objective identified by the resolution was to "combine the strength of the nation with that of the time; take advantage of favourable international conditions to build socialism and defend the nation; and *proactively create a stable environment to focus on economic development* [emphasis added]" (Nam, 2006, p. 26).

Despite these efforts, no major advance in Vietnam's foreign relations was made within the first few years after the CPV's sixth congress, mainly due to the adverse Cold War environment, and especially Vietnam's prolonged military engagement in Cambodia.

It was against this backdrop that in 1987, the CPV Politburo secretly adopted Resolution No. 2 to bring about more radical strategic adjustments to the country's security and foreign policy directions. Most importantly, the resolution stated that Vietnam would completely withdraw its forces out of Cambodia and Laos and reduce the country's standing army to save resources for economic development efforts (Thayer, 1994b, 1995). Soon after that, the CPV Politburo adopted Resolution No. 13 dated 20 May 1988 on "Tasks and foreign policy in the new situation", which stressed that the top objectives of Vietnam's foreign policy would be to assist the stabilization of the political system and to facilitate the country's economic renovation. The resolution emphasized the policy of getting "more friends, fewer enemies" [*thêm bạn bớt thù*]. It also called for diversifying the country's foreign relations on the principle of national independence, equal sovereignty, and mutual benefits and set some specific foreign policy goals for the country, including the resolution of the Cambodian issue; diplomatic normalization with China and the United States; and improving ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and Western countries. Resolution No. 13 has therefore been considered a landmark in the reform of the CPV's foreign policy thinking and a foundation for the country's later policy of diversifying and multilateralizing foreign relations (Hung, 2006, p. 14; Nam, 2006, p. 27).

At its seventh congress in 1991, the CPV reaffirmed the overall foreign policy objective of maintaining peace and expanding its foreign relations to facilitate domestic development. It also declared that Vietnam would "diversify and multilateralize economic relations with all countries and economic organizations". More importantly, it was at this congress that the CPV officially departed from its traditional ideology-based foreign policy making in favor of a more pragmatic approach. Specifically, it officially stated that Vietnam wished "to be [a] friend with all countries in the world community" (CPV, 2010, p. 403) and sought "equal and mutually beneficial cooperation with all countries regardless of differences in socio-political regimes based on the principles of peaceful co-existence" (CPV, 2010, p. 351). This pragmatic approach to foreign policy making was maintained and further developed by the CPV in its subsequent congresses. For example, at its ninth congress (2001), the party reaffirmed that "Vietnam is willing to be a friend and a reliable partner of countries in the world community, striving for peace, independence and development". Such a slogan has since become the standard summary of Vietnam's foreign policy.

The pragmatic nature of Vietnam's new foreign policy under *Doi Moi* is also reflected in its economic focus. Accordingly, promoting international economic cooperation and integration has been identified as a key foreign policy task in various official documents of the party. For example, in March 1989, the party's Central Committee adopted a resolution in which the MOFA was demanded to decidedly shift its focus from political to politico-economic

diplomacy. At its eighth congress in 1996, the party embraced the policy of "building an open economy which is integrated with the region and the world" and "to accelerate the economic integration process". Five years later, the CPV Politburo adopted Resolution No. 7 dated 27 November 2001 on Vietnam's economic integration, outlining specific measures to facilitate the country's "active integration" into the global economy. At its eleventh congress in 2011, the CPV's foreign policy guidelines expanded the scope of international integration to cover not only the economic realm but also integration in other fields. Two years later, the CPV Politburo adopted Resolution No. 22 to further detail the comprehensive international integration called for in the guidelines. It also links Vietnam's international economic integration with its efforts to restructure the economy.

Under these foreign policy shifts, Vietnam's external relations expanded rapidly. By 2016, the country had established diplomatic relations with 180 countries and secured membership in most major international and regional institutions. Vietnam has also sought to deepen ties with important countries. By the same year, Vietnam had established "special partnership" with Laos and strategic partnerships with Russia (2001), India (2007), China (2008), Japan, South Korea, Spain (2009), the United Kingdom (2010), Germany (2011), Italy, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, France (2013), Malaysia and the Philippines (2015).[3] It also entered into comprehensive partnerships with South Africa (2004), Chile, Brazil, Venezuela (2007), Australia, New Zealand (2009), Argentina (2010), and the United States (2013).

Vietnam's policy of proactive international integration also helped to mobilize valuable external resources to turn the country into an economic success story. Between 1990 and 2014, Vietnam enjoyed an average annual growth rate of 6.8 percent and reached the low middle income status in 2009. The poverty rate also declined significantly, from 58.1 percent in 1993 to 11.1 percent in 2012. Expanded foreign trade and foreign investment have played an essential role in this process. By 2014, for example, the total registered foreign direct investment (FDI) stock into Vietnam amounted to US$290.6 billion. In the same year, the country's two-way trade turnover reached US$298 billion, equivalent to 160 percent of its gross domestic product GDP (GSO, 2015). As such, Vietnam has become one of the most outward-looking economies in the region.

In sum, *Doi Moi* has served as the single most important driver of transformations in Vietnam's foreign policy over the past three decades. As the country sought to create a favorable external environment and mobilize foreign resources for its economic development, diplomacy has become an essential tool. Foreign policy breakthroughs, such as the diplomatic normalization with China and the United States or the accession to ASEAN and the World Trade Organization (WTO), have indeed contributed to Vietnam's economic success as well as its enhanced international standing. Nevertheless, significant foreign policy challenges remain that Vietnam needs to overcome in the coming decades. Among them, managing the South China Sea disputes and handling the relationships with China and other major powers, especially the United States, emerge as the two most challenging ones.

Vietnam's Major Contemporary Foreign Policy Challenges

Managing the South China Sea Disputes

The South China Sea plays an important role in Vietnam's national defense, as the long coastline makes the country vulnerable to seaborne attacks. Similarly, Vietnam would come under significant strategic constraints if it lost control over both the Paracels and the Spratlys. The sea is also essential for Vietnam's economic well-being. In 2010, for example, PetroVietnam's revenue, which was generated mainly from the company's operations in the South China Sea, accounted

for 24 percent of Vietnam's GDP (Hà Nội Mới, 2011). The sea also brings Vietnam other significant economic benefits, such as fishery, tourism, maritime transportation, and port services. In 2007, the CPV Central Committee passed a resolution on "Vietnam's Maritime Strategy Toward the Year 2020", which set the target for Vietnam to generate 53 to 55 percent of its GDP and 55 to 60 percent of its exports from maritime economic activities by 2020 (Dang, 2012).

Nevertheless, Vietnam is now locked into two increasingly heated disputes over the South China Sea. The first is related to the competing sovereignty claims over the Paracels and the Spratlys. While the Paracels dispute is mainly between Vietnam, China, and Taiwan, the Spratlys row involves also the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The other dispute is related to conflicting claims regarding maritime boundaries in the sea. Claimant states' activities to enforce their claims have recently stoked up tensions in the region. Some notable developments include China's placement of the giant oil rig *Haiyang Shiyou* 981 in Vietnam's proclaimed exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in May 2014, and China's construction and militarization of seven artificial islands in the Spratlys since 2014.

Vietnam's official position is that the South China Sea disputes should be solved peacefully on the basis of international law, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). However, given the complex nature of the disputes as well as the unwillingness of China to have the disputes addressed through legal avenues, Vietnam has also resorted to other measures to manage the disputes. Specifically, in its dealing with China, Vietnam has adopted a hedging strategy composed of four major components: economic pragmatism, direct engagement, hard balancing, and soft balancing (Le, 2013b). Accordingly, while Vietnam has tried to promote economic cooperation and political engagement with China to boost mutual trust and cooperation, it has also pursued a "hard balancing" strategy against the latter through its military modernization program. At the same time, Vietnam has also sought to "soft-balance" against China through deepened ties with other powers as well as regional multilateral arrangements, especially the ASEAN.

The key challenge for Vietnam is how to simultaneously achieve the two goals: adequately protecting its national interests in the South China Sea while maintaining peace, stability, and a friendly relationship with China. Given the economic and strategic importance of the South China Sea to its well-being, Vietnam will not be able to bow to pressures from China, Hanoi's main antagonist in the disputes. Rising nationalism in Vietnam means that bowing to China's pressures will do irreparable damages to the CPV's political legitimacy. Therefore, on occasion, Vietnamese leaders have managed to speak up against China and emphasized Vietnam's determination to protect its interests in the South China Sea. For example, in a press conference in the Philippines during the *Haiyang Shiyou* oil rig crisis in 2014, then Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng condemned China's actions and stated that Vietnam would not trade its sovereignty and territorial integrity for an "illusionary friendship". On the other hand, due to the geographical proximity and the power asymmetry between the two countries, Vietnamese leaders are aware that Vietnam cannot afford a hostile relationship with China. Moreover, as China is an important trade partner for Vietnam, a broken relationship will also hurt Vietnam's economic interests. Therefore, given the contradicting nature of the two goals, handling the South China Sea disputes and China's growing maritime assertiveness will likely remain a key challenge for Vietnam in the years to come.

Balancing Between China and the United States

In 1995 when Vietnam normalized its relations with the United States, it was the first time that Vietnam had enjoyed normal relations with all the major world powers. Although Vietnam

emphasizes a non-alignment policy and wishes "to be a friend and a reliable partner of countries in the world community", balancing between the major powers has been a key challenge for the country's foreign policy. This is particularly the case since the late 2000s when the strategic rivalry between China and the United States started to intensify.

China's phenomenal rise since the late 1970s has presented the United States with a dilemma. While the sheer size of the Chinese economy and the deep economic interdependence between the two countries make it necessary for Washington to maintain a peaceful and stable relationship with Beijing, the latter's rise in terms of hard power and its strategic ambitions have also alarmed policy makers in Washington. In particular, China's rapid military build-up and its assertiveness in maritime disputes with neighboring countries threaten to unravel the regional order and stability underpinned by Washington's strategic preponderance. In response, the United States has adopted a two-pronged strategy to deal with China. On the one hand, the administration of President Barack Obama announced the "strategic rebalance" to the Western Pacific by shifting 60 percent of its naval capabilities to the region. On the other hand, the United States led negotiations to establish the TPP which involved 11 other countries on the Pacific Rim but excluded China. By late 2018, although the Trump administration had withdrawn the United States from the TPP and nominally cancelled the rebalancing strategy, the U.S. economic and military engagement with the region remains rather robust.

At the same time, Washington also seeks to promote bilateral relations with its traditional allies as well as emerging partners, including Vietnam. The introduction of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" by the Trump administration further strengthened this trend. Broader frameworks for bilateral strategic cooperation have been set up with the two sides concluding a memorandum of understanding on defense relations in 2011. In 2013, the two countries established a comprehensive partnership. In July 2015, CPV General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng paid a historic visit to Washington, and in May 2016, President Barack Obama visited Vietnam, during which he fully lifted the long-standing lethal weapon sales ban on Hanoi. These developments have significantly strengthened the strategic trust between the two former enemies.

The strengthened relationship with the United States was a logical development in Vietnam's foreign policy, as it brings Vietnam additional leverage to deal with China's increasing pressures in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, in the context of intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition, Hanoi's endeavors to deepen ties with Washington may be interpreted by Beijing as Hanoi being recruited into the U.S.-led efforts to contain China rather than merely a move to address its grievances in the South China Sea. As such, how far and how fast Vietnam should promote its relations with the United States in order to strengthen its strategic position in the South China Sea while not overtly offending Beijing becomes a fundamental puzzle that Vietnamese strategists have to solve.

Indeed, balancing between the great powers is not a new challenge to Vietnam. During the Cold War, after the split between China and the Soviet Union, Vietnam's balancing act between the two antagonistic powers became increasingly precarious, and its decision to side with the Soviet Union in the late 1970s adequately contributed to the downward spiral in Sino-Vietnamese relations and partly accounted for China's decision to invade Vietnam in early 1979. The 1979 war was brief but extremely costly for Vietnam, and not only in terms of casualties. Aside from maintaining incessant armed harassment along the Sino-Vietnamese border in the 1980s, China also pursued a policy of isolating Vietnam diplomatically and providing aid for the Khmer Rouge's warring efforts in the Cambodian conflict to exhaust Vietnam economically. Vietnam's attempts to diversify foreign relations during the early phase of *Doi Moi* also witnessed limited success, mainly due to China's obstructions.

The current regional strategic context is far different from that of the 1970s and 1980s, but bitter memories of the 1980s are still well alive, and Vietnamese policy makers are prudent not to be caught in another great power game. While trying to forge a stronger relationship with Washington to resist China's pressures in the South China Sea, Vietnam still wishes to maintain a delicate balance between Beijing and Washington due to China's strategic importance to Vietnam's peace, stability, and prosperity. The real challenge lies in the fact that China has consistently and coercively pressed its claims in the South China Sea at the expense of Vietnam, as if Beijing was of the conviction that Vietnam could not escape its shadow. Such calculations by Beijing tend to gradually push Vietnam's strategic patience to its limit, by which Vietnam may have to consider a trade-off between an amicable relationship with Beijing and its enhanced capabilities and strategic position to defend its vital interests in the South China Sea by aligning itself more closely with Washington.

That said, the best policy option for Vietnam in the foreseeable future remains walking a fine line between China and the United States. China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and the intensifying strategic competition between the two superpowers will make Vietnam's task ever more challenging. However, at least for the time being, a decisive shift in its balance between the two powers still proves too risky and unfeasible for Hanoi. As such, the challenge for Vietnam in managing its relations with the two superpowers will continue to feature high on its future foreign policy agenda.

Conclusion

Vietnam's contemporary foreign policy is both a by-product of and a major contributor to the success of *Doi Moi*. Fundamental shifts in Vietnam's foreign policy thinking and thus its diplomacy in the late 1980s and early 1990s were born out of Vietnam's desperate need to break out of international isolation and to create a favorable external environment conducive to its domestic economic reforms. At the same time, the economic success of *Doi Moi* over the past three decades has also facilitated Vietnam's efforts to "diversify and multilateralize" its foreign relations as other partners in the international community become more interested in the country, both economically or strategically. Vietnam's foreign policy has also embraced an increasingly outward-looking vision under *Doi Moi* by expanding its focus from mainly securing an external environment favorable for its soci-economic performance and regime security to pursuing active and comprehensive international integration into the global community. During this process, Vietnam's foreign policy becomes increasingly pragmatic as ideological considerations have generally receded to take a back seat in the policy making process.

As Vietnam expands its foreign relations, however, it also finds itself faced with new-found challenges. Among them, the South China Sea disputes and the triangular relationship with China and the United States prove to be the most outstanding ones. In both cases, Vietnam's foreign policy makers have to juggle different strategic objectives. In the South China Sea, Vietnam has to pursue two conflicting goals of defending its maritime interests in the face of an increasingly assertive China and maintaining a peaceful relationship with exactly the same neighbor. Meanwhile, in the latter case, Vietnam has to seek a balance between the two great powers that can enable it to gain strategically from a stronger relationship with Washington while not stepping on Beijing's toes. In both challenges, China emerges as the single most important factor that dominates Vietnam's foreign policy agenda. Therefore, as the history of Vietnam has long shown, how to deal with China is a timeless and thorny question for which Vietnam will always have to struggle to look for the right answer.

Notes

1   A version of this chapter has been published as Le Hong Hiep, Introduction: The Making of Vietnam's Foreign Policy Under Doi Moi, in H. H. Le and A. Tsvetov (Eds.), *Vietnam's Foreign Policy Under Doi Moi* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2018), pp. 3–22.
2   In the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, the MOFA was marginalized and the CPV's Commission of External Affairs took a decisive role in the handling of Vietnam's relations with China and Cambodia.
3   Vietnam has upgraded its strategic partnerships with China, Russia, and India into a "comprehensive strategic partnership".

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PART II

Economy and Society

9

VIETNAM'S EXTRAORDINARY ECONOMIC JOURNEY FROM POVERTY TO PROSPERITY

Martín Rama

At the end of the American War Vietnam was a country with a dilapidated infrastructure and two dysfunctional and disconnected economies. In the North, decades of central planning had led to very low productivity and generalized shortages. In the South, collectivization had brought to a standstill the once dynamic but chaotic market economy supported by the US war machinery.

A decade later, at the beginning of the renovation process (*Doi Moi*), Vietnam was one of the poorest countries in the world. Four years after the transition to a market economy had started, income per capita was below 100 current dollars in current terms, and total exports of goods and services barely reached 2 billion dollars in current terms. Precise estimates are not available, but close to 90 percent of the population might have lived on less than one dollar a day in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms back then.

Today Vietnam is a middle-income country. It may not be growing as fast as it did during the first two decades after *Doi Moi*, but its income per capita is close to 2,500 dollars in current terms. In constant terms, this is almost five times the income per capita at the beginning of the transition. The estimated share of the population living with less than 1.90 PPP dollars per day is only 2 percent, and social indicators are comparable to those of high middle-income countries. Infant mortality, for instance, dropped from 42 per 1,000 children under age one in 1986 to less than 17 at present.

The country has become a magnet for foreign direct investment (FDI), receiving inflows accounting for almost 6 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on average over the last five years. Exports of goods and services reached 227 billion dollars in current terms in 2017. Vietnam first became an agricultural powerhouse, then moved into being a large exporter of garments and shoes, and it is rapidly becoming a major global player in consumer electronics. The speed of this transformation is remarkable: while in 2002 Vietnam was still included in the list of Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), by now it is seen as a model for other countries to emulate.

At the same time, Vietnam remains one of the only five nominally communist countries in the world, together with China, Cuba, Laos, and North Korea. While more open in terms of public debate and internet access than the other countries in the group, it is a one-party system where dissent is not tolerated beyond what is seen as safe limits, and crackdowns on bloggers, journalists, and certain religious groups remain common.

While it is clearly a market economy, the authorities insist in its "socialist orientation". Government spending accounts for almost one third of GDP, more than in most developing countries. The number of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) has declined steadily, and most of them operate on a commercial basis, but increasingly powerful "economic groups" inspired by the Korean *chaebols*, are state-owned and controlled. There are no privately owned media.

Which of these two countries is the real Vietnam? The answer is both. That explains many of the specific traits of the country's performance since the beginning of its transition. The tension between these two apparently incompatible systems is also important to understand the prospects and the challenges ahead. The country's "socialist orientation" is often dismissed as an irrelevant lip service to an old ideology, but that would be a mistake, as this orientation shapes its governance and influences important aspects of its economic policies. Vietnam is also described as China with a ten-year lag, but that is not correct either, as the same nominally communist structures function in different ways in the two countries. Vietnam's development experience is more unique than it may seem at a first glance, and that also makes its prospects different from those of other emerging economies.

The path to prosperity

The economic transformation experienced by Vietnam over these three decades has much in common with that observed in other successful East Asian countries. Growth accelerated as smallholder agriculture became more productive, supporting the development of off-farm rural employment and the gradual migration of household members to towns and cities. In line with the "flying geese" pattern initiated by Japan, light manufacturing activities previously performed by other countries in the region migrated to lower-cost Vietnam. In the process, cities developed and the services sector expanded. At first, much of the urban economic activity was associated with either SOEs or household businesses. But gradually the private sector developed and wage employment, formal or informal, became much more prevalent.

Structural change

Reasonably reliable national account figures for Vietnam are only available since the late 1980s. Back then, agricultural output accounted for 38 percent of GDP at factor cost; by now, it only accounts for 17 percent (Figure 9.1). For some time, productivity gains in farming were so large that the output share of the sector barely declined in spite of urban-rural migration. As in other countries, the flip side of the decline of the agricultural share of GDP was a steady growth in the share of services. However, what distinguishes Vietnam from other developing countries is the rapid growth of manufacturing output, from 12 percent of GDP at factor cost in 1990 to more than 20 percent in the early 2000s and still 17 percent nowadays. While the services sector keeps growing, the share of manufacturing in Vietnam's GDP is relatively high by international standards, and even more so when extractive industries and construction are included as well.

The transformation of agriculture was nothing short of miraculous. In the 1980s the country was at the edge of famine, with rice – the country's basic staple – being a desperately scarce commodity. Since the 1990s Vietnam has been among the top rice exporters, measured in tons, together with India and Thailand. Coffee production had been disrupted by the American War and was negligible after reunification, but one decade after Doi Moi Vietnam displaced Indonesia to become the second world exporter.

Success in food production occurred across the board. Today, Vietnam is the largest exporter and the largest producer of black pepper and cashew nuts, both relatively unimportant products
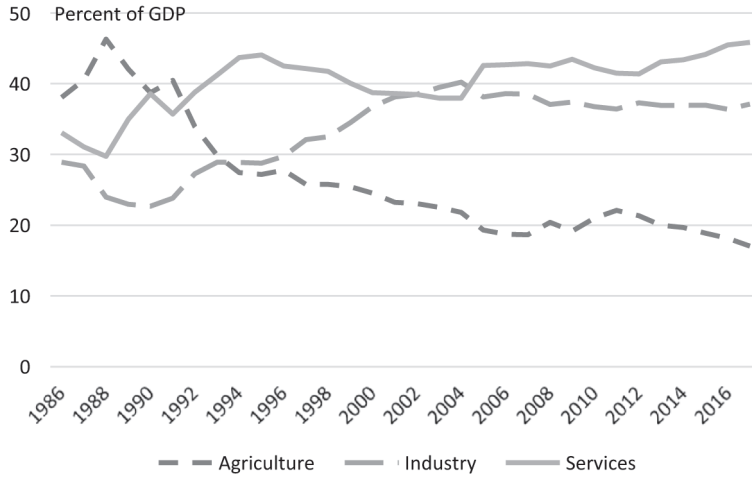
Figure 9.1   Vietnam's rapid structural transformation

Source: General Statistics Office

at the beginning of the economic transition. The story is similar with aquaculture, with Vietnam now occupying third place in the global rankings among exporters of fish and fishery products.

In manufacturing, the initial phases of development were concentrated in garments and footwear, with thousands of firms – mainly a combination of East Asian foreign investors and Vietnamese SOEs – serving orders by the likes of Target and Macy's in the United States. At some point, several of the major producers of sports footwear – such as Adidas and Nike – were indirectly employing more than 60,000 Vietnamese workers each.

However, the transition to higher-value-added products did not wait for too long. In 2010, when Vietnam's per capita GDP was barely 1,200 dollars in current terms, Intel opened its biggest chip-making plant worldwide in Ho Chi Minh City. Canon and Panasonic are producing a large share of their global supply of printers from Hanoi's outskirts. And Samsung has become Vietnam's biggest company, employing more than 100,000 workers and accounting for almost a quarter of the country's exports. As of 2016, high-tech products accounted for more than 20 percent of merchandise exports, up from 5 percent in 2007.

The dramatic growth of agricultural and manufacturing exports has transformed Vietnam into one of the most globally integrated economies. In 1990, the sum of exports and imports of goods and services represented less than three-quarters of GDP. By 2017, the sum was twice as large as GDP (Figure 9.2). No other country with a population of at least 1 million, except for Ireland and Singapore, is more open commercially. But these two countries are much smaller than Vietnam and therefore can be expected to engage more in foreign trade. Among countries with a population similar to that of Vietnam, foreign trade accounts for only half of GDP on average.

The transformation of the services sector was less dramatic, but not less real. At the beginning of the transition, there were five state-owned commercial banks (SOCBs) in Vietnam, and they were all more or less crippled by non-performing loans (NPLs) to SOEs. At present, there are 31 private banks and 8 foreign-owned banks. Three of the SOCBs have been partially privatized, all of them with a strategic foreign partner. The share of state capital in the banking system has declined from 87 percent in 2005 to 37 percent in 2017. And there are no significant
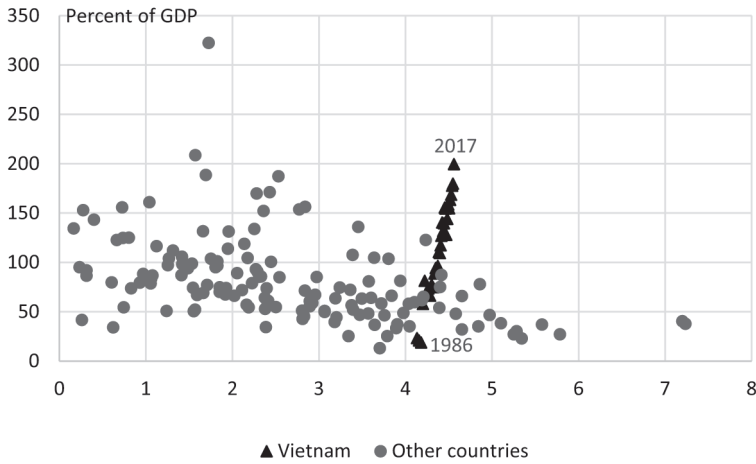
Figure 9.2   A globally integrated economy

Source: International Labour Organization (modeled estimates)

differences in competition and cost efficiency between SOCBs banks and the privately owned counterparts (Nguyen et al. 2016; Nguyen and Nghiem 2017).

The transition was not always smooth, as the macroeconomic stimulus package embraced by the government in the aftermath of the global crisis led to a vast increase in bank lending, and the quality of credit declined. However, after a period of stronger supervision and clean-up by the monetary authorities, NPLs have declined to 2.1 percent nowadays, or to 6.5 percent based on a broader definition. Along the way, there has been a substantial financial deepening of the Vietnamese economy. Banking credit reached 140 percent of GDP in 2017, compared to 35 percent two decades earlier. Stock market capitalization, a meager 1 percent of GDP as recently as 2005, reached 52 percent in 2017.

Other areas of the services sector, such as air transport, have also witnessed a spectacular development. Most private airlines started operations in recent years, but their combined fleet is by now comparable in size to that of the state-owned carrier.

More jobs, new jobs

This transformation did not happen by accident. With a vast majority of the population living in rural areas, and with the traditional power base of the party being in the villages, focusing on agricultural productivity was an immediate government priority when the reform process started. But ever since decision makers in Vietnam have had an almost obsessive focus on job creation. This was not only due to a socialist ideology attaching a high importance to productive work. Labor force participation rates in Vietnam are among the highest in the world; at around 72 percent, they are remarkably high in the case of women. This makes the creation of gainful employment opportunities critical to meet the expectations of the population, even more so in a country facing a massive youth bulge, where the median age of the population at the beginning of the transition was 25 years.

As a result of substantial gains in education and health, and also due to the two-child policy applying to civil servants and SOE workers, the fertility rate of Vietnam plummeted, from five

children per woman in 1984 to fewer than two in 2015. The country was thus confronted with one of the fastest demographic transitions ever. Down the road, this transition raises the specter of a rapidly aging society. But for the last three decades it has resulted in the entrance of more than 1.5 million young people to the work force every year. Smallholder farming had the virtue of being labor-intensive, but soon after massive numbers of additional jobs needed to be created in cities. While the services sector is labor-intensive too, it is characterized by self-employment and family work in activities with low productivity. Labor-intensive manufacturing, on the other hand, opened a faster way to the development of wage employment.

At the turn of the century, roughly two-thirds of the people at work were engaged in agriculture. By 2016, the proportion had fallen to 43 percent (Figure 9.3). With economic reforms, self-employment and work in household businesses became more prevalent. Their growth was especially fast in the initial phases of economic transition. In the early 1990s, the number of SOEs was reduced by half, and 1.1 million workers were retrenched, with a compensation package allowing many of them to start their own businesses. But wage employment in the private sector soon picked up, accounting at present for more than 40 percent of total employment.

This change in the composition of employment was facilitated by a high degree of labor market flexibility. Barriers to geographical mobility are low. Rural–urban migrants do not carry with them all the entitlements to services they had in their villages, but access to basic health and education is granted to their children in urban areas. And more advanced education and health services are often not available in the villages anyway (Dang and Glewwe 2017). Labor regulations are relatively rigid on paper, and compliance with labor standards is higher than in other countries specializing in exporting products from light manufacturing, such as Bangladesh or Cambodia. But there is quite a lot of flexibility in practice, especially through the use of contract labor by firms, and the extensive reliance on overtime work as an important part of labor earnings.

The global financial crisis revealed that flexibility (Cling et al. 2011). With its strong export orientation, Vietnam was a natural candidate for massive job losses in manufacturing. Instead, workers accepted large wage cuts. The urban unemployment rate only climbed from 4.3 percent of the labor force in 2007 to 6.5 percent in 2009 and declined rapidly afterwards.
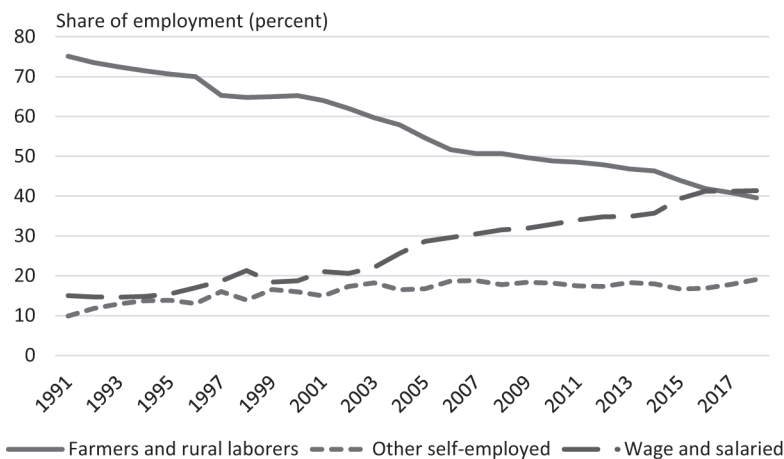
Figure 9.3   From farmers to wage earners

Source: International Labour Organization (modeled estimates)

The change in the composition of employment has been accompanied by a rapid change in the skills mix of the work force. In the decades after *Doi Moi* Vietnam moved rapidly in the direction of attaining full primary education coverage and expanding the coverage of secondary education (Dang and Glewwe 2017). By 2011, gross enrollment rates in secondary education had attained 77 percent.

Over the last few years, the emphasis has shifted to the expansion of preschool coverage to four-year–olds and tertiary education reform. Universities used to be public and to struggle with governance issues similar to those faced by SOEs. The reform aims at setting standards for all universities, public or private, and at supporting the emergence of four model universities from industrial countries. Progress in addressing the governance issues faced by public universities has been more limited. Nevertheless, in 2011 the gross enrollment rate in tertiary education had reached 24 percent.

The combination of the change in the composition of employment and the change in the skills mix of the work force resulted in a rapid growth of labor earnings. Strict comparisons over time are difficult, because the individual earnings of farmers, the self-employed, and workers in household businesses cannot be measured precisely. But based on data from household surveys, the average growth in individual labor earnings in real terms was close to 10 percent per year. Wages remain low by international standards, as a worker in the manufacturing sector typically earns about 3,700 dollars per year, and that is with heavy overtime (JETRO 2017). Still, the improvement was substantial.

The emergence of a middle class

Riding on high labor force participation rates, low unemployment rates, and rapidly growing labor earnings, Vietnam experienced one of the fastest poverty reductions ever documented (Glewwe et al. 2004; Ravallion 2011; Kozel 2014, Demombynes and Vu 2015). Using an internationally comparable poverty line, set at 1.90 PPP dollars per day, the poverty rate fell from an estimated 52.9 percent of the population in 1993 to 2.0 percent by 2016 (Figure 9.4). The decline in poverty is equally striking when considering higher poverty lines. About 70 percent of Vietnam's population can now be classified as economically secure, including the 13 percent who are now part of the global middle class (World Bank 2018a).

Agricultural opportunities played an important role in boosting living standards, but more important has been the steady development of wage and salaried employment in both urban and rural areas (Benjamin et al. 2017). More and better jobs have resulted in increased occupational mobility over time (Nguyen and Nguyen 2017). A comparison of consumption expenditures over time shows that households are as likely to escape poverty in Vietnam as they are in the United States, a country reputed for its upward mobility. And the probability of moving out of vulnerability into the middle class is also similar in the two countries as well (Dang and Lanjouw 2014; Rama et al. 2015).

Not surprisingly, urban poverty has fallen dramatically. Based on the national poverty line, which is substantially higher than 1.90 PPP dollars, the urban poverty rate is below 2 percent. While this figure may be an underestimate due to the difficulty of household expenditure surveys to adequately cover rural-urban migrants, extreme poverty is clearly on the way to being eradicated in cities and in the two deltas where most of the population lives.

The situation of ethnic minorities, and especially of those living in the Central Highlands, is different (Baulch et al. 2010). The 54 officially recognized ethnic groups of Vietnam represent 15 percent of the population but account by now for nearly three-quarters of the poor. This is not for lack of government attention to their fate. Gradually the education levels and access

Poverty rate (percent)

●$1.90 per day (in 2011 PPP) ▲$3.20 per day (in 2011 PPP) ■$5.50 per day (in 2011 PPP)
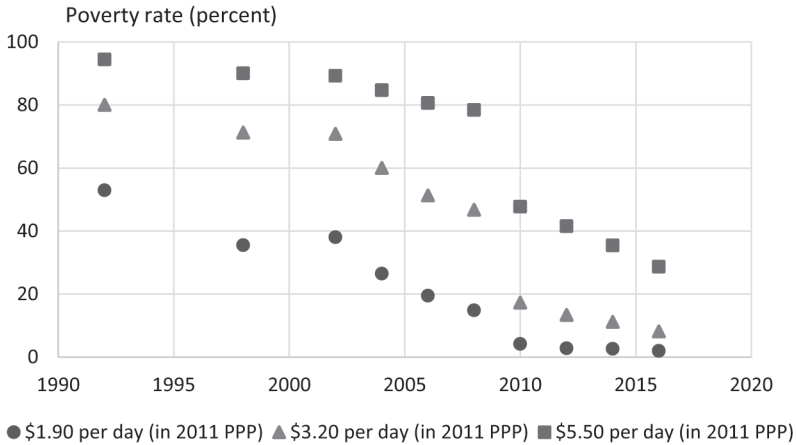
Figure 9.4 Rapidly falling poverty

Source: Povcalnet

Note: Data for Vietnam are for 1986 to 2017. For other countries they are for 2017 or the most recent year available.

Source: World Development Indicators

to services by minorities are catching up with those of the *Kinh* and *Hoa* (Chinese) majority (Swinkels and Turk 2006). Some minority households in the lowlands (such as the *Dao*) are increasingly indistinguishable from a consumption point of view from majority households. Even in the Northern Mountains, from where the party led the independence struggle against the French colonial regime, minorities have experienced strong gains in living standards. But those in the Central Highlands face a greater level of social exclusion.

The spectacular development of coffee production and other crops was associated with the conversion of the forest land to agricultural land. This conversion was accomplished through a massive state-led relocation of *Kinh* people and northern minority groups to the area, depriving locals from the commons they used to live on (Bayrak et al. 2013). Culture and language barriers also make the integration of these groups more difficult (Nguyen et al. 2017).

The social progress accomplished since *Doi Moi* extends beyond gains in private consumption, as it is also reflected in strong improvements in human development indicators. The literacy rate among the adult population was 93 percent in 2010. Life expectancy at birth has by now reached 72 years for men and 81 for women, comparable to industrial countries. Gains in life expectancy are associated with better health outcomes, as the country successfully navigated its epidemiological transition. By 2010, almost 90 percent of deaths were due to non-communicable causes such as cardiovascular diseases and traffic accidents, a pattern observed in more affluent societies.

For some time, motorbikes were the most visible indicator of this social transformation. Confronted with dramatic infrastructure shortages, the government encouraged the local production of motorbikes as the easiest way to connect people to markets. More than 3 million new units are sold every year, and there is one registered motorbike for every two inhabitants. Models are becoming increasingly fancy and expensive, and a growing share of the population is now shifting to cars – an unambiguous sign of prosperity. While earnings may still be low by international standards, a large fraction of the population has traits associated with middle classes elsewhere. Many in this group are urban wage earners, a growing number of them have access

to financial instruments such as bank accounts and credit cards, and they are increasingly covered by formal social protection systems such as health insurance and old-age pension programs (Castel 2008, Lieberman and Wagstaff 2009, World Bank 2007).

This group also belongs to the modern world in other ways. Vietnam experienced one of the fastest penetrations of telecommunications in the world, and its government put emphasis on internet access as a priority. As of 2018, there were 64 million internet users, representing roughly two-thirds of the population. This share is twice as high as in India, a country which has a similar income per capita and is a global powerhouse in information technology. It is close to that of China, whose income per capita is three times higher than Vietnam's. Given the relatively limited censorship of internet content, the Vietnamese middle class is more exposed to global views and debates than that of many developing countries.

Key transformations in the economy

Vietnam's transition from plan to market involved reforms across a range of fronts, which makes it difficult to summarize it under the form of just a few key policy actions. However, the leaders of the country had a remarkable capacity to think strategically, identifying orientations that could be transformational, and coalescing government efforts around them. At the risk of simplifying, six of such axes had a huge impact on Vietnam's economic development.

Land and agriculture

In less than one lifetime, Vietnam radically reformed its rural economy twice, first collectivizing agriculture then de-collectivizing it. The 1988 Land Law mandated the breakup of the agricultural collectives, scheduling more than four-fifths of the country's agricultural land area for effective privatization over a relatively short period.

Initially, the collectives and local cadres still set production quotas and allocated land across households for fixed periods. Farmers with a surplus were free to sell their output at market prices. What is surprising is how egalitarian this process was. The central government had little choice but to leave the allocation of land to households in the hands of local officers it could not easily control. The risk of capture by local cadres and their friends and families was thus considerable. And yet Vietnam's agrarian reform was done in a relatively equitable way – giving everyone within the commune roughly the same irrigated-land equivalent (Ravallion and Van de Walle 2008).

While this reform was similar to China's "household-responsibility system", introduced there in the late 1970s, Vietnam soon went further. In 1989, a number of years before China, it allowed a private market in agricultural output. But the most radical step came with the 1993 Land Law, which introduced official land titles and permitted land transactions for the first time since communist rule began. Large tracts of forest land were also transferred to new landholders, many of which were local households. Land remained the property of the state, but usage rights could be legally transferred, exchanged, mortgaged, and inherited.

A further resolution in 1998 removed restrictions on the size of landholdings and on the hiring of agricultural labor. Economic efficiency was clearly the primary objective of these reforms. The concern was whether freeing up land markets, in a context in which other markets were still heavily distorted, could lead to distress land sales, growing landlessness, and the emergence of a group of poor rural laborers.

The productivity gains and reductions in poverty associated with these reforms are undeniable. A negative relationship exists between land productivity and farm size in Vietnam, and

it is robust to differences in village-related factors such as soil quality, irrigation facilities, and prices (Vu et al. 2012). In this context, the reallocation to land to households on an equitable basis substantially increased yields. And the additional land rights led to statistically significant increases in the share of total area devoted to long-term crops and in the share of labor devoted to non-farm activities (Do and Iyer 2008).

Across countries, growth originating in agriculture induces income growth among the poorest segments of the population to a much larger extent than growth originating in the rest of the economy, a pattern that is confirmed in Vietnam's case (de Janvry and Sadoulet 2010). While it is not possible to mechanically attribute poverty reduction to agricultural reforms, it is telling that Vietnam's poverty rate plummeted in the following years (Benjamin and Brandt 2004). A connection can also be established between these reforms and the subsequent decline in child labor (Edmonds and Turk 2004).

Nowadays there are signs of rural landlessness, especially in the Mekong Delta, where de-collectivization often involved returning the land to previous owners rather than distributing it evenly across households. The question is whether the introduction of a land market results from distress sales, or rather from farmers selling their land to pursue more rewarding activities. The evidence so far seems to support the second hypothesis, implying that the process of land concentration is a positive force towards greater efficiency. But the process entails both winners and losers, including among the poor (Ravallion and Van de Walle 2008; Phuc 2011).

Global integration

Becoming friends with all countries, one of the mottos of *Doi Moi*, also had economic implications. In 1990, four years into the reform process, a resolution was passed to seek integration in the global economy. This resolution led to the renewal of relationships with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on an unofficial basis in 1993 and to joining these two organizations and Asociation of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995. Importantly, it led to steps to bring the US embargo to an end and to open up trade ties with other nations. But the most important milestones in the process were the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) with the United States and accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Talks towards the BTA opened in 1995 and were completed in 2000. The application to the WTO was made in 1994, but Vietnam only became serious about it in 2003; from that point onwards accession only took four additional years.

Getting there was challenging. Vietnamese senior leaders knew little about the global economy and for quite some time were approaching negotiations from a "concessions approach". But the BTA, the most demanding agreement of that sort signed by the United States up to that point, provided an enormous learning opportunity. The BTA covered three-quarters of what was required for WTO accession, and it was from this that senior leaders learned about key principles such as most favored nation, non-discrimination, technical barriers, anti-dumping, and the like (Katz 2012). In 2003 the strategic decision was made by the party to switch from a "concessions approach" to a "development approach", in which international agreements would be used to lock in domestic reforms.

The BTA and the WTO negotiations were followed by implementation plans, including the promulgation of an effective enterprise law; of major improvements in contract law; of new laws on financial instruments and capital markets; on revisions to tax and land laws; and an array of regulations on regulatory transparency, e-transactions, competition, bankruptcy, and the like.

Global integration was unambiguously beneficial to Vietnam. Enterprise data shows a positive impact on the growth of employment, output, and labor productivity. This effect was

stronger for firms engaging continuously with international markets, rather than intermittently, and for firms that sell to both domestic and international markets (Trinh and Doan 2018). FDI also had positive effects on the Vietnamese economy. Vertical productivity spillovers, making suppliers to foreign companies more efficient, were significant (Vu 2008; Le and Pomfret 2011; Tran et al. 2016). And there were also horizontal spillovers, resulting in higher exports from domestic firms (Nguyen and Sun 2012). The effects are strongest within a radius of up 10 km, with small and unproductive firms benefitting disproportionately from the presence of foreign firms in their neighborhoods (Kyburz and Nguyen 2016).

The benefits from global integration spread to the local population. Provinces that were more exposed to tariff cuts in the United States as a result of the BTA experienced faster decreases in poverty; they also experienced faster wage growth for workers with low levels of education (McCaig 2011; Hoang and Nguyen 2020). Following the BTA, Vietnam also experienced a large decline in employment in small, household businesses, as workers real-located toward larger firms. The probability of working in household businesses declined most in industries that faced the largest US tariff cuts (McCaig and Pavcnik 2015). When export markets were closed using anti-dumping procedures, as in the case of basa fish exports, poverty increased (Brambilla et al. 2012).

Vietnam entered the WTO under a "non-market economy" status that made the application of anti-dumping procedures easier for its trade counterparts. But this status formally ended in 2019, and by now more than 60 countries have recognized Vietnam as a market economy. Meanwhile, the authorities were actively engaged in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations and are now part of its new incarnation (without the United States), known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. Other agreements in the pipeline include the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Vietnam's landmark free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union (EVFTA). These engagements show that Vietnam is eagerly looking to strengthen its global integration further.

Public finance

The economic reforms of Vietnam involved a greater reliance in market mechanisms, but they also entailed a profound transformation in the way public resources were allocated and their use was monitored. The most important milestone in this respect is the Law on the State Budget, passed in 2002 (World Bank 2004, 2005).

Together with other measures, this law consolidated three big shifts in power within the Vietnamese state (World Bank 2009). In the control and command economy, the key decisions were made by the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), whose authority spanned not only decisions related to infrastructure but also the allocation of public monies to SOEs. Now MPI retains a leading role on public investment, but the preparation and execution of the state budget is firmly in the hands of the Ministry of Finance (MOF).

The second major shift in power concerns the enhanced oversight role of elected bodies, including the National Assembly and People's Councils at lower levels of government. The 2002 State Budget Law conferred the authority to the National Assembly to call ministers, and even the prime minister, to account. A sensitive vote of confidence on the prime minister took place for the first time ever in 2013, and its outcome could not be taken for granted. The third shift concerns the growing role of the State Audit of Vietnam, a technically independent and increasingly assertive agency which reports directly to the National Assembly.

In parallel, a considerable dose of power was devolved to the provinces. Nation-wide programs and mandates were established, but their implementation was left in the hand of local

authorities, which could also mobilize additional resources in their support. Taxation and decisions related to public debt were left in the hands of the central government. But clear formulas were introduced to allocate resources to provinces across sectors and programs. Since then, transfers to provincial governments conformed much more closely to objective and pr-determined criteria, with poorer provinces receiving more-than-proportionate assistance from the central government (Vu et al. 2015). Cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City retained only one-quarter of their tax revenue, whereas poor provinces such as Phan Thiet funded up to three-quarters of their budget from transfers (World Bank 2004).

This arrangement is arguably one of the main reasons why broad indexes of inequality, such as the Gini coefficient, have remained constant despite very rapid economic growth. Provincial levels of GDP per capita had diverged before 2004, but they started converging afterwards, with transfers from central to provincial governments playing an important role in this trend reversal (Vu et al. 2018).

Competition between provinces to boost economic activity and attract FDI ended up being one of the major drivers of reforms over the last decade (Tran et al. 2009). Allowing provinces to find their own way forward was central to Vietnam's economic development. Ever since the run up to *Doi Moi*, experimentation at the provincial level has allowed dramatic turnarounds. But the approach was institutionalized by the State Budget Law of 2002. This is how Danang could use its privileged coastal resources and the availability of land from the former American air base to undertake a complete urban renewal, focused on a green image. One-third of the population had to change housing over a period of eight years to allow the retrofitting of social services and modern urban infrastructure (World Bank 2004). The city has become a magnet for high-end tourism and modern services and has one of the highest incomes per capita in the country.

Danang may be one of Vietnam's most successful provinces, but is not an exception. Across all of Vietnam, measures strengthening the investment climate at the provincial level are correlated with performance indicators at the firm level (Malesky and Taussig 2009; Tran et al. 2009). There is also evidence to suggest that in those provinces which are making most progress in economic reform the private sector played an important role, not against government but with government. There was no formal public-private coalition, but the dynamic was one of proactive government seeking input from the private sector, and the latter lobbying for and contributing to responsive and effective government (Schmitz et al. 2012).

If anything, it can be argued that decentralization has gone too far in Vietnam. The median province size is too small to make it the optimal constituency to decide about major infrastructure projects or skills policies. Too many coastal provinces end up wanting to develop their own deep-sea ports, whereas regional universities have become fragmented as participating provinces have chosen to retake their part. Local elected bodies also lack the technical capacity to conduct their oversight role in an effective way.

Vietnam has started a recentralization process by piloting a removal of elected People's Councils in 93 districts throughout the country, stratifying the selection by region, type of province, and urban versus rural settings. So far recentralization has significantly improved public service delivery, from quality of roads to healthcare to agricultural extension. More surprisingly perhaps, it has improved the quality of governance as measured by the amount of corruption experienced by Vietnamese citizens (Malesky et al. 2014).

State-owned enterprises

While many aspects of Vietnam's economic reforms get praise, an aspect often criticized is the limited privatization of state assets. To some extent, this criticism is unjustified, as the land reform

process of the 1990s was one of the largest-scale privatizations ever. But it is true that divestiture has been less radical in the case of SOEs. The implications of this choice are less significant than in other formerly planned economies, as Vietnam never managed to go too far in the direction of capital-intensive state-led industrialization, as the former Soviet Union and China did. But SOEs still control large shares of total capital, prime urban land, employment, and finance.

The private sector could use those resources more efficiently. There is evidence, for instance, that global integration led to more substantial productivity increases among private firms than among SOEs (Baccini et al. 2019). It has even been argued that SOEs backslid on the eve of Vietnam's accession to the WTO (Vu Thanh 2017). Greater separation between business and policy making could also result in lower favoritism and corruption. Politically connected firms in Vietnam are less likely to be credit constrained and face lower cost of capital (Rand 2017). And the number of government officials and civil servants in a firm's network is indeed an important determinant of its performance (Howard 2017). All of this evidence makes a strong case for rapid divestiture of state assets.

However, the Vietnamese approach to SOE reform was influenced by the experiences of China and the former Soviet Union. While the former retained its overstaffed state sector more or less intact during the early stages of its transition to a market economy, the latter went for a shock therapy which included the mass privatization of SOEs. In the eyes of senior Vietnamese leaders, this rushed-through process was responsible for the collapse in economic activity that followed, a collapse China successfully avoided by letting the private sector grow on the sides first. Senior leaders were also concerned about the transfer of ownership to private investors at a time when no reliable price discovery mechanism existed for state assets. In their eyes, the potential cost from corruption in the privatization of SOEs was greater than that associated with their production inefficiency (Rama and Văn Kiệt Võ 2008).

The Vietnamese approach to SOE reform favored strengthened incentives over changes in ownership. SOEs were gradually allowed to make their own production and investment decisions, instead of following plan instructions (Fforde and De Vylder 1996). The rules governing employment and pay were progressively disconnected from those applying to civil servants. Directed credit from financial institutions was abolished, which resulted in a harder budget constraint. To reduce the risk of conflict of interest between ownership and regulation, the exercise of state ownership rights in the remaining SOEs is being increasingly transferred from ministries and provinces to the State Capital Investment Corporation, a for-profit sovereign wealth fund inspired by Singapore's Temasek model.

Partnering up with foreign investors also brought in more advanced managerial practices. Indeed, in the earlier phases of economic transition, when many of the institutions of a market economy were still incipient, green-field FDI projects were rare. Having an SOE as a partner, on the other hand, ensured some protection against the unknowns of one of the frontier outposts of economic development. This is how Vinatex, an umbrella corporation for SOEs in the textile sector, became a major exporter of garments (Rup and Rodie 2012).

A similar approach was applied in the services sector. For instance, in 2005 the decision was made to bring in strategic investors to all SOCBs, a transformation that is still under way. But the most remarkable illustration of this approach concerns telecommunications. The liberalization of this sector started in 1993, when Mobiphone was established as an SOE, out of what was until then a government administration. By 1995 Vinaphone, a second SOE, had been established as a competitor to Mobiphone. Gradually the number of players was expanded, and private participation in the capital of the SOEs was allowed. While the sector remains overwhelmingly state-owned, fierce competition between these multiple players resulted in the faster rate of penetration of telecommunications in the world.

This approach has been clearly successful at avoiding a major economic disruption like that experienced by the Soviet Union, but there is more controversy on whether it has been successful at fostering economic growth. There is evidence that productivity growth is increasingly similar in SOEs and firms in the domestic private sector (O'Toole et al. 2016; World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam 2016). The dispersion in productivity between the least and the most productive firms in each sector has also narrowed over time (Nguyen 2017). And the gap between productivity in SOEs and in foreign-invested companies has fallen as well (Le et al. 2019).

The story is similar when assessing trends in labor earnings instead of productivity. The wages paid by SOEs, which were initially higher, have converged to levels similar to those paid by the domestic private sector (Vu and Yamada 2020). The wages paid by foreign-invested companies remain higher, but the gap has narrowed over time (Nguyen 2015; Bhattacharya and Nguyen 2019). Overall, the declining dispersion in productivity and wages across firms with different ownership structures suggests that the approach to SOE reform adopted by the Vietnamese government was successful.

While the focus has been on strengthening incentives, rather than reducing ownership, the relative size of the state sector has fallen over time. There were roughly 12,000 SOEs when the reform started. About half of them were closed in the early 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a major economic crisis in Vietnam. A generous separation package was introduced to facilitate the associated employment restructuring (Rama 2002). Since then, their number has continued to decline, as shares were given to the workers first, then auctioned, then made available through initial public offerings. However, the divestiture process has slowed down in recent years. There were 3,300 SOEs in 2012, but only 2,700 in 2017.

Over the last decade, the emphasis has shifted in the direction of establishing and strengthening national champions in sectors that are deemed strategic or that can benefit from a first-mover advantage. These champions take the form of economic groups, with a parent company as the umbrella and multiple direct subsidiaries underneath. Similar to the Korean *chaebols*, these champions raise a different set of challenges for Vietnam going forward.

Challenges ahead

For quite some time, concerns about Vietnam's development prospects were linked to macroeconomic management. Until 2007, barring a short period of turbulence at the beginning of the transition, growth had been steady, inflation stable, and the balance of payments under control. But accession to the WTO was associated with a construction boom, a stock price bubble, and a ballooning current account deficit (Pincus et al. 2008). Then came the global financial crisis, to which the authorities responded with a massive stimulus package, including a budget deficit in excess of 8 percent of GDP; SOEs were also encouraged to scale up their investments (World Bank 2008). The economy thus seemed to have entered a dangerous stop-and-go cycle. At the beginning of this decade, the combination of slower growth and higher NPLs raised doubts on the sustainability of the Vietnamese model. However, the authorities proved their ability to put the economy back on track. By now, concerns about the future are not related to the quality of macroeconomic management, but rather to deeper challenges.

Too big to fail (and to succeed?)

One of those challenges concerns the role of the state sector. But this is not because of the usual litany about SOEs using resources wastefully and having privileged market positions. This is no

doubt a source of inefficiency, but its impact may be overstated, and it is anyway declining over time.

SOEs do remain more capital-intensive than both domestic private firms and FDI companies, but this is mainly because of the sectors in which they operate, which include utilities. A vast majority of them operate in competitive product markets facing incentives similar to those of private-sector firms, and their managers are criminally liable if they incur losses. The share of the state sector as a whole may still be large in sectors such as textiles, chemicals, or machinery, but the number of SOEs in each of these sectors is large, and they tend to operate independently from each other (Fujita 2017). Even large SOEs with a substantial market share – such as EVN in electricity, Petrovietnam in energy, or Viettel in telecommunications – are highly regarded for their performance (World Bank 2018b). Meanwhile the share of resources absorbed by SOEs at the aggregate level declined as their number shrank and the private sector expanded.

The really serious challenge faced by Vietnam is not as much the drag on resources or the lack of efficiency of SOEs in general as it is the moral hazard potential created by *chaebol*-like economic groups. The performance of these very large SOEs may be reasonably good nowadays, but the combination of their sheer size and weak governance raises two major threats. The first one is the standard "too big to fail" problem. The public and publicly guaranteed debt of economic groups may be moderate relative to GDP, but their total debt is large, and it is unlikely that the government would let them go bankrupt in the event of adverse shocks, bad investments, or a combination of both. The drain on public resources could then be large.

The second threat comes from the fact that economic groups are too large not only in economic terms but also in political terms. Smaller SOEs can be regulated by the relevant line ministries and government agencies as private firms and FDI companies are. Their financial reports can be overseen by the MOF. And the exercise of state ownership rights can be allocated to a for-profit agency such as the State Capital Investment Corporation (SCIC) to avoid conflict of interest with regulators and to strengthen incentives for good performance. But economic groups often have higher technical expertize than the ministries and agencies supposed to regulate them, not to mention the SCIC. And their scale and number of affiliated enterprises make it difficult even for the MOF to fully grasp what their real financial situation is. Economic groups are thus a power within the state.

Current SOE reform efforts go in the direction of preventing them from investing out of their core business areas and assessing the appropriateness of their investment projects. When SOEs face similar incentives as private enterprises, as is most likely the case for the smaller ones, this kind of micromanagement may not be conducive to higher efficiency. SOEs may make poor investment decisions, but it is not clear that the line ministries or government agencies in charge of their oversight would know better. Reform efforts also go in the direction of privatizing more of the remaining SOEs. This is a welcome move, but it will not address the moral hazard problem if it does not tackle economic groups. Upgrading the regulatory capacity of line ministries and relevant agencies, transferring the exercise of state ownership rights to an empowered agency separated from the regulators, and strengthening the oversight by the MOF seem better options.

The legitimacy of wealth

Shared prosperity is perceived by the party as one of main foundations of its legitimacy and a guarantee against social discontent. Shared prosperity depends on access to quality services, gainful employment opportunities, and protection against adverse shocks. So far Vietnam has

done well on all three fronts, as shown by the emergence of a solid middle class. As could be expected with the integration to the global economy, returns to skills have increased substantially, favoring those with more education, and the effects have been amplified by the ensuing changes in the composition of employment (Oostendorp and Doan 2010). Nevertheless, inequality has remained stable at relatively low levels. Not surprisingly, the Vietnamese are among the most optimistic people according to the Gallup World Poll. But there are two disturbing spots in this encouraging picture, and they are at the two ends of the income distribution.

At the low end, the persistent poverty of some ethnic minority groups, and especially of those in the Central Highlands, is a reminder that not everybody is benefitting from growth to the same extent. Ethnic minorities are doing better than in the past, and probably much better than minorities in other countries at a similar development level do. But they do not seem to be catching up. Their hardship may not raise questions about the extent to which prosperity is really shared, though. The dominant view among the *Kinh* and *Hoa* majority is that poverty among ethnic minorities is not due to lack of opportunity, but rather to their "backward" behavior, including not sending their children to school, not relying on modern medicine, or not working hard enough. Thus, disturbing as the situation at the low end may be, it is unlikely to alienate Vietnam's growing middle class.

It is different with the situation at the high end. In just a few years since Vietnam started approaching WTO accession, a small population group with staggering wealth has emerged. It includes a few billionaires (in dollar terms), and its consumption is conspicuous to an extent that is at odds with traditional Vietnamese values. As with the "princelings" in China, this disproportionately fortunate top end is becoming a source of disenchantment among Vietnam's growing middle class.

The wealth of some of the members in this group comes from genuine entrepreneurship. But many simply made extraordinary gains through the up and down swings of asset prices, and especially of land. Because prime land with full papers is scarce and reliable information on listed firms is limited, the general perceptions is that only those with very good connections can have access to the best deals. Privileged access not only makes some people richer, it also makes everyone else poorer. In Vietnam, there is evidence that private investment is lower in provinces that are less transparent, especially in the posting of planning documents (Malesky et al. 2015).

The standard response to a development of this sort is to scale up the fight against corruption. Many of today's industrial countries went through a period of "robber barons" as their cities expanded and fortunes were made on land and urban infrastructure. Greater transparency in urban planning and in public procurement, stronger legal systems, citizen feedback mechanisms, and a whistleblowing media can all help contain and then reduce corruption.

However, the experience of today's industrial countries shows that it may take decades to get there. In the meantime, ensuring a greater stability of assets prices and taxing capital gains on land bear a greater promise to restrain the growth of extravagant wealth that is not associated with genuine entrepreneurship.

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10

VIETNAM'S FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT AND EXPORT PERFORMANCE

Prema-chandra Athukorala and Trung Kien Nguyen

Opening the economy to foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade has been central to Vietnam's gradual transition over the past three decades from a Soviet-style centrally planned economy to a market economy. From a hesitant start in the late 1980s, Vietnam has gone a long way in relaxing restrictions on FDI, particularly in export-oriented projects, and equalizing policies governing local and foreign investors, even though the overall incentive structure is still skewed in favour of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in some key industries. Trade policy reforms have dismantled numerous quantitative import restrictions and significantly reduced tariffs. Thanks to these reforms, the Vietnamese economy has become outward oriented, with FDI and trade playing a pivotal role in growth and structural transformation of the economy. Foreign invested enterprises (FIEs)[1] have become instrumental in linking the manufacturing sector to the rapidly evolving East–Asia–centered global production networks.

The purpose of this chapter is to survey the development of foreign investment and trade regimes and examine emerging patterns of foreign capital inflows and trade in the economy. A key theme running through the analysis is the role of FDI in outward orientation of the manufacturing sector and linking it to global production networks (GPNs). The chapter begins with an overview of foreign investment and trade policy reform. The next three sections examine in turn changing patterns of FDI, export performance, the role of FDI in the expansion of manufacturing exports and the emerging patterns of Vietnam's engagement within East Asia–centered GPNs. Key findings and suggestions for further research are summarized in the final section.

Policy Context

During the era of central planning from the mid-1950s, the economy of North Vietnam was characterized by state ownership of industry, collectivization of agriculture and cottage industries, and state monopoly on trade. After the political reunification of the country in 1975, replacing the market with a plan in the south presented formidable challenges. Efforts to collectivize agriculture in the south were largely unsuccessful, mainly because of the resistance of farmers. Nationalization of industry and commerce had a disastrous impact on industrial output and overall economic activity. By the mid-1980s, the socialist economy of Vietnam was on the brink of disaster, with rampant inflation and a chronic balance of payments situation. Economic difficulties were compounded by the failure of promised foreign assistance from the Western

countries and China to materialize, following Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978, and dwindling of Soviet aid. Worsening economic conditions gave the upper hand within the Communist Party to those favoured, changing the course and transition to a market economy (Dollar and Ljunggren, 1997; Riedel and Comer, 1997).

The government of Vietnam announced its decision to make a transition from a planned economy to a market economy, albeit one with a 'socialist orientation', at the Sixth Communist Party Congress held in December 1986. The reform process, which was introduced under the slogan of *Doi moi* and implemented gradually during ensuing three decades, set the stage for the development of a market economy characterized by a 'fuzzy' mix of state and private ownership. The key elements of the reforms included permitting FDI with a guarantee against expropriation and encouraging tax holidays and permitting full repatriation of profits, eliminating government monopoly on trade, and removing import quotas and licencing to achieve a tariff-based foreign trade regime.

FDI Policy

The Vietnamese National Assembly passed the first law on FDI in Vietnam in December 1987. It specified three modes of foreign investor participation: (i) business cooperation contracts (BCCs), (ii) joint ventures, and (iii) fully foreign-owned ventures. Foreign participation in the fields of oil exploration and communication was strictly limited to BCCs. In some key sectors such as transportation, port construction, airport terminals, forestry plantation, tourism, and cultural activities, joint venture with domestic state-owned enterprises (SOEs) was specified as the sole mode of foreign entry. Fully foreign-owned ventures in other sectors were permitted only under special considerations according to policy priorities of domestic industrial development. The duration of foreign ownership of approved projects was limited to a maximum of 20 years, unless under exceptional circumstances. The incentives offered to foreign investors included exemption from corporate income tax for a period of two years commencing from the first profit-making year, followed by a preferential corporate tax rate between 15% and 25% in priority sectors (as against the standard rate of 32%). Overseas remittance by FIEs for the provision of technology services, repayment of loans, and repatriation of after-tax profits were freely allowed (Tran, 2008; Mallon, 2004; Riedel and Comer, 2007).

In 1991, legislation was passed to permit the setting up of export processing zones (EPZs) as focal points of meeting infrastructure development for export-oriented FDI and providing FIEs with duty-free access to imported inputs. The duration of foreign participation in approved projects was extended from 20 years to 50 years and 70 years in special cases in 1992. A new law enacted in 1996 permitted private enterprises to enter into joint ventures with foreign investors and streamlined procedures for the approval of investment projects. The tax holiday for investment in priority sectors was extended up to eight years, with a beyond-tax holiday income tax rate of 10%.

The initial significant opening of the economy to foreign investment led to a growing resentment against FDI within certain circles of the Communist Party, resulting in adoption of a number of restrictive policy measures in 1995–96. These included establishing Communist Party cells in FIEs, doubling commercial and residential rents for foreign enterprises and expatriate staff, imposing a maximum time limit of three years on work permits issued to foreigners employed in FDI projects, restricting foreign capital participation in labor-intensive industries, and imposing domestic-content and export-performance requirements on FIEs in a number of key industries. This policy backsliding raised serious concerns in the international investment community (Truong and Gates, 1996).

Policy reforms, however, regained momentum following the economic downturn during 1997–99, supporting the adage that 'bad times lead to good reforms'. A new Enterprise Law that came into force in 2000 introduced a simplified procedures for setting up new enterprises and permitted conversion of joint-venture FIEs (including joint ventures formed under BCCs) into fully owned subsidiaries of parent companies. It assured security for private enterprises with a full government guarantee against nationalization or expropriation. FIEs were permitted to open accounts with overseas banks and to mortgage assets attached to land and land-use rights as security for borrowing from credit institutions permitted to operate in Vietnam.

In December 2005, a new unified Investment Law was promulgated in place of the Law on Foreign Investment and the Law on Domestic Investment Promotion. The key features of this landmark legislation included treating foreign and domestic investors equally with regard to investment approval and incentives, providing investors with complete freedom in the choice of the mode of business entry (that is, BBC, joint venture, or full ownership), abolishing local-content and export-performance requirements, and introducing a decentralized three-tier system of investment approval. Under the new approval procedure, projects under US$1 million require only business registration (that is, no requirement for investment approval), projects between $1 and $20 million are approved at the provincial level, and only projects beyond this investment level require the approval of the central government.

Trade Policy

Liberalization of the foreign investment regime has gone hand in hand with significant trade liberalization (Athukorala, 2006; Auffret, 2003). The Law on Import and Export Duties introduced on 1 January 1988 eliminated the government monopoly on foreign trade and set the stage for the transition from the trade regime based on quantitative restrictions (import quotas and licencing) to a transparent, tariff-based trade regime. But during the next decade or so the tariff structure continued to remain characterized by selective protection of some consumer goods industries (cosmetics and some categories of food products), upstream activities related to textiles and garments (silk, cotton, and certain fibers), and some intermediate goods industries (metal products, cements and glass). Import quotas were used side by side with import tariffs in order to protect manufacturing SOEs from import competition.

From the mid-1990s, Vietnam took initiatives to lock in liberalization reforms by committing itself to play an active role in regional, bilateral, and multilateral trade liberalization initiatives. In July 1995, Vietnam became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). In 1994, the United States lifted the long-standing trade embargo against Vietnam. Subsequent negotiations between the governments of Vietnam and the United States culminated in the signing of a bilateral trading agreement (the Vietnam–United States Bilateral Trading Agreement, VNUSBTA) in July 2001. The VNUSBTA, which came into effect on 10 December 2002, was the most comprehensive of all bilateral trading agreements the United States had ever signed with a developing country.

In 1995, Vietnam applied for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The emphasis on WTO accession gained added impetus following China's accession in 2001. Following a series of preparatory sessions, on 10 December 2003, the WTO Working Party started negotiating the terms of Vietnam's membership. During the period of accession negotiations, steps were taken to remove import quota restrictions and to rationalize the tariff structure. Vietnam signed the WTO agreement on 11 January 2007, becoming WTO's 150th member. As part of WTO commitments, Vietnam bound the entire tariff schedule mostly in the 0% to 40% range, with an average bound rate of 11.5%. In 2003, when the WTO accession negotiations

commenced, the simple average tariff rate was about 20%. This declined to 18.5% in 2007 and further to 9.6% in 2017 (WTO, 2018).[2] After two and a half decades of reforms, tariffs are now virtually the sole instruments used in regulating import trade in Vietnam, with only petroleum products subject to import quotas and a few items on the prohibited import list based on health and defense considerations.

Firms operating in Vietnamese EPZs have duty-free access to inputs used in export production and enjoy various tax concessions comparable to or more attractive than those located in EPZs in other countries in the region. Under a duty rebate scheme introduced in 1991, exports of manufactured goods operating outside EPZs are eligible for reimbursement of import duties paid for imported inputs embodied in export products. In 1993 a duty suspension facility was added to the scheme, enabling export-oriented firms (firms exporting more than 50% of output) to suspend payment of duty on imported inputs up to 90 days. The suspension period was further extended to 275 days in 1998.[3]

In the early years of market-oriented reforms Vietnam introduced export duties on a number of export items. This was justified at the time on the grounds of protecting the environment, natural resources conservation, and reserve inputs for domestic production. These duties were subsequently eliminated. Since 1998, only two products – crude oil and scrap metal – have been subject to export duties.

Trends and Patterns of Foreign Direct Investment

This section examines trends, source country composition, and industry profile of FDI inflows to Vietnam following the market-reined reforms that began in the late 1980s. FDI inflows surged from almost zero in late 1980s to US$180 million in 1990 and to US$ 2587 million in 1997. Following a sharp decline during the next five years, FDI inflows regained momentum from about 2003, with a notable acceleration following the WTO accession in 2006 (Figure 10.1).

The onset of the East Asian financial crisis in mid-1997 and the subsequent contraction in intra–Southeast Asian FDI was a significant contributory factor to the decline in FDI inflows during 1998–2002. Investors from East Asian countries – in particular Malaysia, South Korea,
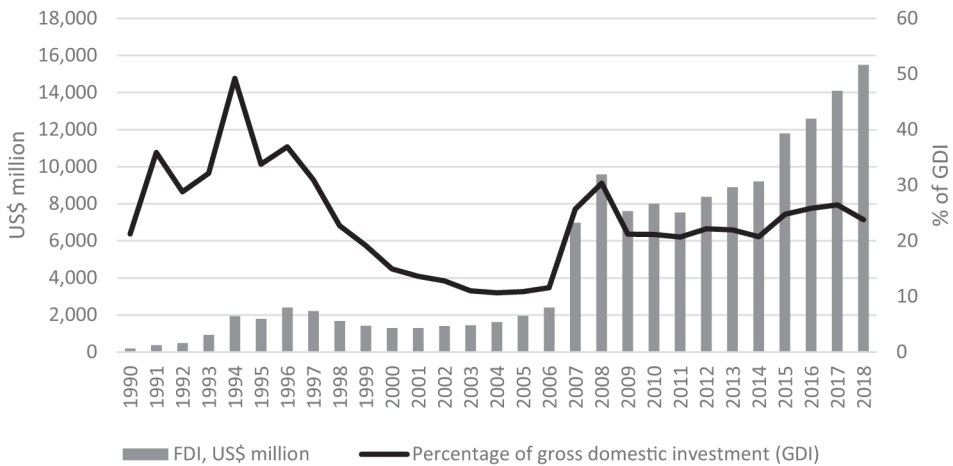
Figure 10.1 Foreign direct investment in Vietnam, 1990–2017

Source: Data compiled from UNCTAD, *World Investment Report* database

and Singapore – played a key role in the surge in FDI inflows in Vietnam on the back of the economic boom in their economies in the lead-up to the crisis. These substantial flows were severely disrupted by the onset of the crisis. However, the data on investment approvals show that investor interest in Vietnam began to wane from about mid-1996 (well before the onset of the East Asian financial crisis) because of the political backlash against foreign firms on the basis of their perceived adverse socio-economic implications (Truong and Gates, 1996; Schaumburg-Muller, 2003). There was also a notable increase in the failure rate of licensed FDI projects (that is, the percentage of withdrawn projects out of total licenced projects) in 1996 and the ensuing three years (Kokko *et al.*, 2003, Table 2).

Total FDI inflows in 2017 were US$14.1 million, a two-fold increase compared to the figure in a decade ago (US$7.2 million 2006). Interestingly, the decline in total world FDI flows during the global financial crisis (2007–08) is not reflected in FDI inflows to Vietnam (Figure 10.1). During 2010–18, FDI amounted to 23.5% of gross domestic investment (GDI), up from 12.5% during 2000–04.[4] Over the past decade, the FDI-DGI ratio has been the highest in Vietnam after Singapore among the main countries in Southeast Asia (Table 10.1).

The ownership patterns of foreign invested enterprises (FIEs) have undergone notable changes over time. During the early years of the reform era, joint ventures, mostly with SOEs, were the dominant entry mode of FDI. During 1988–94, joint ventures accounted for over 70% of total approved FIEs and 75% of total registered capital of these enterprises. Moreover, the bulk of joint ventures (over 90%) had SOEs as the local partners (Kokko *et al.*, 2003). Since then, there has been a significant increase in the share of fully foreign-owned firms among total approved investment (both in terms of the number of projects and value of committed capital) at the expense of the relative position of joint-ventures. By 2017 fully foreign owned firms accounted for over 76% of total registered investment of FIEs.[5]

The source country profile of FDI in Vietnam is characterized by a clear East Asian bias (Table 10.2).[6] Throughout the reform era, investors from East Asia (Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and China) accounted for over 70% of approved FDI. The share accounted for by the United States and the Western European countries is much smaller compared to the source country composition of FDI inflows to the other Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) (Athukorala, 2007, Chapter 2). Among the East Asian

Table 10.1 Foreign direct investment inflow as a percentage of gross domestic investment, 1990–2017[1] (%)

	1990–94	*1995–99*	*2000–04*	*2005–09*	*2010–14*	*2015–18*
Developing countries	5.7	10.9	11.7	12.1	8.0	7.1
China	9.8	13.6	9.3	6.1	3.3	2.7
Southeast Asia						
Indonesia	0.9	2.66	–5.5	6.8	6.6	4.9
Malaysia	19.4	16.58	10.5	13.6	14.5	12.1
Philippines	7.5	9.48	5.8	8.2	5.2	8.7
Singapore	30.3	33.02	62.9[2]	74.4[2]	75.4[2]	84.3
Thailand	4.4	13.44	14.2	13.3	9.4	5.7
Viet Nam	33.5	27.9	12.5	20.4	21.3	25.3

Notes: 1. Period averages.

2. Figures for these years are 'asset-liability' based, whereas those for the previous years are directly from balance of payments records (as data for all years for all other countries).

Source: Compiled from UNCTAD *World Investment Report* database

Table 10.2 Source country composition of approved foreign direct investment, 1988–2005, 2006–10, 2011–15, 2016–19

	1988–2005[1]		2006–2010[1]		2011–2015[1]		2016–19[1]	
	Number of projects	*Registered capital (US$ million)*	*Number of projects*	*Registered capital (US$ million)*	*Number of projects*	*Registered capital (US$ million)*	*Number of projects*	*Registered capital (US$ million)*
Japan	684	6907	741	14052	1489	18014	494	3126
China, PR	431	841	339	2839	526	6494	257	4930
Hong Kong	––	––	622	7846	353	7701	1015	2039
South Korea	1185	6145	1504	16244	2271	26802	140	8155
Taiwan	1615	8657	556	14324	307	8016	14	36
Indonesia	21	286	5	-82	20	193	39	580
Malaysia	214	1772	162	16645	147	-4997	3	32
Philippines	35	346	17	190	20	48	259	3418
Singapore	484	9327	411	12563	649	13259	42	830
Thailand	182	1633	58	4210	179	1884	49	349
Australia	161	1514	79	743	117	479	10	131
Denmark	36	182	55	412	27	88	44	193
France	217	2834	104	120	127	469	29	116
Germany	––	––	162	811	98	583	14	27
Italy	32	106	7	82	30	170	23	466
Netherlands	80	2420	65	3061	110	2784	15	83
Switzerland	48	978	30	747	33	320	42	267
United Kingdom	89	1985	48	237	104	2517	87	453
USA	319	2304	249	1081	213	1503	346	4079
Other countries[2]	603	11426	813	29065	786	4289	3321	32921
Total	6436	59663	6027	134909	7606	87311	2613	26890

Notes: 1. Period total

2. Includes projects financed by capital sent through companies registered in tax-haven countries (Cayman Island, Channel Island, Cook Inland, Mauritius, Panama and Liechtenstein).

–– Data not available.

Source: Compiled from General Statistical Office, *Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam,* Hanoi (various issues)

countries, the relative position of the countries in Southeast Asia has declined over the years as a result of the growing importance of investors from Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and more recently, China. During 2016–19, Korea topped the list with 30% of approved in that year, followed by China (15%).

FDI from the United States and the Western European countries in Southeast Asian countries is heavily concentrated in assembly activities in vertically integrated high-tech industries, mostly in electronics ad automobile (Lipsey, 1998; Athukorala, 2007, Chapter 2). Investors in these product lines place a much greater weight on the stability and transparency of the domestic investment climate compared to their counterparts in the standard export-oriented labor-intensive products (like clothing or footwear) or domestic-market oriented industries. This cautious approach seems to explain the relatively small share of these countries in total FDI inflows to Vietnam.

During the early years of market-oriented reforms in Vietnam, analysts often referred to the US economic embargo as a major constraint on the country's ability to rely on FDI in the process of economic transition. However, interestingly, the lifting of the embargo in 1994 and the signing of the VNUSBTA in 2001 did not immediately bring about a significant change in the source country composition of FDI in Vietnam. The share of US investors in total approved investments in realized projects amounted to a mere 1.5% between 2000 and 2005 (Table 10.3). The first large investment project by a US electronics multinational enterprise (MNE) (Intel Corporation, see later) in Vietnam materialized only in 2006. By then, Vietnam's commitment to market-oriented reforms and promoting FDI had become firmly rooted.

In the early reform years, offshore petroleum and gas extraction and the construction and services sectors were the major areas of attraction to foreign investors, with the manufacturing sector accounting for less than a fifth of registered investment in total approved projects. From about the late 1990s, FDI in manufacturing began to increase over the years. During 2010–14 over 60% of total realized FDI was in manufacturing. During the early years, much of FDI investment in manufacturing was in production for the domestic market. Less than 20% of total approved projects during 1988–90 had export-output ratios of over 50%. From the late 1990s there has been a notable compositional shift in manufacturing FDI from domestic market–oriented to export-oriented production. By 2008, over 70% of approved FIEs in manufacturing had export-output ratios of over 50%, with the majority clustering within 80% to 100% range (Athukorala and Tran, 2012).

Export Performance

Export response to Vietnam's liberalization (*Doi moi*) reforms has been impressive (Riedel and Comer, 1997; Athukorala, 2009; Thanh, 2005). The value of total merchandise exports (in current prices) quadrupled between 1985 and 1990 (from US$699 million to US$2,404 million), surpassed the $50 billion mark in 2007, and reached US$195 billion in 2017 (Figure 10.2). Until about 1992, crude petroleum accounted for a large share of the export increment, a result of earlier foreign investment in the White Tiger field. From then on, there were clear signs of a take-off of non-oil exports, firstly agricultural products and then manufactured goods. Primary products accounted for nearly a half of non-oil merchandise exports from Vietnam in the mid-1980s. This share increased further in early years of the post-reform period as the first positive response to reforms came from agricultural products, mostly rice (Dollar, 1992). Throughout the 1990s, rice was the dominant export earner among agricultural exports. The dominance of rice within primary exports significantly eroded over time as a result of both declines in export value in absolute terms and the rapid expansion of other traditional agricultural products
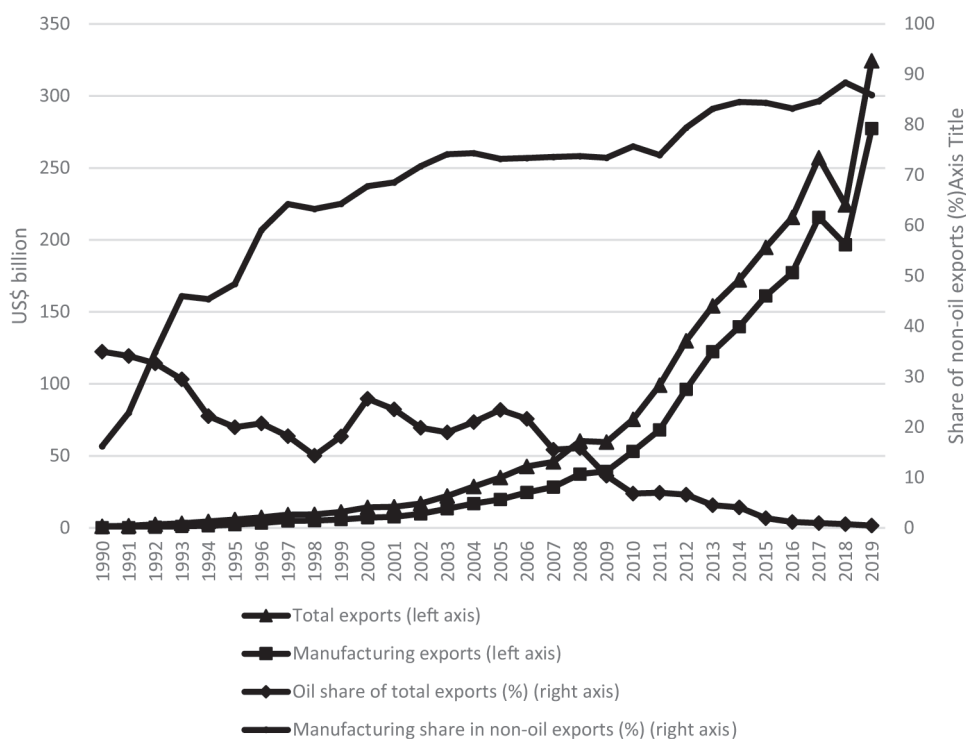
Figure 10.2 Vietnam's merchandise exports

Source: Data compiled from UNCTAD, *World Investment Report* database

Table 10.3 Share world manufacturing exports: Vietnam and other five major ASEAN countries

	2000–01	*2004–2005*	*2009–2010*	*2014–15*	*2018–19*
Indonesia	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7
Malaysia	1.7	1.5	1.7	1.7	1.7
Philippines	0.7	0.6	0.5	5.2	0.5
Singapore	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.9
Thailand	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.6	1.5
Vietnam	0.1	0.2	0.5	1.3	1.9

Source: Compiled from UN Comtrade database

(mostly coffee and rubber) and, more importantly, processed food, in particular, fish and fish preparations.

From about the late 1990s rapid export growth has been mainly driven by manufacturing. The share of manufacturing in non-oil merchandise exports increased continuously from 40% in 1995 to 90% by 2017 (Figure 10.2). Over the past decade or so, the degree of world market penetration of manufacturing exports from Vietnam, as measured by the share of total world manufacturing exports, has been faster than that of the other major economies in Southeast

Asia (Figure 10.2). Vietnam's share in world manufacturing exports increased from 0.18% in 2004–05 to 1.9% in 2018–19, when it was well above those of the other five major countries in Southeast Asia (Table 10.3).

In the 1990s, manufacturing exports from Vietnam were heavily concentrated in traditional labor–intensive products, in particular, apparel, furniture, and footwear (classified as miscellaneous manufacturing (Section 8) on the Standard International Trade Classification [SITC]) (Table 10.3). These three products categories accounted for over two-thirds of total manufacturing exports during this period. There has been a notable diversification of the commodity composition in the new millennium, particularly over the past 10 years, reflecting the rapid integration of Vietnamese manufacturing into the East Asia–centered global production networks. The export shares of products belonging to the commodity class of machinery and transport equipment (SITC 7), in particular, information and communication technology (ICT) products (office machines [SITC 75]), telecommunication and sound recording devices (SITC 76), and semiconductors (SITC 772 and 776), have recorded impressive growth. These are the products in which the ongoing process of *global production sharing*[7] is heavily concentrated (Athukorala, 2014).

Table 10.4 Commodity composition of manufacturing exports from Vietnam, 1992–2014 (annual averages, %)

Product description[1]	1992–93	1999–00	2004–05	2009–10	2013–14	2018–19
Chemicals (SITC 5)	1.7	1.8	3.2	4.1	4.1	2.1
Resource-based products (SITC 6)	13.2	12.7	12.5	17.0	14.7	9.3
Textile (SITC 65)	5.7	4.4	4.1	4.8	3.3	3.4
Power generating machines (SITC 71)	0.1	0.8	1.2	1.8	1.3	0.9
Specialized industrial machinery (SITC 72)	0.5	0.7	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.8
Metal working machinery (SITC 73)	0.1	0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
General industrial machinery (SITC 74)	0.3	1	0.7	1.3	1.2	1.1
Office machines (SITC 75)	0	0.3	5.1	1.1	4.2	3.7
Telecommunication and sound recording devices (SITC 76)	0.2	1.5	1.5	5.6	3.2	3.7
Semiconductors/semiconductor devices (SITC 772 + 776)	0.1	4.7	2.5	1.2	1.2	5.2
Electrical goods (SITC 77, 772, 776)	0.6	3.1	4.5	5.0	4.6	8.4
Road vehicles (SITC 78)	3.1	0.8	2.4	1.6	1.8	1.2
Other transport equipment (SITC 79)	0.2	0	0.1	1.1	1.1	
Furniture and other wood products (SITC 82)	1.8	5.6	8.1	7.2	4.5	4.5
Travel goods (SITC 83)	6.2	11.2	10.0	9.0	6.5	1.7
Apparel and clothing accessories (SITC 84)	55.9	24.8	30.0	25.3	19.2	13.7
Footwear (SITC 85)	1.2	6.2	19.5	12.5	10.0	9.9
Professional and scientific instruments (SITC 87)	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.6	0.7	1.5
Photographic apparatus (SITC 88)	0.1	0.8	0.4	1.4	2.0	0.3
Total manufacturing	100	100	100	100	100	100
US$ billion	0.8	6.2	14.8	37.4	97.1	237.1
Memo item: Manufacturing share in merchandise exports	30	46.7	50.5	57.9	68.8	

Note: 1: Standard International Trade Classification (SITC) product codes are given in brackets.
Source: Compiled from UN Comtrade database

The data plotted in Figure 10.3 specifically focus on the role of global production shar‑ing in manufacturing exports from Vietnam. The share of total 'network products' (parts and components and final assembly) remained around 20% until about the end of the first decade in the new millennium. Since then it has increased, sharply reaching 58% in 2018–19. However, Vietnam is still at the early stage of integrating into global production networks, compared to Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, even though its performance has already been much more impressive compared to Indonesia (Athukorala and Kohpaiboon, 2015). As discussed in the next section, the indications are that the share of network products in Vietnam's export composition is bound to increase rapidly in years to come. At present, parts and components accounts for almost half of total network product exports from Vietnam (77% in 2014) (Figure 10.3). With a large surplus labor pool, the country has the potential for becoming a large final assembly center within global production networks.[8]

During the pre–reform era, Vietnam's geographic patterns of export (and, of course, foreign trade in general) were characterized by a heavy concentration in central planned economies in the Soviet bloc.[9] By 1985 almost two-thirds of Vietnam's exports was to these markets. During the early years of the reform period, market diversification was mostly the outcome of rapid expansion in exports to the regional markets. The combined share of exports to East Asia coun‑tries remained virtually unchanged at around 60% during the ensuing decade, with the South‑east Asian countries accounting for about a fifth of total exports. Exports to the European and
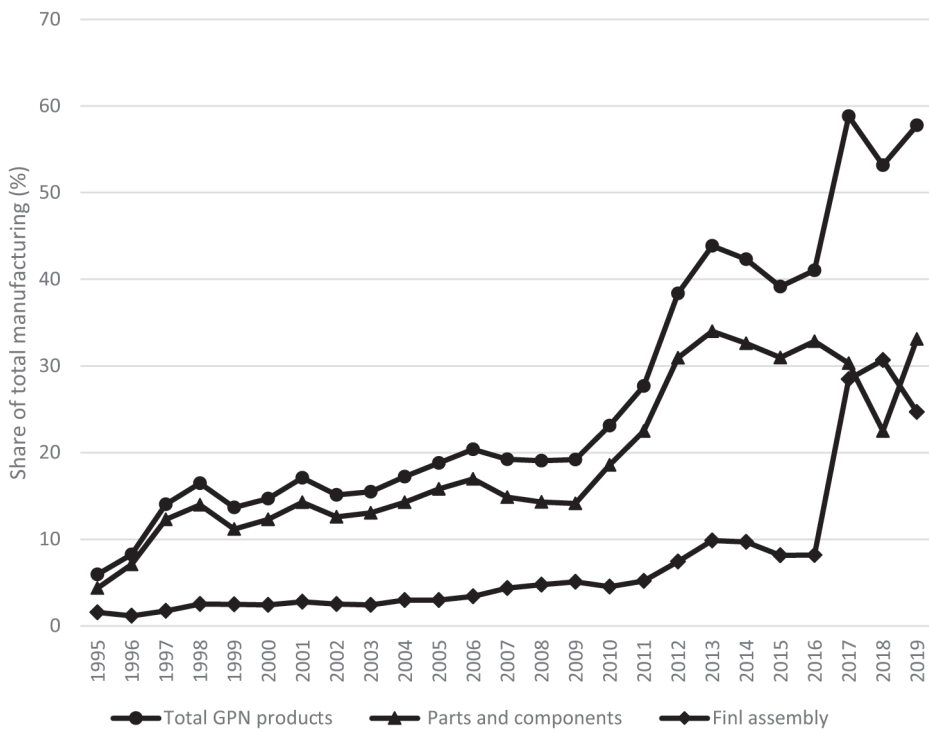
Figure 10.3   Share of 'global production sharing' products in manufacturing exports, 2000–2014

Source: Compiled from Comtrade database using the commodity classification described in Athukorala (2014) for separating exports based on global production sharing (parts and components and final assembly exported within global production networks

North American markets began to expand rapidly with a considerable time lag and gathered momentum from the late 1990s. The combined export share to Europe and North America accounted for nearly half of total exports by 2014. The entry of Vietnamese products to the United States remained virtually barred by the trade embargo, which lasted until 1994. The US share in total Vietnamese export began to increase following the lifting of the embargo, reaching 4.8% by the end of 1990s. Vietnam–US trade received a further impetus for the market entry concession given under the bilateral trading agreement signed in 2001. In 2014 the United States absorbed almost a quarter of total merchandise exports from Vietnam. This share is bound to increase rapidly given the recent entry of Intel Corporation and a number of other US-based MNEs into Vietnamese manufacturing, as discussed in the next section. The export market share of China has expanded rapidly against the backdrop of an overall decline in the relative importance of regional markets. At the beginning of the 1990s, China absorbed less than 1% of total non-oil exports from Vietnam. This figure increased to 10.2% in 2014.

The Role of FDI in Export Expansion

FDI has played a pivotal role in the expansion of manufacturing exports from Vietnam (Figure 10.4). Until about the mid-1990s, FIEs accounted for about 20% of total manufacturing exports. Since then there has been a continuous increase in this share, accounting for over 80% over the past few years. The data clearly show a close relationship between the FIE participation in manufacturing exports and Vietnam's share in world manufacturing exports. This relationship suggests that FIE participation in the Vietnamese economy during the reform era has unequivocally been export creating.

During the early years of reforms, the standard labor-intensive goods (in particular, textile and garments, footwear, and miscellaneous manufacture) dominated the export composition of FIEs (Athukorala and Tran, 2012). From about early 2000, electrical machinery and apparatus emerged as the single most important export line of FIEs operating in Vietnam. These
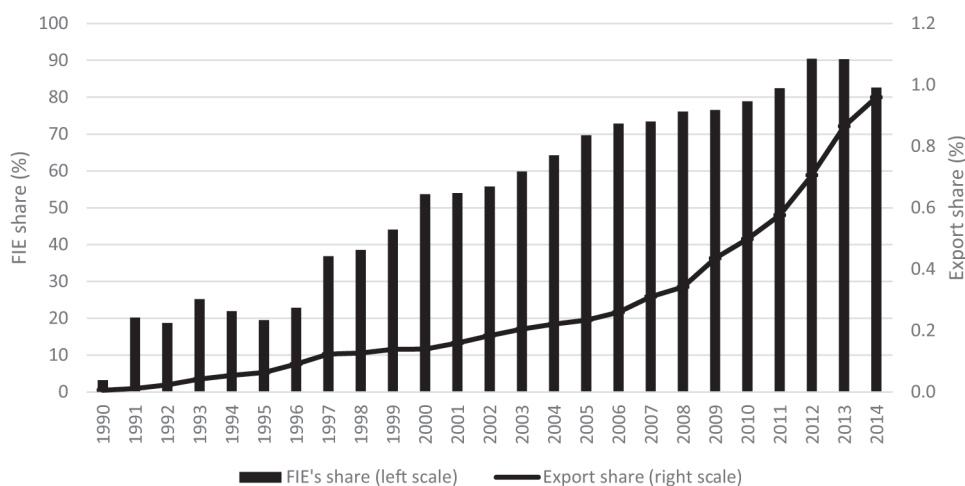
Figure 10.4   FIEs' share in manufacturing exports, Vietnam's share in world manufacturing exports

Source: Compiled from Comtrade database using the commodity classification described in Athukorala (2014) for separating exports based on global production sharing (parts and components and final assembly exported within global production networks

emerging export patterns were indicative of the role of FDI in linking Vietnam to rapidly evolving regional production networks based on its comparative advantage in labor-intensive tasks within global production networks. At the beginning these product lines in Vietnam were dominated by small- and medium-scale foreign investors (predominantly by Taiwanese firms), with the only large global player being Hitachi Corporation from Japan.[10]

The decision made in 2006 by Intel Corporation, the US-based world's largest semiconductor producer, to set up an assembly and testing plant in Ho Chi Minh City in South Vietnam marked a watershed in plugging in Vietnamese manufacturing industry into global production networks. The construction of the US$1.2 billion factory began in 2007, and it started production in 2010. It is the largest assembly and testing facility in Intel's global production networks and employs over 3,000 workers at full capacity (Altman, 2007; Intel, 2010).

There is evidence of a herd mentality in the site selection process of electronics multinational firms, particularly if the first entrant is a major player in the industry. Interestingly, following Intel's entry, a similar process has unfolded in Vietnam. Taiwanese-based Hon Hai Precision Industry (Foxconn), the world's biggest electronics contract manufacturer, came to Vietnam in 2007. The other major players in the electronics industry which have subsequently set up production facilities in Vietnam include Compal, Nidec, Nokia, Panasonic, Tamron, Microsoft, Samsung, LG, and Bridgestone, Jabil Circuits (Wall Street Journal, 2007; Bland, 2012; Lewis, 2016; Nikkei Asian View, 2014).

In 2009, Samsung Electronics set up a large plant in Hanoi to assemble handheld products (HHPs) such as smartphones and tablets. In the subsequent years Samsung has been gradually shifting HHP assembly from its plants in China to its Vietnamese plants in response to increasing wages and rent in China. During the next five years, four electronics parts and component producing subsidiaries of the Samsung group (Samsung Display, Samsung Electro-Mechanics, Samsung SDI, Samsung SDS) also set up operations in Vietnam.[11] In 2009, 65% of Samsung's global HHP supply came from China, with Vietnam contributing a mere 3%; by the end of 2012 these figures had changed to 45% and 33%, respectively. In 2012, Samsung's total exports from Vietnam amounted to 11% of Vietnam's total merchansing exports (Athukorala and Kohpaiboon, 2015). Vietnam is now the largest mobile phone manufacturing base for Samsung (Business Korea, 2014).

Given the arrival of these global players in the electronics and electrical machinery industry, global production sharing is likely to be the prime mover of export-led industrialization in Vietnam in years to come Trade and foreign investment reforms implemented over the past three decades are now deep rooted to win investor confidence. Moreover, proximity to the other East Asian countries which are deeply embedded in global production networks, ample availability of trainable labor at a wage rate that is much lower compared to all these countries,[12] and political stability are the main attractions of Vietnam as a production base for MNEs involved in global production sharing.

FIEs, in addition to their direct contribution to export expansion, seem to act as conduits for the expansion of exports by local firms (both SOEs and newly emerging private firms) by opening up marketing channels (Kokko and Sjoholm, 2006). For instance, following the entry of foreign firms into garments and other light consumer goods industries, many *international buying groups*, which had long-established market links with these firms, expanded their global procurement networks to cover Vietnam. These buying groups have subsequently begun to procure supplies directly from local firms. Moreover, in some export-oriented industries MNEs carry out production in Vietnam entirely through sub-contracting arrangements with pure local firms (e.g. Nike in footwear and Ikea in furniture), while directly engaging only in procurement and marketing tasks through liaison offices. The recent entry of global electronics and electrical

firms has begun to open up subcontracting opportunities for local entrepreneurs. For instance, the Saigon Hi-Tech Park has begun to emerge as an investment hub, bringing together foreign investors with domestic companies in setting up assembly and testing plants linked to regional production networks (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2007).

In sum, there is clear evidence from the Vietnamese experience that under a liberal trade and investment policy regime, which helped unleash the natural export potential of the country, FDI can play a pivotal role in linking domestic manufacturing to global markets. The implications of this emerging FDI-propelled process of export-led industrialization for the long-term growth and development of the economy remain an important subject for further research. The lack of 'industrial deepening' of the merging specialization patterns – limited domestic backward linkages of export-oriented industries and their failure to nurture domestic research and development capabilities – is often emphasized in the Vietnamese policy debate as a barrier to long-term growth. Whether this is a structural feature of export-oriented growth in this era of global production sharing (and hence is beyond the influence of domestic policy makers) or is due to remaining impediments to private-sector operations in the economy remain unresolved issues in this policy debate (Leung, 2015; Riedel, 2015; Sturgeon and Zylberberg, 2016).

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has surveyed trade and investment policy reforms in Vietnam and emerging patterns of FDI and export performance over the past three decades. Particular emphasis has been placed on the role of FDI in linking Vietnamese manufacturing sector into the East Asia–centered global production networks. The evidence pieced together in the chapter from the related literature and some fresh data tabulations clearly illustrates the pivotal role of concurrent liberalization of foreign investment and trade policy regimes in Vietnam's transition from central planning to an increasingly market-oriented economy. When market forces unleashed, albeit in a constrained fashion, specialization patterns of the economy asserted themselves in line with the country's potential for global economic integration.

In the East Asia context, Vietnam's performance in manufacturing exports stands out for the prolonged heavy concentration in traditional labor-intensive manufacturing, in particular, apparel, footwear, and furniture. However, the analysis of the changing commodity mix of exports and patterns of FDI reveals clear early signs of diversification of the export mix into dynamic product lines, in particular, electronics and electrical goods. Normalization of economic relations with the United States, significant reforms of investment and trade policy regimes, and the accession to the membership in the WTO have been instrumental in setting the stage for linking Vietnamese manufacturing to global production networks. In response, a number of major players involved in global production sharing have already entered Vietnamese manufacturing. The indications are that electronics and electrical goods are going to play a dominant role in expanding manufacturing exports in years to come, replicating the specialization patterns of the dynamic East Asian countries, which are well integrated into global production networks.

Notes

1 Enterprises with capital directly invested by foreigners, either entirely (in fully foreign-owned firms) or partly (in joint ventures with local parties).
2 Comparable figures in 2017 for the other major Southeast Asian countries are Indonesia 6.9, Malaysia 6.1, Philippines 6.3, and Thailand 11.6 (WTO, 2018).

3 Currently (February 2018) there are four EPZs in Vietnam, three of which are in Ho Chi Minh City (Tan Thuan and Linh Trung I, II); the newest EPZ, Linh Trung III, is in Tay Ninh Province.

4 The FDI-GDI ratio was much higher during 1990–99 compared to that for 2005–13, but this mainly reflects the lower level of GDI during the former period (the denominator).

5 Data reported in this chapter, unless otherwise stated, are based on General Statistical Office, *Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam* (various issues).

6 Data on the source country composition of FDI need to be treated with caution because some MNEs financed FIEs with capital sent through companies registered in tax-haven countries (Cayman Island, Channel Island, Cook Inland, Mauritius, Panama and Liechtenstein).

7 *Global production sharing* is 'the splitting of the production process (of a good or a service) into discrete tasks, which are located in countries in which factor prices are well matched to the factor intensity of the particular task' (Feenstra, 1998). The alternative terms used to refer to this phenomenon include vertical specialization, international production fragmentation, and slicing the value chain. Interrelations among a set of firms specialising in different segments of the production process of a given product as a single economic group is referred to as *global production networks* (GPNs). Trade within GPNs includes both parts and components (for example, semiconductors exported by Intel from Vietnam) and final assembly (mobile phones exported by Samsung from Vietnam). For details on the global production sharing in the expansion of manufacturing exports from the East Asian countries, see (Athukorala, 2014; Athukorala and Kohpaiboon, 2015).

8 Final assembly within global production networks are generally much larger operations requiring employment of a larger workforce compared to parts and components production/assembly (Jones, 2000, Chapter 9). This is considered one of the main reasons for the virtual disappearance of final assembly plants from Malaysia and Singapore, and to a significant extent from Thailand, following the emergence of China as the premier assembly centre within regional production networks.

9 This paragraph draws on Athukorala (2009), with data updated to 2014 using the same data source.

10 The Hitachi plant in Ho Chi Minh City commenced operation in 2000. It assembles parts and components for a wide range of consumer electrical goods and currently employs about 4,000 workers.

11 By 2014, the total investment of the Samsung group in Vietnam (the combined investment of these four subsidiaries and four other subsidiaries: Samsung Heavy Industries, Samsung Life Insurance, Samsung Fire Insurance, and Cheil Worldwide) amounted to US$9.1 billion (Business Korea, 2014).

12 The monthly wage of a factory worker in Vietnam varies in the range of US$100 to 150, compared to the average wage of over US$350 in the manufacturing clusters in China.

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11

CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

State Effectiveness Under Conditions of Commercialization

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The role of the state in economic development is back on the agenda. The anti-state cul-de-sac of the late 20th century could not survive the twin onslaughts of the historical transformation of the Chinese economy in a single generation and the sudden dependence on government largesse in the advanced countries in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. Development agencies increasingly emphasize the role of government effectiveness – or the state's capacity to make and implement plans, collect taxes, build roads and run schools and clinics – in making progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

Vietnam is an interesting case in that it has been held up as an example of both an effective and an ineffective state: it has outperformed in the provision of basic health and education services, but has disappointed in areas such as environmental protection and corruption. Unlike other Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam has a long history of hierarchically organized and (at times) meritocratic government, and these institutions have been instrumental in the country's transition from an impoverished, isolated and war-ravaged country into a dynamic, outward-oriented, middle-income economy. However, specific characteristics of the country's reform process have given rise to structural impediments to the development of bureaucratic capacity, constraints which have taken on increasing importance with the growth and diversification of the Vietnamese economy.

This chapter focuses on two related aspects of this process: first, the fragmentation of the state apparatus and growing resistance to the centralization and coordination of authority; and second, the commercialization of state agencies, the origins of which can be traced back to government's failure to establish clear boundaries between the state and the commercial classes during the early stages of reform. Fragmentation and commercialization are two sides of the same coin: taken together, they have weakened the capacity of the state to impose discipline state and non-state elites. The chapter proceeds as follows. The next section introduces the concept of state effectiveness and its measurement and discusses competing explanations of variations in state capacity observed in the developing world. This is followed by a discussion of the trajectory of economic reform in Vietnam and its implications for state effectiveness. Because the commercial elite emerged from within the state itself, the bureaucracy could not achieve autonomy from economic interests or impose discipline on competing elite factions. This has contributed to a fragmentation of the state apparatus, competition among government agencies and an absence of coordination. The penultimate section considers the problem of

strengthening state effectiveness in a context of entrenched commercialization and fragmenta-tion. The final section concludes.

State Effectiveness

Max Weber defined bureaucracy as rule-based authority under which all citizens receive equal treatment. More than any other characteristic, the extent to which authority is based on clearly codified rules and not the arbitrary exercise of power is the defining feature of an effective state. To this Weber added other essential characteristics: fixed jurisdictions, hierarchical organization, meticulous record keeping, meritocracy in hiring and promotion and full-time employment (no moonlighting) (Weber, 1946, p. 98). Many of these qualities (although certainly not all) would be familiar to Chinese or Vietnamese scholar-officials under the *ancien regime*. Although the Confu-cian ideal of a meritocratic, centralized bureaucracy was never fully or consistently implemented in Vietnam, this does not diminish the importance of long experience with the imperial model to the norms and practices of subsequent Vietnamese states (Alexander Woodside, 2006).

The contemporary literature has begun to grapple with the difficult problem of measuring bureaucratic capacity. There are essentially two approaches: measuring inputs, or gauging how closely public institutions approximate the "ideal type" Weberian bureaucracy; or measuring outputs like the coverage of health and education services and tax revenue as a share of national income. The World Bank has compiled World Governance Indicators for more than 200 coun-tries since 1996.[1] One of the six dimensions of governance covered in the database is govern-ment effectiveness, an index constructed as a hybrid of input indicators measuring perceptions of institutional quality, and output indicators for schools, health services, water and sanitation, electricity and so on (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, 2010, p. 4).[2]

As shown in Table 11.1, Vietnam falls in the middle of the pack, both globally and within the region. Vietnam performs better on output indicators like service coverage and revenue collec-tion and worse on perception indicators like public sector transparency and the quality of public administration. This reflects the government's long experience of mobilizing resources to achieve concrete targets, an essential skill in wartime and valued under central planning. If the capacity to tax citizens and businesses is evidence of effectiveness, the Vietnamese government is among the most effective in the region: Vietnam's public sector accounts for 30 percent of domestic economic activity, in sharp contrast to Indonesia (18 percent), the Philippines (18 percent and

Table 11.1 Government effectiveness in 2017

	Number of sources	Score★	Percentile ranking
Vietnam	10	0.00	53%
Bangladesh	10	−0.74	22%
China	10	0.42	68%
India	10	0.09	57%
Indonesia	10	0.04	55%
Malaysia	9	0.84	76%
Philippines	10	−0.06	52%
Singapore	8	2.20	100%
Thailand	9	0.38	67%
★Scores range from −2.5 to +2.5			

Source: World Governance Indicators[3]

even Thailand (24 percent). By contrast, the government's administrative and technical capacity has been characterized as weak, and there is evidence of deterioration during the reform period as central control over decision-making has been attenuated (Yip and Tran, 2008, p. 206).

Government effectiveness scores correlate reasonably closely with economic performance. As an illustration, Table 11.2 presents average gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates for a sample of 101 low- and middle-income countries organized by World Bank government effectiveness scores for the period 2000–2017 (oil exporters have been left out of the sample). Countries with exceptionally low government effectiveness estimates recorded lower rates of growth, although the differences are small. A stronger trend emerges when GDP growth is controlled for per capita income (we would normally expect poorer countries to grow more rapidly). Only government effectiveness and regulation quality – which are, not surprisingly, closely correlated – bear a statistically significant relationship to GDP growth for this period, and the signs for political stability and voice and accountability are reversed.

This result is corroborated by other studies of bureaucratic quality and growth. Evans and Rauch find a close relationship between their "Weberianess Scale" and economic growth over the period 1970–1990 and (Evans and Rauch, 1999). They conclude that competent and cohesive bureaucracies were an important factor in the rapid growth of East Asian newly industrializing economies like Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, a point echoed by others (for example, Haggard, 2004; Keefer and Knack, 1997). Dincecco and Katz find a relationship between fiscal centralization and economic performance over the very long term in 11 European countries (Dincecco and Katz, 2014). Sacks and Levi show that famines are less likely to occur in countries with a civil bureaucracy, law enforcement and reliable infrastructure (Sacks and Levi, 2010). Hamm, King and Stuckler explain the poor performance of some transition economies in terms of the loss of state capacity resulting from shock therapy–type policies that undermined the government's fiscal position (Hamm, King, and Stuckler, 2012). Cingolani and colleagues focus on bureaucratic autonomy and detect a close relationship between capacity of the state to act independently and improvements in child mortality rates and the prevalence of tuberculosis regardless of the nature of the political regime (Cingolani, Thomsson, and de Crombrugghe, 2015).

If countries with more effective states perform better, how do we explain variations in state capacity? Rueschemeyer concludes that "[t]he historical record as well as current experience with development efforts suggests two broad empirical generalizations about state building: a well-functioning state is difficult to construct, and success often comes slowly where it does come" (Rueschemeyer, 2005, p. 143). Building a bureaucracy in the Weberian mode implies changes to norms and practices that run against the interests of powerful groups within government and in society. Chanda and Putterman argue that long experience of centralized government is associated with both a higher degree of bureaucratic competence and economic

Table 11.2 Government effectiveness and growth among low- and middle-income countries

			GDP growth 2000–2017	
Government Effectiveness	*n*	*Average GE*	*Real growth rate*	*Net of GDP pc*
Less than –1.0	15	–1.35	3.3%	–1.4%
–0.99 to –0.50	37	–0.67	4.3%	–0.1%
–0.49 to 0	29	–0.26	4.4%	0.4%
0.01 and over	20	0.29	4.2%	0.5%
Total	101	–0.461	4.2%	0%

development. They argue that countries that have been politically unified for many centuries and that share a common language are more likely to develop effective institutions, and as a result enjoy faster rates of economic growth (Chanda and Putterman, 2005). However, the relationship is not a straightforward one: Ethiopia and Guatemala, for example, are present-day low-income countries with long state histories under unified regimes. Acquiring a Weberian state is not simply a product of time.

Some authors have argued that countries sharing China's Confucian tradition – Japan, Korea and Vietnam – were more likely to build effective bureaucracies owing to the emphasis in ancient Chinese thought on hierarchy, meritocracy and duty (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). Dell and associates argue that villages in northern Vietnam, which has a longer history of bureaucracy than the south, have greater capacity to provide public goods and manage redistributive mechanisms. As a result these areas have higher living standards than formerly Khmer regions (Dell, Lane, and Querubin, 2015). The rediscovery of Confucianism as a precursor to modern bureaucracy would have come as a surprise to Weber, who saw traditionalism and clan loyalty as antagonistic to the formation of modern states. Our views of the impact of Confucianism seem to wax and wane with the fortunes of the East Asian economies: while the rapid growth of Korea, Taiwan and Singapore contributed to a positive assessment of the Confucian legacy, the arrival of the East Asian financial crisis in 1997 led commentators to condemn these same values as the source of "crony capitalism." Indeed, a strong case can be made that Korea's "developmental" state owes more to models that arrived with Japanese imperialism, which weakened the aristocracy and introduced a centralized bureaucracy (Woo, 1991; Cumings, 2005a, p. 73; Eckert, 1991, p. 70).

Charles Tilly has made the case that war, or more precisely the need of rulers to finance war-making, was the driving force behind state formation in the European context. In his famous formulation of this idea, "War made the state; and the state made war" (Tilly, 1975, p. 42). Other theorists look beyond the war financing to consider the imperative of resource mobilization more generally and its relationship to the nature of political settlements or coalition building among political elites. David Waldner compares Syria, Turkey, South Korea and Taiwan and argues that state capacity is linked to "elite cohesion," whereas conflict among elites leads to the mobilization of subordinate social groups, clientelist politics and unsustainable spending to hold together diffuse coalitions (Waldner, 1999). Dan Slater applies a similar framework in the Southeast Asian context, in which he sees state capacity as a product of "protection pacts" in which elites agree to pay taxes and submit to state control in exchange for security and defense against threats to their position from popular movements (Slater, 2014). Thus urban-based popular movements in Malaysia drove Malaysian elites into coalition, while elite groups in the Philippines were less threatened by class-based movements in rural areas.

Vietnam: A Fragmented, Commercialized State

Vietnam is considered by many observers to possess a strong state in terms of its legitimacy, authority and internal capabilities (Migdal, 1988, p. 270). Unlike Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, Vietnam has avoided factionalism and political paralysis: the Communist Party is essentially unopposed and manages leadership succession in an orderly fashion, dominates organized labor and religion and has minimized the role of political violence. The government has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to enforce its decisions and implement policies and programs. Judging from indicators like maternal mortality, literacy and electrification, Vietnam's state is among the most effective in the region.

Yet for all its mobilizational and managerial power, the Vietnamese state shows signs of endemic weakness. Interagency coordination is poor, and the upper levels of the political hierarchy struggle

to implement decisions and enforce rules at the local and sectoral levels. The locus of authority is unclear, with decision-making power divided horizontally across agencies and vertically between the center and provinces; public-sector jobs are distributed to family members or sold to the highest bidder; and the border between the public and private sector is intentionally blurred. Consistent application of the rules, the hallmark of modern bureaucracy, has given way to a system that increasingly resembles the imperial pattern of concentric circles of influence.

The coexistence of mobilizational capacity and weak institutions is a product of the country's unique history and engagement with imported models of governance. Alexander Woodside's studies of 19th-century neo-Confucianism have shown that the ideal of a centralized, hierarchical and meritocratic state continually ran up against the reality of distinctly Southeast Asian power structures. The capital's desire for political control was circumscribed by the capacity of local officials to withhold information, creating space for bargaining between localities and the court. Village life, which centered on lineage groups and mutual aid societies, provided few access points of external leverage. The absence of strong indigenous commercial classes was another obstacle to elite cohesion: even as late as 1931 the population of Saigon was just 120,000 people, 34,000 of whom were ethnic Chinese (A. Woodside, 1989, p. 147).

The main objective of French administrators was the colonies' financial self-sufficiency, which implied a skeletal administrative structure and dependence on Vietnamese intermediaries. In 1937, the French ruled 17 million Vietnamese with slightly less than 3,000 administrative personnel and 11,000 French troops; compare this to the 246,000-strong Japanese civil service in Korea which governed a country of 21 million (Cumings, 2005b, p. 217). The colonial government centralized what was important to it, such as customs and security, but left the rest of the administration to atrophy. This was evident in the approach to education: only 2 percent of children received a primary education in Vietnam in the 1930s, compared to 70 percent in Taiwan (Cumings, 2004, p. 294).

Vietnam achieved independence and reunification after four decades of war. To paraphrase Tilly, war made the modern Vietnamese state, and the Vietnamese state made war. But state-building and war-making built on the foundations of localism rather than uprooting them, the need for which only increased with the intensification of American bombing from 1965 (Beresford and McFarlane, 1995, p. 54). The traditional village elite was replaced by party cadres, giving the government the means to intervene directly in village life, and conscription brought millions of rural people into the national institution for the first time. Wartime mobilization was achieved, but the mechanisms deployed were ineffective in peacetime. In a modern version of the Nguyen emperors' importation of the Chinese imperial model, the victorious Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) government set about implementing an essentially undiluted version of Soviet central planning (A. Woodside, 1988, p. 103). The mobilizational state remained mobilized, but now for economic rather than military objectives: all trade was to take place within the state, and commercial interests were suppressed, prompting the mass emigration of ethnic Chinese (Reid, 1997, p. 61). With them left the capital, skills and commercial networks that the economy needed to recover quickly from the war. Collectivization was imposed on southern farmers, who resisted by withholding produce from the market or not planting at all. War in Cambodia and with China, the loss of Soviet aid and international isolation worsened what was already a desperate economic situation.

State Commercialization

Pressure for reform started from below and emerged from the interstices of central planning. Farmers, state enterprise managers and anyone with access to Soviet or Chinese aid had traded

outside of the plan since its inception (Fforde and Paine, 1987; R. Abrami, 2002). Managers of state companies traded scarce commodities, and local authorities tolerated cross-border smuggling to acquire essential supplies and in exchange for illegal levies, some of which were channeled into local government coffers. Ho Chi Minh City authorities set up companies to engage in domestic and international trade. Growing tolerance for these "fence-breaking" activities created underground markets for commodities and factors of production that gradually gained acceptance. Legitimation of fence-breaking also created markets for government positions that conferred control over state resources. The state not only increased the space for market transactions, it was itself effectively marketized (Cheshier, 2010; Fforde, 2007).

As trading was gradually legitimized, commercial interests coalesced within state enterprises, central ministries, and the local party-state. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) and local authorities set up new firms to access state credit, which was used for speculative activities. The number of state enterprises mushroomed from 3,000 to 12,000 in the four years after 1985, triggering a credit-fueled boom and hyperinflation. In reaction, the government imposed an orthodox stabilization program and a cull of nearly half of all state-owned enterprises. The macroeconomic rules of the game were re-established, but the era of central planning was effectively over. Relaxation of restrictions on domestic markets, international trade and foreign investment and the explosive growth of household enterprises created new income-earning opportunities for firms. The absence of an established commercial class left a vacuum that was filled by state enterprises, central and provincial agencies and government personnel working on their own account or linked to businesses and individuals outside of the state. In Jonathan London's words, "what occurred was the development of a business class *within* the state" (London, 2009, p. 385).

The number of SOEs and their share of economic output did not fall until the end of the 1990s, when the East Asian financial crisis triggered a new round of SOE "equitization" (Figure 11.1). However, their role the economy did not change, as equitization was concentrated on smaller firms. Moreover, equitization was not a challenge to the commercialized state, but instead a change in accumulation strategy. No other groups had the capital, knowledge and connections to profit from the joint-stock companies created by equitization, leaving SOE
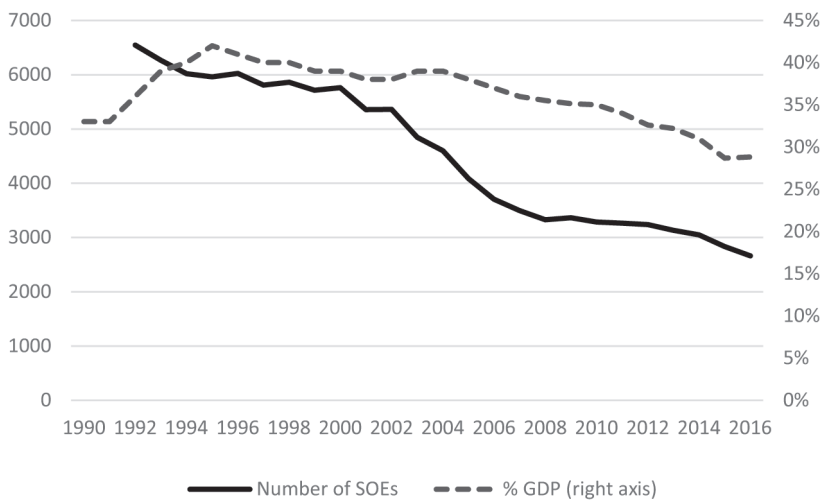
Figure 11.1 Number of SOEs and their share of economic output

Source: General Statistics Office

managers and provincial officials to channel public assets, particularly land, into quasi-private companies under their control. In Gainsborough's formulation, equitization, far from signaling a retreat of government from the economic sphere, was a mechanism of "state advance" (Gainsborough, 2009).

SOEs have taken advantage of easy access to land and credit from state banks to enter into speculative ventures in the property market and the financial sector, much of which collapsed as credit conditions tightened and land prices plummeted in 2010. Spectacular corruption scandals in 2010 and 2012 revealed an absence of controls on management, and an inability or unwillingness of government to take decisive action to correct the situation (Le, H.H., 2013). Arguably of greater consequence for Vietnam's development prospects are the long-term effects of state commercialization, or the formation of a business class within the state that is positioned to use state power to manipulate markets and has a material interest in suppressing the development of an independent commercial class. As Stefan De Vylder presciently pointed out in 1995,

> [A]lthough *doi moi* is an irreversible process, there is at present a danger that the reform process may lose momentum, as the comparatively 'easy' phase of economic transition has largely been accomplished already. The next phase may in some respects prove to be more difficult, as it will require measures that go against the short-term interests of the driving forces behind the initial reforms, in particular within the state enterprise sector.
>
> *(De Vylder, 1995, p. 32)*

The "easy" phase of reform consisted of the gradual reduction of barriers to domestic and international trade and investment, which brought about a shift from rationing to prices and markets as the primary means of resource allocation. As we have seen, state companies and agencies and individuals associated with the state were the institutions and people best positioned to take advantage of market opportunities. The subsequent and more difficult phases of reform consist of the enforcement of rules to prevent the private appropriation of state assets and the use of state power to stifle competition.

The absence of second stage reforms represents an obstacle to the formation of commercial classes that are sufficiently independent from the state and its functionaries to advocate for a rules-based system of economic governance. Even today, the private sector is dominated by tiny firms, except for a few quasi-private conglomerates with close links to the state (Cheshier and Pincus, 2010). That there are still so few large, genuinely private firms even after 30 years of reform suggests that state commercialization continues to impede the growth of private companies.

"Fragmented Authoritarianism"

Commercialization of the state proceeded in tandem with the fragmentation of political authority, processes that are related and mutually reinforcing. The collapse of the planned economy shifted economic power – at least in theory – from the central state to enterprises, local authorities and households. The relaxation of controls on economic decision-making meant that the central authorities needed new instruments – laws, regulations and oversight mechanisms – to control the behavior of firms, households and local authorities. Crucially, the central authorities needed to back up its new rules with the political power to enforce its will on profit-seeking entities within the central and local state apparatus.

The tension between the ideal of a centralized state and the reality of local power is arguably greater in Vietnam than in any other country in Southeast Asia. Precolonial Vietnam imported its core political concepts from China, where the presence of wealthy landlord and merchant

classes provided the wherewithal to finance the central state and political backing for its exist-ence. In Vietnam this political ideal stood in opposition to the reality of an atomized society in which local political structures were largely autonomous from and not organically linked to the central state (A. Woodside, 1989, p. 148). As David Marr concludes, "Boldly stated, the govern-ing system proved too grand for a poor, geographically fragile country. . . . District province elites found ways to use the governing hierarchy to their own advantage, preferably in quiet alliance with someone at the center" (Marr, 2004, p. 48).

The transition from central planning to the market strengthened the hand of local authorities in several ways. Central government grew increasingly dependent on provinces for contribu-tions to the treasury, and the remit of local government increased as it inherited responsibil-ity for basic services like housing and healthcare that had previously been provided by state enterprises. Constraints on central budget funding meant that provinces were forced to rely on alternative sources of revenue, notably creating and supporting local state enterprises to raise funds and implement infrastructure projects (Vu, T. T. A., 2014, p. 18). Provinces have also relied on user fees and other charges for services (Painter, 2008). Foreign direct investment and international trade were no longer a monopoly of the central state, and the concentration of foreign firms in just a few provinces strengthened the hand of these localities. The increas-ing role of local authorities was recognized in the 1996 Law on the State Budget (revised in 2002 and 2015), which put in place a form of fiscal decentralization within the context of the unitary state budget. Provinces were given more authority over how centrally allocated funds were spent and the right to retain revenues after meeting centrally determined – but negoti-ated – targets. In practice, resource sharing between center and locality, including the allocation of investment funds, depend heavily on political and kinship relationships and other forms of personal loyalty (London, 2009, p. 386).

Lack of clarity in the financial relationship between the center and the localities is mir-rored in administrative structures, in which local agencies are under "dual accountability" to both central government ministry and the provincial People's Committees. In fact neither the ministries nor local authorities are able to impose their will on subsidiary agencies and local offices, which increases the autonomy of units lower down in the structure and leaves room for negotiation horizontally across agencies and vertically within sectoral ministries and their local representatives (Painter, 2003a, p. 266).

The growing power of local authorities was also reflected in the composition of the party Central Committee, which increased from 101 members following the 1976 congress to 170 in 1996. Provincial leaders accounted for a significant proportion of new members, and now make up the largest bloc within the body. The 12th Central Committee selected in 2016 consisted of 187 members, 67 of which were provincial officials. This gave local officials considerable influ-ence over the selection of top leaders and other key decisions (Vu, T., 2014, p. 32). A watershed was reached in 2001 when the Central Committee rejected the Politburo's recommendation that Lê Khả Phiêu continue as party secretary (R. M. Abrami, Malesky, and Zheng, 2010, p. 13).

The growing strength of local authorities recalls the "fragmented authoritarianism" frame-work developed by Lieberthal and Oksenberg in China (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988). In fragmented political structures, various agencies – organized horizontally and between the center and localities – advance competing claims to authority over specific policy domains. Competition among agencies creates gaps in authority that open space for political bargaining. Policy outcomes are the product of compromises reached among these agencies, resulting in an incremental, protracted decision-making process that is often clouded by institutional rivalries and the introduction of unrelated issues.

Other scholars have questioned the relevance of the fragmented authoritarianism model to China. Landry argues that China "presents us with a case of an enduring authoritarian regime that has thrived rather than decayed in the era of decentralization" (Landry, 2011, p. 15). China has managed to maintain cohesion while also taking advantage of the managerial and administrative benefits of decentralization by controlling the mechanism through which political elites gain access to official positions. Frequent rotation of cadres, especially at the local level, has been carried out to prevent local interests from winning out over the center's priorities. Edin concurs, focusing on improvements to the central state's capacity to monitor cadres and reinforce control through rotating more successful local officials among administrative levels and geographic areas. "In sum," she writes, "the Chinese party-state has the capacity to be selectively effective, that is, to implement its priority policies, and control its key local leaders and strategically important areas" (Edin, 2003, p. 52).

Owing to the relative strength of local authorities within the Vietnamese Communist Party, the central government has been unable to use appointments and promotions to enforce discipline and achieve hierarchical coherence within a decentralized system (Jandl, 2014, p. 78). Cadres who rise within the Vietnamese system are not necessarily those who have toed the Politburo's line, but rather political leaders in Hanoi and the localities who have managed to build influential political coalitions within the Central Committee and other governing structures. Often this entails implementing successful policies and programs at the local level that challenge Hanoi's directives. Indeed, provincial party cadres play such a large role in the selection of the national political leadership that a case could be that it is the localities that shape the political agenda and not the center.

Nor is rotation of local leaders used as a device to achieve adherence to centrally determined policies. In November 2011, for example, only eight provincial party secretaries and two People's Committee chairpersons did not have strong preexisting ties to the localities in which they were serving. Only 10 percent of senior provincial officials were serving in places where they had not spent the bulk of their careers (Pincus et al., 2012, p. 40). The result of allowing leaders to serve where they have deeply rooted local loyalties is that there are few checks on the pursuit of local interests. Policy making proceeds through the slow and erratic bargaining processes described in the fragmented authoritarianism framework.

The Consequences of Commercialization and Fragmentation

The consequences of fragmentation and state commercialization are evident in every sphere of government action. Attempts to recentralize decision-making and impose discipline have failed because of the power of state entities to resist coordination and control. For example, the creation in 1994 of "general corporations" modeled on Korea's *chaebols* and China's state business groups was intended to reduce fragmentation of SOE management. State conglomerates assembled out of existing state-owned companies were established in sectors ranging from electricity to textile and garment manufacturing as a means of centralizing capital, managerial and technical expertize and realizing scale economies. It was thought that rationalization of industry could only proceed if state enterprises were separated from ministries and provincial governments, since these institutions had a financial incentive to shield SOEs under their control from restructuring. In a further round of centralization the government established "economic groups" with ministerial rank to manage the commanding heights of the economy.

The strategy assumed that central authorities had enough power to override local objections to consolidation and rationalization of state firms. That the state corporations and economic groups did not possess this power is evident from the strategies they ultimately adopted. Rather

than streamline operations and strive for strategic focus, the conglomerates used their privileged access to state land and capital to multiply the number of small businesses under their control. Many of these new subsidiaries were speculative ventures in property development and financial services. Needing the support of local political leaders, state corporation bosses found ways to spread their investments across multiple provinces (Vu, T. T. A., 2014, p. 18). Prior to its collapse in 2010, state shipping conglomerate Vinashin consisted of 445 subsidiaries and 20 joint-venture companies that included investments in properties, finance, handicrafts and breweries in addition to ship building. Vinatex, the economic group given responsibility for developing the domestic textile industry, accumulated 120 subsidiaries including large investments in properties, banking and finance before it was ordered to undergo restructuring in 2013 (Pincus, 2015).

Fragmentation and commercialization have also frustrated attempts to recentralize the equitization process. The National Steering Committee for Enterprise Reform and Development (NCSERD) was formed in 2000 from the merger of two previous national steering committees to overcome institutional fragmentation and coordination failures. NCSERD was chaired by a deputy prime minister and the vice-chair is the head of Government Office, who is in effect the prime minister's chief of staff. Boards of Enterprise Reform and Development (BERD) were also set up in ministries, provincial government and general corporations, reporting to both NCSERD and their agency heads following the standard model of dual subordination. As they were staffed by ministerial, provincial government and general corporation personnel, the BERDs answered primarily to their local bosses who had an interest in retaining companies under their control (Nguyen, T. K. C., 2010, p. 136). Despite pressure from the multilateral financial institutions to give NCSERD greater enforcement powers, the fact that it was not directly controlled by the Ministry of Finance or the prime minister condemned the institution to a weak consultative role. As Martin Painter concludes, "In this highly complex and conflict-ridden field of policy, the Committee is generally viewed as a force for prevarication as much as an engine of reform" (Painter, 2003b, p. 38).

The response to climate change is another area in which high-level strategies and plans encounter coordination problems and give rise to competition among state agencies. The Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment (MONRE) took the lead role through the National Targeted Program to Respond to Climate Change (2008–2015) and the 2011 National Strategy on Climate Change, with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) assigned sector- and task-specific responsibilities. The various programs and plans are channeled vertically through provincial authorities to districts and localities with little or no horizontal coordination or consultation. Predictably, ambiguous roles and responsibilities and an absence of coordination and accountability mechanisms results in competition for well-funded initiatives – mainly infrastructure projects – while other dimensions of adaptation are left unaddressed (Le, T.H.P., Biesbroek, and Wals, 2018, p. 10).

Commercialization and fragmentation of the state have imposed substantial, rising costs on the Vietnamese economy. During the boom years prior to the 2008 global financial crisis, state-owned enterprises acquired stakes in joint stock banks and then used their control over these banks to engage in connected lending to finance speculative investments. Lending by joint stock banks grew by 95 percent in 2007 alone (Leung, 2009, p. 52). Quasi-private conglomerates – nominally private business groups that profit from close relationships with the state – also acquired banks and engaged in similar practices (Cheshier and Pincus, 2010). When the property market collapsed, the State Bank of Vietnam lacked the political clout to close insolvent banks, which left the sector with approximately $10 billion in non-performing loans.

The slow pace of consolidation in manufacturing, which is a contributing factor to the slow rate of productivity growth, is also a product of fragmentation and commercialization. To take one example, Vietnam's pharmaceutical industry consists of 170 companies, including 20 joint-venture foreign invested firms, with the largest company controlling less than 5 percent of the market. Until 2009 foreign companies could not establish wholly owned subsidiaries, but this restriction has been removed. The background to this extreme level of fragmentation is the development of state-owned companies in every province to supply generic medicines to local hospitals and clinics. Direct sales to hospitals account for about one-third of the market and pharmacies the remainder. Although the largest Vietnamese firms have been equitized, they continue to rely on close relationships with distributors and hospitals in their areas. Procurement is carried out by individual hospitals, and the bidding process is notoriously corrupt, with high mark-ups for producers financing payments to hospital administrators. Product registration, which is the responsibility of the Drug Administration of Vietnam, is carried out on a case-by-case basis in which the regulator retains considerable discretion (Jaccar Equity Research, 2008). Under these conditions, genuinely private and foreign firms are at a disadvantage in terms of market access, which enables small producers of generics drugs to survive in what on the surface looks like a highly competitive market.

The development of the Ho Chi Minh City port system is another example of institutional fragmentation (Nguyen, X.T. and Pincus, 2011). As a major exporter, Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding provinces need a modern port accessible to the main industrial zones. Ho Chi Minh City residents would like to move inner city ports to places where they cause less traffic congestion – a change that would also free up land for riverfront property developments. The prime minister approved a master plan in 2005 calling for four ports to relocate to the coastal province of Ba Ria -Vung Tau (*Bà Rịa – Vũng Tàu*) by 2010, and shortly afterwards the Japan Bank for International Cooperation approved a loan of ¥36.4 billion (US$328.6 million) for the Cai Mep -Thi Vai (*Cái Mép – Thị Vải*) port complex. However, the ports in Ho Chi Minh City are owned and operated by different government agencies and companies. Saigon Port is a subsidiary of Vinalines, the national shipping general corporation. Ben Nghe (*Bến Nghé*) port is operated by a local state-owned company under the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City. The Vietnam International Container Terminal (VICT) is a joint-venture of the state-owned Southern Waterborne Transport Corporation, the NOL Group of Singapore and Mitsui & Co. of Japan. Saigon New Port (SNP) is owned by the navy. Other small ports are spread across the region. In the end, the central government was unable to implement the master plan because the individual state agencies saw it as against their interests to do so. Each agency used the regulatory powers and political influence at its disposal to advance a set of narrow financial interests. Thus, the commercialized, fragmented state fails in two ways: as a Weberian, hierarchically organized bureaucracy, as higher levels of the system cannot enforce their will on their subordinates; and as a market, as each agency uses access to political power to extract rents by virtue of their preferential access to land and capital.

Vietnam's gradual transition from central planning to the market economy did succeed in creating a new class of private-sector entrepreneurs, but the businesses that they have created are overwhelmingly micro and small enterprises. Larger domestic firms are still state-owned enterprises, equitized state firms and quasi-private firms with close links to the state. This is not entirely surprising given Vietnam's history and the absence of strong commercial classes at the time that the reforms were launched. However, state commercialization has important implications for government effectiveness. Commercialization and fragmentation serve the short-term interests of state functionaries and their allies, but in the long term undermine state capacity by blocking the formation of a political coalition that would stand as an advocate for clear rules of the game and consistency in the implementation of the rules.

Strengthening State Effectiveness

Public administration reform was officially incorporated into government plans in 1995 and has attracted considerable financial support from bilateral and multilateral development agencies. More than two decades later, neither the government nor donors can point to many substantive changes resulting from successive "master plans." It is difficult to see how it could have been otherwise. From the outset, the party fundamentally opposed changes that would impose external restraints on the power of state agencies. The program has mainly consisted of drafting and approving laws and circulars to establish – on paper, at least – the legal apparatus of the "socialist market economy." Implementation of this now extensive body of laws and regulation was and is another matter entirely (Painter, Ha, H.H., and Chu, Q. K., 2009).

Although usually couched in terms of the transition from central planning to the market, Vietnam's governance problems are not unique. Other Southeast Asian nations have also struggled to induce political leaders to set aside short-term political interests to establish and defend autonomous institutions to curb arbitrary state action. Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission – one of the most effective anti-corruption bodies in the region – was finally brought under government control in 2019 by a cross-party coalition in parliament (Cook, 2019). Political scientists often frame the issue as a commitment problem: since any government that has the power to enforce the rules also has the power to break them, an effective state must at once be constrained by externally enforced rules and norms while possessing sufficient autonomy to discipline non-state elites.

The countries that have had had the most success at squaring this circle are those that have faced external or internal existential threats: Korea, Taiwan, Israel and Singapore are examples of governments that have convinced non-state elites to accept protection from a strong state in exchange for a measure of state autonomy. Malaysia is often cited as a country in which elites challenged by class-based and communal movements were persuaded to back a strong state. One could make the case that a security pact of this kind shored up Indonesia's military government, and the success of the regime in eliminating the threat from below helps explain the porousness of the Indonesian state under elected governments after the fall of Suharto (Slater, 2010, p. 23).

Peter Evans argues that the underperformance of the state reform agenda is due to an over-reliance on marketization as a response to government ineffectiveness. He argues for a "hybridity" model to balance three separate – and at times contradictory – components: i) Weberian bureaucratic capacity based on professional norms and hierarchical structures, ii) market signals to allocate resources and fiscal discipline to match policies with financial capacity and iii) public participation to ensure that policies and programs are aligned with the needs of citizens (Evans, 2005). In his view, relying on any one leg of this public administration tripod will generate unsatisfactory outcomes. The "new public administration" approach, popular among development agencies at the end of the 20th century, tended to overemphasize marketization at the expense of bureaucratic capacity and democratic participation, with poor results both in terms of state effectiveness and public trust in government.

Recentralization of Authority

In recent years Vietnam has experimented with a home-grown approach to hybridity that combines strengthening central government institutions, "socialization" of public service delivery, "equitization" of state-owned enterprises and "grassroots democracy" as a check on the power of local officials. Following his re-election to the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party in 2016, Nguyễn Phú Trọng launched an aggressive anti-corruption campaign under which

central inspectors initiated more than 3,000 investigations of state-owned enterprises and local authorities. The arrest and conviction of high-ranking party officials, including former politburo member and Ho Chi Minh City party chief Đinh La Thăng, was a clear signal of Nguyễn Phú Trọng's determination to reimpose discipline on the party. The campaign, and the elevation of Nguyễn Phú Trọng to the presidency in 2018, invited comparisons with Xi Jinping's centralization of political power in China. However, unlike Xi, Nguyễn Phú Trọng did not move to personalize his leadership of the party or associate his name with a revision of party ideology.

Beyond superficial similarities, Nguyễn Phú Trọng faced a strikingly different set of initial conditions. Power in Vietnam is diffuse and amorphous, and the role of provincial party chiefs in selecting the central leadership affords them considerable leverage over central government institutions. Moreover, unlike China, local leaders in Vietnam are rarely rotated away from their home provinces, a practice that reinforces clientelistic relationships between local leaders and state (and quasi-state) business interests. Provincial governments maintain inefficient state-owned manufacturing facilities to retain access to tax revenues, and exchange favors with state-owned banks and central government planners to finance local projects. Fragmentation results in prolonged bargaining, often leading to stalemates as in the case of the $15.8 billion Long Thanh (*Long Thành*) airport development in Dong Nai (*Đồng Nai*) province, which was first proposed in the 1990s. Expansion of Tan Son Nhat (*Tân Sơn Nhất)*, Ho Chi Minh City and the region's current international airport, has been blocked by the refusal of the military to surrender a golf course located next to the airport.

While bargaining between central and local agencies also occurs in China, the central authorities have managed to retain control over the direction of policy. Chen and Naughton, in their study of Chinese technology policy, argue that:

> the Chinese bureaucracy has now developed a set of broadly understood 'rules of the game' that shape the competition for resources by bureaucrats. . . . We do not observe bureaucrats engaging in a zero-sum struggle (or negotiated trade-off) over policy direction, instead we observe a structured competition over incremental resources.
>
> *(Chen and Naughton, 2013, p. 2)*

Central institutions can organize consultation with local agencies through a top-down process in which viewpoints favored by the center achieve more prominence. Decision-making involves negotiation and compromise, especially during policy implementation, but individual agencies are not sufficiently powerful to divert the direction of policy away from that favored by top leaders. Local experimentation is encouraged, as successful innovations can lead to promotions for local leaders as in the cases of Shantou and Shenzhen in the early 1980s (Xu, 2011, p. 1117).

The largest potential gains, although admittedly at the highest political cost, would come from rationalization of the personnel system. In China, economic decentralization was carried out within a personnel system that ensured that the central government would not lose control over local bureaucrats. As Landry concludes, "Personnel management is the glue that turns the fragments of the Chinese local state into a coherent – albeit colorful – mosaic" (Landry, 2011, p. 79). Frequent rotation of officials and linking of performance to appointments and promotions would change the incentive structure facing local leaders, and therefore their institutions. This would require strengthening of the centralized personnel mechanisms of the party, identifying appropriate performance indicators and applying them systematically in appointment decisions. It would also mean upgrading of the curriculum of existing training programs for high-ranking officials and favoring cadres with experience of tertiary education, foreign language proficiency and core competencies in economics, engineering and other applied disciplines.

Restructuring of the central bureaucracy to boost the government's capacity to formulate and implement economic policies is also needed. Greater coordination among government agencies at the central level and between Hanoi and the provinces would reduce the level of interagency obstruction and bargaining send consistent policy signals to the business community. This, of course, assumes that there is a consistent signal to be sent. The government's muddled response to the domestic and global financial crises in 2008 was a reminder that a fragmented bureaucracy – in this case the institutions responsible for fiscal and monetary policy and financial regulation – will find it difficult to produce a coherent strategy (Pincus and Vu, T.T.A., 2008).

The high-performing East Asian economies solved this problem through the creation of "capstone agencies," for example, Korea's Economic Planning Board, that were given authority to formulate economic policies and coordinate decision-making at the ministerial level. Vietnam's attempts to establish superordinate agencies have generally failed, as the example of NCSERD has shown. The reasons are not difficult to fathom: in a fragmented, commercialized state, power resides in individual agencies, and attempts to coordinate policy formulation and implementation are resisted. Steering committees and interagency commissions do not reduce the bargaining that takes places during the policymaking process. As in India, a country that wrestles with its own problems of chronic state fragmentation, coordinating committees have resulted in deadlock as no agency has had the authority to override the preferences of others and enforce its decisions (Chibber, 2003, p. 181).

Market Discipline

The use of market signals to discipline resource allocation – the second element of Evans's hybridity model – has also featured in government efforts to reform the state apparatus. The most important channels are the "equitization" of state companies and the "socialization" of health and education costs. The common thread linking these policies is the intention to harness the power of the market mechanism to rationalize production and distribution. The government has studiously avoided the term "privatization" because the intention is not to deliver companies, hospitals and schools to private hands, but instead to create markets encompassing public- and private-sector entities to achieve greater efficiency and reduce the fiscal burden on the state.

The origins of socialization in health and education date to the fiscal crisis of late 1980s when user fees were introduced to keep essential public services functioning. Private provision of services was also allowed at this time. Numerous subsidies and exemptions were put in place over the years to enable children, the poor and other disadvantaged groups to retain access even as responsibility for financing services shifted from the state to households. Financial and managerial decisions were devolved to schools and hospitals in 2004, which were permitted for the first time to generate off-budget revenue by delivering health and education services based on market demand (London, 2018).

The result has been an explosion of private and quasi-private (commercial services delivered at public facilities) services, which has expanded the range of services available to those who are able to pay, but which has also given rise to perverse incentives within institutions that deliver essential services. The difference in fees received by hospitals for patients financed by state health insurance compared to private patients encourages hospital managers to shift resources from basic care to for-profit offerings. Overprescription of drugs and surgical procedures has emerged as a serious public health problem (UNDP, 2011, p. 97). Primary and secondary schools require students additional fees for a full school day and for extra classes, among other charges (Duong, B.H., 2015). The commodification of basic services within the state sector is yet another example of state commercialization, or the leveraging of state power to generate

profits for government functionaries and their institutions. Like the equitization process, socialization is marketization without market discipline: state agencies respond with alacrity to market signals, but in the absence of external checks on their behavior they are able to extract monopoly rents from their control over state assets and power.

The commercialization of state agencies has blurred the boundaries between public and private institutions (Gainsborough, 2009, p. 269). SOE restructuring has not yet delivered the expected benefits primarily because the state is unable to close off speculation in risky assets and various forms of corporate corruption. The absence of an external regulator, strict accounting standards, independent audits, independent board members and clear and monitorable performance criteria has removed the brake on self-dealing and rent-seeking behavior (Vu, T. T. A., 2014).

Land is the most lucrative source of profits in the state sector. Although land is owned by the state, use rights are allocated for agriculture, residential, industrial and other uses. Since the first Land Law was enacted in 1993, land use rights can be bought, sold and leased. Land use rights in agriculture were extended to 50 years under the 2013 revisions to the law, and there was some recentralization of control from communes to districts. Local authorities have the power to convert land from agricultural to industrial or commercial use, and thus at the stroke of a pen increase its value many times over. The land can then be transferred to investors – within or linked to the state – for development. The vast profits generated by the rezoning and selling of land is the largest source of corruption at the local level (Vu, T. T. A., 2014). Disputes relating to ownership of and compensation for land are also the main cause of friction between local governments and the communities that they serve. In 2014, 90 percent of the formal complaints received by government deal with land issues (Wells-Dang, Pham, and Burke, 2015, p. 3).

Much of the problem can be traced back to the discretion that local authorities possess to convert land use rights from agricultural to other uses. The value of the land does not reside in agricultural land itself but rather in the power to rezone it, which effectively reallocates the capital gains from the farmer to the government. Businesses face similar issues, for example when attempting to convert land from industrial to commercial or residential use. While the land has limited market value until the use rights are converted, the potential windfall, and the need to produce use right certificates as collateral for bank loans, are sufficient incentives to hold the land rather than return it to the government. One result is that SOEs hold back large amounts of land from the market, which has the effect of reducing supply and raising prices. Another consequence is that land redevelopment is held up by prolonged negotiations as companies and government agencies bargain over land and zoning.

Easy access to credit has also shielded state and state-related companies from competition. State-owned commercial banks (SOCBs) continue to favor SOEs despite the increasing share of the private sector in national income. The decision to equitize SOCBs has not encouraged them to expand lending to the private sector largely because the state companies have superior collateral and therefore offer the safer option as banks build up their balance sheets in advance of share sales. Nor has the rapid growth of joint-stock commercial banks (JSBs) leveled the playing field for private companies. During the boom years prior to 2010 SOEs acquired stakes in JSBs both to expand into the lucrative financial sector and to channel credit to their own projects (Leung, 2009, p. 48). General corporations (large public-sector conglomerates) also established or acquired finance, insurance and securities companies for the same reasons (Cheshier, 2010, p. 185). The collapse of the property and stock markets left the banking sector mired in bad debt, but decisive action by the regulators to close or nationalize insolvent banks proved to be politically impossible, in part because of fragmentation of authority among several departments of the State Bank of Vietnam and the Ministry of Finance, none of which were empowered to formulate and implement a coherent reform program (ADB, 2014, p. 22). The government's

banking reform strategy relies heavily on equitization of SOCBs, but the governance issues in the JSBs suggest that changes in the structure of shareholdings will not generate improvements.

Participation

Vietnam replaced central planning with the market while retaining the essential structures of the party and state, a system that Jonathan London refers to as "market Leninism" (London, 2017, p. 326). The position of the party is superior to that of the state, military, judiciary, legislature and mass organizations for farmers, women, youth, business, workers and other groups under the Vietnam Fatherland Front. Within this framework, politics has adapted to changes in society and the economy associated with the transition from central planning to the market. Institutionalization of the National Assembly, Provincial People's Councils and "grassroots democracy" at the village can be seen as attempts to create space for public participation and assessment of government performance.

These initiatives reveal a deep tension within the political system between the need to find new mechanisms to connect the party and state to the public while preventing the appearance of autonomous social and political organizations that could potentially undermine the party's monopoly on power. The party-state's efforts thus far have centered on consultation mechanisms that encourage citizen engagement through the party's mass organizations or directly to representative bodies without allowing participation through groups not sanctioned by the state. Yet as society becomes more complex and the mass organizations lose relevance, the gap between the institutions of the party-state and citizens has widened. Other forms of informal association, most prominently religious organizations, but also professional societies, charities, sport groups and alumni clubs, just to name a few, have begun to fill this space. These groups represent a reconstruction of civil society beyond the reach of the state, but relevant to the state's reform efforts to the extent that they offer alternative forms of social interaction that are experienced as organic because they are voluntary and self-governing. Finding ways to incorporate these groups into participatory structures will not be easy, but it is an essential part of efforts to increase public accountability.

People's Councils at the provincial, district and commune levels elect the members of the People's Committee, which form the local executive. They are also responsible for monitoring local development plans and, since 2002, approving budget allocations for provinces, districts/wards and communes/neighborhoods except for expenditures stipulated by central government mandates. The councils are expected to provide oversight of the People's Committees at their level. However, as Vasavakul has shown, the autonomy of People's Councils is constrained by an array of intersecting relationships and reporting requirements involving the Vietnam Fatherland Front, the council's own party organization, the local People's Committee, the Standing Committee of the National Assembly and the central government. The supervisory function of the councils is limited to compliance with national policies and laws and do not touch on the performance of local government in implementing policies and programs (Vasavakul, 2014).

Faced with an upsurge in rural unrest in the 1990s, the government issued its first of its "grassroots democracy" decrees in 1998. The aim of the decree was to constrain the behavior of local officials through public meetings and posting of budget data, among other measures (London, 2009, p. 388). Subsequent decrees have defined the role of citizens in local decision-making, including planning and management of locally funded projects, elaboration of village codes, village security, sanitation, endorsing village boundary changes, drafting development plans and settling complaints. However, the mechanisms specified do not depart from the pre-existing structures of commune government. Case studies report considerable variation

in outcomes depending in part on the quality of local leadership and the dynamism of local branches of mass organizations like the women's and farmers' unions, and other local groups (Nguyen, H. H., 2016, p. 184). However, even with the implementation of grassroots democracy citizens are expected to interact with the state much as they had done before, with perhaps some additional meetings and requirements to make budget information available to the public (Fforde, 2011). Decision-making power still rests with the People's Committee, which means that local people act essential as informants, and hence have few incentive to attend meetings (Tortosa, 2012, p. 119).

From Mobilization to Effectiveness

The Vietnamese state has demonstrated considerable mobilizational capacity but its overall effectiveness has not improved during the reform period. Despite years of externally supported public administration reform and constant exhortation from the party leadership, progress towards bureaucratic coherence, rule-based behavior, hierarchical structures and meritocratic personnel systems is limited. The rapid shift from plan to market has not given rise to a class of non-state elites with the power to influence state action. Markets developed from within the state, at once increasing its reach and reducing its effectiveness. Power was decentralized to localities and service providers giving rise to a pattern of "fragmented authoritarianism," in which the central leadership has struggled to impose its will horizontally across sectors and vertically on provincial authorities and other local institutions. Localities and agencies use the power and networks at their disposal to pursue particularistic interests, leading to a prolonged bargaining process and suboptimal policy outcomes.

Building government effectiveness, even within the framework of existing political structures, will require a reversal of bureaucratic fragmentation and commercialization. This is likely to involve some combination of recentralization, market discipline and popular participation to increase transparency and accountability. Extending the current anti-corruption campaign to encompass recentralization of state personnel management, including vetting of candidates, strict enforcement of conflict of interest rules and regular rotation of local leaders, would reduce fragmentation and gridlock. Greater transparency in land and credit markets would limit opportunities for profiteering and stimulate competition. Relaxing constraints on autonomous non-political social, religious, and professional organizations would provide new avenues for public accountability even within existing political structures. Such policies would certainly meet with considerable resistance from within the state, and the main groups that would benefit are heterogeneous and politically diffuse. This could change if the current trajectory of income growth, urbanization and access to education can be sustained. But as the experience of neighboring countries has shown, reversals are as common as advances on the path to greater state effectiveness.

Notes

1 http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home.
2 The other five dimensions are voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption.
3 (http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home)

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12

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PRIVATE-SECTOR DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM SINCE *DOI MOI*

Tu-Anh Vu-Thanh

Since the adoption of *Doi moi* (economic renovation) policies in the middle and late 1980s, Vietnam's private sector has grown exponentially. From a marginal position in the 1980s and 1990s, the private sector is today the country's main growth engine. Be that as it may, its growth has been highly uneven owing to constraints that have and continue to limit is contributions to the country's development. This chapter provides a political economy account of Vietnam's private-sector development since *Doi moi*, illustrating and explaining its contributions to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and industrial performance while highlighting factors that have shaped its development over time.

The chapter is organized as follows. The next section will provide an overview of continuity and change in ownership sectors of Vietnam's economy, including state-owned enterprises (SOEs), large and small domestic-private enterprises (DPEs), and foreign invested enterprises (FIEs). The second section identifies tensions regarding the private sector stemming from the Communist Party of Vietnam's determination to maintain its dominance in politics and the economy, showing how party leaders' attitudes toward these different sectors has determined their economic role in the country's development strategy over time.[1] The third section examines the contributions of different ownership sectors to economic growth since the 1980s. The remainder of the chapter trains its attention on the developmental dynamics and mixed outcomes of private-sector development in the context of successive rounds of legal and institutional reform and economic change. This includes an analysis of how undisciplined decentralization has contributed to the rise of clientelism between large domestic private enterprises and the government.

The main argument of this chapter is that for political reasons, significant improvements in the legal status and operating conditions of the private sector, especially in the domestic (i.e. non-foreign invested) private sector, have usually only been possible during periods of economic crisis, when the political necessity for reforms reached levels of acute urgency. In this connection, the chapter shows how the improved status of the private sector after the adoption of *Doi moi* reforms was a key factor contributing to Vietnam's sustained economic growth, but that political and institutional constraints on the private sector's development have adversely affected Vietnam's development overall. It finds the crowding out of small and medium-sized private enterprises at the expense of state-owned and state-linked private firms has greatly

constrained the private sector's development, and explains how and why the emergence of clientelist state-business relations (SBRs) since the mid-2000s have shaped and constrained the private sector's development locally. The chapter concludes by establishing conditions under which these challenges might be addressed.

Vietnam's Private Sector Introduced

Vietnam's private sector includes both a formal and informal private sector. The former includes firms established and formally registered in accordance with law, whereas the latter do not meet this criteria and include mainly (but not only) small, family-owned and -operated ventures engaged in petty trade or informal service-sector activities. The main concern of this chapter is the formal private sector, within which we observe three distinctive sub-sectors. A basic distinction can be drawn between foreign invested (private) enterprises, large-scale domestic private conglomerates and private small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs).

The first and most successful of these consists of FIEs. In 1986 this sector did not exist. By 2018 it accounted for more than 22% of a vastly enlarged GDP, 30% of employment in the formal business sector, and 24% of total investment. In 2018, the FIE sector accounted for over 43% of the industrial production and contributed more than 70% of Vietnam's total exports.

Emerging since the mid-2000s, the second sub-sector of Vietnam's private sector consists of domestic private conglomerates; large firms that have thrived most in such lucrative and rent-seeking industries as banking and real estate, and whose competitive advantage benefits from strong links to the public sector and leading policy makers (World Bank Vietnam and Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2016; Nguyen, 2019). Virtually nonexistent only 20 years ago, they today account for one-third of the top 100 largest companies in Vietnam ranked by total sales.

The third sub-sector, comprising domestic private small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), has experienced the fastest growth in terms of quantity, but its contribution to GDP has remained limited and stable at roughly 10%. In the meantime, the average size (in terms of both capital and labor) of SMEs has declined over the last two decades. Results from the General Statistics Office's Enterprise Survey show that the average number of workers in Vietnam's domestic private SMES has decreased from 30 in 2000 to only 16.7 in 2016.

Overall, the growth in Vietnam's private sector has been striking. In 1985, when Vietnam was among the poorest countries in the world, the private sector accounted for only 30% of the country's small and stagnant GDP and 44% of its limited industrial output, while employing 27% of its non-agricultural workforce and representing 51% of total investment. By 2017 Vietnam had registered three successive decades of economic growth and these shares had risen to 68%, 81%, 91%, and 64%, respectively, as is seen in Figure 12.1. As Jonathan Pincus has detailed elsewhere in this volume, a great deal of economic activity remains concentrated in the commercialized public sector. Be that as it may, the growth of Vietnam's private sector reflects a fundamental shift in the country's economy – from one centered on the public sector (and central planning) to one in which the private sector, including the foreign direct invested sector (and decentralized markets), have become the most dynamic, if not always most dominant, engine of economic growth.

Note: GSO has stopped publishing data on industrial production by ownership since 2014.

Vietnam's Fundamental Political Economic Dilemma

Until recently, the CPV's leadership in unifying the country had been its greatest source of legitimacy, whereas today the party's legitimacy is seen to rest on its ability to promote

Figure 12.1   Relative importance of the three ownership sectors since *Doi moi*

Source: Author's calculation based on Vietnam's Statistics Yearbooks (1985 to 2017)

economic growth and improved living standards. The Vietnamese party-state's overarching goal is to achieve high rates of economic growth in order to maintain its economic performance legitimacy, while keeping intact its absolute political power. Tensions emerge when changes in the structure of the economy are perceived to represent a threat to the political control.

This, in a nutshell, reflects the fundamental dilemma in Vietnam's approach to the private sector. On the one hand, the need for economic growth led the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) to adopt market-oriented reforms, permit private ownership, allow the functioning of markets, and actively integrate into the world economy. On the other hand the Vietnamese party-state has sought to maintain a large SOE sector despite its indisputable inefficiency and has even found various ways to subsidize and shield this sector from international competition, even after Vietnam's membership in WTO and Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CP-TPP).

This political economic dilemma explains why domestic private sector, while being promoted rhetorically, has continued to face formidable barriers in its operations. First and foremost, these barriers stem from the dualistic nature of Vietnam's socialist-oriented market economy. Partly due to the communist ideology, partly because of the symbiotic economic relationship between the Vietnamese party-state and the SOE sector, SOEs – especially the larger ones – have always been regarded as the backbone of the economy, despite the fact that the SOE sector is inefficient and therefore a heavy burden on the economy (Perkins and Vu-Thanh, 2011). By contrast, domestic private enterprises face many challenges, such as weak enforcement of private property rights, unequal terms of access to resources such as land and credit, and the ineffectiveness or absence of market-supporting institutions.[2] These institutional weaknesses continue to impede the private sector.

The dilemma and its consequences are further visible *within* the private sector, where we observe clear differences in the operating conditions and business strategies of firms or business

groups led by "cronies" or those with close relationships to political and state officials and of firms without. The former, who enjoy privileged access to land and credit, have tended to focus on commercial or speculative activities, especially in the real estate sector (cf. North, 1990). In such a context, private SMEs operating across a variety of economic sectors are crowded out (by SOEs, by politically linked private business groups, and by the FIE sectors), finding it very difficult to get access to credit and make the long-term investments necessary to scale up and become large enterprises. This explains why Vietnam has very few large-scale manufacturing private enterprises. Thirty years of reform have certainly helped many entre-preneurs accumulate wealth, but failed to create internationally recognized manufacturing enterprises.

While the domestic private sector, with the exception of a few large cronies, has been fet-tered and discriminated, the FIE sector – thanks to its political neutrality – has thrived. Since the very beginning of *Doi moi*, Vietnam has opened up its economy to foreign direct investment and has steadily refined the rules governing FIEs. Throughout, foreign private investors have also been favored over domestic-private investors. In this respect, Vietnam's experience is much like China's. In both countries domestic-private investors have had to struggle to get access to capital, have had to pay higher taxes for similar activities, and have had less help in cutting through government red tape. FIEs, especially in the early years, regularly developed joint ven-tures with SOEs to take advantage of these state firms' easier access to land and other preferential treatments. While conditions of WTO membership may have begun to level the playing field for domestic-private investors vis-à-vis their foreign competitors in some sectors (Vu-Thanh, 2017) the domestic-private sector – especially the domestic private industrial sector – continues to face adverse conditions that hamper its development.

Economic Performance by Ownership Sector

Vietnam's economy features a tripartite structure, comprising SOEs (both central and local), FIEs, and DPEs, large and small.[3] As will be observed later, the last three decades have seen striking changes in the composition of GDP by ownership. Subsequent sections show how policies toward the private sector – and the rollout of successive revisions of the Law on Private Enterprises in particular – can help explain this pattern of change.

The changing composition of GDP by ownership

The most striking changes in the composition of GDP by ownership sector include the rise of the FIE sector, the relative decline of the SOE sector, and the limited growth of the private sector. As indicated, starting from nothing in early years of *Doi moi*, the FIE sector has grown quickly, currently accounting for more than 20% of Vietnam's GDP. During the same period, the state sector's share declined from 42% to 31%, while the non-state (private) sector's share dipped from 57.2% to 48.6%, respectively Figure 12.2.

Changes in the composition of GDP by ownership have been striking both in the indus-trial sector, where a significant share of foreign investment is concentrated, and more broadly in terms of growth and contributions to GDP. From effectively zero in 1986, the FIE sector accounted for a third of Vietnam's industrial production by 1996, helping the private sector (including both domestic and foreign-owned private firms) overtake the state sector in terms of contribution to industrial output. Growth of output by ownership also shows striking patterns. Since the first FIE came to Vietnam, the FIE sector has registered the highest rate of GDP growth (Figure 12.3).
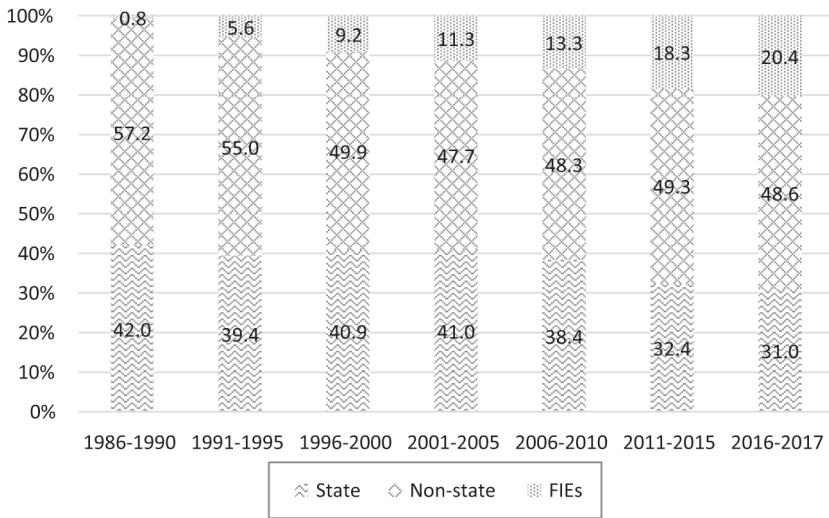
Figure 12.2   GDP share by ownership (1986–2017)

Source: Author's calculation based on *Vietnam's Statistics Yearbooks*, 1986–2017
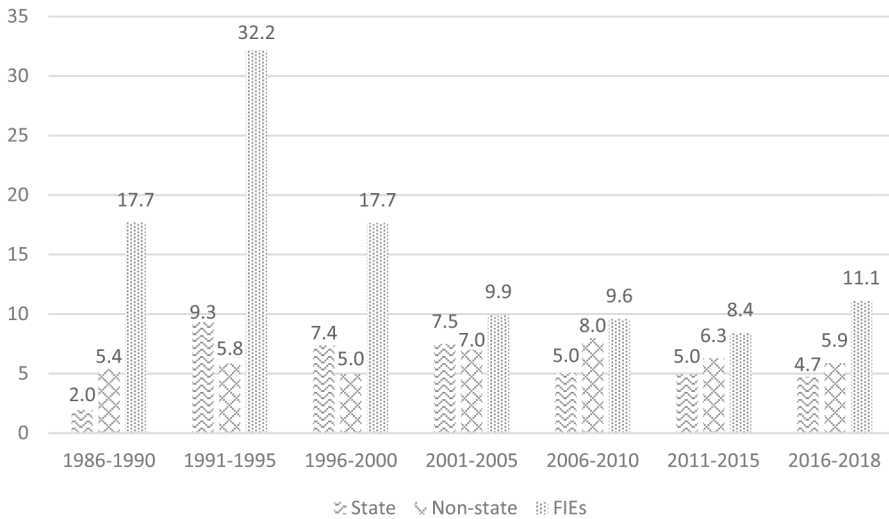
Figure 12.3   GDP growth by ownership sectors (%, 1986–2017)

Source: Author's calculation based on *Vietnam's Statistical Yearbooks*, 1986–2017

As observed in Figure 12.3, after reaching peaks in the mid-1990s, the growth rate of all three sectors has generally declined (except for the FIE sector during 2016–2018), reflecting slower growth in Vietnam's expanding economy.

Given its growth and its prominence in the industrial sector, it is unsurprising that the FIE accounts for a large and rising share of exports. By 2018, the FIE sector contributed a striking
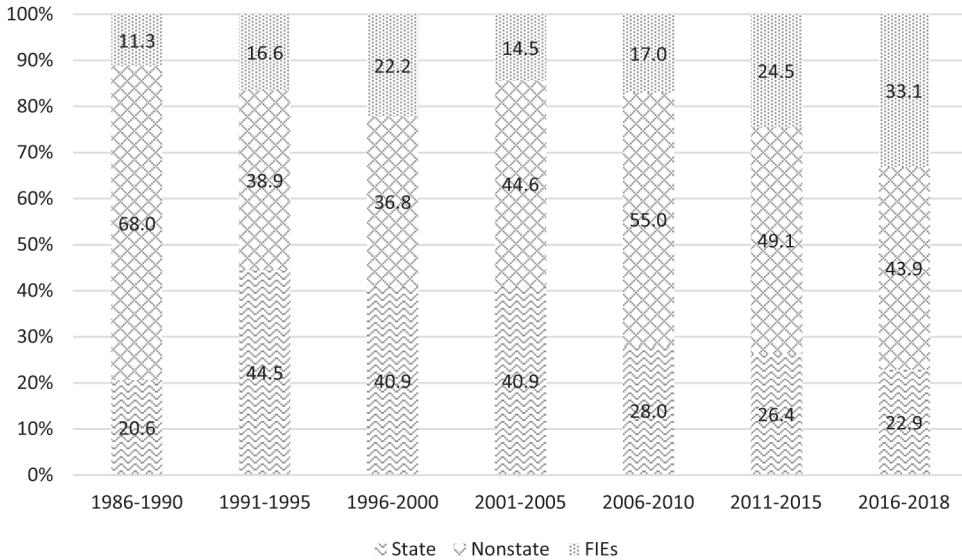
Figure 12.4   Contribution to GDP growth (1986–2017)

Source: Author's calculation based on *Vietnam's Statistics Yearbooks*, 1986–2017

72% of Vietnam's total exports.[4] In effect, the FIEs are able to meet international competition whereas the state sector and substantial parts of the domestic-private sector are less able to do so. By roughly 2016, the FIE sector alone contributed more to Vietnam's GDP growth than the state sector

The decline of SOE sector's share in Vietnam's GDP has occurred despite the fact that this sector received a disproportional greater share of investment vis-à-vis the non-state sector (Perkins and Vu-Thanh, 2020). In Vietnam the state share of investment was consistently at or above 50% of total investment in the forms of government budget and state-owned commercial bank loans until mid-2000s. By contrast, the private SMEs had no access to budget finance and little access to bank loans as a source for financing their fixed assets. To understand these patterns more deeply, it is instructive to examine the political and economic circumstances of the private sector's development over time, focusing in particular on the role of and continuous revision of Vietnam's Law on Private Enterprises, as discussed later.

Economic Crisis and the Emergence of the Private Sector

In the first half of the 1980s, Vietnam experienced what even the CPV has to admit as a "comprehensive social and economic crisis".[5] A series of policies intended to eradicate private property and put an end to the free market along with policies aimed at the "socialist rehabilitation" of industry, agricultural collectivization, and the prohibition of inter-provincial circulation of goods combined to push the economy to the brink of crisis at time when Vietnam was facing economic and political international isolation. Vietnam's involvement in Cambodia was not only extremely costly but also shut down any window of opportunity for economic normalization with the United States and, therefore, trade with the West. Serious failures of the "price-wage-money" stabilization package in 1985 resulted in hyperinflation and was the final

blow to the already fragile economy, with little prospect for external assistance. By the late 1980s Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) aid declined and was cut completely due to the political crisis within the socialist block. It was thus in the context of an economic emergency that Vietnam's political leaders resorted to market reforms.

These changes were not without irony. Trường Chinh – the then acting general secretary of the CPV and previously chief architect of Vietnam's socialist economy – renounced his old dogma in order to adopt market-oriented reforms, which was for him completely uncharted water. He led a group of reformers within the CPV who in just five months (from July to December 1986) would rewrite the Political Report of the Central Communist Party in the direction of market-oriented reforms, with the hope that such reforms would restore economic growth and, thereby, the legitimacy for the party's leadership. Under his leadership, the party-state conducted *Doi moi* in 1986, accepting the coexistence of different economic (or more precisely, ownership) sectors in the so-called "commodity economy" and began to open up international trade and economic relations. It bears emphasis that while sharing the goal of restoring economic stability and legitimacy with reformers, orthodox communists viewed *Doi moi* reforms as a stopgap measure and "strategic step backward" in the transitional path to social-ism.[6] Similarly, the opening up of economic and trade relations with non-socialist countries was considered a strategic necessity.

The Law on Encouraging Foreign Investment – the first market-oriented law in Vietnam – was enacted in 1987. The Law on Private Enterprise and the Company Law – the first two laws applying specifically to DPEs – were issued in 1990. While the growth of the non-state economy occurred over the course of the 1990s, the formal "normalization" of private busi-nesses in 1990 would generate immediate and sustained growth in the number of formally registered private enterprises, whose numbers increased at an annual average rate of 112% annual growth for the period 1991–1999 as is seen in Figure 12.5A.[7] Similar trends were observed in foreign investment, where foreign direct investment (FDI) projects and their reg-istered capital on average increased about 36% per year over the same period (Figure 12.5B). The domestic private sector's investment growth increased more slowly during this period, averaging only 17.2%, reflecting its much smaller size as well as its comparatively limited capacity to mobilize capital.
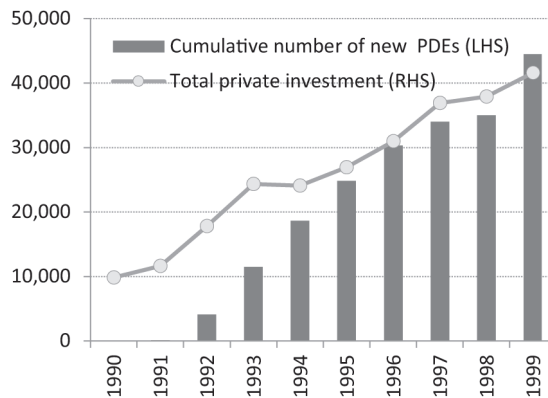
Figure 12.5a Newly registered FIEs and DPEs in Vietnam (1987–1999)

(A) Cumulative newly established DPEs and private investment (1990–1999)

Source: Author's calculation based on data published by Ministry of Planning and Investment (various years)
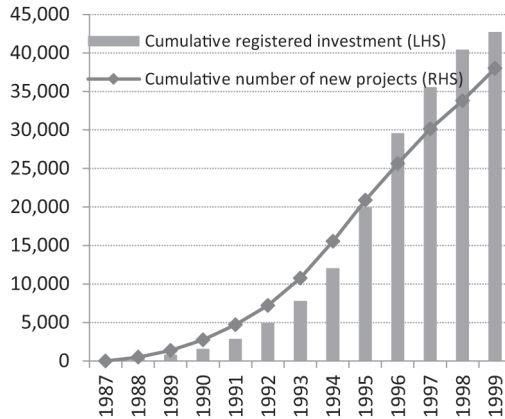
Figure 12.5b Newly registered FIEs and DPEs in Vietnam (1987–1999)

(B) Cumulative newly registered FIEs and foreign direct investment (1987–1999)

Source: Author's calculation based on data published by Ministry of Planning and Investment (various years)

While the advent of the Law on Private Enterprise and the Company Law in 1990 played an important role in shaping the formal domestic-private sector, they proved insufficient for strengthen the position of the domestic-private sector, whose share of total investment decreased from 42.5% for the period 1986–1990 to 36.3% in the period 1991–1995 and 23.6% in the period 1996–2000. Similarly, over the course of the 1990s, the GDP growth rate of the domestic-private sector was modest, at 5.4%, which was much lower than that of the SOE sector and only about a quarter of the FIE sector. As a result, the share in GDP of this sector fell sharply from 57.2% in the period 1986–1990 to 49.9% in the period 1996–2000. As will be shown in the next section, sluggish GDP growth for the DPE sector would be dramatically reversed only in the 2000s, encouraged by the passage of the 1999 Law on Enterprise.

The Asian Financial Crisis and the Private Sector's Expansion

As in the late 1980s, it was circumstances of economic crisis that saw private-sector reform. Though less strikingly than elsewhere in East Asia, Vietnam's economy was significantly affected by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and its aftereffects. This was principally the result of Vietnam's heavy reliance on FDI and exports. From a peak of US$9.6 billion in 1996, annual registered FDI plummeted to US$6.0 billion in 1997 and to US$2.3 billion in 1999. Moreover, many investors stopped investment or even withdrew licensed projects. Export growth, which averaged 30% annual growth in previous years, dropped to less than 2% in 1998. GDP growth experienced a free fall from 8.0% in 1997 to 4.8% in 1999.

Facing these circumstances, the party-state's leadership decided to adjust the path of economic development, placing greater emphasis on promoting "internal forces" forces of production, including both the SOE and DPE sectors. It was in this context that the 1999 Law on Enterprise was introduced.

In contrast to the 1990 Law on Private Enterprise and the Company Law, which established the DPEs as a formal economic sector but did little to support their development, the 1999 Law on Enterprises was more substantial and produced more promising results. Substantively the law
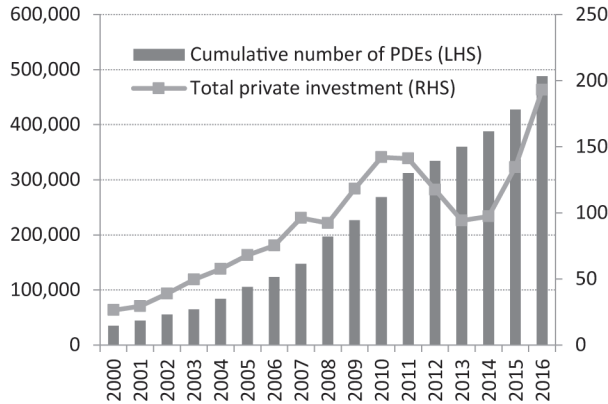
Figure 12.6a Growth of the domestic–private sector (2000–2016)

(A) Cumulative newly established DPEs and private investment

Source: Author's compilation based on data published by Ministry of Planning and Investment (various years)
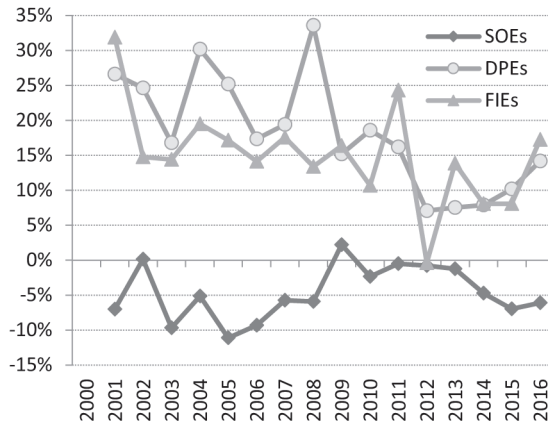
Figure 12.6b Growth of the domestic–private sector (2000–2016)

(B) Growth rate of new*ly* established enterprises by ownership

Source: Author's compilation based on data published by Ministry of Planning and Investment (various years)

(i) introduced the principle that enterprises can do anything that is not prohibited by law; (ii) stipulated clearly the kinds of business which are prohibited or subject to specific conditions; (ii) replaced the licensing system with business registration; (iii) applied post-audits instead of pre-audits; (iv) institutionalized the autonomy of enterprises in selecting business areas, locations, forms of business, and organization; and (v) clarified internal decision-making mechanisms within private enterprises while protecting the rights of investors, particularly minority shareholders and creditors.

Within two years of its implementation, more than 35,000 additional DPEs were established, nearly as many as the number of enterprises established in the previous 10 years combined.

During the period 2000–2005, a total of approximately 160,000 DPEs were established with the total investment of VND 323 trillion (or about 1.5 times the total investment of the FIE sector), creating 3 million new jobs (Figure 12.6 and Pham 2008). In the industrial sector, the private sector's average growth rate for the period 2001–2005 surged to 21.9%, significantly higher than that of the FIE sector (16.8%) for the same period and nearly double the growth rate of the SOE sector (11.5%). With this remarkable growth, the private sector's contribution to industrial growth in the period 2001–2005 amounted to 35.1%, far exceeding the contribution of the SOE sector (26.3%) and quite close to the contribution of the FIE sector (38.6%).

The contribution of the DPE sector was even more impressive when it comes to GDP. Robust growth of the DPE sector helped the non-state sector increase its contribution to GDP from 36.8% during 1996–2000 to 44.6% during 2000–2005. During the same period, the contribution of the state sector stayed unchanged (40.9%), while that of the FIE sector fell from 22.2% to 14.5%. It is important to emphasize that during 2000–2005, the domestic private sector in Vietnam, for the very first time since *Doi moi*, surpassed the state sector in terms of both contribution to GDP and industrial production.

What accounted for the huge differences in the substance and effects of the 1990 and 1990s laws on private enterprises? Many factors involved, of course, but two stand out.[8] First and foremost, a fundamental shift had occurred in the political status of the domestic-private sector.

When the first two laws on domestic-private enterprises were enacted in 1990, private enterprises in Vietnam were still considered "subjects of socialist rehabilitation". By contrast, the 1999 Law on Enterprise effectively institutionalized the rights of doing business for private firms alluded to in 1992 constitution.[9] Improvements in the political status of the private sector were further cemented in 2001, when the Ninth Party Congress confirmed the new direction of "widely encouraging the development of the private capitalist sector in the production and business areas which are not prohibited by law"[10] and further still, at the 5th Plenum of the Central Committee of the 9th Party Congress (in March 2002), when the status of the private sector was firmly established as "an important component of the national economy".

A second key difference of the 1999 law was seen in the activist approach taken with respect to its implementation and enforcement via the establishment of the Law on Enterprise's Implementation Task Force (hereafter Task Force), which elevated the status of the private sector that was unprecedented. Comprising some of Vietnam's most dedicated reformers, the Task Force was led by Trần Xuân Giá, who previously chaired the Law on Enterprise's Steering Committee. The main job of the Task Force was to draft guiding decrees for the implementation of the Law on Enterprise and keep the business licensing system in check.

It is important to note that the Task Force enjoyed autonomy vis-à-vis the government since it reported directly to the prime minister. In February 2000 (i.e., only two months after the Task Force was founded), Decree 02/2000/NĐ-CP drafted by the Task Force was enacted, which significantly reduced administrative procedures for private business. In the same month, following the recommendation of the Task Force, the prime minister issued Decision 19/2000/QĐ-TTg abolishing 84 types of licenses formerly required of private business than were now deemed contrary to the revised Law on Enterprise. Later in the year, Decree 30/2000/NĐ-CP abolished 27 additional licenses and made requirements on 34 additional licenses variable, contingent on specific conditions of affected businesses. In total, under recommendation of the Task Force, some 286 licenses were abolished.

In key respects then, the revised Law on Enterprises of 1999 and the work of the Task Force appeared to signal a turning point; suggesting that the development of the private sector had indeed become integral to the party-state's socialist-oriented multisectoral economic development strategy. As the CPV itself now stated: such a strategy dictated that a "favorable

institutional and social environment for the development of the private sector should be created".[11] But would it?

Legal Reform and WTO and TPP Membership: Less Than Meets the Eye

After several years of implementing the 1999 Law on Enterprise, the earlier advantages faded away, partly because waning of internal pressures for reform and partly because the initial "low hanging fruit" of the reforms had been exhausted. More importantly still, with the recovery of growth and the continued influx of foreign investment, the implementation of 1999 Law on Enterprise increasingly came into conflict with emergent interest groups within and outside the party-state. In the meantime, political support for further reforms waned, and the Task Force saw its levels of political support and effectiveness diminish.

Institutions are said to be durable because they generate benefits for powerful interests. For the same reason, new institutional designs put into place with the 1999 law would prove vulnerable. Seeking to recoup losses and expand their foothold in the economy, ministries and state agencies whose political opposition to reform had been temporary neutralized now lobbied effectively for the restoration of licenses that had been abolished while finding ways to add new licenses by building them right into the new laws or amendments of existing ones. As a result, the number of licenses gradually increased. This reflected renewed debate about the government's role and its relationship with private sector. In these debates the real motives of the conservatives and interest groups (especially state conglomerates – which was to expand their foothold and hoard opportunities in the market economy – were often disguised under the umbrella of maintaining political and social stability.

In the meantime, the unequal status of ownership sectors remained strong, with the same pecking order as before; in which SOEs come first, followed by the FIEs, and the DPEs, themselves stratified on the basis of their size and the nature of their links to state power. This discrimination exists both *de facto* and *de jure* and would undercut the effectiveness subsequent legal reforms.

The Limited Efficacy of the 2005 and 2014 Legal Reforms

Until 2005, in the Vietnamese legal system, the Law on (Private) Enterprise co-existed with the Law on State-owned Enterprise; and the Law on Domestic Investment Promotion existed alongside the Law on Foreign Investment. Reformers realized an increasingly urgent need to create a level playing field for all types of businesses regardless of their ownership, which was also a critical requirement of World Trade Organization (WTO) accession. With this motivation in mind, the Prime Minister Research Council and the Task Force recommended to Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải to merge the two existing enterprise laws into the unified Law on Enterprise and the two investment laws into the common Investment Law, both were enacted in late 2005 and became effective in mid-2006. While the first two generations of law on private enterprise in 1990 and 1999 were drafted and enacted during crisis and therefore considered an "emergency exit" for the economy, on the contrary, the 2005 Law on Enterprise came out when the economy was at its peak and vested interest groups began to take root and spread. The later factor also applied to the 2014 Law on Enterprise. The impact of both laws would prove limited.

There are several basic reasons for this. First, it is apparent that for some senior party state leaders, the 2005 and 2014 Law on Enterprise were passed as a necessary formal means to achieve the objectives of joining the WTO and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), respectively, rather than

a genuine political commitment. Further, while "breakthroughs" on paper, these laws were frequently disabled during the implementation process. For instance, lawmakers have succeeded in forcing the SOEs to "sit at the same table" with the other economic players in the unified Law on Enterprise, and this opened the hope for ensuring equal footing for all types of businesses, especially for private SMEs. But in reality, sitting at the table has had little effect on discrimination, which has remained persistent, deep, and widespread and more sophisticated in circumventing inconvenient laws (Pham, 2008). The declining efficacy of laws meant to assist the development of the private sector has been especially apparent since 2005, when Vietnam began to see the emergence of powerful state economic groups since 2005 (Nguyen, 2014; Vu-Thanh, 2017).

In summary, the 2005 and 2014 Laws on Enterprise have not brought about significant changes to Vietnam's private-sector development. The limited success of the 2005 law and its contribution to domestic-private sector development and industrial growth during the 2006–2010 period owed principally to declining support of the 1999 Law on Enterprise the Global Financial Crisis, and the government's subsequent fiscal stimulus package, which advantaged the state-owned sector rather than with the contents of 2005 Law on Enterprise itself. Similarly, the recovery of the private sector (Figure 12.6B) since 2014 was more likely the effect of recovery of both international and Vietnamese economy rather than the 2014 Law on Enterprise. Two additional developments during this period bear emphasis. First, from 2005 onwards, the cooperative relationship and trust that had been developed between the state and Vietnam's emerging private business sector that was built during Phan Văn Khải's tenure as prime minister (i.e., 1997–2006) withered.[12] Second this period saw the development of a clientelist relationship between the state and big businesses – mostly state-owned economic groups and a very small group of big private conglomerates – in search of political support or privileged benefits, as detailed next.

Political Leadership and the Clientelist Pattern

In the mid-2000s, the Vietnamese political economy experienced two important events. The first was the launching of the model of state economic groups – the "commanding heights" of the socialist market economy – in November 2005 and the second is that Nguyễn Tấn Dũng became the prime minister in June 2006. These two seemingly unrelated events turn out to be intrinsically woven together.

The aspiration to develop large SOEs dated back to the time of the late Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt. In 1994, the 18 largest SOEs (referred to as State General Corporation 91 – hereafter SGCs 91) were established, inspired by the role of the *keiretsu* and *chaebols* in the industrialization success of Japan and South Korea (Perkins and Vu-Thanh, 2011). The stated goal is to create large corporations that can become internationally competitive with well-known brands such as Sony or Samsung.[13] Despite this effort, by early 2000s, the SOE reform in general and the experiment with the SEGs in particular came to a standstill. Despite obvious advantages and the government's preferential treatments, the performance of the SOE sector was not improved and even lagging behind the private sector. In this context, the Resolution of the Third Plenum of the 9th Party Central Committee on SOE reform in 2001 laid the way for the experimentation of the state economic group (SEG) model by taking existing SGCs 91 as the core, adding to them other SOEs in the same industry, and then injecting capital to these new SEGs. Compared with the SGCs 91, the SEGs have several new roles, in which the most notable are that they become the government's key instrument to ensure major macroeconomic balances and a main force in international economic integration. In order to perform these macroeconomic and strategic roles, SEGs are built up in terms of both scale and scope.

Being a relatively young and very ambitious prime minister who wanted to quickly assert his economic leadership by means of SOEs, Nguyễn Tấn Dũng replaced the gradual approach of experimenting with the SEG model under Phan Văn Khải with a bold plan to accelerate the expansion of this model. Being the person in charge of establishing the first SEGs as soon as taking office, Nguyễn Tấn Dũng rushed to establish more SEGs despite the warning of many economists and of the former prime minister Võ Văn Kiệt himself. By 2011, 13 SEGs had been established.[14] Instead of being traditionally supervized by the line ministries, all SEGs are now put under direct supervision of the prime minister. Moreover, all decisions to establish new SOEs are now assigned either to the prime minister or the local governments, implying that the line ministry's authority over SOEs has dramatically curtailed. All these moves converge to one direction: fragmented authority in SOE supervision, particularly the SEGs, has become more concentrated in the hands of the prime minister. Large SOEs increasingly move closer to the prime minister and further away from the line ministries.

With massive support from the government, SEGs quickly expanded not only in terms of size but also in terms of their activities. In the name of increased autonomy, SEGs now can expand into all kinds of businesses such as banking, real estate, financial investment, and securities trading. Now that SEGs can own commercial banks, they are less dependent on government funding mechanisms. In addition, with inherent advantage in access to land – which under the constitution is owned by the people but managed by the state – SEGs quickly occupied land in prime locations to build new urban complexes or commercial residential housing, thereby inflating the already inflated real estate market. Similar trends were also observed in the finance and security markets.

The degradation in institutional and business environments has serious implications for the development of the private sector. Many businesses that succeeded in the reform era by developing capacity now are eager to invest in a relationship with politicians, government officials, and SOEs. In the past, businesses were trying to explore new markets to maximize their profit. Nowadays, much of their energy is driven toward rent-seeking activities. If these kinds of negative behaviors previously appeared idiosyncratic, they now are quite common. In a Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI) survey conducted by Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) in 2013, 8,093 domestic-private firms in all 63 provinces were asked to comment on the following statement: "Contracts, land and other economic resources mostly fall in the hands of enterprises that have strong connections to local authorities" (Malesky, 2014). The result is not very surprising: the ratio of respondents who agree with this statement in the median province is 96.6%.

The Private Sector in a Decentralized Clientelist Context

To explore further the dynamics of private-sector development, attention is now given to developments at local levels of governance, as such an analysis can help to understand both national trends and within-country diversity with respect to forces shaping the private sector's development. The starting point of the analysis is the observation (highlighted in Malesky's contribution to this chapter) that although Vietnam is a unitary party-state, its operational structure has and continues to be increasingly decentralized. Two of the most important collective decision-making institutions – namely the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the (party-controlled) National Assembly – are meant to be representative bodies drawn from local constituencies. While Vietnam's party-state retains certain centralized features, decentralization and the interests of local actors remain equally important aspects of the country's political economy.

Fiscal Decentralization and the Political Economy of Decentralization

Pressures for further decentralization have been growing since *Doi moi*. Economic successes in the 1990s and early 2000s generated stronger pressures for decentralization, simply because the old "operating system" under central planning has proved incompatible with the new economy, which is increasingly market-oriented and internationalized. To remedy this situation, the government enacted the new Budget Laws in 1996 and in 2002 (with the latter effective 1 January 2004). These were designed to accelerate fiscal decentralization and issued Resolution 08 in June 2004 to further decentralize state management, according to which the central government will accelerate decentralization in important dimensions, including the management of development investment, budget, land and natural resources, and SOE autonomy. These two policies have led to important changes in relationships within the state system itself as well as between the state and business at the local level.

The immediate implication of fiscal decentralization is that provincial governments now have to increase their budget to meet a higher spending responsibility, while the revenue sharing structure with the central government remains largely unchanged and the transfers from the central government are significantly curtailed.[15] For local governments in Vietnam, most of their revenue comes from three sources. The first is land-related revenue (mainly tax on land use and on the transfer of land use rights) and natural resources tax which, according to the budget law, local governments can retain entirely. The two other sources of revenue are corporate income tax and value-added tax, which local governments can retain a certain proportion of, depending on their negotiations with the Ministry of Finance. All three sources of revenue have one thing in common: they all depend on the existence of businesses, especially the large ones. This is relatively easy to understand for the latter two sources of revenue, but even for the first source, revenue from land and natural resources usually correlates with the degree of vibrancy of local economy. Thus, decentralization changes not only the status of the business sector in general but also the relative role of the three business sectors in the calculation of the local government.

Fiscal decentralization has different consequences for the 63 provinces in Vietnam in terms of their budget. For the dozen provinces that are capable of balancing their budgets (thanks to a strong business base or abundant natural resources), decentralization helps expand their fiscal space considerably, and they thus become more independent from the central government. In contrast, fiscal decentralization tends to increase the dependence on the central government for the remaining 50-plus provinces which currently receive transfers from the central government.

Implications for State Business Relations

This situation has several important consequences for the state-business relationship. First, at the national level, the prime minister – who has already consolidated the control over the SEGs – now can use these "weapons" to serve his interests. For instance, to obtain the local support in the party Central Committee, the prime minister may suggest SEGs to invest simultaneously in many provinces.[16] During the boom time, this suggestion is often welcome by both SEGs and local governments because SEGs can seize the opportunity to extract rents, and local governments can benefit from big investments. Of course, the state budget cannot accommodate every investment projects.[17] And when the economy slows down – as it does currently – these political-driven projects become a huge burden for all parties involved, especially for the state expenditure, which ultimately falls onto shoulders of tax payers.

Decentralization has both positive and negative impacts on the relationship between local governments and businesses. Probably the most important positive impact is that many local

governments become more proactive in improving business environment for economic development. Some of the most successful examples include Ha Tay (*Hà Tây*) (before being merged into Hanoi) and Vinh Phuc (*Vĩnh Phúc*) in the north, Danang in the central, Binh Duong (*Bình Dương*) and Dong Thap (*Đồng Tháp*) in the south. These provinces have been either consistently at the top or greatly improving their ranking in the PCI compiled by VCCI and Vietnam Competitiveness Initiative since 2005.[18]

The improvement in the relationship between businesses and provincial governments, and thus the quality of the business environment, generally help provinces attract additional FDI. In turn, these FIEs – acting as "agents of change" – contribute to better business environment (Vu, 2008), especially where FIEs are significant contributors to the province's GDP and industrial production.

However, although provincial governments can support the business expansion, they often fail to facilitate cluster development as in the case of local governments in China (see Dinh, 2014). One of the main reasons is due to the fact that provinces – which are the decentralized units in Vietnam – are quite small.[19] As a result, industrial clusters often spread across several provinces, while unfortunately these provinces have little incentives to coordinate but compete with each other. For instance, industrial clusters such as catfish, shrimp, and rice – those agricultural processing industries that Vietnam has outstanding comparative advantage – spread over provinces in the Mekong Delta. But so far, despite commitments made by leadership of these provinces, "public good" activities such as export market database and regulations, as well as trade promotion activities of the 13 provinces in the Mekong Delta remained isolated (Nguyen and Vu-Thanh 2020). Similarly, the southern textile clusters – one of Vietnam's leading exports – located in Ho Chi Minh, Binh Duong, and Dong Nai (*Đồng Nai*) hardly have any cooperation or coordination efforts for improving or upgrading the cluster by the provincial governments.

Clientelism and Collusion

In addition to the clientelism described earlier, two of the most serious negative impacts are the emergence of rent-seeking and state-business collusive activities. In the short run, the largest, and also fastest and simplest source of revenue comes from land and natural resources. For example, to increase tax revenue, the provincial People's Committee can now simply issue an administrative decision to convert hundreds of hectares of land from agricultural to industrial or urban uses, then transfer the land use rights to investors at much higher value. The enormous rent generated from land and natural resources is the greatest source of corruption at the local level. *Nhân Dân* (The People) – the mouthpiece of the CPV – quoted a report by the Government Inspectorate acknowledging that between 2003 and 2010, the state administrative organs at all levels received more than 1.2 million complaints and denunciations in which 70% were related to land.[20] Similarly, according to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, land-related complaints have always accounted for about 70% to 90% of total complaints received by this ministry. This number was tripled between 2004 and 2007, right after the revised Land Law came into effect in 1 July 2004 (World Bank, 2009).

In many provinces, decentralization pressures make the local government feel the need to build up a number of key local SOEs to become its right arm in raising funds as well as implementing infrastructure projects.[21] These companies can be either rent-seeking or welfare-improving or both, depending critically on the degree of commitment to economic development of the local government. Very little is known, however, why some local governments are more benevolent than others.

Some provinces even nurture crony private companies to help them mobilize resources from the central government. Nominally, these firms are delegated by local governments to raise

funds for local development projects. With this delegation, not necessarily in official forms, these companies start their lobbying efforts, possibly first by lobbying the center – e.g., the planning agencies and line ministries – to insert their projects into the master plan. They then take this master plan to the Ministry of Finance to apply for disbursement. Another channel is that, under the name of raising funds for local economic development, the crony companies can directly "lobby" the Vietnam Development Bank, state-owned commercial banks, and the economic stimulus funds for outright subsidies or loans with preferential interest rates. For example, during the period of economic stagnation, subsidies from central government to Ninh Binh (*Ninh Bình*) province in 2009 increased by 1.8 times compared to 2008 (while on average, the subsidy increased only 1.4 times), thanks in significant part to the "efforts" of a couple of key private domestic firms in the province.

Absent Unforeseen Changes a Breakthrough Seems Implausible

The private sector in Vietnam has experienced impressive growth since *Doi moi*. From a marginal position – being considered a subject of "socialist rehabilitation" and only allowed to do business in areas stipulated by law until early 1990s – this sector has played the central role for economic growth, industrial development, and job creation for the economy. Indeed, the development of the private sector is one of the most significant achievements of *Doi moi* in Vietnam.

But the success of the private sector in Vietnam is only a partial one. The FIE sector has grown very strongly and now dominates both export and industrial production in Vietnam, however without being integrated into the domestic economy. The domestic private sector has also grown very fast in terms of quantity, but its average scale is very small and its competitiveness is still limited. As analyzed in this chapter, the root cause of this situation stems from the nature of the Vietnamese political economic system in which one of the biggest challenges facing the CPV – or its fundamental political economic dilemma – is how to maintain a balance between political ideology and economic legitimacy, or how to boost economic development while keeping its absolute power and comprehensive leadership.

Adhering to the communist ideology, the party-state's distrust of, and therefore discrimination against, the private sector is inescapable. However, the level of distrust and discrimination has depended on the degree of the tradeoff between the political ideology and economic legitimacy, on the internal structure of the state, and on the quality of leadership. Consequently, for a long time, the private sector, especially the domestic private sector, has been discriminated against, despite the fact that this sector is the largest contribution to the growth and integration Vietnam's economy. Only very recently (i.e., the 12th Party Congress in 2016), after many heated debates, the private sector is now considered to be "an important driving force" of the economy, while the "leading role" of the state sector has been reaffirmed. It is also because of the fundamental political economic dilemma that the status of the private sector had only been fundamentally improved when the economy plunged into crisis. And then, as evidenced in this chapter, the private sector (together with the household agricultural sector) has always become the "life saver" of the economy.

This chapter also points out an important distinction in Vietnam's domestic private sector, which is the difference in nature between small and medium-sized private enterprises and large private conglomerates. While the former have to struggle in unfair competition and institution environment, and therefore it is very hard for them to grow up, the majority of the latter are rent-seeking, overcoming their "original sin" primarily through colluding with the state and state enterprises. As argued in this chapter, the rapid emergence of these enterprises since the

mid-2000s stems from the Vietnamese political economic system itself, as well as from the leadership, institutional fragmentation, and decentralization in Vietnam.

In retrospect, *Doi moi* success in Vietnam depends on three decisive factors: the existential urgency of the situation, the quality of reform leadership, and the lack of powerful vested interest groups, which emerged due to the collusion between business conglomerates (both public and private) and the state. Looking forward, if the first factor does not emerge while the other two factors remain unchanged, any reform breakthrough, or the so-called "*Doi moi II*", seems implausible.

Notes

1 From now on, we will refer to the state-owned enterprise sector as the state or SOE sector, the domestic private enterprise sector as the non-state or PDE sector, and the foreign invested enterprise sector as the FIE sector.

2 For a detailed discussion, see Pham, C.L. (2008), Vu, Q.T. (2008), Pham, D.N. et al. (2013).

3 There are also collective firms and household industrial firms, but the share of these latter groups is small and generally growing slowly, if at all.

4 It is estimated that the state sector contributed only 10% to 15% to total non-oil exports, and the remaining is contributed by the domestic private sector.

5 See, for example, the Strategy for Socio-economic Stabilization and Development to 2000 adopted at the 7th Party Congress in June 1991.

6 The term "private economy" is only officially used for the first time since the 6th Meeting of the 6th Party Congress (March 1989). Before that, documents of the 6th Party Congress (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1987: 59–61) asserted that "the socialist economy with the state sector as the core must regain a decisive role in the national economy". This document acknowledges the need of a private capitalist economy but, at the same time, maintains steadfast direction of completely eliminating private commercial business and only accepting the existence of small productive capitalists in industries and commodities that are closely regulated by the state. Moreover, these capitalists are still deemed to be subjects of "socialist rehabilitation".

7 In addition to private enterprises officially registered, the family business households also increased rapidly from 0.84 million households in 1990 to 2.2 million households in 1996 (Pham, 2008: 191).

8 Another very important factor was the bilateral trade agreement between Vietnam and the United States (2001), which almost coincided with the time of the 1999 Law on Enterprise, and therefore strongly complemented it.

9 For further discussion, see Pham (2008), Tran (2008), and Vu (2008).

10 Vietnam Communist Party (2001: 98).

11 Vietnam Communist Party (2002: 58–59).

12 While the first meeting of Phan Van Khai (in 1997) with the business community was with the domestic private enterprises, the first meeting of Nguyen Tan Dung was with state conglomerates, followed by a meeting with FIEs. In the mid-2000s, both state and private conglomerates started to enjoy a much more favorable position.

13 But there are at least two fundamental differences between Vietnam's and Korea's efforts to create large, well-known competitive firms. In Korea, most of these firms were private, whereas all of the conglomerates in Vietnam are state-owned with their boards of directors and top management selected by the government. Second, in Korea all of these large *chaebols*, in exchange for temporary government support lasting in most cases for only a few years, were expected to become internationally competitive exporters. Vietnam's conglomerates are still largely oriented toward import substitution.

14 It should be added that the plan to promote SEGs is in line both with the official view that the state sector must play the leading role in the economy and with the dogmatic conservatism of the new CPV's secretary general, who also came into power in 2006.

15 Indeed, between 2000 and 2010, the ratio of local revenue to total national revenue increased from 25% to 38% while the ratio of local spending to total national expenditure increased from 45% to 53%. During the same period, the subsidy from central government as a percentage of total local expenditure significantly reduced from about 50% to 30% (Vu-Thanh, 2012: 16).

16 For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Pincus et al. (2012).

17 The total investment estimate for an incomplete list of public investment projects is about US$150 billion for the 2011–2020 period, or approximately US$15 billion each year, which is equivalent to about one-third of the total annual budget expenditure.

18 PCI is a non-government initiative, jointly developed by the VCCI and USAID, designed to assess the ease of doing business, quality of economic governance, and progress of administrative reform in all 63 provinces in Vietnam. PCI is constructed using opinion data provided by domestic private businesses, as well as published data regarding 10 dimensions of provincial economic governance, namely (i) entry costs for business start-up; (ii) access to land and security of business premises; (iii) information transparency and equitability; (iv) time requirements for bureaucratic procedures and inspections; (v) informal charges; (vi) policy biases toward state, foreign, or connected firms; (vii) proactivity of provincial leadership in solving problems for enterprises; (viii) business support services; (vi) labor and training policies; and (x) fair and effective legal procedures for business dispute resolution. Since the PCI was first introduced in 2005, it has been actively used by provincial governments to monitor and benchmark the competitiveness of their business environment. The PCI is, however, rarely used by the central government as an input to its policy formulation. For more information on the PCI, see http://eng.pcivietnam.org.

19 By way of comparison, in 2010 an average province in China (Vietnam) has an area of 282,264 (5,257) km^2, a population of 38.6 (1.4) million, and a GDP of US$175 (1.6) billion.

20 Source: www.nhandan.com.vn/mobile/_mobile_chinhtri/_mobile_tintucsukien/item/788102.html, accessed on 12 October 2014.

21 Many examples can be found, for instance, Ho Chi Minh City Finance and Investment State-Owned Company (HFIC), Hanoi Housing Development and Investment Corporation (Handico), Investment and Industrial Development Corporation (Becamex IDC) in Bình Dương province, and Tín Nghĩa Corporation in Dong Nai province.

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13

DECENTRALIZATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM

Edmund Malesky

One of the first things every student of Vietnam learns is the expression "the king's laws stop at village gates" (*phép vua thua lệ làng*), indicating the critical role that subnational leaders play in choosing to implement or defy central policies. The theme is central in historical accounts of Vietnam, and rightly so. From Vietnamese imperial history to the present day, central leaders have been challenged by the physical and cultural distance of their far-flung empires and their reliance on the consent and conduct of local actors. In the (Đổi Mới) or reform era, the implementation of central initiatives and directives has often hinged on local decisions, understandings, and imperatives, reminding Vietnamese analysts of the local actors' gatekeeping role. Vietnam's successful response to COVID-19 was also premised on a combination of centralized regulatory mandates combined with decentralized spending to tailor responses to local needs.

In the contemporary context, decentralized authority relations remain a source of tension while reflecting increasing complexity. Vietnam's booming economy, among the fastest growing in the world over the past 30 years, has created wide disparities in economic performance, welfare, and institutionalized practices across Vietnam's regions. The tension between allowing political executives in successful provinces room to tailor economic and administrative policies to their local tastes and demands, and the need to ameliorate the rising inequality between localities has been a central concern of Vietnamese authorities, as evidenced by continual experimentation with institutions governing central–local relations. At times, the central state has unveiled far-reaching decentralization plans, providing provinces (especially economically successful ones) a great deal of latitude and autonomy in local initiatives. At other times, it has rolled them back through formal and informal means, chastising the fence-breakers for going too far.

In this chapter, I survey central–local relations in the reform era, paying particular attention to the structure of the local government apparatus, decentralization efforts, and the implications of decentralization and subnational governance for economic development. Along the way, the chapter explores key debates in the literature on the benefits of fiscal decentralization, the relative importance of formal versus de facto decentralization, and whether recent institutional changes in the central-local relations are a sign of recentralization efforts. Finally, the chapter introduces several metrics for measuring subnational economic performance, foremost among them the Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI) for measuring economic governance and the Provincial Administrative Performance Index (PAPI) for gauging how Vietnamese citizens

experience local governance and service delivery. The value and limits of these metrics are assessed in view of debates on their merits and contributions to Vietnam's development.

A Unitary State

Constitutionally, Vietnam is a unitary state. The present structure of the Vietnamese provincial governance system has its origins in Articles 119 to 125 of the 1992 Vietnamese constitution (VNA, 1992). The 1992 constitution and the 2013 revised constitution lay out the explicit roles of the different local political, state, governmental bodies, including the party, executive, legislature, and local departments and offices of central (functional) line ministries (e.g. finance, construction, health). Since 1992, the powers of provincial authorities have been refined and made more concrete by further laws and implementing documents.

The overall party-state architecture has both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Horizontally, the system is separated into Communist Party of Vietnam (CVP), executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. Vertically, the system consists of the central, provincial, district, and commune levels.[1] The horizontal division is then replicated at each subnational level, so that branches of the CPV, the executive (People's Committee), legislature (People's Council), and judiciary (People's Court/Procuracy) exist in every subnational unit in the country (Fforde, 2003; Kerkvliet, 2004). In a combination of its French and Marxist-Leninist legacies (Marr, 2004), Vietnam follows a parliamentary system, which means that citizens vote to elect their representatives in the legislative branch (Vietnamese National Assembly [VNA] and People's Councils [PCs]), who in turn elect the leadership of the executive branch and appoint the heads of the judiciary branch. Citizens vote to directly elect each of these legislative bodies at national, provincial, district, and commune elections.

Because Vietnam is a single-party regime, all institutions are technically accountable to the CPV at each level and must pay attention to the decisions made by the party secretary (*Bí thư Tỉnh ủy*). In practice, as I discuss later, the actual level of subordination to the CPV can differ based on geographical history, cultural, and independent financial resources available to the People's Committee chairman (*Chủ tịch Ủy ban nhân dân*).

Scholars refer to Vietnam as a unitary state because the most important positions – the party secretary, People's Committee (PCOM) chairmen, and chairman of the PC (*Chủ tịch Hội đồng nhân dân*) are effectively determined by the central CPV. The party secretary for each province along with the PCOM of the Hanoi and Ho Chi Min City (HCMC) are selected directly by the Politburo, while the chairmen of the PCOM in the other 61 provinces are determined by the CPV Secretariat. Constitutionally, these appointments must be approved by representative bodies. The VNA must vote on the Hanoi and HCMC PCOM appointments, while other PCOMs are technically voted on by the directly elected provincial People's Council. However, Vu-Thanh (2016, p. 8) refers to this as the "Party elect, people vote" mechanism, meaning that the representative bodies and voters primarily rubber-stamp personnel already elected by the CPV. Central party, state, and governmental organs also have control over the dismissal of elected personnel. In the wake of corruption scandals in 2006, the prime minister obtained the ability to dismiss provincial PCOM chairmen and ministers through the National Assembly (Vietnam.Net, 2006a, 2006b).

In addition, as in other Leninist systems, Vietnamese local executive departments and agencies, such as the Department of Planning and Investment (DPI) or Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DONRE) are dual subordinate, meaning that they report both to the People's Committee chairman at the local level and to their line ministry (i.e. the Ministry

of Planning and Investment and the Ministry of Natural Resources in Hanoi). Ideally, the system should deliver central objectives from the line ministry guided by implementation with local knowledge by the People's Committee chairman. In actuality, the relative importance of these local and central agencies differs across locality and is heavily contingent on the economic resources and attendant autonomy of specific provinces (Malesky, 2004, 2008).

While Vietnam has engaged in a great deal of decentralization over the years, residual central control of political promotions and the role of the CPV in cadre selection, evaluation, and promotion have ensured elements of upward accountability. At times, this has appeared to incentivize provincial leaders' attention to and performance in economic and administrative reforms, as strict control over the elite positions and dual subordination to line ministries link promotion to performance. Indeed, Vietnam scores highly on the expert analyses of meritocracy.

How strong is meritocratic incentive? Daniel Bell (2015, p. 195), singles out Vietnam in his best-selling book on political meritocracy in China as the most likely case of success outside of China. While not expert on Vietnam, Bell's claim finds certain if limited support. In Vietnam, it is common to refer to provincial leaders as more or less "successful" (thành công) based on their assessments within the party-state, in the state-controlled media, surveys, and the like. And there is an expectation that success portends upward mobility. A "successful" chair of a PCOM, for example, commonly aims to become the provincial CPV secretary. Leaders regarded as "very successful" provincial party secretaries, such as Nguyễn Minh Triết (former party secretary of Binh Duong [*Bình Dương*] and HCMC who became president) and Nguyễn Bá Thanh (party secretary of Danang who headed the CPV Central Steering Committee for anti-corruption) will seek and be selected for high-ranking employment in the central government in Hanoi.

In practice, and recent modest reforms notwithstanding, place of birth and personal and local ties appear more important determinants of promotion than merit, particularly in comparison to China. Whereas only 18% of Chinese provincial party and state officials serve in the province of their birth, 70% of top Vietnamese provincial officials do so (Malesky and London, 2014). In fact, if one includes Vietnamese officials who spent the bulk of their career in a province after arriving at a young age, 90% of Vietnamese officials can be considered native to the province they serve (Malesky, 2009b; Pincus et al., 2012). This feature of Vietnam's political economy generates important feedback loops that structure economic development and its politics.

Because they are rooted deeply in local political economies, local leaders' long-term time horizons are more likely to be associated with the economic success of their home province and specific projects, as opposed to careers in the central bureaucracy. Importantly, however, this does not signal retreat from national politics. On the contrary, the official will remain in the province but aspire for appointment to the CPV CCOM, the most powerful policy-making body in the country (Malesky, Abrami and Zheng, 2011; Abrami, Malesky and Zheng 2013). It is the CCOM that in charge of devising the country's 10-year socioeconomic plans and which is responsible for selecting the secretary general and members of the Politburo. A seat in the CCOM can be used to influence national decision making while also advancing local agendas.

This leads us to question of whether and to what extent competition for scarce promotion slots (e.g., in the CCOM) incentive for reform in line with central leadership's objectives (Malesky and McCulloch, 2014) or otherwise shape or distort policy formation. Jenson and Malesky (2018, Ch. 8), for example, find central-local dynamics to have encouraged the overuse of costly tax incentives to attract investments (Jenson and Malesky, 2018, Ch. 8). Do, Nguyen, and Tran (2017) further burnish this point by demonstrating that even officials promoted to higher office, especially the CCOM, have incentives to channel resources back to their home provinces for infrastructure improvements.

Decentralization

Decentralization of formal authority over economic decisions has been intimately linked with economic policy in Vietnam since the initial *Doi moi* economic reforms in 1986 (Fritzen, 2000; Westcott, 2003), even as "spontaneous" decentralized economic decision making had become increasingly widespread in the context of the economic crises years of the late 1970s and middle 1980s (Fforde and dyVlder, 1996). To facilitate the provincial-level implementation of the reforms, a 1989 resolution of the council of ministers delegated a range of expenditure and revenue-collection responsibilities to the local level (Võ, 1989). This role would later be refined and amended with a new council of minister's decision (Võ, 1992) and government Resolution 8 (Phan, V.K., 2004). Resolution 8 is particularly enlightening for its frank discussion of the flaws and limitations of the previous decentralization efforts (Vu-Thanh, 2016), discussing the lack of consistent understanding among stakeholders and the fears that further decentralization would foment regionalism.

To put Vietnam in comparative context, the broader political economy literature on decentralization generally points to three arenas where authority is shifted to local levels: fiscal, administrative, and political decentralization (Rondinneli and Nellis, 1986). *Fiscal decentralization* provides local governments with the power to tax citizens and business, raise money through borrowing either domestically or overseas, and decide how to spend that money through the preparation and implementation of local budgets. *Administrative decentralization* involves the allocation of executive power, specifically over the civil service and human resources, to local authorities. This entails the ability to recruit and retain staff, allocate human resources according to local needs, hold personnel accountable to performance, and manage the financial resources necessary to make these decisions (Green, 2005, p. 131). Finally, p*olitical decentralization* provides for the local election of subnational legislatures or executives, who have authority over a range of administrative and fiscal responsibilities. Most importantly, political decentralization allows for downward accountability to the local citizenry, who can shape policy through their choices of officials and can vote them out if they do not. Of course, these divisions are simplifications. In reality, they overlap quite a bit. Political decentralization is irrelevant if local authorities do not have control over some fiscal and administrative decisions. Administrative decentralization requires some control over budget expenditures, as human resource allocations require decisions about which government services will be prioritized.

Fritzen (2002) argues that the how Vietnamese policy-makers understand decentralization is encoded in the term they use to describe it: "*Phân công, phân cấp, phân quyền*" means "hierarchical division of labor, administrative decentralization, power devolution. As Fritzen (2002, p. 9) puts it,

> In purely constitutional terms, Vietnam is a unitary state where decentralization is most easily expressed in administrative terms. Local governments do not have constitutionally mandated resources, responsibilities and legal status, but exist as deconcentrated agents of the central government. Thus, "phân cấp" literally implies the allocation of implementation duties to lower levels of governments.

On the whole, experts on Vietnam agree that administrative and fiscal decentralization in Vietnam has been substantial (Fritzen, 2002; Vu-Thanh, 2016; Van Arkadie et al., 2010).

Political Decentralization

Compared to administrative and fiscal decentralization, political decentralization in Vietnam is seen to be quite limited, particularly if viewed outside the Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy

(29/CP/2006) which facilitated the election of village heads (Fritzen, 2000; Peláez Tortoza, 2012). Interest in the issue of political centralization and decentralization with respect to provinces saw an uptick in the wake of the Thai Binh (*Thái Bình*) protests of 1997 and has remained a prominent theme, particularly in provinces where political leaders have implemented experimental schemes and projects, such as Danang. There has also been consistent attention to whether to what extent political power can or should be decentralized to the village level, a level of governance below the commune that is not formally a part of the Vietnamese political and administrative hierarchy and has little control over important economic decisions. The decentralization of power to villages is deemed important because it is at the village and (to an extent) neighborhood where Vietnamese interactions with public authority and services take place. Research has demonstrated that the quality of village elections varies greatly and that those with higher quality election procedures have better public service delivery (Nguyen H.H., 2016; Westcott, 2003; Wells-Dang, 2010).

The most interesting political developments affecting local policy are actually occurring at the national level. Over time, the share of provincial representatives in Vietnam's powerful CCCOM has increased, rising from 36% in 1991 to 46% in 2006 to over 50% today. In political squabbles (Abuza, 2002) or to move policy forward (Malesky and Merchant-Vega, 2011), it is important to engage these political elites, either through state-directed transfers (Malesky and Schuler, 2011), state investment (Pincus et al., 2012), or greater policy authority (Jandl, 2013). Increasingly, greater decentralization may be the result of increasing subnational prominence in Vietnam's key decision-making body.

Fiscal Decentralization

In terms of fiscal decentralization, Vietnam has engaged in enormous change since 1986. The effort to decentralize expenditures and revenue to the province level began with Council of Ministers' Resolution 186/HDBT on Fiscal Decentralization to Local Governments (Võ, V.K., 1989). Notably, this document contained a clause that proved to be extremely important for incentivizing innovative economic development at the provincial level. According to the document, provincial governments could keep 100% of the savings from assigned expenditures (Section II, Article 6, Clause a) (Nguyen, H.P., 2008). That is, if revenue exceeded the expenditures allocated by central authorities, provincial leaders could funnel the money back into their own province in the form of additional resources for public services and other innovative policies. The concept, which borrowed from the pre-1994 Chinese public finance system (Wong, 2007), had a legacy in profit-targeting for state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Vietnam (Fforde, 2007).

According to later academic work, the ability to keep savings over target had three downstream effects. First, it created an incentive for revenue collection. Although provincial officials of the tax authority were a centrally appointed position and not under the direct control of provincial PCOM, local leaders were motivated to formalize household businesses and assist with tax collection in order to generate surplus revenue (World Bank, 1996). Second, targeting motivated some provinces to pursue economic reform that would benefit the private or foreign sectors (Malesky, 2004, 2008; Jandl, 2013). Third, targeting may have generated interprovincial inequality as provinces were able to enter virtual or vicious cycles (Nguyen-Hoang and Schroder, 2010). Some localities used the decentralization to generate growth by pumping excess revenue back into their coffers. Others became more dependent on central transfers and state-owned enterprise investment in order to make ends meet (Nguyen-Hoang, 2008).

The 1996 Budget Law along with the amendments in 2000, 2004, and 2015 would further refine the fiscal relationship between local and central governments. The 1996 Law was notable

in that provided detailed information on subnational levels of government below the province (district and commune), clearly articulated the taxes that constituted own-source, shared, and central revenue, and set up a stable transfer system, whereby the revenue shares that provinces needed to contribute back to the central government would be fixed for several years before renegotiation (VNA, 1996a; GVDWG, 2000; Nguyen, 2008). This change served to augment the provincial-reform incentive noted previously. The 2002 State Budget Law further elaborated the shared revenue between provinces and fixed the rate for five years before recalibration (VNA, 2002).

The biggest decentralization in the 2002 State Budget Law, which came into force in 2004, occurred on the expenditure side (VNA, 2002). Prior to 2004, expenditures assignments at the sub-provincial level were mandated by the Ministry of Finance. Provinces were told how much money to spend in each district and what to spend it on. After 2004, provincial leaders were provided with an expenditure and allowed to distribute expenditures as they saw fit. In principle, provinces control complete autonomy over health and education expenditures within their locality (GVDWG, 2000). Around 50% of the budget has been delegated to provinces for to their allocation (Van Arkadie et al., 2010). Authors of the change argued that this would allow for greater tailoring of expenditures to the needs of the localities, who had a far better understanding of what their provinces needed. Critics, however, were concerned that such discretion would exacerbate within province-inequality, as provinces concentrated the expenditures on urban areas, neglecting their rural heartlands or neediest citizens (Martinez-Vazquez and Gomez, 2004, p. 356).

To address these concerns, the central government recentralized expenditures in the area of National Target Programs (NTPs). Under the 1996, Budget Law, a single block grant transfer provided for all NTPs with provinces able to allocate resources among NTPs as they saw fit. The 2002 Budget Law recentralized authority over individual NTP allocations, by stipulating that provinces could only allocate funds within each NTP. As Vu-Thanh (2016) argues, this change means in practice that expenditures are much more centralized in some localities than others. In poorer provinces without surplus revenue, the portion of pre-determined expenditure in local budgets can be as high as 80% to 90% (Ninh and Vu-Thanh, 2008). Even in some provinces running surpluses this predetermined expenditure accounts for more than 50% of the total budget.

A World Bank (2015) analysis of Vietnam's fiscal decentralization, pointed out that in raw numbers, Vietnam is one of the most decentralized countries in the world with local governments generating roughly 50% of sub-national revenues and accounting for over 50% of sub-national expenditures, particularly in the areas of education and health policy. The incentives generated by Vietnam's fiscal recentralization are critical for understanding the local politics in Vietnam. Growing the domestic private sector and attracting substantial foreign direct investment (FDI) mean that provinces have the ability to exceed revenue targets and funnel money back into the province (Jensen and Malesky, 2018, Ch. 8; Doan and Lin, 2016). The incentives structure has benefitted some provinces over others with 10 provinces accounting for about 70% of Vietnam's pre-tax revenue. Nevertheless, the system is highly equalizing. After accounting for equalizing and block transfers, per-capita public expenditures at the local level are very similar across provinces (Malesky, Abrami and Zheng, 2011; World Bank, 2015, p. 10).

Administrative Decentralization/Authority Over Investment

Vu-Thanh (2016) makes an argument the greatest gains for local governments have been made in the realm of "*investment decentralization*," a category of administrative decentralization. This comprises the ability to grant approval for domestic and foreign investment projects

located within a given jurisdiction. Because the activity generates revenue through user fees and involves capital flows, this responsibility could be considered as fiscal decentralization. On the other hand, managing investment projects also includes granting registration certificates, licenses, and the regulation of the entities, which fall more under the administrative decentralization. For FDI flows, the crucial legal changes made were Decree 852 of January 1996, which under the direct DPI control of the local people's committee (Hoang, 2006). Planning toward FDI had varied by province and led to frustration on the part of investors. The idea was to make provincial planning uniform across the provinces.

The second major change was the decision of the central government to allow provinces and cities to sign FDI projects directly. After a great deal of lobbying on the part of high FDI recipient provinces, who argued that they were slowed down by red tape, the VNA approved the amended Foreign Investment Law in 1996 (VNA, 1996b). This document allowed a small range of provinces to issues licenses on category "B" project and also put the provincial People's Committee directly in charge of land clearing and rental procedures. Under the 2006 Common Investment Law, Hanoi and HCMC could issue licenses up to $10 million, while other provinces can license all projects up to $5 million. Subsequent investment laws, which combined the rules for domestic and foreign investment in 2005 and 2013, have reaffirmed these powers (VNA, 2005a, 2005b, 2014). The prime minister would continue to be the only authority to approve licenses on category "A" projects, which include infrastructure construction and a range of activities considered vital to national security. Furthermore, the prime minister also reserves the right to issue licenses in a few other strategic project areas (including energy and mining) of $40 million or more.

While the early energy on investment decentralization was focused on FDI, the deteriorating influence of the East Asian Financial Crisis on inward FDI from the affected countries convinced Vietnamese officials that more effort needed to be expended on developing a competitive domestic, private sector. Vietnam's 1992 Constitution acknowledged the role of the non-state sector (Article 16) and there were two early laws governing the non-state sector in 1990 and 1991. These original Enterprise Laws created the legal entities of sole-proprietorships, limited liability company, and joint stock company, but they maintained elements of the top-down management system of Vietnam's central planning past. Before 2000, the legal code essentially created a certification system where potential entrepreneurs had to convince local-policy makers about the utility of their business plans and seek permission to risk their own capital (Hakkala and Kokko, 2007).

In August 1999, a group of economic innovators led by Lê Đăng Doanh – (director of the Central Institute for Economic Management), Nguyễn Đình Cung (head of the Macroeconomics Department of Central Institute for Economic Management (CIEM) at the time, and now its director), Phạm Chi Lan (vice president of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce) helped shepherd through an entirely new philosophy of how to think about the private sector. These changes were enshrined in 1999 Vietnam's Law on Enterprises (VNA, 1999). Rather than a certification system, Vietnam would now erect a registration system that allowed entrepreneurs to start businesses much more freely (Brown, 2002). Instead of seeking permission, businesspeople with good ideas were given the freedom to try their own luck. Certification in the form of licenses would only be required in a narrow group of strategically important sectors listed above (Tran, Grafton and Kompas, 2009).

The change in world view necessitated a dramatic reduction in entry barriers (including time costs and requisite licenses) to setting up a company that had immediate effects. In 1998, the median firm waited nearly a month to fulfill registration procedures. By 2000, waiting periods had been halved to 15 days (Taussig and Pham, 2004). This leveling of the playing field

was achieved through aggressive implementation of the law, which included public castigation of particular agencies and officials seen to not be on board (Nguyen et al., 2004). By the end of 2006, after seven consecutive years of increased annual registration totals, there were over 120,000 registered private companies operating in Vietnam – nearly six times the number in operation (Malesky and Taussig, 2009). Today in 2019, there are over 600,000 private enterprises, and the sector is the largest driver of employment growth in the country (GSO, 2019).

A key feature of the Enterprise Law was the delegation of the registration procedures to the DPI in each province (GVDWG, 2000). Technically, the DPI is dually subordinate to both its line ministry, the Ministry and Planning and Investment (MPI) and the People's Committee chairman. In practice, however, the appointment of the chair of DPI and the budget for the office are determined by the PCOM, aligning the interests of the DPI much more closely with that of the province. DPIs were now charged with reducing extra licenses, stamps, and procedures, and were supposed to submit formal plans for how they would do that. The Enterprise Law would later be subsumed into a Unified Enterprise Law in 2005 that covered business entry for both domestic and foreign firms (VNA, 2005a). In addition, to the Enterprise Law, a range of other laws also emerged at that time that also substantially increased provincial authority over local business activity. The 1998 (revised in 2001) and 2003 Land Law (later amended again 2013) gave significant power over the allocation of Land Use Rights Certificates (LURCs), long-term leases that could be sold, exchanged, mortgaged and used as collateral by small businesses (VNA, 2003; Do and Iyer, 2008). The 2004 Law on Inspections refined authority over visits by provincial regulators to small businesses to inspect labor safety, environmental, tax, and sanitation, attempting to streamline the burdens on businesses of shutting down regularly to accommodate the regulatory agencies (VNA, 2004).

While proponents of market reforms praised the emerging quality of Vietnamese business law at the national level (Cao and Spencer, 1997; Tran, Grafton and Kompas, 2009; Gillespie, 2002), it became immediately apparent that implementation of these laws relied heavily on the capacity and ingenuity of local provincial officials. At the time of the 1999 Enterprise Law, many provincial officials had backgrounds in the military or CPV apparatus, but very few had the requisite training to manage a modern market-system (Gainsborough, 2003). As a result of the delegation of these activities to the provincial level, tremendous variation began to emerge in the implementation of the laws across provinces. Indeed, Nguyễn Đình Cung headed an Enterprise Law task force out of the CIEM that tried to monitor and encourage implementation across the country (Nguyen, D.C., 2001)

A similar task force existed in regard to Public Administration Reform (PAR), which addressed the streamlining and improvement of regulatory institutions. PAR also began in the late 1995 under the Ministry of Home Affairs with the aim of improving public service delivery. In 2000, the PAR Master Program (PAR-MP) was initiated covering all services, and explicitly engaging the needs of the business sector (Painter, 2003). In 2011, Prime Minister Resolution 30c expanded the program and focused attention on the private business sector. The expressed goal was "creating an equal, open, favorable and transparent business environment to reduce time and costs for enterprises of all economic sectors in the compliance with administrative procedures."

Measuring Decentralization Effectiveness

Differences in capacity and ambition in how leaders used these new powers were driving tremendous divergence in the business and regulatory environment for Vietnam's private sector. While there was a general feeling among policy-makers and academics that these differences mattered for economic development (Meyer and Nguyen, 2005), there was no technology for

measuring and analyzing the effects of these differences. Scholars tended to emphasize structural conditions and infrastructure, but not the quality of local governance. There is a sizeable literature on the determinants of foreign direct investment Vietnam which typically points to traditional location advantages, including factor endowments, market attraction, labor costs, and physical infrastructure as key to attracting FDI (Mirza and Giroud, 2004; Nguyen and Anwar, 2011; Do-Pham and Tran-Nam, 2002).

The inordinate focus on endowments and infrastructure as the driver of development posed a prophecy of despair for less developed subnational locations, providing no incentive for their leaders to develop their local economies. If their economic welfare was solely determined by initial conditions outside of their control, why risk political capital on local policy innovate and reform? The Vietnam PCI, initiated by the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry and funded by US-AID, was a response to the need to see if decentralization allowed provinces to overcome their initial deficits in endowments and infrastructure to catch up with historically successful localities. In short, the PCI was designed to assess the ease of doing business, economic governance, and administrative reform efforts by Vietnam's provincial and city governments in order to promote private sector development. Thus, the PCI augments the collective voice of private entrepreneurs in Vietnam regarding economic governance in their province and the country. At its core, PCI is an effort to explain why some parts of the country perform better than others in terms of private-sector dynamism and growth. Using survey data from businesses that describe their perceptions of the local business environment, as well as credible and comparable data from official and other sources regarding local conditions, the PCI rates Vietnam's provinces on a 100-point scale. The year 2020 marks the 15th iteration of the report.

While the term "competitiveness" is grand and catchy, the PCI team actually built the index around the smaller, manageable slice of the broader reform agenda – economic governance. Dixit (2009) defines economic governance as "the processes that support economic activity and economic transactions by protecting property rights, enforcing contracts, and taking collective action to provide appropriate organizational infrastructure." The concept is best captured by the "Institutions" pillar of the global competitiveness index (Blanke, Paua and Sala-i-Martin, 2003). Beyond the academic antecedents, the decentralization reforms detailed earlier made it clear that Vietnamese provincial leaders actually had been granted authority over the policies and initiatives that shaped economic governance. Business registration, access to land, regulatory inspections and fines, vocational training, strategic planning over land allocation, and infrastructure rollouts were now entirely under the control of local authorities. With these new powers also came discretion over how to publicize them and share the rents generated by the new procedures. Thus, transparency and corruption, cornerstones of economic governance, were now also under the control of local leaders.

The approach that the PCI architects used to alter the focus of the index is visible on the front cover of every PCI report in the subtitle, "Measuring economic governance for business development" (Malesky, 2005; Malesky and Merchant-Vega, 2011). The 10 sub-indices of competitiveness were constructed to capture different elements of the business environment that can be directly influenced by provincial authorities in the short-to-medium term. The overall PCI index score comprises 10 sub-indices reflecting economic governance areas that affect private-sector development. A province that is considered to perform well on the PCI is the one that has 1) low entry costs for business start-up; 2) easy access to land and security of business premises; 3) a transparent business environment and equitable business information; 4) minimal informal charges; 5) limited time requirements for bureaucratic procedures and inspections; 6) minimal crowding out of private activity from policy biases toward state, foreign, or connected firms; 7) proactive and creative provincial leadership in solving problems

for enterprises; 8) developed and high-quality business support services; 9) sound labor training policies; and 10) fair and effective legal procedures for dispute resolution and maintaining law and order (Malesky, 2006, 2016). A range of scholars have shown the relationship between PCI scores and economic outcomes.

Some authors show that there is a positive correlation between local economic governance and FDI (Tran, Grafton and Kompas, 2009; Doan and Lin, 2016; Dang, 2013; Malesky, 2008; Nguyen and Diez, 2017), and Tu and Minh (2010) argues that the quality of local business services, as measured by the PCI, played a key role in attracting FDI. Correlations have been found in private-sector activity, including formalization of household businesses (Malesky and Taussig, 2009) expansion of private and small foreign investors (Malesky, McCulloch and Nhat, 2015), and local investment (Diep, 2014). Finally, Thanh and Zouriki (2011) find that better-governed provinces, using the PCI, have greater public service delivery. Dissenting work also exists. Dut (2015) points out that productivity, income, and investment did not increase in line with improvements in the business environment in the Mekong delta.

The PCI, however, is more than just a metric. It has played a key role in putting the views of the Vietnam private sector at the center of policy debates (Nguyen, 2013, 2014, 2016). To put the visibility of the PCI in sharper relief, Figure 13.1 plots Google Trends data between 2004 and 2016. The y-axis records the total amount of interest recorded for the search term each year using the Google algorithm, which has a daily range of between 0 and 100, with 100 listed as the most-searched term each day. The figure shows that Vietnam language searches for the PCI are as common as those for the Central Committee and twice as likely as for the Vietnamese National Assembly. To guard against bias caused by the international recognition of the PCI,
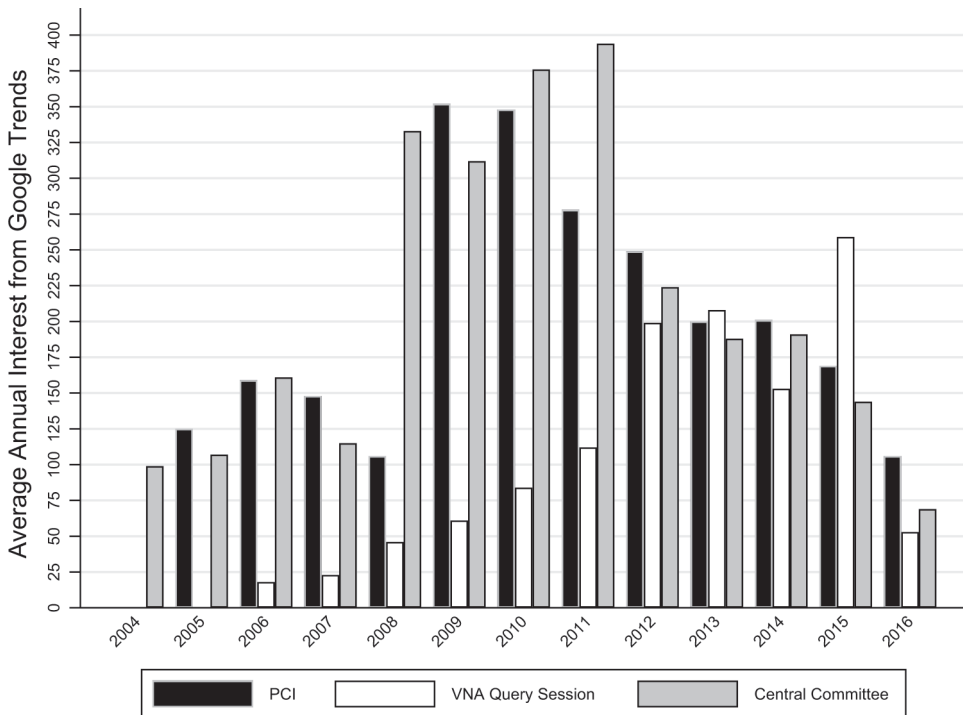
Figure 13.1   Google Trends data on the comparative visibility of PCI

Table 13.1 Number of articles found on online search engines

News Aggregator	PCI	VNA Query Session	Central Committee
	Chỉ số Năng lực cạnh tranh cấp tỉnh	*Chất vấn Quốc hội*	*Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*
Tuoitre.vn	150	93	140
Baomoi.com	576	168	744

Table 13.1 compares the three Vietnamese terms in news stories in Vietnam's *Tuổi Trẻ* (Youth) newspaper[2] and *Báo Mới* (New Paper) an online news aggregator for Vietnamese newspapers.[3] Again, the PCI is nearly as popular a subject as the Central Committee and substantially more well cited than the National Assembly Query Sessions.

The visibility of the PCI and the wide interest it has garnered have sparked similar projects in Vietnam and abroad. In Vietnam, three new indices have emerged to rank provinces on other aspects of governance not fully captured by the PCI. Most importantly, the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) PAPI survey in partnership with the Fatherland Front assesses governance from a citizen's perspective. One concern about the PCI was that it tended to associate good governance with what businesses needed. Clearly, however, businesses and citizens don't always agree. For instance, firms see regulations as a burden, while citizens depend on them for protection. The PAPI surveys therefore capture views of governance from the citizen's perspective and have been successfully influencing local administrative reform for eight years. The Justice Index, also produced by UNDP and the Vietnam Legal Association, measures access to justice across Vietnamese provinces. Finally, the Public Administration Reform Index measures implementation of PAR reforms.

Formal Versus De Facto Decentralization and Recentralization

To conclude this chapter, I reflect on two ongoing debates in the literature on Vietnam subnational relations that will motivate future work in this area. Interestingly, both return to age-old questions in the study of Vietnam about the tug-of-war between central and local authorities. First, how much of the actual decentralization in Vietnam is due to formal transfers of power, and how much is due to de facto seizures of authority by local authorities? Second, are recent changes in Vietnam's institutional rules best understood as efforts to reclaim central authority?

Formal Versus De Facto Decentralization

A key feature of research on subnational politics has been the emphasis on de facto decentralization over the formal devolution of authority, as the two trends appear uncorrelated both over time and spatially (Vu, Zouikri and Deffains, 2014). Going back to the seminal works of Fforde and De Vylder (1996) and Kerkvliet (2005), research has shown that for reasons of history, cultural, physical distance, and economic power, sub-national governments have had greater authority over local decision-making than the formal decisions allocated to them. Gainsborough (2018) has taken these claims to their logical extreme by emphasizing the "Myth of the Centralized Socialist State."

The emphasis of this literature has been on fence-breaking, which can best be summarized as sub-national leaders pursuing economic policies that were not permitted by central law. Examples

of such policies include agricultural liberalization (Fforde and De Vylder, 1996; Kerkvliet, 2005), trade openness (Van Arkadie and Mallon, 2003), SOE reform (Fforde, 2007), industrial zones and land titling (Malesky, 2008), and extra-legal tax incentives (Vu-Thanh, 2007). When these policies proved successful and constructive, the local initiators were rewarded with promotion and acclaim, and occasionally the local experiments were codified as central policy (Turley and Womack, 1998; Van Arkadie et al., 2010). At other times, the experiments failed or undermined central initiatives and the local leaders faced punishment (Vu-Thanh, 2007).

A fascinating feature of the debate on fence-breaking has been the slow linguistic morphing of the Vietnamese term shift in its usage. When describing the historical reform experiments that predated the renovation policy, Vietnamese and foreign scholars alike used the term, *phá rào*, which implies busting or exploding fences (See Pham, 2016). More recently, Vietnamese journalists and scholars have employed the term, *xé rào*, which implies a much less destructive tearing of the fence (See Nguyen and Pham, 2016). *Xé rào* is also more likely to be used when the subnational experiment was deemed unconstructive by central authorities and needed to be disbanded.

Malesky (2004, 2005, 2008) extended the early work on fence-breaking to local policy experiments in the renovation era. In contrast to previous work, Malesky emphasized economic incentives for the reforms, which were stimulated by the financial decentralization pointed out previously. Provinces able to retain revenue above negotiated targets were shielded from central authority, as they were less dependent on central transfers and had greater monetary resources to pursue their own initiatives. These incentives tended to align local leaders with the interests of early foreign investors, who were both a source of surplus revenue and ideas about economic and administrative policy changes. Using a simultaneous equation model to deal with endogeneity, Malesky (2008) demonstrated the impact of foreign investment on fence-breaking initiatives. Subsequent scholars have also explored this dynamic, showing the benefits of surplus revenue from governance improvements (Jandl, 2013) and public service delivery (Vu Zouikri and Deffains, 2014) and governance (Dang, 2013). More recent work, however, has challenged Malesky's thesis arguing that foreign investment is only good for governance in the early stages of reform. Once provinces develop, foreign investment is more prone to capture and corruption, which diminish the quality of governance (Jandl, 2013, p. 93; Kim, 2019). This may be especially true in the case in protected industries that require specialized licenses to enter (Malesky et al., 2014).

A key unresolved debate in the fence-breaking literature has been to what extent the central government authorized or looked the way at local experimentation they wanted to see succeed. Fforde and Homutova (2017) and Gainsborough (2018) have been adamant in recent work that such local experimentation was organic and central and local leaders alike were simply playing catch-up with the local inspiration of non-state actors. Others have drawn attention to the awareness of central leaders (Rama and Vo, 2008).

Is Vietnam Recentralizing?

Throughout the history of Vietnam's reform era, there have been debates about efforts by central authorities to claw back formal and de facto power from subnational authorities. Gainsborough (2003), for instance, argued that central leaders used high-profile corruption cases to rein in local leaders who were gaining too much power. Recent high-profile cases have generated similar discussions in the media. In addition, there have been various efforts to reinvigorate local party recruitment as a way to maintain authority over wayward regions (Thayer, 1988, 2007).

A series of institutional changes have led several Vietnam watchers to express concern that Vietnam was decentralizing. The first of these initiatives was a pilot program to remove district People's Councils, the local legislature, in 10 Vietnamese provinces. Malesky, Nguyen and Tran

(2014), analyzed the pilot, finding that "recentralization significantly improved public service delivery in areas important to central policy-makers, especially in transportation, healthcare, and communications." Subsequent work has further found that the DPC removal stimulated business investment, especially among micro enterprises, by reducing administrative barriers to investment (Friedrich, 2018) and corruption (Le, D., 2018). Vu-Thanh (2016), however, disputes the notion that the policy change represents decentralization, arguing instead that this was evidence of further recentralization – concentrating executive authority at the district level by removing its main checks and balance.

Further centralizing initiatives have been piloted in selected provinces and in the National Assembly. With respect to provinces, central authorities, who have expressed concerns about waste in the bureaucracy, have merged the responsibilities of party secretaries and People's Committees at the district and commune level. In Quang Ninh province, centralizing reforms meant to address waste were carried out under the guise of bureaucratic reform. Rather than having two executives (one of the local PCOM and one of the CPV), party secretaries were assigned responsibilities of the administrative management of the People's Committee chairman and duplicative bureaucrats were to be released (Le, H.H., 2018). In the National Assembly, caucus rules have changed so that provinces are to meet with other provincial delegations before debate, rather than being able to coordinate unique provincial positions as they have historically. While there is optimism among these schemes' proponents, domestic and foreign journalists and academics have viewed the initiatives as attempts to recentralize by strengthening party control over sub-national state entities in a similar vein to Xi Jinping's efforts in China (Hutt, 2017).

The final answers in both of these debates have yet to be written, and the future trajectory of decentralization in Vietnam and its implications remain uncertain. Going forward, political economy scholarship on central-local relations in Vietnam will continue to highlight links and a disjuncture between past and present, posing new questions for an area of inquiry that has motivated Vietnamese studies for decades (Goscha, 2016) and an aspect of social life that remains central to the dynamics and development of Vietnam's political economy.

Notes

1 As of this writing, Vietnam has 63 provinces and cities, 696 districts, and more than 11,000 communes.
2 http://tuoitre.vn/
3 www.baomoi.com/

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14
CONTRADICTIONS OF MULTISTAKEHOLDER LABOR RELATIONS IN VIETNAM

Angie Ngọc Trần

Since the late 1990s Vietnam has developed into a major export platform specializing in the production of labor-intensive manufactures, such as apparel, footwear, electronic parts, and smart phones. In a globalizing market, the Vietnamese state's development strategy has sought to leverage the country's comparative advantages in low-cost labor, political stability, and geographic location. State policies have actively and successfully attracted large flows of foreign direct investment, particularly into labor-intensive manufacturing. To encourage this trend, Vietnam's government has ratified numerous trade and economic cooperation agreements with countries around the world. The increasing costs, risks and the trade war between the United States and China have made relocation of production from China to Vietnam an even more attractive investment destination.

While it is widely known that employment in low-wage, labor-intensive manufacturing and services in Vietnam has surged alongside industrialization, less is known about labor relations within these sectors. Employment in these sectors continues to increase in scale and importance in the coming decades (Dang, 2019), even when it accounts for a small share of overall formal employment: 5.9 million formal-sector workers are in foreign direct investment (FDI) and domestic private-sector manufacturing firms out of 22.5 million. Labor relations in these sectors are crucial not only for the welfare of workers and their families but also for equitable development.

In the small but growing literature on this subject, attention has centered primarily on working conditions and labor rights in sectors linked to production for the global market. Within this latter focus, there has been interest in the nature, causes, and outcomes of wildcat strikes and other mostly spontaneous workers' collective actions as part of their struggles for improved rights and working conditions (Clarke, Lee and Đỗ, 2007; Đỗ and Broek, 2013; Phạm, 2017; Van Gramberg et al., 2013). In these accounts, emphases on the weaknesses of Vietnamese labor relations institutions in addressing strikes and worker grievances are accompanied by expectations that further development of domestic multistakeholder industrial relations in combination with external pressures via free trade agreements (FTAs) might lead to improvements in labor rights and workers' welfare. This chapter casts skepticism on this view, highlighting the inherent contradictions that characterize Vietnam's multistakeholder labor relations and the limited practical impact of labor reforms contained within trade agreements.

Overall, the chapter provides a nuanced account of the development of multistakeholder labor relations in the context of Vietnam's integration into global supply chains and trade

relations, the limits of external factors, and the mixed bag of changes in the 2019 Labor Code Revision with respect to the rights and welfare of workers.

Key Stakeholders

Conventionally, labor relations comprise interactions among representatives of labor, management, and the state. A striking feature of Vietnam's formal labor relations institutions is the extent to which they are dominated by government ministries, state agencies, quasi-state agencies (affiliated with the state via retired state officials), state-controlled labor unions, and a quasi-state, quasi-independent chamber of commerce run by former state officials.

Understanding the idealized functions of the key stakeholders in Vietnam's labor relations is crucial to understand the contradictions of the multistakeholder framework in Vietnam. The dominant players in Vietnam include Vietnam's Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MoLISA); the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor (VGCL); the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI); and the National Wage Council (NWC).

The Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs: Duties, Relations, and Initiatives

MoLISA oversees labor relations and the creation and enforcement of labor laws and regulations. Formally, the responsibility for compliance with labor laws is divided between MoLISA and VGCL, still the only formally recognized trade union in Vietnam. As part of its duties, MoLISA regularly consults with VCCI. In 2013, MOLISA established a labor relations body, the NWC, which is charged with advising the prime minister on annual minimum wage increases. While the NWC is nominally tripartite, it demonstrates uneven power relations, with labor's interests being outnumbered by those of the capital-state alliance. In recent decades MoLISA has also expanded its relations with international organizations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), and bilateral donors. It has received substantial financial and technical support from them to help draft labor code revisions that aim to bring Vietnam in line with ILO conventions and the requirements of various regional trade agreements.

One of the key points of contention leading up to the 2019 ratification of the Labor Code Revision concerns the terms and scope of worker representative organizations (WROs), a form of non-VGCL labor unions that, if permitted in practice, would prepare Vietnam for the ratification of ILO Convention no. 87 (freedom of association). Leading to the ratification of the Labor Code Revision in November 2019, MoLISA had conducted nationwide working sessions to obtain inputs from a broad-spectrum audience, including local government and VGCL offices, local research institutes, and independent researchers on the four most controversial issues: WROs, workplace dialogue, retirement age, and overtime work (Nam Dương, July 17, 2019). As discussed later, the 2019 revision shows a mixed bag for workers' interests: more pro-labor stipulations in workplace dialogue, ambiguous implementation of WROs, status quo for overtime work (still up to 300 hours per year) and weekly work hours (48 hours/work week), and phasing-in increases in retirement age (62 for men by 2028, and 60 for women by 2035) (pp. 32–33, 49).

The Vietnam General Confederation of Labor

The VGCL is still the only officially recognized trade union in Vietnam, as enshrined in the 1990 Trade Unions Law. By definition, the VGCL is a broad sociopolitical organization of the working class, not simply a trade union. It is led by the Vietnamese Communist Party (Trade Union Law,

2012). The VGCL's primary mission is to balance its mandate to fight for labor rights with its obligation to serve the interests of the one-party state. The party appoints the VGCL's leadership. Under the planned economy, labor relations were rarely adversarial, since the state-controlled unions were part of state management. Under the market economy, VGCL's representation of workers' interests has been weak, especially at the workplace level, where most union representatives, appointed by management, often work in human resources departments. (Trần, 2013).

The continuing development of Vietnam's export processing zones (EPZs) and industrial zones (IZs) underscores the challenges facing the VGCL. After the 1987 law establishing foreign investment policy, foreign investment in Vietnam increased rapidly, posing challenges to the government, which did not have adequate infrastructure to grant investment licenses and to implement these projects. So, in October 1991, the government established the regulations for EPZs and IZs (Hội Đồng Bộ Trưởng, 1991). By 2017, the state had authorized 325 such zones, of which 220 operational IZs, 88 EPZs, and 16 economic zones (Dezan Shira and Associates, 2017).

The VGCL is required to form enterprise-level locals in all factories in these zones and has attempted to do so. In 1991, for example, the VGCL formed the Ho Chi Minh City EPZs Authority (HEPZA) Labor Union, which is comparable to the district level of the union hierarchy (outside the EPZs). The HEPZA Union oversees all labor management problems in all the EPZ factories and reports directly to its higher-level labor union, the HCMC Labor Federation. Through such means, the VGCL has sought to develop mechanisms to address unfair labor practices in EPZs.

But the VGCL is ill-equipped to respond to the fast development of EPZs and IZs. In practice, the VGCL has little leverage outside the state-owned sector, especially in IZs and EPZs hosting foreign-owned factories (Clarke et al., 2007, p. 549). Even in EPZs where the VGCL is present, its effectiveness in promoting workers' rights remains limited, due to management's ability to control the selection of union leaders loyal to them (Đỗ, 2008). This, combined with intimidation and other unfair labor practices, systematically has weakened the collective bargaining functions and powers of union locals and has contradicted the Labor Code, which requires enterprise-level union leadership be elected by workers. The VGCL itself recognizes these problems to be both persistent and widespread (Đỗ et al., 2016).

The Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce and Industry

In 2003, as Vietnam geared up to join the WTO, the prime minister's Decision No. 123 formed the VCCI to represent the interests of local and global management. VCCI is a business association run mostly by retired state officials or party members with close connections to and influence within the government. In principle, the law stipulates that the association represents the entire private sector, comprising thousands of foreign and domestic employers, small and medium enterprises, as well as joint-stock companies that were formerly state-owned enterprises. In practice, the VCCI only represents its members. Moreover, it does not have a nationwide presence, nor can it control the financial/budgetary decisions of its member firms (Trần, 2012, pp. 128–129).

Overall, the VCCI's views are broadly consistent with the interests of management, both domestic and global. Notably, the state has designated VCCI and not VGCL to be the key organization to manage, oversee, and mainstream corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities as a "business case" instead of a "people's case" for labor and environmental rights (Trần and Jeppesen, 2015). In this capacity, the VCCI works with major foreign chambers of commerce, such as from the United States, Korea, and Taiwan. The VCCI also plays a role in annual

minimum wage determination and has increasing influence over MoLISA and the VGCL as discussed below.

The National Wage Council

On paper, tripartite labor relations offer a promising approach to collective bargaining among workers, their employers, and the state. The impetus for Vietnam's movement in this direction came as a response to a dramatic uptick in strike activity in 2008, when workers demanded an annual inflation–adjusted minimum wage. Faced with these pressures, the then prime minister was charged with determining a percentage increase in minimum wage for the following year. This led to informal lobbying efforts (by VCCI and foreign investors) to sway the prime minister's decisions in accordance with their interests. Consistent with the ILO's tripartite framework, the government in 2013 formed the NWC to advise the prime minister on annual minimum wage increases (Prime Minister Decision 1055/QĐ-TT). Thus far, the prime minister has approved all NWC recommendations, without modification.

In principle, formation of the NWC promised greater transparency. Following the ILO tripartite structure, the NWC has 15 members, with the votes equally divided among the three represented sides: MoLISA for the state, VCCI for business, and VGCL for labor (Hoàng Mạnh, 2018). The NWC's presiding president is the incumbent deputy minister of MOLISA, who is also a voting member of the council. Without transparent reporting on the voting patterns of these three interests, the outcomes of six annual rounds of recommendations strongly suggest that at least some MoLISA group members have sided with business interests over those of the workers. In principle, deliberations on minimum wages within the NWC should be based on four factors: estimated income required for subsistence (the most difficult to calculate), regional living conditions, average wage levels in the labor market, and the enterprises' ability to pay. In practice, MoLISA and VCCI maintain broad power in setting these levels, with the VGCL playing a marginal role. The NWC has not effectively or actively promoted a livable wage for workers, except for a small wage increase in 2020 which is slightly larger than a small increase in 2019. Even with the newly ratified 2019 Labor Code Revision, WROs do not have a seat at the NWC table (p. 29). This fact means that the VGCL still reigns supreme in "representing" all unionized workers and the WROs are not included in this most important forum that determines workers' livelihoods.

Labor Law Revisions, Tripartite Arrangements, and Their Impacts on Labor Relations

Vietnam's integration into the world market has occasioned new patterns of labor relations in many sectors of the economy, particularly in Vietnam's booming export sector. In formal terms, labor codes and union laws in Vietnam remain progressive compared to those of other developing countries. The most anticipated element is introduced in the 2019 Labor Code revisions: WROs, are permitted to form. Workers are encouraged to join, on a voluntary basis, either in VGCL's enterprise-level unions or in WROs where they work. However, while the WROs are embedded in all labor relations processes, including labor representation, social dialogue, collective bargaining and collective action, their roles are vague, and they are under strict state surveillance. The 2019 Labor Code offers vague language about a "state authority" (cơ quan nhà nước có thẩm quyền) that is supposed to register/certify the WROs before they can represent the workers and engage in all labor relations activities (Vietnamese Labor Code, 2019, p. 50).

In practice, the Vietnamese state, MoLISA, and the VGCL have been slow to respond to the challenges of Vietnam's changing labor relations organization, especially when the state-capital dominated tripartite labor relations tend to privilege state and business over workers. It remains to be seen whether this new WRO mechanism, which took effect in 2021, can offer a genuinely new avenue to represent workers' collective interests.

In the industrial sector, there is a gap between the *idealized* visions of harmonious labor relations mainly drawn from socialist-era rhetoric, when all workers worked for the state, and developments in *actual* labor relations, which have become more adversarial and which increasingly take place in foreign-owned, domestic-owned, and joint-venture factories, rather than in state-owned enterprises. In contemporary contexts, labor relations reflect more salient conflicts of interests when bargaining is dominated by management's interests in low-cost labor, labor peace, and stable production.

In this context, the VGCL lacks the capacity to advocate for workers' rights, let alone leading collective actions, such as strikes (Phạm, 2017). Moreover, the ambiguity of laws and their weak enforcement leaves workers at a disadvantage. As a deputy-director of the Institute for Workers and Trade Unions warned:

> The VGCL's operation is confined to doing what is prescribed in the law instead of doing what the law does not prohibit. Therefore, anything which is not clearly stated in the law is difficult for the VGCL. . . . Union leaders are confused and fearful and do not know how to deal with problems which are not specified or ambiguous in the law.
>
> *(Phạm, 2017)*

Confronted with these limitations, workers have responded via informal labor mobilizing and unauthorized strikes and actions, all of which presents workers with significant risks and for which there is little legal protection. In this context, questions are raised about the extent by which the ratified 2019 Labor Code Revisions can genuinely strengthen workers' rights to collective action.

Up to now, the state has deemed non-VGCL led strikes and other such collective actions to be illegal, as they do not follow prescribed bureaucratic protocols. The 1994 Labor Code granted workers the right to strike, but the 2012 Labor Code weakened this right by placing legal constraints on strike procedures: stipulating that workers are permitted to strike only on "interests-based" issues, such as bonuses, allowances and other demands that exceed legal requirements. Strikes are forbidden on "rights-based" issues: violations of legal requirements such as minimum wage, social insurance, health insurance, as stated in the Labor Code. These conflicts are supposed to be settled in the labor courts (Trần, 2013; Cox, 2015; Phạm, 2017). In sum, legal strikes have to be on interest-based issues and under VGCL leadership, following a lengthy process. For this reason, virtually none of the thousands of strikes followed those two conditions; all have been considered wildcat strikes.

The 2019 revision fails to permit strikes on rights-based violations which continue to be the most common violations by management. Thus, it still does not address the root cause of most wildcat strikes: a combination of rights and interest violations. The end-of-2019 VGCL report confirms that employers continued to engage in prolonged late salary payment, wage theft, no contribution or even stealing workers' contributions to social and health insurance. Allowing only strikes based on interest violations severely curtails the power of both VGCL and WROs in leading workers using the most powerful collective action: strikes. Permission for rights-based strikes had been considered in the penultimate draft but was omitted in the final revision.

Consequently, WROs are permitted only to organize and lead interest-based strikes, not rights-based (p. 60). Worse yet, the state's *a priori* statement that WROs are "violating the laws" would lead to disciplinary actions thus curtailing their roles in leading strikes (pp. 53, 58). Moreover, the strike procedure requires the submission of full names and addresses of the WRO's leaders five days in advance to the employers and local authorities (pp. 60–1). This form of intimidation and surveillance further weakens the effectiveness of WROs in leading strikes.

Patterns of Labor Disputes and Strike Activity

Over the last two decades, patterns of collective action in Vietnam reflect the tensions and contradictions of labor relations in both foreign and domestic sectors, mostly production for export. Most strikes are illegal because they do not follow the legal procedures and are not led by the VGCL. But they do address legitimate complaints over non-livable wages and inadequate benefits, especially underfunded social insurance benefits. Since 2010, the VGCL has catalogued strikes under three strike categories: rights-based, interests-based, and a combination of rights and interests (Trần, 2013; VGCL, 2019). Indeed, Vietnamese workers do not see "rights" (quyền) and "interests" (lợi ích) as two separate concepts, but rather as a singular unitary concept, or "quyền lợi," which need to be satisfied for them to survive.

Strike Trends and Waves

Since 1995, the number of recorded strikes has increased gradually, punctuated by sharp spikes around 2007–2008 and 2011 (Trần, 2007b). Starting in 2014, increases in strikes leveled off before dropping drastically in 2018, even as the scale of industrial production in Vietnam has continued to expand. Figure 14.1 shows these spikes amid long-term trends. The upsurge in strikes between 2005 and 2008 coincided with Vietnam's efforts to enter the World Trade

Vietnamese Strikes By Year (1995-2019)
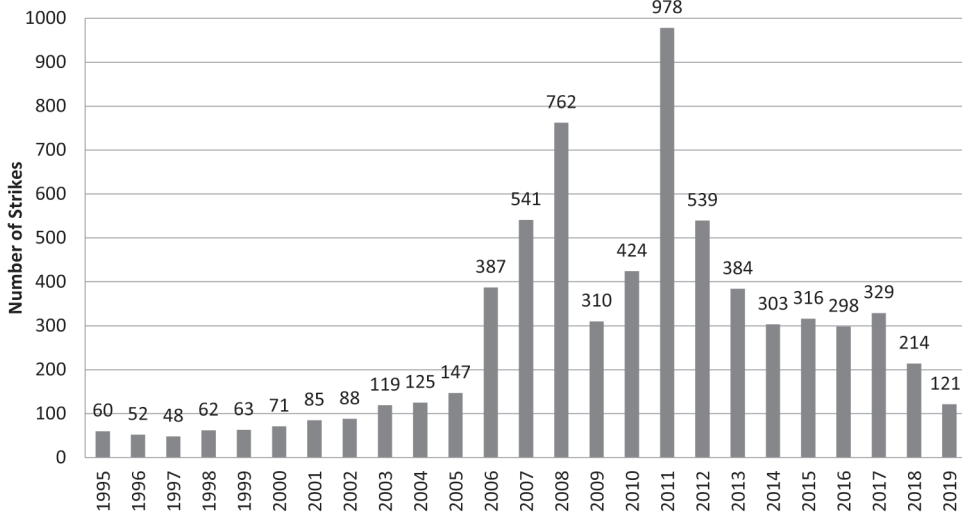
Figure 14.1   Reported Vietnamese strikes by year (1995–2019)

Source: Trần (2013); VGCL-Labor Relations Department (January, 2019); Quế Chi- Hải Nguyên, 2019

Organization (WTO); the 2009–2019 period coincided with state efforts to revise labor laws in response to global labor standards requirements from some key multilateral FTAs, such as the Transpacific Partnership agreements (TPP Agreement, 2016), Comprehensive Transpacific Partnership agreement (CPTPP) and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA).

Worker grievances are rarely addressed through collective bargaining, so they engage in short-term strikes, mostly lasting only one to three days, and typically succeed only in gaining short-term victories, as management chooses to accede to demands, weighing the additional expenses to profit margins against the costs of non-productive work stoppages (Trần, 2013; Cox, 2015; Anner and Liu, 2016). Despite formidable risks and ineffective labor relations institutions, workers in Vietnam continue to strike illegally. The prospective benefits of securing increases in basic wages for the next 12 months or limited one-off improvements in working conditions can often exceed the risks of being penalized a few days' pay.

Over time, the scale and effectiveness of strikes and the responses they have elicited from the state have varied, as has the role of state-run media and other actors. The 2005/2006 strike involved hundreds of thousands of workers in foreign-owned factories in the south who brought pressure to bear on the state, moving the government to introduce and enforce a 40 percent increase in the minimum wage. In 2007, workers demanded wage increases to compensate for spiraling inflation and received strong support in the state-run labor media, moving the government to institute an annual inflation adjustment in January 2008. This was followed by strikes against FDI factories that refused to implement the inflation-adjusted decision.

Notably, these events took place during the state's efforts to gain membership in the WTO, increasing incentives for the state to demonstrate its tolerance of labor dissent and quasi-independent media coverage (Koh, 2007). Contrary to the image of a dictatorship, the state allowed labor newspapers during this period to report actively on instances where local governments and firms failed to adhere to the labor laws and were irresponsive to workers' demands. Indeed, the state labor media played a decisive role in bringing key stakeholders to the negotiating table that eventually resulted in the 2006 minimum-wage increase (Trần, 2007a). But the situation changed with Vietnam's 2006 admittance to the WTO, after which the state constrained both labor resistance efforts and labor newspapers' reportage. To this end, local authorities and union officials heightened their surveillance activities by using worker self-management and social-opinion cells to monitor, control, prevent, and preempt various forms of worker protest (Trần, 2013).

In 2010 strike activity trended upwards and peaked in 2011, leading to the passage of the revised Labor Code and Trade Unions Law in 2012. Many reasons explain the peak, including delayed effects of the global financial crisis (2008–2009) on East Asian suppliers, many of whom went bankrupt in Vietnam in 2011 (P. Thanh, 2012). In this context, firms, especially foreign-invested companies, often failed to comply with terms of labor contracts, including wage and benefit norms, mandatory social insurance contributions, public announcement of wage rates, paid vacation policies, and others. And yet, even amid the financial downturn, workers had leverage owing to limited supplies of minimally skilled labor. Workers bargained with confidence in the likelihood of keeping their jobs even after the strikes. The 2012–2020 period has witnessed a steady decline in officially recorded strikes. Labor observers have detected some qualitative changes in the nature of strikes: workers tend to frame strike activities in relation to broader political concerns (Kerkvliet, 2019; Chae, 2018) and increasing labor informalization in the gig-economy which disempowers workers (Văn Hưng and Thảo Cao, 2020). The 13 strikes of e-taxi motor bikers between 2017 and 2020 demonstrate this trend (Joe Buckley, 2020). Moreover, Covid-19 pandemic had led to 91 wildcat strikes nationwide (in the first five months of 2020) due to shutdowns, scale-down production, and contract termination related to falling orders (Hoàng Phong, 2020).

The 2015 Social Insurance Strike

A less dramatic but possibly more significant illustration of the increasing links between strikes and broader political issues is found in the social insurance strike that unfolded from March 26 to April 1, 2015. The strike movement reflected systemic problems in labor management–state relations: a rule of law that fails to protect workers who are exhausted way before their official retirement age while manufacturing for the global capitalist system and an underfunded social insurance system caused by shirking and recalcitrant factory owners, mostly foreign. Striking workers stated explicit opposition to the 2014 Social Insurance Law, which was to take effect starting January 1, 2016. Under the law, workers were required to reach their respective retirement age (60 for men; 55 for women) before receiving their monthly pension, after accumulating 20 years of social insurance payments. The 2014 law denied workers the right to withdraw one lump-sum social insurance payment (based on their total contributions) when they stopped working even before reaching their retirement age, as permitted under the 2006 Social Insurance law [Article 55]. As soon as workers understood the negative ramifications of the 2014 law, about 90,000 workers went on a massive strike in the Taiwan-listed Pou Yuen Vietnam Co. Ltd. in (Bình Tân) District, Ho Chi Minh City, which then spread to sympathetic strikes, not reported in the labor media, in Long An and (Tiền Giang) provinces, where subsidiary factories of PouYuen are located (Trần, 2015).

The 2015 social insurance strike also demonstrated the difficulties in holding capitalists in the global supply chains responsible for complying with the labor laws in Vietnam. Here is the hierarchy of these corporations in the global supply chains. Global brands (the top level) such as Nike, Adidas, Converse, Timberland, New Balance, and Ikea, place orders with the Taiwan-listed Pou Chen Group, a vendor (the second level), which then places orders with its subsidiary, the Chinese shoemaker Yue Yuen Industrial Holdings Ltd., (the third level), which then places orders with PouYuen (the fourth level). This huge factory hires 80,000 workers to manufacture sports shoes and apparels for those global brands. But the supply chains do not end there: below PouYuen are its subsidiaries in Tiền Giang and Long An provinces. While PouYuen is too big to hide, its subsidiaries are invisible to most people, so it is virtually impossible to check whether they comply with Vietnam's labor laws.

Moreover, the underfunded social insurance system is caused by management shirking their responsibility to contribute to the state social insurance fund. They have acted as foot loose "cicada factories," or fleeing owners who did not contribute to the social insurance fund for workers who are stranded without back pay and social and health benefits (Đường Loan, 2018; Thúy Phương, 2019). Such management's predatory practices and the state's inability to enforce social insurance laws have led to rising debts and the danger of a bankrupt social insurance fund, as forecasted by the ILO to be in 2034 (Hoàng Mạnh, 2018).

Multistakeholder Forums and Their Impacts on Labor Relations

Recent literature on industrial relations in developing countries reflects a growing interest in the ILO's "multistakeholder" framework of labor relations. This framework is based on the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (FPRW), especially the eight conventions widely recognized as global labor standards. The deeper Vietnam has entwined into the global capitalist system, the more the ILO and FTAs with trade-labor linkages have influenced labor relations in the country.

Government Decision QD588 (May 2018) has raised management's role and slowed reforms. In particular, it approved the one-year project (2018–2019), supervized by the ILO, and implemented by MoLISA and the VGCL. The language of this decision gives the ILO the key role

in pushing for the New Industrial Relations Framework Programme (NIRF) in Vietnam, especially raising the profile of management in the tripartite structure at all levels and revising the labor code. The language clearly indicates a slower reform process in ratifying Convention #98 (collective bargaining) first, and then the controversial #87 (freedom of association): "that are appropriate for national economic and social conditions."

Specific outcomes for this project at the central level and in some selected provinces include 1. increasing state management's understanding of the tripartite structure to engender the NIRF and consultation on the Labor Code revisions to reflect the ILO conventions on labor rights; 2. a tripartite structure to coordinate MoLISA, VGCL, and VCCI at both national and local levels to identify strategic priorities on labor relations and the labor-management structure to coordinate and ensure better implementation of labor relations policies; 3. strengthening state labor inspectoral systems at local and national levels; and 4. sharing lessons from pilot projects at some selected locations with all stakeholders in labor relations. On Outcome #4, the role of management is strengthened and bilateral and trilateral structures are implemented at all levels to push for the NIRF. The fact that the role of management is singled out suggests that their power is fully recognized by the state. Such state-capital alliances can be seen in the case study of the NWC and the minimum wage increase struggle.

The NWC's Annual Minimum Wage Increases and the Silencing of the Labor Press

Over the years, the VGCL delegates have been routinely outvoted by MoLISA and VCCI members whose bargaining power has been increasing in the NWC bargaining table. The VGCL has been unable to negotiate effectively for a subsistence level increase of the minimum wage: they always started with a high recommended minimum wage increase but ended up losing their bid to a smaller increase (V. Duẩn, 2017; Quế Chi–Lê Hoa, 2018). The fact that the 2019 Labor Code Revision does not include WROs in this important forum does not bode well for workers' associational rights (Vietnamese Labor Code, 2019, p. 29). Annual minimum wage increases have been eroding since the formation of the NWC in 2013: dropping incrementally from 29.5% in 2013 to 5.3% in 2019. However, for the first time in seven years, the VGCL, under a different VGCL negotiator, successfully reversed the downward spiral to a modest increase: 5.5% for 2020 (D. Thu, July 11, 2019).

Most studies show that these increases fail to meet the minimum level for workers' livelihoods. Mr. Vũ Quang Thọ, Director of the Institute for Workers and Trade Unions, said in an interview that the range (5% to 6.8%) proposed by the NWC for (2018 increase) fails to address the basic necessities of workers (Thủy Trúc, 2017). This study found that 40% of interviewed workers made ends meet, having to be very thrifty to survive on the minimum wage. Only 8% of workers had some small savings of, at most, đ 1.000.000 per month (depending on available overtime work). The rest, about 50% of the interviewed workers, did not make ends meet and had to find other sources of income. While journalists estimated that minimum wage covers only up to 70% to 80% of basic necessities for workers, a study of the Institute for Workers and Trade Unions found that on average the Vietnamese minimum wage is only about 37% of the Asian floor wage and only 64% of the average wage calculated by the Global Living Wage Alliance (Institute for Workers and Trade Unions, 2018, p. 15). So, to make ends meet, most workers (from 100 factories in Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, and Binh Duong) must work overtime, which averages 60 hours per month (Hồng Vân, 2016).

Facing such trends, the labor press (official forum of the VGCL) led by such newspapers as *Labor* (Lao Động) and *Laborer* (Người Lao Động), have at times played an active role in defending

workers' struggles, although their voices have been muted over time (Trần, 2013). In the 2015 insurance strikes, journalists reported daily strike scenes and published workers' voices with first-hand accounts and poignant photos. In the months leading up to decisive 2015 NWC meetings on minimum wage increases, the *Laborer* published a poignant six-part series entitled "Living below the subsistence level," exposing the difficult lives that workers lead, featuring their own voices, sometimes with full names and locations of where they worked (An Nhiên, 2015; An Khánh, 2015; Tất Thảo, 2015; Như Phú, 2015). Between 2013 and 2015, some articles sharply criticized Mr. Phạm Minh Huân, the president of the NWC in 2015, for taking sides with the VCCI-management side (Hồng Vân, 2016). Another article challenged VCCI's faulty claim of losses, while juxtaposing the real lives and real suffering of workers (Đào Tuấn, 2015).

But such public criticisms have diminished, partly because the NWC has become less transparent and partly because an increase in censorship has prevented critical coverages (correspondence with a former Laborer journalist, January 2018). A few times, the NWC tried to avoid media scrutiny by meeting in undisclosed locations (although this has changed in recent negotiations) and only emerged to announce the results of their vote. Despite these barriers, the labor media journalists continue to report actively on issues nationwide to expose management violations of labor rights and cheating of workers (Mai Chi, 2017). Challenges confronting the state-led media have been offset somewhat by developments in civil society, addressed in this chapter's concluding section.

The Limits of Trade-Labor Linkage on Labor Reforms

External influences have had minimal effects on labor reforms when there were no binding provisions, lack of enforceability, and no possibility of commercial sanction (Trần, Bair, and Werner, 2017). The two recently ratified FTAs, the CPTPP and the EVFTA, shows the limits of external pressures on holding the Vietnamese state accountable to ratify the key ILO conventions on labor relations reforms. In particular, the Vietnamese state has been required by those two FTAs to provide a roadmap to ratify the three key ILO conventions: #87 (freedom of association), #98 (the right to organize and collective bargaining), and #105 (abolition of forced labor). The state ratified Convention #98 on June 14, 2019, effective on July 5, 2020. On June 8, 2020, the state ratified Convention #105, leaving Convention #87 as the only one yet to be ratified. Convention #87 is a lot more controversial with challenges to the one-party and one-union system, and its ratification date has been pushed back to 2023, five years after the ratification of the CPTPP on November 12, 2018.

Both CPTPP and EVFTA are weaker than the original TPP because they do not have as strong binding documents for labor reforms as did the Vietnam-U.S. labor side agreement to the TPP (or Consistency Plan). The Consistency Plan had clear commercial sanction: if Vietnam did not comply with labor reforms within two years after this grace period (five years after the TPP came into force), tariff phase-outs for Vietnamese exports (including apparel and footwear) would be suspended (Basu Das et al., 2017). EVFTA, on the other hand, pressures for labor reform by incorporating participation from civil society organizations (CSOs) by way of Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs). However, the DAG mechanism has a key weakness: the state can dictate the membership of these DAGs (EVFTA, Chapter 15 Article 15, Section 4.).

Impacts on Labor Relations Reforms

The pressure to implement CPTPP and EVFTA, Convention #98 effective starting July 2020, gave rise to activities of two non-VGCL labor unions: the newest one formed on July 1, 2020,

the Vietnamese Independent Labor Union (*Nghiệp đoàn Lao động Độc lập Việt Nam*), aims to work with the VGCL on behalf of labor rights (Nguyễn Đình Hùng 2020). The other one, the *Viet Labor Movement*, has faced harassment from the government and is antagonistic towards the VGCL. While the former focuses on ensuring labor rights as promised in CPTPP and EVFTA, the latter campaigns for workers' freedom of association (Quốc Phương 2020).

Overall, the Vietnamese government has moved forward with some cautious reforms in labor relations by relenting on the "independent labor unions" yet maintaining control over all possible activities of the WROs. In the process of ratifying the CPTPP and the EVFTA, the state had opened up many forums for state officials and researchers to discuss the revisions of the labor code, especially the thorny issue of WROs. Informally, however, MoLISA must deal with pressure and lobbying efforts from management in the final writing of the labor revisions (Conversation with an official in the Legal Department of MoLISA).

Even without the US participation in the CPTPP, its role in promoting VGCL reform continues to be felt. Part of the US Department of Labor funding encumbered in preparation for the TPP/Consistency Plan ratification has been used by the VGCL's one-year pilot projects with the ILO (such as multiemployer bargaining) to train both grassroots and higher levels of the VGCL cadres as part of NIRF as proposed in 2016. In this safe "incubator" space, the VGCL would be empowered by these resources and be ready to compete with other unions when Convention #87 is eventually ratified.

Dialogue in Multistakeholder Labor Relations

After the strike waves peaked in 2011, the government became wary of this instability and required periodic workplace dialogues, as stated in the 2012 Labor Code (Article 63 and 64 in Chapter 5). A year later, the government introduced the Ministerial Decree 60/2013/ND-CP – Grassroots Democracy Regulation in the Workplace, to implement this workplace dialogue provision, specifically detailing the purpose, forms, and content of these dialogues. In the spirit of this "grassroots democracy regulation," I refer to the *implementation* of workplace dialogue as "democratic dialogue" at the factory level. Later, I explain how democratic dialogue, if implemented close to the intent of Decree 60, would give more power to workers than would the ILO "social dialogue."

Democratic Dialogue: Idealized Workplace Dialogue

According to Decree 60, every three months, employers are required to hold discussions, during which they must publicize a long list of financial information to workers, including, but not limited to, the following three key items: production and business plans, wage scales and grades, and the annual financial statement on all items related to workers. Clearly, this long list requires *management's compliance* with transparency and, if enforced properly, can level the power relations in the labor–state–management tripartite system and empower workers and unions in collective bargaining negotiations. In principle, with "democratic dialogue," workers have the right to know, give feedback on, and decide and monitor all issues related to their rights, interests, and responsibilities.

The 2019 Labor Law revision introduces a mixed bag of changes. It includes the role of WROs throughout the sections about workplace dialogues, reflecting an effort to comply with labor reforms required by the recently signed FTAs. Now, at least once per year (or more often based on the needs of the tripartite stakeholders), workplace dialogues must be held at the enterprise level. The government will decide all the details of how to organize social dialogues

to implement Decree 60. But the biggest victory for labor rights is the mandatory list of topics to discuss during these workplace dialogues.

The 2019 Labor Code includes stronger mandatory agenda items for the periodic social dialogues, thanks to the feedback from civil society (including non-governmental organizations [NGOs], research institutes, independent researchers/labor experts) in nationwide meetings organized by MoLISA. While the code still does not require management to disclose their financial statements (such as how to calculate subcontracting prices crucial in collective bargaining on wages) in periodic social dialogues (as stipulated by Decree 60), now management has to disclose the following mandatory items (pp. 21–2): 1. reasonable labor productivity (or daily quota) based on an average of many workers so they would not have to work overtime to meet the quota (Stipulation #93, p. 29); 2. plans to use labor, including using technology to replace workers, to downside the workforce, to retrain and retool the workforce (Stipulation #42, #44, pp. 14–5); 3. plans to calculate bonuses (Stipulation #104, p. 32); 4. rules and regulations (Stipulation #118, p. 36); and 5. plans for temporary layoffs of workers who are under investigation of some alleged violations (Stipulation #128, p. 39).

The VGCL had attempted several good-faith initiatives to implement "democratic dialogue" but were mostly unsuccessful. In April 2014, the VGCL formed a Department of Labor Relations (Ban Quan hệ Lao động), consisting of 16 to 18 cadres, focusing on harmonizing labor relations on the factory floor based on the laws and holding management accountable to social insurance contributions (Phạm Chi, 2014). In 2015, they issued a resolution called "Pushing Forward Workplace Dialogues in Enterprises" (VGCL, Resolution Number 2, 2015). Moreover, the VGCL attempted to implement the real intent of "democratic dialogues" by publishing two guidelines: one for management and the other for unions to facilitate democratic dialogue at the enterprise level (2013; VGCL, Resolution Number 2, 2015). Unfortunately, these efforts were largely unsuccessful due to their inability to articulate the guidelines clearly and, partly, their unrealistic expectation of "harmonious relations" between labor and management in a market system (Phạm, 2017).

With the VGCL's inability to implement "democratic" dialogue, how does "social dialogue" (Đối thoại xã hội), enshrined in the ILO industrial relations framework, fare?

Social Dialogue and Its Limits

The 1999 ILO Decent Work Report introduced social dialogue as one of its four objectives which

> requires participation and freedom of association, and is therefore an end in itself in democratic societies. It is also a means of ensuring conflict resolution, social equity and effective policy implementation. It is the means by which rights are defended, employment promoted and work secured.

In this broad definition, social dialogue does not just aim at conflict resolution, but also social equity and effective policy implementation. However, in Vietnam, with the VGCL's inability to implement workplace dialogue, the ILO has successfully introduced "social dialogue" as a form of workplace dialogue to improve conflict resolution. This does not only fall short of its broad definition provided earlier but also those of the requirements in Decree 60.

The ILO commissioned the Research Center for Employment Relations, a private labor consultancy, to create two manuals (one for the unions and the other for the employers) on how to conduct these periodic dialogues (Đỗ et al., 2016). Acknowledged by Đỗ Quỳnh Chi, this is an

initial effort to approach "democratic dialogue" (Correspondence with Đỗ, 2016). The manual includes management interests and admits that the main goal is to help "minimize labor conflicts" (Manual for Employers, 7). For instance, it elaborates a step-by-step procedure for "emergency dia-logues" (Đối thoại đột xuất) to deal with *potential strikes*, sudden policy changes that can negatively affect workers without their input, and external conditions such as inflation and natural disasters.

Overall, while promoting harmonious labor relations benefit both employers and workers, focusing on conflict resolution alone ignores the other two goals of ILO social dialogue – social equity and effective policy implementation. Together, these three goals would have addressed the root causes of these strikes. Moreover, social dialogue is a watered-down version of demo-cratic dialogue, because it does not disclose critical information about the employer's financial responsibilities to workers, as required in "democratic dialogue." A 2018 Oxfam study found that international brands and their supplier companies never reveal how they calculate the sub-contracting unit price which is very low (labor cost is only 4% of the retail price). This lack of crucial financial information, required to be disclosed in "democratic dialogue," undermines the unions in factory-level collective bargaining.

In addition to these two reports, the ILO also used a platform that it created in 2007 and developed in Vietnam in 2009 to popularize its social dialogue. That platform is Better Work Vietnam (BWV), a social compliance auditing service provider, funded by global capitalists. However, its mechanism, the worker management Performance Improvement Consultative Committees (PICCs), uses social dialogue to reduce or preempt strikes, even though this claim has been called into question by scholars: strike statistics actually increased after BWV opened offices in Vietnam (Chae, 2013; Trần et al., 2017; Anner and Liu, 2016).

Rising Role of Civil Society Organizations

Historically, CSOs' advocacy efforts focused more on poverty reduction, humanitarian relief, and professional development. In the 1990s, increases in foreign development agencies and development projects led to an increase in international NGOs and local CSOs; many paid attentions to human rights issues (CIVICUS, 2006). In the context of limited political freedom and legal environment, any connection between NGOs and human rights issues is considered sensitive in Vietnam (Norlund, 2007). Over a decade later, still without a law on associations, CSOs continue to be controversial, especially now that they have extended their advocacy work to include labor rights issues.

The linkages between free trade and labor rights, aspired to by EVFTA and CPTPP, no doubt have contributed to this increase in advocacy work on labor rights. Vietnamese CSOs have been working closely with some international NGOs in Vietnam and have adopted a very proactive approach, as characterized by a labor activist: "we are ready to spring into actions in any situations, never stay passive. . . . We have to create forums to participate and present, not waiting to be invited!" (Correspondence with Ms. Văn Thu Hà, July 2018).

Encouraged by DAGs, these CSOs actively search out forums to participate in the imple-mentation of these FTAs, focusing on labor rights and sustainable development. These CSOs network with each other to be ready to act on behalf of workers' rights.

Some global CSOs have held workshops to inform the Vietnamese CSOs on how they can participate in these forums even before the ratifications of FTAs. OXFAM-Vietnam has been supporting several domestic CSOs in raising workers' awareness about the use of toxic materials in the electronics industry and in networking with domestic NGOs on migrant workers' rights. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (a German NGO) and Oxfam-Vietnam brought domestic and global NGOs together to explain the meaning of labor-trade linkages in these FTAs to enhance

skills and find mechanisms for CSOs to participate in these multistakeholder forums. Their intention is to "make changes in actions, not in the text of the agreement" because the text is fixed and not changeable (Correspondence with Ms. Văn Thu Hà, July 2018).

By themselves, the Vietnamese CSOs are diverse and come from different organizational types, such as associations, NGOs or civil society forums. Since most CSOs know each other, they network and share resources to strengthen their platforms. Some focus on labor relations within broader social contexts, such as Research Center for Employment Relations, Research Center for Gender, Family and Community Development (GFCD), and Center for Research and Consultancy for Development (CRCD). Vietnam's two labor research networks (one south; one north) focus on policy research. Some have specific foci on migrant workers' rights: Center for Development and Integration (CDI) organizes workers at the grassroots level, while Mnet fights for female migrant workers' rights (The Research Center for Family Support and Community Development (CFSCD'), and Light for Better Life advocates for improved workers' health in both formal and informal sectors.

Eyes Wide Open for Genuine Labor Reforms

Contradictions in the multistakeholder framework and limits of external pressures by FTAs have important implications for workers' rights and reduce the promise of "social dialogue." In Vietnam's multistakeholder framework, the most fundamental contradictions remain: strong alliance between management and the state overpowering labor, and the broad suppression of countervailing forces in the media and civil society. The ILO tripartite framework can scarcely address this uneven power relation, while the watered-down social dialogue can detract from genuine efforts to empower workers from the ground up. Limited implementation of social dialogues – as a strategy for strike reduction and cost-effective risk management tool – tends to create an illusion of harmonious industrial relations instead of long-term improvements in workers' conditions.

Nor should we expect FTAs to deliver anything more than lip service improvements. The real impact of external pressures by the FTAs on labor reforms must be examined at the implementation level, not the promises leading to its ratification. The suppression after Vietnam's accession to the WTO and an ambiguous path towards freedom of association after the demise of the original TPP offer concrete illustrations of the limits of external influences on labor reforms, absent of binding provisions, enforceability, or possibility of commercial sanction.

The extent to which the most celebrated inclusion, the WROs, permitted in the 2019 labor code revisions can truly represent workers and lead strikes, also remains to be seen. Ambiguity remains: the state authorities, charged with certifying and overseeing WROs' activities, have not yet been officially announced. But the power and influence of management is *unambiguous*. The limitation on the scope for strikes (interest-based only) and state surveillance on the WROs demonstrate the staying power of management and state in the 2019 labor code revisions.

Positive changes in the revisions without implementation would simply be lip service to appease external pressures. One glimmer of hope is the active role of domestic and global civil society organizations in pushing for genuine labor reforms. Unions, WROs, and labor advocates (national and global) should bolster efforts to inform and educate workers of their rights and strategies to negotiate with management both on the factory floor and in the gig economy as labor becomes more informalized. Mandatory topics for periodic social dialogues need to be implemented properly to stay true to the spirit and letter of Decree 60 for a more equal footing in dialogues between labor and management. Demands should be made so that WROs can have a seat at the powerful NWC table. Only then will Vietnam approach a tripartite framework that is more genuine and capable of improving the working and living conditions of its workers.

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15

LAND IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Nguyễn Văn Sửu

Land has been at the nexus of changing relations between the Vietnamese state and the Vietnamese people, not only because of its fundamental material role in economic life but also its association with immutable questions about how to best organize and govern an economy and society. Correspondingly, land has remained at the center of state economic policies and the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV's) efforts to promote its shifting ideological, political, and economic values and goals. Land policy does not occur in a vacuum, however. The politics of land in Vietnam is animated by struggles among competing interests and is laden with Vietnam's changing social and political culture. The importance of land in Vietnam is seen on a daily basis, whether in national and local debates and political struggles that crop up around rights and controversies over the means by which access to land has been acquired and sold. While Vietnam has changed enormously, the significance of land endures.

This chapter offers an overview of land in contemporary Vietnam up to the present. The first and second sections address land in the context of Vietnam's market transition, while the third section addresses key themes and controversies in land policies over the last two decades. Overall, the account shows that while the position of land in social life has been transformed, social relations, tensions, and contradictions continue to figure centrally in the political, economic, and cultural development of Vietnam.

Land tenure prior to Đổi Mới

Scholars of contemporary Vietnam have established land's fundamental importance in shaping the country's path from past to present.[1] From the revolutionary land reforms of the 1950s in the North to the wartime and post-war land reforms of the 1960s and 1970s in the central and South, land was at the center of contentious, often bloody, struggles that defined, animated, and dominated the first decades of the country's post-independence history. By the 1980s, the planned economy that was formed around the collectivization of land under public ownership and administration met severe difficulties, necessitating a process of market liberalizing land reforms that has continued in fits and starts up to the present. The nuances of these historical processes are crucial for understanding contemporary Vietnam.

Traditionally, land tenure in Vietnam had two levels: the 'ultimate ownership' of the king and the 'practical holdings' at the village level, with the later itself divided into two forms:

communal land – under the ownership of communities – and private land under the ownership of peasant households.[2] Colonial rule and attendant changes in Vietnam's political economy sharply reduced the area of communal lands, which French and Vietnamese landlords took over. This, in turn, fueled bitter conflicts that contributed to social unrest. The CPV's slogan of 'land-to-the-tillers' (*người cày có ruộng*) struck at the heart of a central tension in colonial Vietnam and drew popular support that would prove vital to the anti-colonial movement and attendant efforts at land reform.[3]

Between 1954 and 1975, Vietnam saw radical changes in land tenure in both the North and the South. In the North, an aggressive and at times violent campaign of land reform carried out between 1953 and 1957 redistributed the agricultural land of those labeled landlords and rich peasants to those labeled poor and middle peasants. This was followed by the steady collectivization of all land and agricultural production; that process lasted until the late 1980s. Taken alone, the land reform campaign of 1953 to 1957 involved the reallocation of 810,000 hectares of agricultural land to more than 2 million peasants.[4] However, it also involved violence and bitterness, including clashes between land reform teams, poor peasants, landlords, and rich peasants owing to the misclassification of landlords and arbitrary land grabs and widespread abuses of power. All told, the land reforms of the 1950s resulted in an estimated 3,000 to 15,000 deaths[5] and produced bitter memories that have lasted through generations.[6] By design, the land reforms aimed at redistributing land and disrupting previous structures of exploitation and also introducing a new way of life that lay at the core of agricultural collectivization in the North.[7] From the early 1960s, the CPV continued the collectivization of production and increased the scale of agriculture cooperatives and their attendant labor-exchange teams. By the late 1970s, most peasant households in the Red River delta joined or otherwise were incorporated into cooperatives and became 'wage workers' for cooperatives. Agricultural collectivization shifted the organization of production from family-based cultivation to collectivized farming, expanding cooperatives' control over agricultural land and mostly eliminating private ownership, save for a very small number of private households.[8] Importantly, village households were allocated small (so-called) 'five percent plots'[9] for individual use, even as poor incentives associated with the planned economy would lead peasants to invest ever increasing shares of their time and effort into these 'supplemental' holdings.

During 1954–1975 most of the South was controlled by the Republic of Vietnam, with forces of the National Liberation Front (NLF) occupying some areas. Land tenure in the South – especially in its Mekong region – continued to fall under private ownership and exchange,[10] but it was also characterized by sharp inequalities owing to exploitive features of the southern political economy. Ownership was highly concentrated, and landlessness was widespread; the majority of poor farmers were tenant farmers.[11] In such a context, both the Republic of Vietnam and the NLF recognized the importance of land reforms. In contrast to land reforms carried out in the North during the same period, the land reforms carried out by Ngô Đình Diệm's administration between 1955 and 1957 aimed mainly to strengthen the rich peasants. Not until the 1970s did the South's Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime recognized the need to expand reforms to middle and lower peasants. In the meantime, the NLF redistributed agricultural lands to poor peasant supporters in the areas it occupied and continued to agitate for an agrarian revolution and regime change.[12]

Vietnam's unification in 1975 brought major changes to land tenure and agricultural production, especially in the South. While collectivization in agricultural production was intensified in the North, it was introduced in the South in stages.[13] Even so, the outcomes of collectivization in the South were limited. By the mid-1980s, only one-third of peasant households had joined or been organized into cooperatives and production teams.[14] Beyond the limited powers of the state, scholars have variously attributed the slow pace of collectivization in the South to farmers'

everyday resistance,[15] poor incentives,[16] and the continued political power and influence of independent farmers in rural areas.[17]

Land reforms in Vietnam's market transition

Although rooted years before, *Đổi Mới* was officially declared in Vietnam only in 1986, and this marked radical changes in land tenure in Vietnam in a number of key points. The first is a formation of land rights. By the end of the 1970s, agricultural production had critically stagnated, contributing to an economic crisis across the country. Forced transformation of agricultural production had resulted in non-violent resistance from the peasants that transformed the national policy of agricultural collectivization.[18]

Formation of land rights

The state had to amend its agricultural policy starting in the early 1980s, which led to not only agricultural de-collectivization but a new phase of land reform involving the formation of land rights in Vietnam that were illuminated in the land law published in 1988 and its various revisions made in 1993, 1998, 2001, 2003, and 2013. Throughout this new phase of land reform, the state clarified key aspects of ownership (*sở hữu*), control (*quản lý*), and use (*sử dụng*) of land in its land tenure policy and legislation. While ownership rights (*quyền sở hữu*) belong to the entire people (*toàn dân*) in order to maintain the collective ownership of land, controlling rights (*quyền quản lý*) of the state, use rights (*quyền sử dụng*), had been distributed to various institutions, including individuals, family households, and organizations for a limited period of time based on the types of land.

Legislation divided land into several mayor types, which slightly changed through various versions of the land law and restricted farmers from changing their types of land. The 1988 Land Law, delineated five types (*loại*) of land: (1) agricultural land, (2) forest land, (3) residential land, (4) special-use land, and (5) non-used land. The revised Land Law in 1993 re-divided land into six types: (1) agricultural land, (2) forest land, (3) rural residential land, (4) urban land, (5) special-use land, and (6) non-used land. The revised Land Law in 2003 redivided land into three groups (*nhóm*): agricultural land, non-agricultural land, and non-used land. Agricultural land has been further classified into eight types: (1) annual crop land, (2) perennial crop land, (3) forest-used land, (4) protected-forest land, (5) special-use forest land, (6) aquatic land, (7) land for salt production, and (8) other types of land determined by government regulations.[19] In the rest of this chapter, I use the term agricultural land to mean both farmland and forest land.

Land use rights redistribution

Since the 1980s, the distribution of agricultural land and the terms of use rights have been adjusted a few times. In 1988, agricultural land was distributed on an equitable basis among households in each village; each household's use rights to that land lasted 5 to 15 years. In 1993, agricultural land was redistributed again and the duration of use rights became 20 years for annual crop land and 50 years for perennial land.[20] In 2013, agricultural land was not reallocated, but use rights were extended to 50 years.[21] The holdings of agricultural land use rights and use rights to other types of land are legally recognized by certificates (*giấy chứng nhận quyền sử dụng đất*) often called a Red Book (*sổ đỏ*). The holders of use rights to agricultural land and other types of land have further rights to transfer, exchange, lease, inherit, and mortgage land use rights, etc. The state, however, limits how much agricultural land a holder can have.

A remarkable feature of land allocation is that interpretations of laws about agricultural land use and distribution have varied across regions. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, the distribution of use rights to agricultural land was not uniform across all lowland villages.[22] Similarly, in 1994 the distribution of rights to forest land varied. In the Northern Mountainous region local authorities and ethnic factors have influenced how land use rights were distributed.[23] This indicates gaps between the central state policy and local implementations of land distribution.[24]

Rebirth of agricultural communal land

For centuries prior to the 1950s land reform, agricultural communal land (*công điền*) had been a vital component of political and socioeconomic life in villages, especially in the central and northern regions.[25] The amount of communal land and how it was allocated varied from village to village, region to region. During the colonial period, for example, agricultural communal land area accounted for 21 percent in the northern region (Bắc Bộ), 25 per cent in the central region (Trung Bộ), but only 3 percent in the southern region (Nam Bộ).[26] In addition, each village had considerable autonomy to decide how this land should be distributed and used. Consequently, communal land was often abused by local elites and the French, resulting often in resistance by villagers.[27]

The land reforms in the 1950s and agricultural collectivization erased agricultural communal land in the North. But after agricultural decollectivization, communal land reappeared in rural villages of the central and northern Vietnam. As farm land was being distributed among households, local authorities reserved a certain area labeled "the second-round agricultural land".[28] In 1993, the name of this area was changed to *đất công ích* (agricultural land for the public interest). This new form of communal land, along with streams, ponds, and lakes, were for the benefit of the village community and regulated by local authorities.

Once again, the area of agricultural communal land varied from province to province, and even commune to commune. The law authorized provincial authorities to reserve a maximum of 5 percent of agricultural land in each locality for *đất công ích*.[29] In practice, a number of provinces reserved more, some kept less, and others held none. A research investigation made in 1997 reported that the nationwide percentage of communal agricultural land accounted for 3.80 percent, but it differs considerably between regions. For example, the Red River delta had nearly 10 percent, the central region had about 9 percent, and the southern region had less than 1 percent. Within the Red River delta, the percentage of communal agricultural land also varied – for instance, 2.86 percent in Hà Nội's rural areas, 8.31 percent in Bắc Ninh province, and 11.77 percent in Thái Bình province. Communal land has continued to be a source of local elite abuse and discontent among villagers, as occurred in Thái Bình in 1997[30] and later in Bắc Ninh.[31]

Revitalization of customary rights to forest land

In addition to the rebirth of communal land was the revitalization of customary rights to forest land (*đất lâm nghiệp*) in mountainous areas. In the early 1990s, the land law allowed the distribution of forest land use rights to families and individuals but not to local communities. That exclusion provoked opposition in numerous villages whose members petitioned and in other ways resisted state authorities.[32] That and research findings by Vietnamese as well as advocacy by non-government organizations and international donors led to the state recognizing customary rights to forest land in the 2003 revised Land Law. As a result, the 'community' became one of the legal entities eligible for forest land use rights titles. By 2019, the Government's official data

informed that communities held 1,216,982 hectares of forest lands, accounting for 8.33 percent of the total area of forest land in Vietnam.[33]

Land inequality

Although the Communist Party and the state have emphasized an equitable distribution of agricultural land use rights among farming households, inequality in access to agricultural land has emerged. In numerous lowland areas, state agencies encroached on farming households' use rights and some farmers managed to acquire more agricultural land than their neighbors.[34] Inequality also arose between men and women within households. This was due in considerable measure to inheritance rules and customs emphasizing males.[35] In the Central Highlands, local people's long-standing land tenure system based on community ownership and customary laws was upset starting in the late 1970s. That is when the state launched three large programs in the region: migration, state farms, and resettlement. These programs transferred considerable amounts of land used by ethnic minority groups to state farms and to new settlers, many of whom came from lowland parts of the country.[36]

Land market and property rights

Because the right to use agricultural land included the right to sell, rent, exchange, mortgage, and bequeath it, a land market grew in Vietnam.[37] That, in turn, led to land dispossession in many parts of the country.[38] In numerous rural areas, the land market remained tiny.[39] In peri-urban areas, though, markets for agricultural land became very active and sometimes were feverish.[40] Land being a key asset for many households, many Vietnamese farmers have considered a piece of it like a piece of gold (*tấc đất tấc vàng*). The monetary value of land, however, varied across the country, with the most expensive usually being in and around Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.[41]

A complicating factor is Vietnam's two-price system for land. One is the market price, which fluctuates. The other is the price which is set by the state as it exerts its authority to appropriate land from farmers. When the state did so in the 1990s–2000s, farmers often ended up receiving an amount of money far below the market price. Real estate developers, however, often benefited by obtaining control of that land and then selling it at the higher market prices.[42]

Contemporary burning land issues

Since the 1990s, Vietnam's leaders promoted industrialization and modernization, which necessitated converting agricultural land into areas for factories, roads, other infrastructure, urbanization, recreation sites, etc. One official source reported that during 1991–2013, an average of 58,000 hectares of farm land was appropriated annually for industrial zones, infrastructure construction, and other non-agricultural purposes.[43] Land appropriation increased after the 2003 revised land law, which loosened regulations regarding land appropriation. Much of the appropriated land was around Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, where more than 1,000 hectares of agricultural land were taken annually between 2000 and 2013.[44] Eventually, unused appropriated land, petitions and protests from farmers, and a global economic slowdown pressured state leaders to add restrictions against land appropriation to the revised Land Law of 2013. Thereafter the pace of land appropriation subsided.

Provincial authorities often favored converting farm land to urban and industrial uses to attract foreign and domestic investments. In addition to numerous new urban zones that

changed the landscape of Vietnam since the early 1990s, 300 industrial zones have consumed 84,000 hectares of agricultural land.[45] Golf courses alone took more than 38,000 hectares of agricultural land.[46] In upland areas, land was appropriated for dams, roads, resettlements, and rubber plantations. Since the early 1990s, the state converted thousands of hectares of forest land in the northwest to rubber plantations. The process, some research suggests, amounted to grabbing land from rural households for the benefit of rubber companies and state authorities.[47] Villagers' resistance to land appropriations emerged in the 1990s to become one of the burning issues in contemporary Vietnam.[48] Complaints about land confiscations and related issues constituted 70 percent of the total number of petitions in the country.[49]

In lowland areas countless numbers of villagers demonstrated at local and national offices to demand the preservation of their farms, proper compensation for the loss of their land use rights, punishment of corrupt officials who took their fields, and justice for their families and communities.[50] In the uplands, farmers frequently objected to state forest companies (SFCs). The SFCs, as well as private enterprises, often took control of, or cornered the lion's share of, forest lands that villagers previously used.[51] After their agricultural land was appropriated, many farmers had to change their livelihoods, residences, and other aspects of their lives. Some were able to acquire alternative land use rights. Some found jobs in factories and other enterprises. Others managed to establish small businesses such as boarding houses, eateries, and repair shops. Many had to move away to find ways to make a living.[52]

Notes

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16

MARKET PERSONHOOD IN URBAN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

Ann Marie Leshkowich

What does it mean to be a person? The English verb *to be* connotes an ontological status: a person is something that one is. This understanding of personhood also exists in Vietnam. Yet in Vietnamese language, as in culture and society, personhood is equally and perhaps more widely understood to be processual, interrelational, and developmental: one becomes a person (*thành người*), not at birth, but through socialization and the acquisition of ways of thinking, being, and doing that enable one to join social and moral communities (Gammeltoft, 2014, p. 192).[1] Exploring understandings of personhood in Vietnam affords anthropological insights into how notions of personhood have been culturally constructed, experienced, reproduced, and sometimes challenged, and indeed of how people in Vietnam have come to understand their conditions and themselves over time.

Globally, social scientists and historians have observed how instances of rapid, large-scale change can disrupt prevailing ideas of personhood and call forth practical and normative debates about what personhood is or should be. In classical political economy, theorists explored personhood in relation to the development of capitalism, variously emphasizing continuity and change in moral and ethical values, dispositions, and behaviors (as in the work of Max Weber) and ideological obfuscation and consciousness of interest with a prevailing social order (Karl Marx and others). In the contemporary context, tracing shifts in concepts of personhood can offer insights, not only into how processes of social change affect social life and day-to-day experiences but also the ways in which they fundamentally shape what we understand ourselves to be, what we see ourselves as able or required to become, and the relations of power that emerge as a result of our personhoods (Michel Foucault).

This chapter contends that the development of a market economy in Vietnam, especially in its epicenter in the southern metropolis of Ho Chi Minh City and among its increasingly prosperous middle classes, has occasioned a dramatic transformation of personhood into what I call *market personhood*. It uses ethnographic research on social workers in Ho Chi Minh City to explore how particular people grapple with issues of personhood and the self in daily life.[2] Social workers employ therapeutic techniques to empower individual clients to analyze themselves and their problems so that they might formulate feasible, rational plans for self-improvement. Social workers also attend to family and community systems because they recognize that environmental and material conditions change personhoods, variously supporting and compromising their clients' well-being. Because social workers often work with marginalized populations, they are

on the front lines in managing the problems that emerge among those who suffer from what might seem to be failed or broken personhoods. The problem with this, something that the social workers I know recognize but do not feel able to address, is that as market economies sort people into haves and have-nots, the resulting inequalities are viewed by some – including the victims of poverty – to be the result of faulty personhood, rather than a product of political and economic institutions, global geopolitical relationships, or transnational capital flows that shape personhood. Understanding what social workers do and how they do it thus allows us to see the sleight of hand through which market personhood serves to naturalize or normalize the uneven effects of the market as instead caused by differences between people.

In broader historical and anthropological terms, the development of social work in Vietnam may itself be seen as a marker of Vietnam's emergent market society, shedding light on how economic formations shape both societal and individual notions of self and the development of practices meant to assist individuals and communities in need or, viewed in a more draconian way, to regulate or control behavior. Against this backdrop, notions and experiences of personhood are key to creating – and hence to analyzing – the social, political, and cultural implications of macroeconomic transformations taking place in contemporary Vietnam.

Market Socialist Personhood

Vietnam is part of a global trend in which people are increasingly called to behave as what Makovicky (2014) terms an *enterprising self*: a rational, autonomous, responsible actor able to self-assess, to be flexible under volatile conditions, to apply logics of maximization and self-investment, to recognize and seize opportunities, and to develop plans to address shortcomings in order to be market ready. These entrepreneurial forms of personhood and the "psy" professionals who cater to them have appeared with particular vibrancy in the context of rapid marketization in post or market socialist settings in Eastern Europe and China (see, e.g., Kleinman et al., 2011; Makovicky, 2014, p. 1; Matza, 2009, p. 492; Raikhel, 2016, pp. 14–16; Yang, 2015; Zhang, 2014), but they are also emerging in areas long connected to global market assemblages (Freeman, 2014).

What does market personhood look like in contemporary urban Vietnam, with its particular mix of "market economy with socialist orientation" (*kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*), a.k.a. "market socialism"? The desired person is one who is simultaneously a *homo economicus* and possessed of emotions and self-awareness of them. With respect to the economic part, the market person rationally calculates utility in order to maximize scarce means in an increasingly competitive environment. While proponents of neoliberalism might see the maximizing person as an expression of supposedly natural human tendencies toward self-interest, in Vietnam it appears as an obvious social creation, and a rather novel and contingent one at that. Rather than innately inclined to seek profit, this person must be responsible to cultivate particular internal dispositions, such as the capacity to see the self as an entity possessing human capital that can be developed and in which one can – and should – invest. This person must be socialized to be self-regulating and self-managing, yet also able to articulate individual desires and motivated to fulfill them. Here's where the emotional dimensions of market personhood become important. Tran (2015) claims that Vietnam is witnessing a reorganization of the self from one defined interpersonally through relationships based on sentiment (*tình cảm*) to one possessed of inner emotions (*cảm xúc*) that need to be examined and respected.

The convergence of market rationality with a focus on individual emotional longing is no mere coincidence, for the contemporary market economy requires people to become citizen consumers who engage with commodities in order to satisfy appropriate individual desires. Lisa

Rofel notes a similar emergence of the desiring self in China, where media and other sources teach people "the art of 'longing'" (Rofel, 2007, p. 6). One of Tran's interviewees claimed that the new emphasis on introspection required an emotive self that seemed "not very Vietnamese" (Tran, 2015, p. 487). When Tran asked how his interviewee had managed to develop such a self, he responded flippantly that he was good at English (ibid.)! Such a moment aptly captures the tensions between a market self that is attractive for its novel cosmopolitanism versus a Vietnamese self more conventionally and interrelationally defined.

In Vietnam, as elsewhere in Asia and perhaps most especially in China (Yang, 2015; 2018; Zhang, 2014, 2015), a range of experts in government, education, and mental health has arisen to assist this market-ready person at all stages of the life course. They offer a potpourri of theories and techniques, from explicitly Western psychological models of human development to Buddhist approaches to mindfulness. Urban bookstores abound with translations of pop psych self-help titles promising professional success and personal fulfillment. Newspaper columns, magazine features, radio call-in shows, and programming from both private businesses and government entities such as the Women's Union provide advice about how to have a happy family in the midst of growing pressure and material temptations (Nguyen-vo, 2008; Pettus, 2003; Drummond, 2004). Counseling centers offer professional mental health assistance to combat urban middle-class ennui, anxiety, stress, and depression (Tran, 2015). The modes of intervention and their goals can be equally diverse: from learning Myers-Briggs personality traits in order to succeed in business negotiations, to cultivating children's talents, to seeking help with anxiety or depression through talk therapy or psychopharmacological medication (Tran, 2017).

Pursued singularly or in tandem, technologies of self in Vietnam's expanding marketplace offer programs of rational management to achieve economic prosperity, self-actualization, and family happiness. Buying a handbook to understand principles of child psychological development, practicing meditation to relieve stress, taking an antidepressant, or engaging a private counselor to probe one's emotional depths also all signal that someone is conversant with new, modern, and scientific approaches to the self and willing to invest precious time and resources in applying those principles. They are markers of an urban, middle-class lifestyle.

A Brief History of Southern Vietnamese Personhood

Although market personhood and the anxiety about it that has crystallized in the advice industry may be perceived by many in urban Vietnam as novel, seemingly revolutionary approaches to personhood gain traction because they invoke or modify prior ways of being. Over the past century in southern Vietnam, French colonialism, war, and socialist revolution have each sparked calls for new forms of personhood. What's more, southern Vietnam's more recent history of conquest by ethnic Kinh and its significant ethnic Chinese population, much of it visibly engaged in business activities, have given this region a reputation as a freewheeling frontier zone. The south has long been described as populated by, if not exactly individualists, then at least a personality type less confined to the spirit of collectivism and conservatism associated with Hanoi and the Red River Delta. A brief history of urban southern Vietnam, viewed through the lens of concepts of the self, thus provides important context for the contemporary fluorescence of market personhood.

French colonialism provoked a crisis of Vietnamese identity. By the 1920s, many intellectuals had come to see Vietnam's vulnerability to Western conquest as due to a weakness of the Vietnamese self, constrained by ossified family and social hierarchies. Radical youth argued that national independence would emerge "organically from their struggle toward self-emancipation" from traditional Vietnamese institutions (Tai, 1992, p. 4; see also Marr, 2000, p. 777–8).

Language figured prominently in colonial-era debates about the person. Well before the establishment of French Indochina, Catholic proselytizing and its focus on the individual believer inspired some Vietnamese Catholics to adopt the pronoun *tôi*, a form of self-reference used with superiors that does not place "both speaker and listener in a quasi-familial relationship" (Marr, 2000, pp. 775–776). By the 20th century, *tôi* had gained traction as a generic first-person pronoun (ibid., pp. 786–787), although its use was limited (and still is today) by the lack of a popularly accepted generic equivalent for "you" (ibid., p. 788). Some colonial-era speakers preferred to pepper their vernacular speech with French pronouns, such as "'*C'est moi*'" (ibid., 2000, p. 777). Colonial French classes introduced Vietnamese students to the notion of possessive interiority with Descartes' dictum, "'*Je pense donc je suis*' (I think therefore I am)" (ibid.). Just as English made possible the emotional self referred to by Tran's 21st-century interviewee, so, too, did French-speaking Vietnamese in the 19th and 20th centuries have occasion to ponder the individuated "I" in the French "*je/moi*" and its rough Vietnamese equivalent of "*tôi*."

The southern region's social diversity incubated a variety of other, less radical claims about individuality and personhood. After World War I, a small colonial-era Saigon bourgeoisie committed to utilitarian ideas published books and pamphlets with titles such as "Buying Cheap and Selling Dear" and "Wealth Is Better than Nobility" in an effort to encourage Vietnamese to take up commerce and undercut French and Chinese monopolistic practices (Marr, 1981, pp. 122–123). Other southerners envisioned a public sphere of individual rights and open discourse. In his study of the development of journalism in Saigon, Philippe Peycam writes that in the "heterogeneous urban environment" of 1920s Saigon that included Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabs, Southeast Asians, Indians, and Europeans, "individualism, pragmatism, and openness to strangers flourished" (Peycam, 2012, p. 15). French-educated members of the growing middle class experienced "new spaces of individual agency", including consumerist culture, that "emerged beyond family structures and conventions of conduct that had hitherto restricted the affirmation of the 'self'" (ibid., p. 32). The pages of the newspapers they founded offered both new ideas and new products through which Saigon's elite could fashion themselves.

By the 1940s, communism had become the primary ideology guiding anticolonial revolution. Although the ideal socialist would labor on behalf of the collective, the New Socialist Person in fact offered a novel form of individuality that was particularly attractive to adventurous youth. Hồ Chí Minh's New Way of Life campaign of the 1940s, for example, sought to disentangle the individual from family and community relations in order to forge a direct relationship with the party (Drummond, 2004, pp. 162–163). David Marr notes that photos of Việt Minh revolutionaries from this period reveal "diverse poses and facial expressions, the jaunty caps, scarves and other fashion statements. Unit commanders sported Japanese swords, Chinese pistols, walking sticks or cavalry-style riding boots" (Marr, 2000, p. 790). Marr sees in these early fighters a form of personality strongly influenced by French colonialism and captured by the neologism "individual" (*cá nhân*). Joining the movement promised a heroic adventure of "personal release and self-fulfillment" (ibid.), even as it also demanded group loyalty.

Following the achievement of independence, socialist revolutionary personhood in the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1954–1975) increasingly emphasized collective loyalty and uniformity of expression. As in China, socialist thought work resonated with earlier Confucian ideas of self-cultivation (*tu thân*) that typically took the form of extended study and immersion of the *thân* or body-self in multiple hierarchical social relationships (Marr, 2000, pp. 773–774; see also Đỗ Thiện, 2003, p. 133). Individualism (*cá nhân chủ nghĩa*), a term that had aroused concern about its appropriateness in Vietnamese society even among those jaunty intellectuals who had seemed to embody it, now became even more strongly condemned as bourgeois and reactionary (Marr, 2000, pp. 789–791).[3] By the late 1950s and 1960s, the

personal histories narrated to prove loyalty to the revolution became more formulaic (ibid., pp. 791–2). But this more uniform new socialist person was nonetheless individuated. People were encouraged to speak out against supposed enemies of the revolution in their own families in concerted attempts to overturn hierarchies of age, gender, or wealth. One could also pursue self-cultivation in a collectivist vein by studying abroad in the USSR and Eastern Europe (Schwenkel, 2015, p. 15). Histories of what Schwenkel terms "socialist mobilities" during the wartime period reveal a cosmopolitan expansion of personal horizons that nonetheless stopped short of selfish individualism.

Although the southern Republic of Vietnam (1954–1975) was founded on explicit anti-communism, its leader Ngô Đình Diệm's deep skepticism of capitalist individualism led him and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu to champion a political moral philosophy known as Personalism. Developed in the 1930s by progressive French Catholic intellectual Emmanuel Mounier, Personalism rejected "the two extremes of bourgeois individualism/liberal capitalism and fascist/communist collectivism," which were critiqued, respectively, as "selfish anarchy" that overemphasized the individual, versus oppressive collectivism that denied "the dignity and worth of individuals" (Catton, 2002, p. 41; see also Miller, 2013, p. 43). The ideology had spread among Vietnamese studying in Paris, including Ngô Đình Nhu, and through the work of French Catholic missionaries in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2017, p. 106). For the Catholic Ngô brothers, Personalism offered a nationalist doctrine that would foster a spirit of collectivity, promote economic development, resist communism, and empower peasants without igniting class warfare (ibid., pp. 117–120; Catton, 2002, p. 42; Goscha, 2016, p. 276).

Personalism drew a clear distinction between the "individual" and the "person":

> The "individual" was the atomized man, pursuing his selfish goals in a liberal society or standing helpless and alone before the power of a totalitarian state. The "person" possessed certain inalienable rights but was also an inherently social animal, oriented toward the life of the community and part of a larger organism whose aim should be to secure the common good of all its constituent elements.
>
> *(Catton, 2002, pp. 41–42)*

The Ngôs followed Vietnamese Catholic practice of using the term *nhân vị* (human being or humanity) as the translation of the French *la personne* (Miller, 2013, p. 44). As opposed to *cá nhân* (individual) or *con người* (person), *nhân vị* emphasized Personalism's affinity with Confucian notions of human beings as "possessing both rights and responsibilities" (Catton. 2002, p. 43; see also Miller, 2013, pp. 138–139). At the same time, personalism explicitly sought to transcend Confucianism's familial parochialism (Catton, 2002, p. 44). The result would be "the individual discovering him- or herself by confronting difficult realities" that would liberate the person and promote collective interest, including nation-building (ibid., p. 45).

It is unclear how much personalism was ever understood or adopted by citizens in the Republic of Vietnam. Given the Diệm regime's dictatorial cronyism, dependence on US support, and ignoble end in the 1963 coup and assassination of Diệm and Nhu, it is easy to dismiss Personalism as a vacuous or cynical excuse for authoritarianism. More recent historical analyses, however, treat Personalism as a serious attempt to rethink Vietnamese culture in light of questions about individual character, dignity, freedom, social relationships, and group discipline (Catton, 2002, pp. 48–49; Nguyen, 2017, p. 125). Personalism thus shared with earlier attempts by southern radicals, bourgeoisies, and communists the goal of fostering a form of personhood as key to Vietnam's future.

Meanwhile, the southern revolutionary movement in the Republic of Vietnam maintained its heterogeneity. David Marr writes of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam

(NLF), "Participants came from diverse backgrounds, possessed personal idiosyncrasies, wore all sorts of clothing, and often maintained contact with urban culture condemned as neo-colonial by Hanoi cadres" (Marr, 2000, p. 792). This "idiosyncratic character" of southern revolutionaries "continued to pose a problem for the Communist Party establishment long after the war had ended" (ibid., p. 792). David Hunt emphasizes the NLF's tendency to send cadres far and wide, "thereby taking advantage of and intensifying the restlessness of country people who longed to wander and explore" (Hunt, 2008, p. 179). This "revolutionary modernism" could turn "an unlettered peasant into a self-assured urbanite" (ibid., p. 12), with tastes for the city's conveniences, personal freedoms, and romantic attractions (ibid., pp. 17–18). Whereas the 1950s and 1960s saw a movement toward party loyalty and conformity in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, southern visions of revolution retained a decidedly more urbane individualistic flair.

After 1975, the victorious regime sought to curb southern bourgeois excess, including individualism. Cadres collected information about political loyalties and economic status through documents known as *lý lịch*, which required individuals to detail the educational levels, occupations, property, and political activities of themselves, their parents, siblings, children, and spouse.[4] Individuals were also asked to assess their strengths and weaknesses. Although adapted from similar forms used in the USSR and China, Vietnamese *lý lịch* figured the socialist citizen as embedded in familial relationships that determined personal character, much like Confucianism had stigmatized descendants for their ancestors' crimes.

Although *lý lịch* today are no longer used for socialist reorganization, they continue to be collected for university admission, job applications, and other bureaucratic procedures. As Mai Huy Bích wrote in 1991, "'The individual is not an independent entity; there is no free individual; every facet of his life is bound up with the family; he owes complete allegiance to the family'" (Mai Huy Bích, 1991, p. 49; quoted in Marr, 2000, pp. 794–795). While perhaps extreme, this statement penned in the early years of *Đổi mới* aptly conveys long-standing ambivalence about a concept of the individual as atomizing and inconsistent with Vietnamese forms of relational personhood.

Personhood Dilemmas: Three Case Studies From the Field of Social Work

Official critiques of individualism continued into the second decade of the 21st century. A billboard from 2014 reminds people to follow Hồ Chí Minh's example by resisting individualism through their words and deeds (Figure 16.1). The message may seem anachronistic as people in the busy intersection below dash to make their fortunes, ply their wares, take kids to private tutoring, or meet up with friends at hip cafés and restaurants. With the development of market socialism, individuals now seem required to prioritize their own interests and families. Meanwhile, the difficulties of a growing underclass and the "social problems" (*vấn đề xã hội*) they experience have become the specialty of the expanding profession of social work (*công tác xã hội*).

Social work began in southern Vietnam under French colonialism in the early 20th century to professionalize charitable work and administer social programs, particularly for orphans (Nguyen-Marshall, 2012, p. 71). During the Republic of Vietnam, various government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promoted social work training to combat poverty and to manage internal war refugees. The field was disbanded after 1975 but began re-emerging in the 1990s through programs in women's studies, sociology, and psychology. After decades of deeming social work unnecessary in a socialist society, the Vietnamese government formally approved it as a field of university study in 2004. In 2010, it set a target of training 60,000 cadres

Figure 16.1   "Study and follow the moral example of Hồ Chí Minh about 'Promoting a sense of responsibility, combatting individualism, speaking in accord with doing,'" Ho Chi Minh City, 2014 (photo by the author)

in social work by 2020. Universities, local governments, and NGOs have scrambled to draft curricula, translate textbooks, and organize workshops.

Like other therapeutic modalities, social work encourages people to view themselves as a project requiring ongoing investment in order to be happy, healthy, and productive. Unlike psychiatrists or psychologists, who in Vietnam tend to treat clients through time-limited interactions in clinical settings, social workers meet clients where they are and cultivate longer-term interpersonal relationships. Although trained in psychological and neuroscientific models of behavior, they tend to follow a systems approach that views individuals as profoundly shaped by social and cultural context. They will include family and community members in their work with clients as needed. By not treating individual distress as primarily the result of internal psychological dynamics, social workers also attend to structural or material causes of suffering, such as by providing referrals to job training or securing financial support for childcare or substance abuse treatment. At the same time, as the three case studies that follow indicate, social work rests on a model of who clients are and how to prompt them to engage in processes of self-reflection and commitment to self-transformation.

Although the ethnographic material that follows is specific to social work, it draws on education programs in which models of personhood are explicitly presented and debated. Such contexts are instructive precisely because they seek to make taken-for-granted notions of human experience explicit so that social workers can effectively intervene. For our purposes here of understanding changing notions of personhood in contemporary Vietnam, these case studies offer a window on how the idea of person as an autonomous locus of feeling or an entrepreneur

of the self is indeed gaining traction among the urban middle classes that include social work professionals, but not without a good deal of controversy about how Vietnamese personhood is also relationally defined.

Case Study 1: Constructing the Client's Personhood

One of the first topics covered in an introductory social work program is how one should refer to the person with whom one works. Students or community workers sometimes suggest the word *đối tượng* (object). The term implies a hierarchy reminiscent of socialist central planning: expert acts to change passive object. In my experience, professors or facilitators quickly reject "object" as unacceptable. Some offer the word *khách hàng* (customer). This indicates that some-one voluntarily seeks social work services, but the denotation of a market relationship brushes uncomfortably against social workers' sense that they are not delivering a commodity, but fostering a personally transformative, helping relationship. Students are told that the best word to use is *thân chủ*, or client.

The words in the term *thân chủ* are of Chinese origin. *Thân* is the Vietnamese version of *qin* (親), meaning "close, dear, or intimate." *Chủ* is *zhu* (主), "master, lord, host, owner." *Thân chủ* literally means "close/dear patron."[5] The Sino-Vietnamese term seems to have been coined in Vietnam during the French colonial period as professional commercial services spread. It appears in vernacular Vietnamese newspapers in Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon during the first several decades of the 20th century to refer to various kinds of customers and clients. With the decline of private commerce in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam after 1954, *thân chủ* seems to have fallen out of use.[6] The term met a similar fate in southern Vietnam from 1975 through the late 1980s. A Vietnamese dictionary published in Hanoi in 1994 designates the term as "old" (*cũ*), but a 2003 version has no such reference. Under *Đổi mới*, professional commercial relationships have become widespread once again.

Social workers' definition of *thân chủ* goes beyond the generic sense of customer or client. One professor defined *thân chủ* during the first session of an introductory class: "The client is a person, a group, or a community that is facing difficulties in the process of existence and development and is the partner with whom the social worker works." Both the professor and students, however, quickly moved to use *thân chủ* only to indicate an individual and used other terms such as group (*nhóm*), family (*gia đình*), or community (*cộng đồng*) to indicate more than one person. In the next session, students learned that their goal should be to "Help the client solve the difficult problems that they are facing" by following basic principles, including accepting *thân chủ*, acknowledging that *thân chủ* have the right of self-determination, respecting confidentiality, and building a professional, bilateral relationship with *thân chủ*. In an advanced class, students about to begin practicum placements were reminded that casework should maintain the self-identity or ego (*bản ngã*) of *thân chủ* by supporting the client in exploring, expressing, and releasing feelings. Through empathy, a positive attitude, and the provision of resources, *thân chủ* should better understand their own thoughts and emotions so as to be more hopeful, self-confident, and self-accepting, even as they also are motivated to make desired changes.

Intrigued by this seemingly highly individuated notion of personhood, I asked a group of advanced students whether they saw social work's vision of the client as perhaps at odds with a tendency in Vietnam to see persons as defined relationally. Maybe, I offered, the notion of *thân chủ* who can identify and solve their own problems reflects the more individualistic approach to personhood taken in the Western societies in which the field of social work developed at the turn of the 20th century. Acknowledging how one could see such a link, the students asserted that the notion of individual empowerment was not at all at odds with Vietnamese notions of

personhood. One student said that social work helps the individual who has been marginalized to reintegrate as a member of a community. Another said that social work in Vietnam fostered a relational sense of personhood:

> The key principle for social work is not to take the individual away from family or community. Even if the family has problems . . . social workers still have to place the individual within the family or community because the role of the family is the most important factor for human development.

They contrasted this to their vision of social work in the United States as often separating individuals from families by placing children in foster care or elders in nursing homes.

I had ample opportunity to observe the attempt to balance individualistic and collective forms of personhood as the social work students designed intervention plans during practicum placements with local community organizations, charity schools, and NGOs. A group working with homeless youth engaging in transactional sex and injected drug use repeatedly emphasized the need for family reunification, even when abuse or rejection by that family might have triggered the client's problems. Particularly for young mothers who were homeless or users of injected drugs, moving back home with their families was seen as necessary to stabilize them so that they could care for their children and receive vocational training for gainful employment. To become healthy persons, clients needed a family system.

Case Study 2: Traumatized Personhood

Although student and professional social workers deftly outlined how to reconcile individual and social dimensions of personhood in theory, the dilemma resurfaced when social workers confronted extreme suffering in practice. In May and June 2015, I attended a social work training program in a Mekong Delta province which included a two-day workshop on trauma healing. Led by an experienced US-based social worker, the workshop was conducted in English with extensive pauses for translation into Vietnamese. Technical terms related to brain chemistry proved straightforward, but psychological concepts of trauma and recovery were harder to translate due to differences over what it means to experience intense suffering, what factors can help someone to recover, and hence what model of personhood social workers should foster in their clients.

The workshop began with small group discussions to share stories of people who had recovered from a difficult experience. Each group was to pick one story, list the specific steps that the person had gone through, and use this to generate a model for how someone might heal. As the groups reported back, most emphasized the importance of an individual's will, such as how a woman who was now a university student had overcome the trauma of being trafficked to China for factory work in part because she preserved her personal sense of dignity. The presenter gamely tried to refocus attention from stories of individual character or heroism to a model of healing as dependent upon community support. Our goal, he argued, was to learn how to work with clients so that they could tell a linear story of their trauma that would be comprehensible to themselves and others. Storytelling in personal and social terms was crucial to healing.

Over the next two days, the model of individual strength repeatedly emerged to challenge the presenter's focus on social support. For example, the presenter explained that while a group of people might experience the same trauma, only some might develop a condition diagnosable as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). What might explain this? The first person to raise her hand volunteered that she and her two sisters had all experienced bombing during the war. One had died, another was wounded psychologically, but she herself was fine. Her only explanation

was that for some reason she was a stronger person. The presenter asked if others had possible explanations. Almost all the responses focused on individual character or physiology: a Buddhist-inflected assertion that mental health rests on acceptance of fate; a genetic predisposition toward strong psychology; a nervous system with high tolerance for suffering; an orientation toward the future; religious faith; an optimistic spirit. Only one person mentioned strong community or family support after the traumatic event.

The presenter praised all the responses but said that research indicated that the strongest predictor of whether or not someone would be traumatized was the level of social support. This was because the social is also physiological. Trauma results from the brain's inability to process experiences that have triggered biochemical fight-or-flight reactions. Those parts of the brain are particularly responsive to social contexts, so a supportive family or community, including an empathetic therapist, can encourage someone who has been traumatized to engage in the work of putting memories into language so that they become comprehensible, and the individual can move forward.

Participants broke into pairs to practice these techniques. While most of the social workers in the room were already skilled empathetic listeners, many seemed confused by what the content of the client's story should be. Someone asked: "Shouldn't we be working with a client to understand the truth of what happened? . . . Wouldn't helping the client see reality help with the process of healing?" The presenter responded that the social worker should focus on process more than content because healing comes from developing a story that feels right to the client and can be shared with others. The goal is not to address why the trauma happened, but to help the person who experienced trauma make sense of it.

As the workshop concluded, many faces in the room still looked skeptical. In my conversations with several participants later, I came to understand that the model of storytelling therapy seemed simultaneously too individualistic and too social. Too individualistic, in that it emphasized that similar events and experiences might cause some individuals, but not others, to be unable to make sense of what happened. The proposed treatment to help the individual compose a story that made sense to him or her disregarded an objective truth of what happened that could lie outside that individual's memory or perception. Too social, in that rather than use medication to alter the individual brain chemistry that underlay trauma, the social worker was to construct social scaffolding that would enable the individual to tell a story – any story, it seemed – that would receive empathetic validation. This disregarded both individual resolve and notions of fate, such as how Buddhism could provide a model for accepting uncertainty and leading a moral life. As one older participant declared, surely those factors shape how a person responds to tragedy.

Case Study 3: Motivational Interviewing

Although the trauma healing workshop raised questions about individuality and objectivity among the Vietnamese social workers in attendance, it exemplified how casework employs communicative techniques to empower individuals for self-help. One of the most popular persuasive approaches is motivational interviewing, which deliberately employs tone, gesture, and pause in order to guide a client to make a desired choice (Carr and Smith, 2014). Learning this technique involves considerable work.

I observed two workshops designed to introduce Vietnamese social workers to motivational interviewing (*phỏng vấn động lực*). In one, two US social workers performed a version of an iconic role play, readily available on YouTube, in which a husband reluctantly seeks therapy because his wife has threatened to leave him if he does not cut back on drinking with his friends. As the man responds to the social worker's brief questions about his troubles, the social worker slowly guides him to recall earlier, happier times. Then, the social worker carefully

observes, "It sounds like that was a happy time in your marriage. I sense that you would like to get back to that happy time." Key here is that the social worker represents the idea of change as coming from the client and then pauses to let the client think about this. Ultimately, the client agrees, and the conversation turns to concrete steps the man might take to regain marital happiness. In the discussion following the role play, one of the workshop organizers described this as dancing, rather than wrestling, with the client. "Remember," he concluded, "the client is the expert on the problem. You are the expert in helping the client understand the problem."

It was precisely this image of client as expert on the self that prompted an objection during this same social worker's similar presentation a year earlier at a Ho Chi Minh City university. One experienced Vietnamese academic social worker objected in English that the method would not work for Vietnamese women, because they "are not socialized to think about what they want. They're not going to give you their point of view because they may not have one. They do what others want: their parents, their husbands, and their children." Social workers would need to be more assertive and directive with women clients. What's more, she added, "social workers in Vietnam can be authoritative because Vietnamese society is authoritative." As she translated these comments into Vietnamese for the audience, she added that the method they had just learned might work in the United States, which has a stronger culture of democracy (*dân chủ*) and personal freedom (*tự do bản thân*). The US social worker responded, "You're not working with a whole culture. You're working with one person or group or family."

Over a meal following that session, Hương, an experienced practicing social worker in Ho Chi Minh City, told me that she had successfully employed motivational interviewing with an HIV-positive homeless young man. Several less experienced social workers had repeatedly urged him to register for anti-retroviral therapy, but without success. After 30 minutes with Hương, he committed to signing up. What made the difference? Hương had told him that all she wanted to do was talk (*tâm sự*), a term that has the connotation of confiding in someone. After a few minutes, Hương reminded the man of a past incident in which he had taken a leadership role to help friends who, like him, were living in a downtown park. Perhaps he might do that again by signing up for the program and then letting others know about it. "If you want to help others," she reported telling him, "then you have to take care of yourself." Through tears, he said that being HIV positive had made him feel lonely, but now he saw that he could use his status to help others. "It was settled pretty quickly," Hương reported, "but I needed the experience to know how to see the opportunity for the client to accept making a change. That's motivational interviewing."

Hương's approach, at least in this retelling, had been more directive than that presented in the workshop. Rather than subtly lead her client to volunteer a course of action, she explicitly suggested anti-retroviral therapy as an opportunity to be a role model. At the same time, she followed the primary tenets of motivational interviewing: guide someone in generating a vision of the life one wishes to have or a goal one wishes to achieve and then identify a concrete, realistic change that one can pursue as a step toward achieving that end.

Conclusion

What images of personhood – actually existing or desired – do these stories of social work education and intervention conjure? All three case studies imagine the client as an autonomous entity whose needs and desires should be supported to enable a process of self-reflection intended to spark commitment to a plan for concrete change. That sounds like the entrepreneurial self, willing to invest in one's own human capital. Along the way, however, this notion of personhood bumped up against other possibilities: the importance of family, even if

dysfunctional, to anchor selfhood; the idea that recovery from trauma might rest on individual will or strength of character that could emerge through Buddhist non-attachment to the self; a client who may not possess a self that can articulate personal needs, but who might be motivated to do so through an appeal to social obligations.

These moments allow us to glimpse how social workers in urban southern Vietnam contend with multiple, often competing and contradictory, visions of personhood of diverse provenance. Market personhood with its desiring emotional, yet rational self holds tremendous appeal, but can prove elusive in practice. The balance between client-centeredness and directiveness that makes motivational interviewing attractive to Vietnamese social workers proves hard to achieve because both the subjectivity of the client as self-aware, self-scrutinizing, and decision-making entity and the subjectivity of the social worker as skilled professional are under construction. Rather than be the basis for therapeutic encounters, these forms of personhood may in fact emerge from them, as the client adopts a new perspective on the self (the expert on his or her own problem) and the social worker consolidates his or her mastery of embodied and verbal therapeutic methods (social worker as expert on helping the client understand the problem). Experienced and neophyte Vietnamese social workers seemed to sense that this is a far less certain outcome in Vietnam than one might expect in a place such as the United States, where both the ideal of individual personhood and the professional expertise of a social worker are entrenched.

To put it differently, Vietnamese social workers certainly endeavor to engage clients in self-evaluation to become the kind of self that the client wishes to be. Social workers craft clients, in the sense that one of their main goals is to implant dispositions toward self-examination that will enable a client to become the kind of person who can then take action on the self. We might say that cause and effect cycle: market logics require that people become market selves, and the development of that form of personhood creates actors whose activities advance market logics. But in Vietnam, this new market person faces a tall order, and here's where things get complicated: Be the best person you can be. Make money. Cultivate yourself. Invest in relationships. Be happy and fulfilled. Be mindful of your responsibility to others. Navigate with ease cultural settings that are global, as well as those that are more traditionally Vietnamese.

What this evidence from social work in the southern urban epicenter of market-oriented development suggests is that the emergence of a market economy in Vietnam today is as much a moral and cultural project of crafting market personhood as it is a matter of economic or political policy. We clearly see the pull of desire to be this new modern person, more legible in English than in Vietnamese. But there could be a high price to pay: if personhood shapes market outcomes, then those who fail to move ahead in the market might have no one but themselves to blame. This is the problem that keeps many of my social worker friends awake at night battling the unease they feel as they try to create self-aware, market-ready persons, even as they also know that the most empowered individualistic selves are never solely responsible for their fates.

Notes

1 Gammeltoft's observation is made in the context of the devastation that pregnant women and their family members in northern Vietnam experience when ultrasounds suggest a fetal abnormality and together they contemplate terminating the pregnancy. Chief among their concerns is that disability would render the child unable to *thành người* and join "larger sociomoral communities of mutual belonging" (Gammeltoft, 2014, p. 192).

2 Fieldwork included six months (2010–2011) of participant observation and interviewing with social work students and faculty in Ho Chi Minh City, three months (2014, 2015, 2016) of research at training workshops, follow-up visits in 2017 and 2018, archival research, and review of media discussions and policy documents.

3 In contemporary usage, the word order is reversed: *chủ nghĩa cá nhân*.
4 For a detailed account of *lý lịch* history and use, see Leshkowich (2014, pp. 149–152).
5 Although the words come from Chinese, the term is not in fact used in Chinese. Therapists in China instead refer to their patients as *zi ke* (counseling client or guest), *lai fang zhe* (visitor), or *bing ren* (patient) (see, e.g., Zhang, 2014, p. 284n.4).
6 Information about the etymology of *thân chủ* comes from Nguyễn Nam (personal correspondence, November 3 and 4, 2015).

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17

CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM'S ECONOMY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Đổi Mới or Đổi Lại?

Gerard Sasges

In the Mekong Delta in the 1990s, farmers joked that the state's much-vaunted reforms represented less a đổi mới – literally change for the new – than a đổi lại, or a reversion to the norms that operated in Southern Vietnam before reunification in 1975 [Biggs 2012, 68]. The anecdote is a useful reminder that our decision whether to use terms like new or old, forward or backward, reform or reaction, depends very much on our point of view and the historical scale we adopt. So while most of the chapters in this collection focus on the new, I'd like to highlight some of the old and argue for the importance of placing developments in contemporary Vietnam in a longer historical perspective.

My interest in this theme stems from a dialogue with Scott Cheshier, a political scientist who has examined the transition period and its relationship to class formation (Cheshier 2010). My work, on the other hand, looks at the political economy of the colonial period. As we read each other's work, if often seemed we were describing similar phenomenon, just using different vocabularies. In 2012, we co-authored an article that highlighted the continuities we saw in the political economies of the colonial and Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV, 1976 to present) periods (Sasges and Cheshier 2012). We argued that many enduring features stemmed from the state's dependence – taken for granted for the SRV but more surprising for the colonial period – on monopolies as a tool of state policy. The result was political economies where state and enterprise were highly interpenetrated, where policies were deformed by regional and ethnic dynamics; where monopolies proved unenforceable; and where the state was unable to discipline its monopolists as they pursued their own, rather than state, aims.

By pointing out these continuities, we hoped to call into question the assumption of rupture that underpins conventional labels like "pre-colonial," "colonial," "planned economy," and "transition." These assumed breaks have made it difficult for scholars of contemporary Vietnam to see back in time beyond 1954 and the DRV's establishment of control over all of Northern Vietnam. Aside from the occasional invocation of ill-defined terms like "Confucianism" or "Southeast Asian political tradition," or sayings like "phép vua thua lệ làng" ["the King's writ stops at the village gate"], the more distant past remains largely absent from our understanding of the present. It may be tempting to ask what it matters if we begin our account in 1954 or 1858 when our concern lies with the undeniable changes occurring in the present. Yet failing

to put present developments in their longer historical context risks misunderstanding the limits, the nature, and even the direction of change.

To take an example from the present collection, Andrew Wells–Dang (Chapter 5) writes, "Vietnamese concepts of civil society began from a Marxist origin, reflecting the predominance of Marxist-Leninist social and political theories" (p. 75). This erases the rich history and multiple origins of civil associations and activism under the colonial, and in Southern Vietnam, postcolonial regimes. This included everything from mutual aid societies to chambers of commerce, popular educational societies to urban reform movements, religious movements to sporting associations. The Vietnamese Scouting Association (Hội Hướng Đạo Việt Nam), founded in 1930, is a useful case. Although banned in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), it flourished in the South until 1975 and continues to operate semi–clandestinely to this day. Accounts that begin in 1954 or 1986 thus don't simply ignore history, but risk doing it in ways that discount the experience of Southern Vietnamese, foreground the role of the party, and overstate the importance of the nation's broadening global engagement after 1986. Where we begin our accounts matters.

The present chapter takes up the same theme of historical continuity that framed the 2012 article. Its focus is on the political economy, but its implicit argument is that all analyses of contemporary Vietnam could be more attentive to the way enduring dynamics shape the nation's past, present, and future. It begins by sketching out some of the characteristics often highlighted in accounts of contemporary political economy and explores some of the reasons why it has been so difficult to analyze the colonial economy in similar terms. It then transposes this language of transition and development to the state's economic policies in the colony of Cochinchina, or what we would today call Southern Vietnam. The resulting account reveals important similarities across the colonial and contemporary periods. The chapter ends by suggesting some dynamics that may help explain these long-term continuities. It argues that much like the Communist Party in 1986, the colonial state faced a similar challenge of fostering competent, politically dependable managers capable of realizing its developmental goals. Furthermore, in both periods this process of state-led economic development unfolded in two important contexts. The first can be expressed variously in terms of a lack of shared ideology or the lack of popular legitimacy. The second is Vietnam's place in regional and global economic systems. Ultimately, however, the example of Vietnam's political economy is simply a means to help us think differently about periodization, encourage us to adopt longer time frames in our studies, and challenge us to be as attentive to connection as disjuncture in our analysis.

Flawed Developments

Since 1986, the Vietnamese Communist Party has presided over a period of remarkable economic growth. From being dependent on food imports in the 1980s, the country has become one of the world's leading agricultural exporters. The growth rate has averaged almost 7 percent annually. Household incomes have tripled and the percentage of the population living in poverty has fallen from 60 to 12. Despite these impressive statistics, however, most analyses see the party–state's record as decidedly mixed. While emphases vary, analyses point to a range of factors as characterizing contemporary political economy and impeding further, more rapid, or better quality growth (see for example Pincus, this volume).

These often-interrelated factors include the lack of clear delineation between public and private, the inability of the state to discipline key economic actors, and state fragmentation (see Pincus 2015; Fforde 2007, 2014; Cheshier 2010; Gainsborough 2009, 2002). One particularly

salient characteristic is "state commercialization," or what Jonathan London described as "the development of a business class within the state," which in turn sets the stage for the effective privatization of public assets (see Pincus, this collection, London 2009, 385; Woodside 1997). Accounts generally trace these characteristics to the planned economy and the subsequent transition to "market Leninism." A recent example explains, "we need to situate recent developments within the broader context of Vietnam's unique experience of transition from central planning to the market" (Pincus 2015, 29). Yet what if these same recent developments also characterized the political economy of the colonial period?[1]

Disciplinary training helps explain why accounts so frequently fail to situate contemporary developments in a longer historical perspective. Yet ideology also plays a role. One reason many continuities remain obscure is the assumption that the colonial regime was alien and its policies some sort of aberration. The example of Siam should make it clear the region's regimes, whether colonial or not, pursued similar ends using similar means (Thongchai Winichakul 1994). At the same time, it's important to recognize the ways in which the colonial regime was as much Vietnamese as French. The Nguyễn regime that it variously displaced and "protected" provided multiple inheritances. Its political borders, its imperialist designs on Laos and Cambodia, its bureaucratic structures, and in many cases its officials, their practices and habits of thought were all adapted by and refracted through the colonial regime (Poisson 2004; Davis 2015). In terms of civilian personnel, the regime was overwhelmingly Vietnamese: 100,000 versus no more than 5000 French. Moreover, the institutions and understandings of the colonial state would provide crucial frames of reference for the builders of new states after 1945. To borrow Christopher Goscha's evocative biological metaphor, just as the colonial state represented a kind of "imperial graft," so too did the DRV state that followed represent a kind of "colonial graft" (Goscha 2016, also 2012).

A related and perhaps more important problem is the different way we conceive of the economy under colonial rule and the different vocabularies we use. Postcolonial Vietnamese scholarship on the economy has, unsurprisingly, been overwhelmingly Marxist in its analysis and its language, and most English-language scholarship has adopted a similar perspective. One standard text describes almost a century of economic change under colonial rule as little more than "protectionism, parasitism, and stagnation." (Murray 1980, 161). Yet in terms of rhetoric, at least, economy functioned similarly. Upon taking office in 1897, Paul Doumer, the governor general who would do more to shape Indochina's economy than any other, declared that the "economic oeuvre" was the "primary goal of colonization" (Doumer 1902, 3–4). Whether expressed in terms of a "civilizing mission" or today's goals of "dân giàu, nước mạnh, xã hội công bằng, dân chủ, văn minh" ["rich people, powerful nation, [and] egalitarian, democratic, civilized society"], then, as now, economic development was a critical component of the state's claim to legitimacy before its citizens and itself.

Even more important, it was crucial to the state's survival. The inclusion of "powerful nation" among the today's development goals reminds us that for the state, the primary outcome of economic growth is not creating happy citizens, but rather increasing the surplus available for extraction as taxes, funding its own expansion and modernization, and above all ensuring its own survival (Tilly 1992). The combination of financial independence from Paris and large sovereign debt meant that colonial administrators faced the same imperatives to marshal and to develop the nation's economic resources as today. While the colonial regime may have been authoritarian, racist, unconcerned by issues of equity, and frequently violent, nonetheless it did pursue developmental goals using many of the same tools and shaped by many of the same contexts as other regimes that have ruled and continue to rule the spaces of Vietnam.

Colonial Developments

Arguably, the most transformative development project of the colonial period was the re-ordering of Cochinchina's agricultural and commercial economy. Then as now, Cochinchina was the nation's economic engine. And much like the present day, agriculture was the cornerstone of the Cochinchinese economy (Brocheux 2009, 79). One half of the colonial state's developmental strategy for Cochinchina was relatively straightforward: a dredging program in the Mekong Delta that opened up new lands to rice cultivation. The project built on Nguyễn antecedents, and like them was motivated as much by security as economic concerns (Biggs 2010). Between 1902 and 1927 the main state contractor dredged 1,300 km of new canals and expanded a further 350 km of existing waterways in Cochinchina. These in turn permitted the digging of 2,500 km of secondary canals. The canals simultaneously opened new lands to cultivation, linked them to local, regional, and global markets, and brought them within the scope of state systems. Over the course of the colonial period, cultivated land in Cochinchina increased by a factor of 21, providing livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of immigrants and transforming Vietnam into the world's second largest exporter of rice (Brocheux and Hémery 2009, 122). At its root, the project was intended to maximize the utilization of the colony's natural and human resources. And in the way it was premised on the creation and then exploitation of a developmental frontier zone, it has much in common with post-colonial projects focused on the Central Highlands, light-industrial export processing zones (EPZs), or the "New Cities" ringing older urban cores.

The second half of the strategy was more complex: maximizing the potential of the expanded rice economy and permitting the extraction of its surplus by the state and its clients. In this case, the obstacle was not the Mekong's difficult hydrology, but rather the ethnic Chinese who dominated the colony's commerce, finance, and small industry. These included everything from petty traders in remote villages and sampan captains plying the newly dredged canals to rice dealers in Gò Công and powerful financiers and traders in Saigon capitalizing on networks linking them to Hong Kong, Singapore, Manila, and beyond. Precolonial regimes had depended on these ethnic Chinese as a sort of alien capitalist class, and initially the French were content to adopt the same practice. Over time, however, Chinese control of the rice economy was seen as an obstacle to economic growth. Critics highlighted issues like the slow uptake of new milling and processing technologies, or the lack of consolidation that limited economies of scale. At the same time, they pointed to seemingly opaque Chinese business practices to suggest the state was being denied its share of tax revenue. Thus the era of more aggressively developmental policies – or in French, Indochina's *mise-en-valeur* – that began at the end of the century coincided with a new determination that the fruits of economic growth would go to the state and its French and Vietnamese protégés rather than the "alien" Chinese.

To prise open the rice economy and make it susceptible to exploitation by the state and its clients, the state proceeded to monopolize the production and sale of one of the rice economy's few value-added products: liquor. While state monopolies on opium, and to a lesser extent, salt were also envisioned as important sources of revenue, it was industrially produced alcohol that was the cornerstone of the state's development policies. Monopolizing production of rice liquor would incentivize a chosen entrepreneur to introduce new industrial technologies, drive down the cost of production, and, in theory at least, create a sufficient margin to allow the state to collect increased taxes and its client to enjoy healthy profits. At the same time, it would help soak up excess production, divert rice from export, and promote the further development of a monetized, commercialized economy. In its turn, monopolizing distribution and sales would deprive Chinese merchants and retailers of a highly sought-after product and create a space for Vietnamese entrepreneurs to establish their own profitable commercial networks.

The three policies – Mekong Delta canal building and the monopolization of the production and sale of rice alcohol – should be seen as interlocking parts of a larger developmental strategy. The first would vastly expand the agricultural economy, while the others would allow the state and its clients to extract its surplus. Yet for the most part, metropolitan French capital was leery of the far-away colony. With the exception of a few privileged, capital-intensive sectors like railroads, cement, and mines, private investment remained negligible until the 1920s (Brocheux 2009). To implement the development policies necessary for its survival and growth, the colonial state would have to incubate new "native" enterprises. To lead these enterprises, the state unsurprisingly turned to former officials, offering them monopolies and long-term contracts in exchange for assuming the risk, arranging financing, and managing the introduction of the new technologies on which the state's development strategy rested.

Cochinchina's dredging program would be implemented by a former employee of Tonkin's Department of Public Works, Louis-Félix Dessoliers. After first winning a contract to construct a segment of the Hanoi-Nam Dinh railway line, in 1902 he founded the Société française industrielle d'Extrême-Orient [French industrial company of the Far East, or SFIEO] with financial backing from a Franco-Belgian railway contractor, the Société anonyme franco-belge [Franco-Belgian Public Limited Company]. 1913 brought a name change as the SFIEO was transformed into the more accurate Société française d'entreprises de dragages et de travaux publics [French dredging and public works limited company, or SFEDTP]. Little else changed, however. From 1904 until the end of French rule, the SFIEO/SFEDTP would hold a monopoly on state dredging projects and a quasi-monopoly on public works in Indochina. Paul Bernard estimates that between 1900 and 1930, the state spent 120,000,000 piasters on hydraulic and navigation works, or about one-fifth of the state's total spending on public works (Bernard 1934, 80).

The alcohol monopoly would depend on the efforts of Auguste Raphaël Fontaine, a former official in the Tonkin administration (Sasges 2017). By 1905, his Société française des distilleries de l'Indochine [French distilleries of Indochina limited company, or SFDIC], also founded in 1902, had an effective monopoly on the legal production of rice liquor across Indochina. Its monopoly would also continue to the end of the colonial period. The cornerstone of his enterprise was the enormous Bình Tây complex in Chợ Lớn, which at the turn of the century boasted one of the largest, most technically advanced distilleries in the world. It also featured Cochinchina's largest rice mill and served as the hub of an integrated network of warehouses, trucks, barges, tugs, and cargo ships. Fontaine was thus one of the few Europeans to contest in depth the Chinese dominance of the rice trade, even going as far as to introduce skeptical French consumers to the exotic pleasures of rice. Yet as with the SFEDTP, the bulk of the SFDIC's profits came from its generous contracts with the state. These contracts made the SFDIC one of the most profitable corporations in the entire empire, famed in the 1920s for consistently paying some of the highest dividends on the Paris Bourse. And as with the SFEDTP, those contracts would be renewed continuously until the end of the colonial period.

Vietnamese entrepreneurs also had a place in the state's developmental strategy. While the most generous profits were reserved for men like Dessoliers, Fontaine, and their shareholders, selected Vietnamese were encouraged to contest Chinese control of the commercial economy. The most obvious example is Trương Văn Bền, famed as one of the colonial period's most successful Vietnamese entrepreneurs.[2] Like Dessoliers and Fontaine, he was a former civil servant tapped to transform state patronage into economic growth. After he left the civil service he enjoyed modest success in commerce. Encouraged by his former superiors to diversify, in 1905 he founded an oil processing plant, then a rice mill the following years. In 1912 he was granted the liquor sales monopoly for the lucrative Saigon-Gia Định market. The dependable profits he derived funded the expansion and modernization of his oil factory and diversification into soap

production. Thanks to canny marketing, his new "Savon Vietnam" company, producing one of Vietnam's first trademarked products, "Cô Ba" soap, came to dominate the Cochinchinese market. Bền was deeply involved in the economic and political life of the colony in general, serving as a Director of Saigon's commercial port, the Vice President of the Saigon Chamber of Commerce, and a longtime delegate to Indochina's representative assembly [Grand Conseil des intérêts économiques et financiers]. Thanks to his success and his close relationship to the state, by the time he retired in 1948 Bền had gained both French citizenship and membership in Indochina's decision-making elite.

When Doumer and his advisors implemented their developmental strategy after 1897, they struck a Faustian bargain. By incubating such powerful corporations so deeply imbricated in key branches of government like public works and customs, they blurred the lines between public and private. In effect, the colonial state came to be co-constituted with powerful corporations like the SFEDTP and the SFDIC. The state's customs branch, for example, operated as a subsidiary of the SFDIC, with over half of its resources devoted to enforcing the corporation's monopoly and its agents incentivized with shares of the fines they collected from contraband distillers. While the customs branch pursued the corporation's illegal competitors and denied applications by others to build new distilleries, the SFDIC proceeded methodically to purchase and then close its few remaining legal competitors. After intervening personally with the corporation in a last bid to stop the SFDIC's inexorable advance and preserve a modicum of consumer choice in the colony, the governor of Cochinchina wrote to his administrators in 1937 that, "I regret it very deeply, but the local Administration was powerless to do anything." To borrow one description of contemporary Vietnamese political economy, the colonial state had succeeded in creating "a business class within the state that is positioned to use state power to manipulate markets and has a material interest in suppressing the development of an independent commercial class" (Pincus, this volume).

The results of the state's development strategy were mixed. In many senses, it was a success. The state's monopolists enjoyed healthy profits that funded consolidation and diversification. The Indochinese state derived approximately one-quarter of its revenue from alcohol, along with a growing share from taxes on consumption that came to include not only basic commodities like alcohol or salt, but also new products like safety matches, cigarettes, condensed milk, and Trương Văn Bền's oil and soaps. The revenue funded the state's own expansion and modernization and ensured the timely repayment of its debt. Yet in another sense, the project was a failure: the secondary objective of the development strategy, the modernization and exploitation of Cochinchina's expanding rice economy, remained largely out of reach. It would take more drastic measures to threaten the entrenched interests that controlled Cochinchina's political economy. Yet despite ambitious projects that might have achieved this overarching goal, the colonial state was too fragmented to see them through to completion.

The first was the "Candelier project" of the early 1920s. The project, backed by Cochinchina's Governor Maurice Cognacq, saw a consortium of private interests offer to consolidate, expand, and modernize Saigon's port facilities in return for a fifteen-year monopoly over its operations (Sasges, 2017; Engelbert 2010, 103–104; Peycam, 119). While the need for improved port facilities was clear, the monopoly the consortium demanded would have given it a stranglehold on Cochinchina's trade. Not surprisingly, Chinese merchants played a major role in the project's defeat, quietly funding a campaign in the Indochinese press and lobbying in Parliament and at the Ministry of Colonies in Paris. Their efforts were aided by divisions within the French administration: vertically among Paris, Hanoi, and Saigon, and horizontally among departments like public works, customs, and the provincial administrations. State clients whose interests might have been threatened by the project, like A.R. Fontaine and Trương Văn Bền,

also worked to undermine the project. At least some of the incoherence of Ho Chi Minh City's port facilities today can be traced to the inability of a fragmented colonial regime to create a consensus for its development in the 1920s. The rest of the blame can be traced to the post-colonial regime and its inability to impose a consensus of its own on interests that include the Ho Chi Minh City government, Vinalines, and the Ministry of Defense (Pincus 2015, 45–46). In the end, real estate developers and the lure of "golden land" may have finally succeeded in creating a kind of coherence where governments have failed. ("Ports must make way for new phase" *Vietnam Investment Review*, 04/15/2018, https://vir.com.vn/ports-must-make-way-for-new-phase-58338.html)

Even as the Candelier project died its slow death, an even more powerful consortium including the SFEDTP and the SFDIC planned an even more ambitious reordering of Cochinchina's economy. Their proposed company, the 'General stores and river transport of Cochinchina' [Magasins généraux et transportations fluviales en Cochinchine] would establish a monopoly over commercial transport, warehousing, commerce, and agricultural credit in the French colony of Cochinchina: in short, a monopoly over most of its economic activity (Sasges 2015; Nguyen Tan Loi 1938). According to the plan, the state would use its regulatory powers to restrict the activities of Chinese shipping companies, opening up a space for the consortium to monopolize first transportation, then commerce more generally. Once again, the plan addressed real weaknesses in the colony's infrastructure. Chief among them were the inadequate warehousing, transportation, and processing facilities that made it impossible to control the quality of Cochinchina's rice and ensured its position at the bottom of the international rice market. Another problem it promised to address was the provision of credit to smallholders at rates lower than those demanded by Chinese merchant and Chettiyar moneylenders.

In its scale and scope and its intent to capture and to manage centrally Cochinchina's entire rice economy the plan was an eerie foreshadowing of the planned economy to come. As such, it underlines the extent to which the two regimes confronted similar problems of modernizing production and facilitating the extraction of surplus. Yet as with the Candelier project, it too was undermined by divisions within the administration. This time, while the project received backing from elements of the administration in Paris and Hanoi including several Governors General and the Bank of Indochina, nevertheless entrenched interests in Cochinchina and the power they wielded in the local administration ensured that the project was never implemented.

The participation of the Bank of Indochina in the plan to monopolize Cochinchina's rice economy hints that the class of local entrepreneurs the Indochinese state had worked to incubate was being gradually eclipsed. The 1920s saw greatly increased international investment in Indochina and the development of new sectors like rubber that would eventually join rice as an important motor of economic growth. Local capitalists were increasingly squeezed by more highly capitalized, better managed, and more globally integrated metropolitan firms. By 1924, Dessoliers had lost control of the SFEDTP, victim of a hostile takeover led by the Parisian financier Octave Homberg. In the wake of the Depression, Homberg's holdings in turn became part of the portfolio of the Paris-based Bank of Indochina. In 1934, thanks to A.R. Fontaine's risky diversification strategies in the previous decades, the SFEDTP was joined by the SFDIC. By the eve of the war in the Pacific, control of Indochina's key quasi-state enterprises had shifted from local entrepreneurs to a new generation of international financiers and managers based in Paris and Brussels. Yet no matter where they were located, the state and its supposed clients remained locked in the same co-dependent relationship.

If colonial Vietnam provides a clue as to the future evolution of this relationship, it is probably to be taken from this period when the generation of local entrepreneurs created at the turn of the century ceded their place to more global forms of capital and organization. Indeed,

recent plans for divestment hint at how the state's relationship with local and with international capital may change in the future. The remnants of the SFDIC's empire in Northern Vietnam, first nationalized then equitized as Halico [Hanoi Joint Stock Liquor Company, Công ty cổ phần Cồn rượu Hà Nội], are now owned 46 per cent by Diageo, the world's largest producer of liquor. And in 2017, a Singapore-based affiliate of ThaiBev acquired a majority stake in Sabeco [Saigon Saigon Beer-Alcohol-Beverage Joint Stock Corporation, Tổng Công ty Cổ phần Bia – Rượu – Nước giải khát Sài Gòn], the inheritor of the SFDIC's assets in southern Vietnam ("ThaiBev is taking over Vietnam's largest beer maker" Nikkei Asian Review, 21/10/2017 https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/ThaiBev-is-taking-over-Vietnam-s-largest-beer-maker). Necessity, shifting developmental priorities, or some combination of the two may be compelling the state to trade some of its control over the macro economy for the promise of higher growth privatization seems to hold.

The Limit of Development

In 1986, the Vietnamese Communist Party implemented its own version of a developmental strategy that combined elements of the market with monopolies, private enterprise with state control of the macro economy. As in the colonial period, a key part of the strategy were corporations created and sustained by the state yet operating very much for their own interests. In both cases the state turned to its own ranks for the most competent and politically dependable managers available to implement the state's agenda. The interdependence thus formed left it difficult to disentangle private interests from public, creating space for the increasing commercialization of the state and leaving an indelible imprint on the growth that has occurred. This interdependence has been refracted through a state fragmented both vertically and horizontally at multiple scales, making the implementation of coherent policies difficult and putting strict limits on state effectiveness. While the colonial and post-colonial states may have been able to set the overall developmental strategy, it was their supposed clients who would determine exactly how that strategy would be realized.

Nevertheless, it's important not to overstate the importance of policy in shaping the political economy of either period. A crucial factor shaping these processes has been state legitimacy, or to put it another way, shared ideology (see Fforde 2014). Beneath the veneer provided by the "civilizing mission" and its accompanying Orientalist discourse, colonialism's ideological core was little more than reflexive racism combined with cold self-interest. While the nation and its struggle against imperialism provided the cornerstone of the regime's legitimacy after 1945, the end of the Second Indochina War presented the party with the novel challenge of finding a new goal, authority, or ideology capable of trumping particular interests. Already in 1991, a senior Hanoi economist observed that the lack of popular trust in the regime was a fatal obstacle to mobilizing the nation's resources for national development, and it's unclear whether the situation is much changed today (quoted in Woodside 1997, 69).

This lack of a shared ideology of rule has many sources. The violence that was inherent in the "August Revolution" that brought the Communist Party to power may have served to create a sort of consensus, but it was an artificial one. A 30-year civil war driven in part by competing visions of the nation is another powerful obstacle to unity. The party's dogged adherence to a widely discredited ideology doesn't help either. The result is to fatally undermine the purchase of appeals to the public good or national development goals and put strict limits on the capacity of policy to shape outcomes. In the language of political economy, in both the colonial and the contemporary periods, actors have responded to incentives, not policy. A more popular expression of the same sentiment might be the saying "đầu tiên tiền đâu?" [roughly: "show me the money"].

Another factor that has shaped the political economy of both periods is Vietnam's place in the global economy. While it's customary to highlight colonial Indochina's subordinate relationship with France, dependency also characterized its relationship with historical markets in East and Southeast Asia. Only in the 1930s under the impact of new tariff and monetary policies did Indochina's trade with the French Empire finally overtake trade with places like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Osaka. The enduring role of ethnic Chinese in the nation's commerce is one reflection of this long-term historical alignment; Indochina's wartime inclusion in Imperial Japan's "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" is another.

The years 1954–1975 saw the bifurcation of this Asian orientation. After 1954, the DRV's economy was focused overwhelmingly on China and a new geopolitical partner, the USSR. And while US aid played a similarly new and important role for the RVN, the period saw a simultaneous deepening of the southern economy's integration with those of Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. Japanese funded and built major new infrastructure projects like the Đa Nhim hydroelectric generating plant (Moore 2013). Japanese, Taiwanese, and Korean advisors oversaw hundreds of programs to increase agricultural and fisheries production, funded by long-term loans from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and intended to promote the growth Vietnamese exports.[3] Even in the midst of war, fisheries in Vietnam were supplying tons of frozen shrimp to Japanese markets every year, just as they do today. And in return, Japanese consumer products flowed into southern Vietnamese markets, everything from Ajinomoto to Honda motorbikes, Seiko watches to Yanmar marine engines.

After 1975, the reactivation of these Asian networks was crucially important in allowing the Vietnamese economy to function despite heavy-handed policies and diplomatic isolation (Cheshier 2010). And by the 1990s this long-term integration of the Vietnamese economy in Asian economic circuits had re-emerged fully, and more important, wholly. Today, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and above all China are the nation's major trading and investment partners. The turning point in the đổi mới era was less the normalization of relations with the United States in 1995 than the normalization of relations with China four years earlier. This northward orientation of Vietnamese political economies has been apparent for centuries (see Taylor 2013). And it is clear today when China is once again the nation's most important trading partner, enjoying a large trade surplus and providing much of the inputs necessary for Vietnam's export industries. Whether America's evolving relationship with the region in general and China in particular will lessen or deepen this interdependence remains to be seen. But for the foreseeable future, the nature of Vietnam's integration in regional circuits of trade will imply particular patterns of economic growth, dependent less on industry than on agriculture, low value-added manufactures, real estate, and above all services.

This is not to say that Vietnam's political economy today is a mirror of its colonial predecessor. There are important differences. There is no single financial institution analogous to the colonial period's Bank of Indochina, and control of the state bank gives today's state powerful new monetary tools. The global economy is no longer constrained by imperial preferences, and Vietnam's trade can exploit new opportunities both in terms of products and in terms of markets. The "problem" of the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam has been more or less "solved," with those Chinese remaining after the exodus in the 1970s and 1980s integrated in the same webs of interdependency with the state. Meanwhile, economic relations with countries like China, Taiwan, Japan, and Singapore are now carried out within the framework of new national identities and institutional norms. Perhaps most important, the state in Vietnam today has access to domestic revenues and foreign capital flows beyond the wildest dreams of colonial officials.

This last point may be the crucial difference between the colonial and the postcolonial regimes: the resources the party-state can call upon as it seeks to win the allegiance of the

nation's growing class of capitalists, or at least to give them an interest in the regime's survival. Yet it also underlines the way both the colonial and postcolonial periods have seen an authoritarian regime with limited legitimacy struggle to maintain its monopoly on political power while simultaneously implementing developmental strategies with economic, social, and cultural outcomes largely beyond its control. The colonial regime managed to square this circle for almost five decades after the reforms of 1897; the current regime is at three and counting since its own reforms of 1986. While some might criticize the party-state for its ineffectiveness in policy implementation, if its ultimate goal has been remaining in power then we need to acknowledge the ways it has been successful as well.

Ideology does matter, as does history, and people. Contemporary Vietnam has undeniably been shaped by its experience of war, collectivization, and the dismantling of the command economy after 1986. Yet adopting a longer historical perspective makes it difficult to frame contemporary Vietnam exclusively in terms of a transition from plan to market or the contradictions inherent in a "socialist oriented" "market economy." An alternative framework might be that of authoritarian Vietnamese states attempting to promote and profit from economic growth while maintaining their monopolies on political power by co-opting the nation's economic elites. Widening our perspective in this way could permit a more holistic understanding of the present, one that acknowledges its debt not just to the colonial period but also to the Republican regime in Vietnam's south. And it would allow us to be more attentive to the ways future evolutions will represent return as much as renovation, đổi lại as much as đổi mới.

Notes

1 This question also deserves to be asked about the State of Vietnam/Republic of Vietnam between 1949 and 1975 and its place in the development of the nation's political economy.
2 Bền is an example of the complexity of ethnic labeling. As a "Minh Hương" [follower of the Ming dynasty] Chinese on his father's side, he might best be thought of as a sort of "naturalized Vietnamese," and moreover one who made adept use of economic nationalism to promote his business interests.
3 ADB and Japanese funding and technical assistance were integral to the rural reform programs that redistributed land and introduced new agricultural technologies under the Second Republic. By 1974, these programs had resulted in rice surpluses for the first time in decades. They in turn formed the basis of the "đổi lại," or "reversion," that Mekong Delta farmers discerned in state policies in the 1990s.

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PART III

Social Life and Institutions

18

WELFARE, INEQUALITY, AND OPPORTUNITY IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Jonathan D. London and Jonathan Pincus

Three decades of rapid economic growth has transformed Vietnam from a poor, agrarian country devastated by war and a failed attempt at central planning to a solidly middle-income country with a diversified, outward-oriented economy. The incidence of poverty has fallen and access to education, healthcare, and basic infrastructure, especially in rural areas, is superior to many of Vietnam's Southeast Asian neighbors. Official statistics report remarkably little change in income inequality, although there are reasons to be skeptical about these claims. There is no reliable information on the distribution of wealth, but some sporadic evidence of concentration of land holdings. Despite broad-based gains, economic vulnerability remains a fact of life for millions of Vietnamese people, especially those working in agriculture or the informal economy, and particularly as the social protection system still favors public-sector and salaried workers.

This chapter advances three claims. First, by 2020 Vietnam had seen improvements in well-being owing, most proximately, to the expansion of new opportunities to earn wages, salaries, and profits that has attended Vietnam's market transition. Second, improvements in welfare owe crucially to the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV's) sustained political commitment to promoting well-being, reflected in its mix of redistributive fiscal policies and efforts to expand the scope and accessibility of essential services. As will be observed, however, features of Vietnam's party-state's fiscal and social policies and their effects have at times worked to limit the pace, scope, and sustainability of gains in well-being. Third, accelerating improvements to well-being in coming decades can be achieved through two sets of policies that Vietnam's political elite have thus far resisted: i) positive discrimination in employment, especially in the public sector, to spread access to economic opportunities more widely and ii) allowing more scope for labor to organize and demand better wages and improvements in working conditions. Although the government moved quickly to increase social assistance at the peak of the coronavirus lockdown in 2020, the pandemic revealed that the existing system – based on residence and traditional categories of households – is in need of updating to accord with Vietnam's increasingly mobile wage labor force.

Welfare, inequality, and measurement

Welfare (or well-being) refers to the satisfaction of basic human needs and protection from poverty and deprivation in the face of adversity. A more expansive understanding of well-being refers to human flourishing, understood as the continuous expansion of capabilities and

273

autonomy (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). Vietnam's achievement in increasing living standards for the vast majority of its citizens is impressive, in terms of its scale, scope, and speed. In the 1980s Vietnam was one of the poorest countries in the world. Although reliable figures on national output were not collected or published, informed observers estimated per capita income in 1982 at about USD 160, far less than the average in the region and among the 20 lowest in the world at that time (Kimura, 1986). Rice production per capita was still below pre–World War II levels (Pingali and Vo Tong Xuan, 1992). Reconstruction and development after three decades of war and devastation was an immense challenge that became even more difficult in and after 1978, when Vietnam, after deposing Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime, became embroiled in a protracted conflict. Military conflict with China and a US trade embargo followed. The leadership's commitment to a strategy prioritizing heavy industry in a poor, agrarian country and its decision to impose collective agriculture on the newly integrated south aggravated what was already a dire economic situation.

Economic reform took place incrementally in the 1980s and consisted of five components that together constituted a transition from central planning to the market: i) gradual decollectivization of agriculture production, ii) decentralization of financial control to state-owned enterprises, iii) acceptance of household and private businesses, iv) relaxation of central control over international trade, and, v) monetary reform. These building blocks were in place by early 1989, although the components were refined and expanded over the following decade. Domestic product increased over the next three decades at an average annual rate of 7 percent despite pronounced slowdowns during and after the East Asia Financial Crisis (1998) and Global Financial Crisis (2008). Real income per person increased four-fold over the same period. Rapid growth in agricultural output and the expansion of wage-earning opportunities outside of agriculture, especially in manufacturing and construction, supported growth of household incomes (Rama, this volume).

Economic growth sustained over such a long period transformed living standards. The first large-scale expenditure survey carried out in 1992 concluded that more than half of households were living in extreme poverty. Using the current definition of subsisting on less than $1.90 per day (in constant 2011 dollars in purchasing power parity terms), less than 2 percent of the population was living in extreme poverty in the most recent survey (VHLSS 2018). Growth was broad-based, across all sectors and provinces. Job creation was most rapid in manufacturing, averaging 6 percent per year over 30 years and accelerating after 2013, but formal-sector employment also rose quickly in services. Extreme deprivation in Vietnam is increasingly confined to remote rural locations, often in the uplands, and heavily concentrated among ethnic minority groups (McElwee, this volume).

Even at the more realistic international poverty line for a middle-income country of $5.50, the headcount poverty rate was just 7 percent in 2018, compared to 19 percent in Indonesia and 22 percent in the Philippines, despite higher per capita incomes in these countries.[1] In the space of one generation, Vietnam has transformed itself from near-universal poverty to a country in which most people, if not well-off, have enough money to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, healthcare, and education. There is also evidence of increasing prosperity. Motorbike registrations rose from 1.2 to 58 million between 1990 and 2018 (Hansen, Chapter 33 of this volume). Per capita electricity and petrol use, cellphone registrations and ownership of consumer durables like televisions, refrigerators and personal computers also point to higher levels of disposable income. Spending on housing and essential services have also increased (Phan and Coxhead, Chapter 19; Tran Chapter 20).

Only recently a nation of small producers, Vietnam has increasingly become a nation of wage earners. As Figure 18.1 shows, by 1991 only 11 percent of the labor force was classified as

employees. By 2019 this figure had risen to 46%, while share of the labor force classified as own account or family worker fell from 49% to 38% (GSO 2020). Increasingly, well-being depends on the level of real wages and working conditions, yet our information on these trends is limited. Government time series data on hourly wages shows an increase of 4.5 percent per annum from 2011 to 2019, which is in line with productivity growth. However, we lack information on earnings, hours and benefits for specific occupations, disaggregated by sex and location. In the informal sector, waged employment is frequently under substandard conditions with few protections, subjecting vulnerable workers (including migrants, children, and other vulnerable groups) to all manner of risks (Roelen et al., 2010).

The stability in measured inequality has contributed to Vietnam's success in reducing the incidence of poverty at a relatively low level of national income. The Gini coefficient, a generalized measure of economic inequality, has hardly changed since 1992. The official figures are heartening, but difficult to square with evidence of the formation of an elite class that controls substantial amounts of wealth. Luxury apartment blocks, gated communities, and designer boutiques, and even Bentley and Maserati dealerships, have sprung up to cater to the wealthy, who also spend liberally on international travel and overseas education. At the other end of the distribution, the statutory minimum wage ranged between $132 and $190 per month, which works out to between $4.40 and $6.30 per day, not enough to sustain a household of four people above the extreme poverty line.[2]

Vietnam's poverty and inequality statistics are based on the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS), a nationally representative consumption and expenditure survey carried out every two years. Like all surveys modeled on the World Bank's Living Standard Measurement Survey (LSMS) methodology, the survey assumes that people live in nuclear family households and earn their living locally. Sampling is carried out from lists of official residents in each location, and residents who are not present at the time of the survey are dropped and replaced. Household membership is based on the standard "cooking pot" definition; that is, the borders of the household are determined by physical presence and pooling of resources. All of this excludes migrants from the survey, both entire households that are not officially resident or
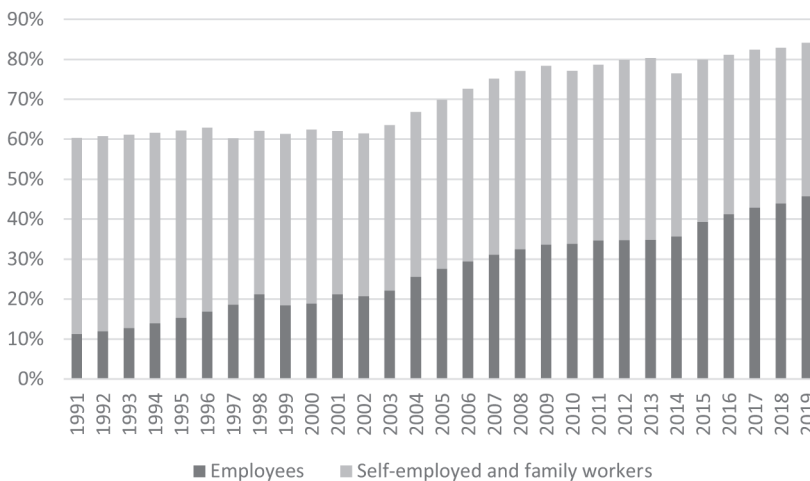
Figure 18.1   Share of wage earners, 1991–2019

Source: GSO

are absent – and therefore drop out of the sampling frame – and individual migrants (Pincus and Sender, 2008). According to the 2015 National Internal Migration Survey, domestic migrants make up 14 percent of the population, and are on average poorer than non-migrants (General Statistics Office, 2016). Added to this significant group are people who drop out of the survey for other reasons, for example non-migrants who live in temporary or substandard housing and institutional settings. The trend decline in the coverage of VHLSS consumption relative to consumption in the national accounts indicates that the survey has become less representative over time (Nguyen Thang and Pincus, 2021). Inclusion of migrants and wealthier households would result in a more realistic assessment of inequality trends. As Harms and Labbé (Chapter 22) point out in this volume, migration has positive welfare effects as workers move from low to higher productivity activities. But excluding them from official surveys lowers average inequality and poverty indicators, especially in urban areas.

Economic growth, industrialization, and urbanization are associated with rising inequality everywhere, and middle-income countries show more diversity in inequality outcomes than either poor or rich countries (Palma, 2018, 1138; Rehbein, 2011; Rigg, 2015). Vietnam began its economic reforms after decades of war, a failed attempt to impose central planning in the newly liberated south and an under an international embargo that severely limited trade and access to international finance. Inequality was minimal because a large majority of Vietnamese people lived in absolute poverty. The absence of a landed oligarchy or established merchant classes, and a relatively small urban population, meant that the benefits of economic growth during the early reform period were widely distributed. The CPV's commitment to rural development limited the extent to which urban-rural disparities widened. Universal rural electrification was achieved by 2015, even before Thailand and Indonesia. Still, when the government organized its first household surveys in 1992, *measured* inequality was on a par with Indonesia and Bangladesh, if lower than Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

We should be careful not to read too much into this because international comparisons of inequality statistics are fraught with complications. Methodologies and coverage vary markedly from country to country (Szekely and Hilgert, 2000). Non-response is generally highest among the well-off, who are both loathe to reveal their spending habits to government officials (for obvious reasons) or to spend hours competing detailed inventories of daily expenses. Moreover, these surveys typically underestimate consumption among high-income households because they omit important categories of spending like overseas travel and tuition fees and expenses for children studying overseas. Undercounting of the richest and poorest, even if these groups make up a small percentage of the population, is decisive because the national income share of the middle deciles shows remarkable consistency cross-nationally and over time, the group that Palma refers to as the "administrative classes" (Palma, 2019).

Just about everywhere, even in highly unequal societies, the administrative classes, or the population in the fifth to ninth income deciles, account for between 50 and 58 percent of national income. The real action is at the extremes, reflected in shares of income controlled by the top 1 to 5 percent and the bottom 40 percent of the population. But these are precisely the people most likely to drop out of consumption surveys. Cross-national comparisons of economic inequality should come with a warning that not too much attention should be paid to small or even moderate differences among countries. The quality of these statistics certainly does not justify the importance that many economists and policy makers attach to small movements in inequality measures.

In comparison to other middle-income countries, Vietnam's most recent Palma ratio of 1.5 places the country near the median but the below the average of the 103 countries that reported data to the World Bank for the period 2015 to 2018 (Figure 18.2). East and Southeast

Asian countries fall in the moderate inequality group, recording higher levels of inequality than wealthy countries with advanced welfare states, and less inequality than Latin America and Southern Africa. By this measure, the level of inequality in Vietnam is lower than other countries in the region, including China, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. Because of varying quality and inconsistency of the data from these countries, we should not attach too much importance to fine differences.

More interesting than the precise level of inequality reflected in official statistics are the explanations for the relative stability of inequality measures in Vietnam – that is, aside from undercounting of the rich and their incomes. If we take the official statistics (from the World Bank and General Statistical Office [GSO]) at face value, the big losers in income distribution over the past three decades are the bottom 10 percent, whose income share has fallen by about one-fourth since the early 1990s (from 3.3 to 2.5 percent of national income). The second decile has fared better but also lost groups relative to better-off households: their share fell by seven percent. This group consists of people living in remote areas, dependent on traditional agriculture and other low-productivity occupations, but also casual wage workers in agriculture and other low-productivity jobs, often migrants, in all parts of the country. The biggest winners in terms of income share are in the lower-middle segment (the middle 20 to 60 percent), which have benefited from the rapid growth of labor-intensive manufacturing jobs. The share of wage and salary workers in total employment more than doubled (from 19 to 49 percent, 1992 to 2019), while the corresponding figure for women tripled (from 13 to 38 percent). The share of employment in industry for both men and women rose by 160 percent. The growth of formal wage and salary employment in industry, combined with the recorded failure of the top earners to increase their share of national income (at least according to official statistics) explains the stability of inequality measures despite the declining share of the bottom 20 percent.
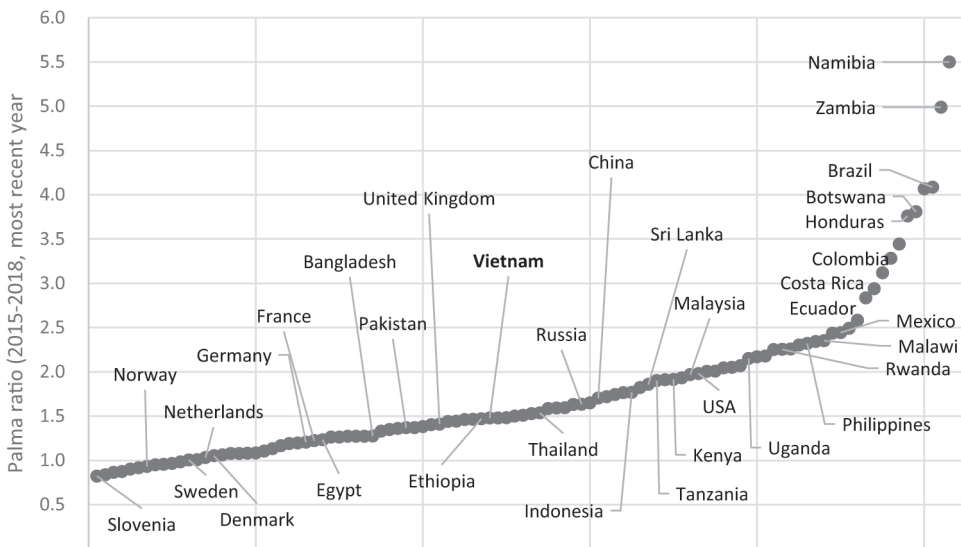
Figure 18.2   Vietnam's Palma ratio in comparative perspective

Source: World Bank data

Multidimensional measures of well-being and poverty

Multi-dimensional poverty indicators gained traction around the turn of the millennium in reaction to what many perceived to be an over-reliance on income-based measurements of welfare (Sen, 1999). They were given further impetus by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which gave equal status to education, health and environmental sustainability alongside income-based poverty. Like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the successor to the MDGs, the components of multidimensional welfare measures have multiplied over time to address new concerns ranging from social protection and housing to the rule of law and social integration (Fleurbaey and Blanchet, 2013). Whether the proliferation of indicators has added precision or confusion to our understanding of poverty is open to debate: many forms of deprivation correlate closely with income poverty, while others entail an extension of traditional notions of poverty into the of domain political, civil and cultural rights. The interpretation of multidimensional poverty indices raises issues that do not adhere to traditional poverty indicators, and the relationship between multidimensional indices and the underlying theory of well-being is not immediately apparent (Atkinson, 2003).

Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with income-based indicators of well-being have prompted many countries to introduce multidimensional poverty indices, including Vietnam. Until 2015, Vietnam's official poverty indicators were based on a poverty line set based on the cost of a basket of food yielding 2,100 Kcal/person/day plus an increment for essential non-food spending. The Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) used this poverty line as a cut-off point to compile commune-level lists of poor households eligible for government support. However, there was a growing sense that monetary measures of poverty were missing out on important forms of deprivation, especially those related to access to basic infrastructure and social services. At the end of 2015 the government issued a new decree, backed by the National Assembly, calling for the incorporation of multidimensional poverty indicators into poverty monitoring and the identification of household eligible for participation in government social assistance programs.

Vietnam's approach for the 2016 to 2020 period identified five dimensions of poverty each represented by two indicators. Households that did not reach the cut-off point for three indicators were classified as poor in addition to households that do not meet the income poverty threshold. From 2021, the index featured employment as a sixth dimension, bringing the number of indicators to 12.[3] Multidimensional headcount poverty fell from 18 to 11 percent of the population from 2012 to 2016, rates that were nearly identical to the traditional expenditure poverty rate. However, important differences were recorded at the regional level. The 2016 multidimensional poverty rate in the Mekong Delta was 19 percent, far higher than the expenditure poverty rate of 6 percent. Conversely, the headcount rate for multidimension poverty was lower than expenditure poverty in the Northern Mountains and Midlands region (19 and 28 percent, respectively). These differences between monetary and multidimensional indicators reflect the success of government programs in health and basic infrastructure (UNDP, 2018). Although income per capita in Vietnam is significantly below that in Indonesia and the Philippines, outperforms both countries in access to clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, and electricity. Vietnam's health indicators, including life expectancy at birth, and maternal and child mortality, are also superior. Mean years of schooling received by people 25 years and older is higher in Vietnam than in Indonesia and Thailand (UNDP, 2020).

Among ethnic groups, the greatest differences between income-based and multidimensional poverty in 2016 were recorded by the H'mong group. Both the average number of indicators for which households did not achieve the minimum standard, and the intensity of deprivation,

were highest for this group. Female literacy and girls' participation in secondary education have increased but remain comparatively low, while the incidence of child marriage is high (UNDP, 2018, 60)

Targeted programs, social assistance, and social protection

Alongside education and health policy, Vietnam has designed and implemented an array of policies that seek to improve living standards, incomes, and social protection. These include national targeted programs, tailored to address need in poor regions and communes, means-tested social assistance programs targeting poor and vulnerable households, and social protection policies, including health insurance and social protection. Features of these programs are discussed in turn.

National targeted programs

Sustained and rapid economic growth is the main driver of improvements to well-being in Vietnam. As average incomes have risen in cities and the rural lowlands, the government has come to see extreme poverty as a problem that is increasingly concentrated in the uplands and among ethnic minority populations. In comparison to the Kinh majority, these groups have so far been unable to take advantage of growth in waged employment, they are less likely to migrate, and they are more reliant on agriculture despite residing in low (agricultural) productivity regions. They also face increasing competition for land – especially forested land – from development projects (especially hydroelectric power), reforestation projects, and in-migration of farm households in search of relatively cheap land.

Government social assistance programs are mainly implemented through national targeted programs and related programs of sectoral ministries. In an attempt to improve coordination, 16 national targeted programs implemented in the 2011–2015 period were consolidated into two programs for 2016–2020: the National Targeted Program for Sustainable Poverty Reduction managed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLISA); and the National Targeted Program for New Rural Development under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD). The latter program received substantial support from the Korean government and is partly modeled on Korea's New Village Movement (*Saemaul Undong*), which financed rural infrastructure development in the 1970s and 1980s. The Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA) manages Program 135, which forms part of the poverty reduction targeted program and supports poverty reduction in villages inhabited by minority groups.

The National Targeted Program for Sustainable Poverty Reduction, including Program 135, delivers central and provincial resources to poor districts and communes for infrastructure, livelihood diversification, and training to facilitate labor export through official channels. A separate component under MARD focuses on agricultural production and formulating new models for income generation. More than USD 4 billion was allocated to the program for the 2016–2020 plan period (Thanh Giang, 2020). The New Rural Development targeted program also supports rural development master planning, infrastructure development, education, social protection, health facilities, and village community centers. This is an exceptionally ambitious program, implemented nationwide with the goal of achieving benchmarked progress across 19 criteria, including roads, irrigation, electricity, education, healthcare, social security, and minimum income levels. The government budgeted USD 35 billion for five years, and according to MARD 58 percent of communes fulfilled all criteria by the end of 2020. A new target of 80 percent has been set for 2025.
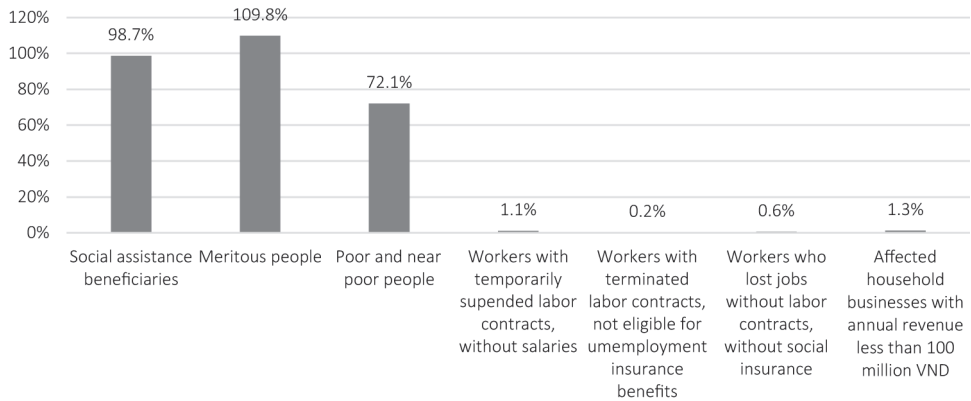
Figure 18.3 Proportion of targeted groups receiving government social protection

Source: UN Assessment of the Social and Economic Impact of COVID-19 in Viet Nam, September 2020

Despite the intention to improve coordination by consolidating the national targeted pro-grams, duplication and poor coordination remain a problem, as the various components and subcomponents offer similar instruments such as road building, upgrading irrigation systems, low-interest loans, and vocational training. It is not unusual for different agencies to offer similar projects in one location, although eligibility requirements, administrative procedures and time-tables differ. The top-down nature of the programs mean that some of the support offered is not appropriate for the locations selected (Lam, 2020)

Nevertheless, the national targeted programs have had a positive impact on living condi-tions in rural areas, narrowing the gap between remote, upland locations and the lowlands. With 90 percent of spending devoted to infrastructure, the programs represent a major effort to improve access to markets, build schools and healthcare centers, deliver clean water and electric-ity, and increase agricultural productivity through investments in irrigation and drainage (World Bank, 2020).

Social assistance

Vietnam does not have a well-developed system of social assistance for people living in or vulnerable to poverty. A system of payments was established for those who had distinguished themselves during the French and American wars, especially disabled veterans and survivors of war heroes. It was not until 2004 that social assistance programs for other categories of poor and vulnerable people were first established. Small cash payments were provided to people over 80 years of age who did not receive social insurance payments, people with severe dis-abilities, people living with HIV/AIDS and orphaned or abandoned children and children living in single-parent households. Education grants were given to children in ethnic minority households under the national targeted programs. A subsidy for electricity payments was estab-lished for poor households. The value of assistance is low, starting at VND 270,000, or about USD 12 per month in 2016. In the context of the 2020 pandemic, social protection support reflected this broader trend. Figure 18.3 depicts the distribution of beneficiaries of targeted social assistance.

Social protection and health insurance

Social protection is important to well-being as it helps people manage common economic risks associated with illness, disability, unemployment, and loss of income in old age. Expenditures on healthcare and support for elderly and disabled family members are important factors in household living standards and are often causes of households falling into poverty. Therefore, efforts to reduce poverty and inequality are closely linked to the development of pension, health insurance, and unemployment insurance systems. Social protection programs, if well managed, can generate savings for long-term investment in slow-gestating projects, like infrastructure development.

The government approved a master plan for social insurance reform in 2018 with the stated goal of achieving universal coverage through a combination of contributory and non-contributory programs. As noted in the previous section, all citizens 80 years and older receive a small social pension if they are not participants in the social insurance program. This group made up 26.5 percent of people 65 year of age and older in 2015. Another 7 percent received pensions from the social insurance system in the same year. Access to pensions is closely associated with post-transfer income: 70 percent of the richest decile have access to pensions, compared to 25 percent in the poorest decile (Kidd et al., 2019).

Social insurance consists of a compulsory program for formal employees with at least a one-month contract and voluntary insurance. Compulsory social insurance covers sickness, maternity, unemployment, labor accidents and occupational diseases, retirement, and survivor allowances. Voluntary insurance is limited to retirement and survivor allowances. The challenge facing Vietnam, like most middle-income countries, is to increase participation in social insurance programs among workers in the "informal" or non-enumerated sector, who make up three-fourths of the labor force. Few of these workers pay into social insurance programs and will not have contributory pensions later in life. Yet demographic change is occurring rapidly in Vietnam, implying a sharp increase the number of elderly people per working adult. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), there were 6.6 working age adults (ages 15 to 59) for each person over 60 in 2015, but by 2055 this ratio will fall to 2.1 (Tsuruga et al., 2019).

Health insurance was introduced for public-sector workers in 1992 to cover additional costs of healthcare resulting from the introduction of user fees, which in Vietnam is paradoxically known and translated into English "socialization" (more on this later). A voluntary scheme was introduced for the general public in 1998, and provincial and sectoral pools were consolidated into a single national mechanism under Vietnam Social Security (VSS) in 2002. The Health Care Fund for the Poor was established in the same year to provide insurance for poor households or directly cover medical expenses, but by 2005 poor households were required to enroll in compulsory health insurance funded by provincial government. The Law on Education, Health Care and Protection of Children, enacted in 2005, mandated free healthcare for children under six years of age. The Health Insurance Law of 2008 covered the poor and children under six under the compulsory insurance scheme with premiums covered by the central government. The law was revised in 2014 introduce household enrollment, eliminate the voluntary insurance category, and implement other changes in pricing and administration. Vietnam has made rapid progress toward universal health insurance coverage largely through the mechanism of provided government subsidies for participation of specific categories of people, for example the poor and near poor, the elderly, young children, and students (Figure 18.3).

Coverage is generous, including expensive drugs and eliminating co-payments for the poor and near poor, people with disabilities, the elderly, and veterans (Quynh Ngoc Le et al., 2020).

Participation in the health insurance scheme has been shown to reduce inpatient and outpatient expenditure for all groups, especially the poor (Thanh et al., 2019). However, out-of-pocket expenditures remain high because of the perceived low quality of care at commune health centers and district hospitals, which increases demand for paid provision at central hospitals. Obtaining care at a central hospital without of referral also incurs higher co-payments. Reliance on user fees to finance health facilities also incentivizes prescribing expensive medicines and procedures, which drives up out-of-pocket costs (Lee et al., 2019). The expansion of health insurance coverage has reduced private health spending as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) from its peak in 2012, but out-of-pocket costs in Vietnam are still higher than average for middle income countries (Figures 18.4 and 18.5).

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of Vietnam's social protection system. The government capacity to mobilize quickly to counter emerging risks was fully in evidence, reflecting both previous experience with infectious diseases – for example, the sever acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) episode in 2003 and the continuing threat of avian influenza – and well-established routines to manage disasters like typhoons and floods. Vietnam had its National Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia in place by January 20, 2020, three days before the first cases were detected. A mass communications campaign was launched on January 30, and on February 2 a 14-day quarantine was imposed on Vietnamese citizens returning from China, schools were closed, and large public meetings and gatherings banned. Quarantine requirements were gradually extended to all returning citizens and foreigners holding official visas. Domestic supplies of essential goods were secured and distributed, including a reliable, locally produced test kit and personal protective equipment. Localities with high potential risk of community transmission were put under lockdown. These timely actions and others succeeded in contained the spread of the virus and made it possible for schools to reopen in April and for most social-distancing measures to be relaxed by May.
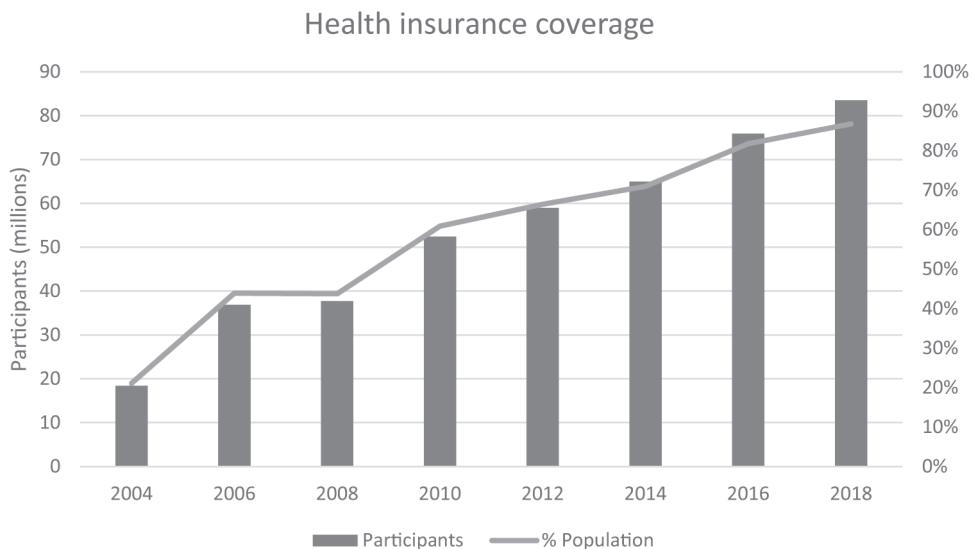
Figure 18.4 Health insurance coverage in Vietnam, 2004–2018

Source: Ministry of Health Statistical Yearbook, 2018

General health expenditure as % GDP
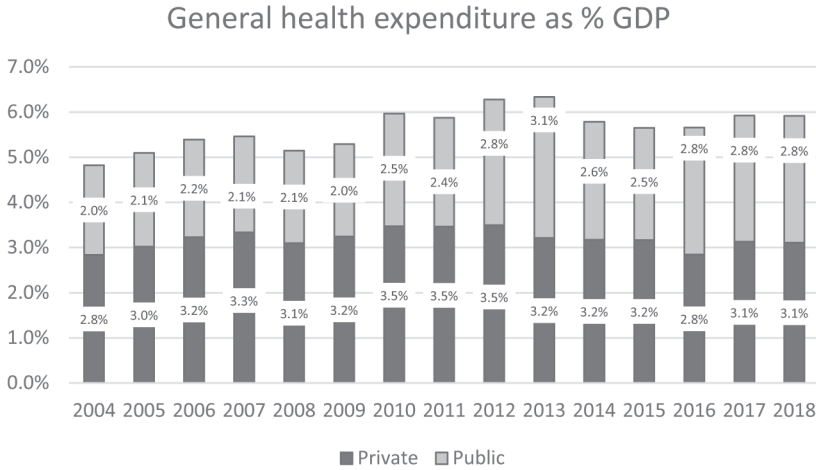
Figure 18.5   General health expenditure as a share of GPD

Source: WHO

As social distancing measure took a toll on economic activity, the government instituted a VND 62 trillion ($2.6 billion) social protection package to transfer VND 1 million ($43) per month to households vulnerable to falling into poverty and workers who had lost jobs between April and June 2020. The government also provided low-interest credit to firms to enable them to continue to pay workers' salaries during the lockdown period. However, because distribution of the payments was based on existing lists of the poor and vulnerable, significant groups of poor affected by the pandemic were not eligible for support, or had to overcome substantial bureaucratic obstacles to obtain it. Even some targeted groups experienced problems in accessing support because of complicated rules and procedures, especially for returning migrants, significantly increasing the cost for those requesting assistance. This lack of a social safety net caused many families with children to struggle to make ends meet due to loss of or reduced income forcing many to spend and borrow more. The situation was worse in drought and saltwater intrusion communities in the Mekong Delta and illustrates the link between social protection and weakened resilience to crises (UNDP and UN Women, 2020).

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the gaps in the existing social protection system, which was designed to cater to two groups of workers: public-sector employees, who receive pensions, health insurance, and other benefits, and self-employed farmers, trades people, and small business owners. The latter can sign up for voluntary pension and health insurance programs and other risks, such as natural disasters, are addressed through local mechanisms. Private waged employment was never as low as the official figure of 11 percent in 1991, but public provision largely excluded private employees group with the exception of a minority of workers in the formal sector. High mandatory contribution rates – 20.5 percent of salary for employments, 10 percent for employees – has discouraged formalization among small enterprises. The social protection system has lost relevance as the share of waged employees in the labor force, and the geographical mobility of wage workers, has increased. Reforms are needed to shift from the traditional reliance on residence and the assumption of long-term public employment to a system based on individual entitlements that can be carried with the employee from job to job regardless of the employer and location.

Access to essential services, social mobility, and opportunity

The CPV's commitment to promoting access to essential services is reflected in its support for increasing public expenditure on public health and education and for redistributive fiscal policies that have supported services provision in poor regions. Together within increasing household expenditure, spending on health and education and grown rapidly, which has brought improvements in the accessibility of services while also raising questions about the efficiency and equity of spending patterns. In this volume, chapters on Education (Phan and Coxhead, Chapter 19) and health (Tran, Chapter 20) address these issues in greater detail. Next, patterns of public spending and health and education services provision are considered in brief. This, is followed by a discussion of the complex system of co-payments that that have developed in the health and education sectors that the concerns it has raised around access to services. The overall picture that emerges is that Vietnam has seen major improvements in the accessibility and quality of services, but concerns persist about the efficiency of public spending priorities and the implications of the commercialization of services for accessibility, mobility, and opportunity.

Public spending and the expansion of services

The CPV's commitment to improving the country's health and education systems has resulted in robust support for health and education policies and have contributed to major improvements in the accessibility and quality of services at all levels of services provision. Expenditures on public health have increased from 1 percent of a very small GDP in 1990, to 1.7 percent in 2000, to 2.7 percent in 2018, funding a steady increase in the number of doctors, nurses, midwifes, hospitals, and community health centers. This commitment has produced results. By 2018, 91 percent of commune health centers had a doctor and 95 percent had a midwife. Ninety-seven percent of children less than a year of age were fully immunized (eight vaccines), and 98 percent of births were attended by a skilled technician. Under-five child mortality fell from 30 per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 20 in 2019, and maternal mortality from 58 in 2000 to 43 in 2017. Antiretroviral therapy was available to 70 percent of people living with HIV/AIDS in 2019.

Vietnam public spending on education as a share of GDP is among the highest in Southeast Asia. Specifically, public spending on education increased from 1 percent of GDP in 1990 to 5.8 percent in 2019. The number of schools and teachers doubled between 1990 and 2006, with particularly rapid growth of secondary schools after 1998. Lower secondary and preschool enrollments grew quickly during this period and gender parity has been achieved. Dang and Glewwe (2018) traced growth in enrollments, noting the achievement of near-universal primary and lower-secondary enrolment (by state accounts), a doubling and tripling of net lower- and upper-secondary enrolment between 1992 and 2006, respectively, and a big nearly-three-year increase in average years of schooling between 1992 and 2014. Within the Kinh majority population, girls lead boys in enrolment, and academic achievement. While mired in controversy, Vietnam's Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) results in language, math, and science that rival Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, including the United States and the UK. Phan and Coxhead (this volume) provide additional analysis of Vietnam's performance on education. This generally optimistic picture is qualified by weaknesses in both the education and health systems. Beyond questions concerning the efficiency of spending (addressed in Chapters 19 and 20) are concerns about the equitability of the co-payment system on which access to health and education services have come to depend.

"Societalization"

Over the last three decades Vietnam has seen the development of a complex system of co-payments for health and education services that combines public, household, and private sources of finance. The roots of these arrangements can be traced to the late 1980s, when Vietnam experienced an acute fiscal crisis that eviscerated already limited sources of public finance for health and education services. By 1990s, both the health and education systems descended into crisis. In the health system, hospitals and commune health centers struggled to maintain their functions. In the education system, many localities saw declines of 30 and even 40 percent in lower and upper-secondary enrollment, delays in staff pay lasting months.

Facing these circumstances, and as part of efforts to both prevent the collapse of the health and education systems and support health and education workers' livelihoods, Vietnam's government promoted a raft of policies designed to mobilize non-state sources of finance for health and education services under the banner of socialization or societalization (*xã hội hóa*).[4] Over the course of the 1990s, Vietnam saw explosive growth in out-of-pocket payments for health and education services to a point where, by 1997, out of pocket payments exceeded 70 percent of total health spending and 50 percent of total education (London, 2009). Currently, up to 50 percent of health spending and 40 percent education spending is out of pocket, carrying obvious implications for the poor, who face barriers to accessing services on the account of their lower incomes (Tran this volume, Bui, 2013; London, 2020).

Social mobility and equality of opportunity

Vietnam's success in raising the average level of well-being and reducing extreme levels of deprivation is widely recognized. Poverty reduction has been broad-based, across all regions, rural and urban areas and all ethnic groups. However, progress has not been achieved at equal rates, reflecting differential access to employment, earnings, educational opportunities and finance. National and regional averages conceal churning within broad categories of individuals, for example, people living in rural areas, young people, women, and ethnic minorities. Nguyen and Nguyen, analyzing panel data from the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey, report that 37 percent of households in the bottom expenditure quintile in 2010 ascended into the second quintile or higher in 2014, but over the same period 38 percent of households in the richest 20 percent descended at least one quintile (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2020). Ascents and descents were most closely associated with education, especially upper secondary and university qualifications, age (over 60), location, and ethnicity.

As noted previously, the rise of wage employment outside of agriculture has changed the structure of employment and opportunity, especially among low-income groups. The country has been transformed in a few decades from a nation of small farmers and self-employed tradespeople in traditional services to a one of wage workers. The transformation is most apparent in the middle of the income distribution from the second to the fourth quintiles. For example, the share of households relying on self-employment in agriculture in the third quintile by expenditure fell from 56 to 31 percent from 2002 to 2018, while non-agricultural wage employment increased from 19 to 44 percent (Table 18.1). Social mobility has those become more closely associated with access to stable, formal-sector jobs. Worker lacking educational qualifications, those living in remote areas and older people are disadvantaged in obtaining better non-agricultural jobs that pay higher wages and include some benefits, for example, sick leave and access to social protection programs.

Table 18.1 Employment by income quintile

	Wage employment				Self-employment			
	Non-farm		Farm		Non-farm		Farm	
	2002	*2018*	*2002*	*2018*	*2002*	*2018*	*2002*	*2018*
Total	22%	42%	6%	4%	19%	19%	53%	35%
Poorest 20%	5%	14%	7%	7%	6%	6%	82%	73%
Second 20%	12%	35%	8%	7%	12%	16%	67%	42%
Third 20%	19%	44%	8%	4%	17%	20%	56%	31%
Fourth 20%	28%	56%	5%	2%	25%	24%	42%	18%
Richest 20%	44%	55%	2%	1%	31%	29%	23%	15%

Source: Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey, 2002, 2018

Table 18.2 Highest educational qualification by expenditure group

	Poorest		Second 20%		Third 20%		Fourth 20%		Richest		Total	
	2006	*2018*	*2006*	*2018*	*2006*	*2018*	*2006*	*2018*	*2006*	*2018*	*2006*	*2018*
Never attended school	18%	15%	10%	6%	7%	3%	5%	2%	3%	1%	8%	5%
No credential	20%	19%	17%	16%	16%	12%	13%	8%	8%	5%	15%	12%
Primary	27%	25%	27%	25%	26%	22%	24%	17%	17%	13%	24%	20%
Lower secondary	27%	29%	33%	31%	32%	31%	29%	28%	23%	23%	29%	28%
Upper secondary	7%	9%	9%	14%	12%	17%	15%	21%	19%	20%	13%	16%
College or university	0%	1%	1%	4%	1%	8%	4%	14%	14%	25%	4%	11%
Postgraduate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%	2%	0%	1%

Source: VHLSS, 2006, 2018

Progress toward universalization of upper secondary education has slowed over the past decade. According to VHLSS, the gross enrolment rate was 77 percent in 2018, marginally higher than 2008.[5] School fees and other contributions increase as students progress from primary to secondary school: for example, in 2018 average annual expenditure for a primary school student was 3 million VND, versus 8 million VND for each upper secondary school student. Education spending per student rises with income at all levels, but only 12 percent of upper secondary students were exempted from school fees in 2018 according to VHLSS. Completion of upper secondary education or higher is closely associated with economic status, and upper income groups have achieved more rapid progress. As average education levels rise, households and individuals lacking qualifications are confined to the lowest income groups. Only 10 percent of individuals in the lowest income quintile had upper secondary qualifications or higher in 2018, compared to 47 percent in the richest quintile (Table 18.2). However, the gender gap in access to secondary and tertiary education is narrowing (Table 18.3).

The income of parents and education levels of parents and children are the main determinants of intergenerational mobility. Children's wages correlate closely with both mothers' and fathers' wages and with children's highest level of educational attainment. Children whose parents completed lower secondary school qualification were more likely to work in a skilled occupation then children whose parents did not (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2020, 21). These relationships hold for men and women and all regions of the country, although members of ethnic

Table 18.3 Highest educational qualification by sex

| | Women | | Men | |
	2006	2018	2006	2018
Never attended school	11%	7%	5%	3%
No credential	17%	14%	12%	9%
Primary	24%	20%	24%	20%
Lower secondary	27%	27%	30%	29%
Upper secondary	12%	15%	14%	17%
College or university	4%	11%	5%	11%
Postgraduate	0%	0%	0%	1%

Source: VHLSS, 2006, 2018

Table 18.4 Sectoral classification of employment by gender

| | Women | | Men | |
	2008	2018	2008	2018
Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries	53%	41%	49%	37%
Mining	0%	0%	1%	1%
Manufacturing	15%	19%	12%	15%
Construction and utilities	1%	2%	11%	14%
Trade	14%	15%	8%	11%
Transport and communications	1%	1%	6%	6%
Finance	1%	1%	0%	1%
Other services	6%	8%	3%	5%
Public service and defense	1%	2%	4%	4%
Education, culture, sport	2%	7%	1%	3%
Others	6%	3%	4%	2%

Source: VHLSS 2018, 2008

minority groups are less likely to move into a skilled occupation even after accounting for the education levels of both parents and children.

The gender division of labor is another factor constraining social mobility (Table 18.4). Although Vietnam's female labor force participation rate is the highest in the region, women are still largely excluded from certain groups of preferred jobs, including skilled occupations in manufacturing, mining, construction, and transport. Senior management positions are largely held by men. Women have increased their share of public-sector employment from 46 percent in 2009 to 48 percent in 2016, but the share of female ministers remained among the lowest in Southeast Asia at 4 percent (OECD, 2019, 28).

Remittances are another factor influencing the economic prospects of families and individuals. According to the World Bank, Vietnam received $ 17 billion in overseas remittances in 2019, or 6 percent of GDP, and inward flows have grown at an average rate of 11.5 percent per year in real terms since 2000.[6] To this must be added remittances from internal migration of an unknown amount, but on the order of $5 billion based on information from the 2015 National Migration Survey (General Statistics Office, 2016). Remittances increase household income and expenditure and do not have a large impact on labor days worked, except among

young people under 22 years of age. This suggests that remittances enables young people to stay in training and school longer (Cuong and Linh, 2018). Of course whether remittances are used for investment, education or consumption depends on the distribution of power within the household and the ultimate control of resources (Small, 2018).

Prospects

Rapid economic growth, sustained over three decades, has transformed the lives of a vast majority of Vietnamese citizens. Although the benefits of growth have not been equally distributed, income growth has improved living standards of all groups, and access to essential services and infrastructure is nearly universal. The government has made a concerted effort to close gaps in well-being, notably through targeted programs for rural and remote areas and ethnic minority groups. That these programs have not always realized their ambitions points to both the difficulties involved and the need to rethink underlying strategies.

The legacy of central planning, when setting and securing consumption levels was the responsibility of cooperatives in rural areas and state-owned enterprises in the cities and towns, is still evident in Vietnams social assistance and protection programs. Eligibility for social assistance is still determined at the lowest level of government based on lists of the poor and otherwise deserving recipients of support. The rural-urban dichotomy also lives on in the social protection system, with coverage and costs under mandatory programs in the formal private and government sectors higher than under voluntary programs intended for informal workers, mainly in agriculture. Programs have evolved gradually in response to changes in organization of labor, specifically the decline in public enterprise employment and decollectivization of agriculture. Increases in worker and employers' contributions have reduced pressure on government budgets but constitute a disincentive to formalization, with negative implications for coverage and for the long-term solvency of Vietnam Social Insurance. Large-scale migration has undermined the rationale for localism from the perspective of ensuring well-being, but the government is wary of severing the households' links to the countryside and accelerating the mass movement of people to the city.

Prospects for moving from the current exclusionary system derived from pre-reform social structures to an inclusive system based on national citizenship hinge on the government's capacity to expand coverage of social protection programs, increase welfare spending and create new vehicles for private savings. The next decade offers a window of opportunity as age dependency ratios remain at historically low levels and the rapid pace of job creation, if sustained, reduces informality and generates additional government revenue. Replicating the incremental expansion of health insurance in other spheres, in particular, pensions and support for people with disabilities, is a viable way forward. For example, the state old-age pension could be lowered in stages from 80 to 65 years of age, while equalizing the retirement age for men and women at 65. The government could also subsidize voluntary pensions for certain categories of workers, especially people with disabilities or those living in remote or otherwise disadvantaged regions.

Access to better jobs is the primary means through which gaps in well-being will be reduced between men and women and among ethnic groups. There is now considerable evidence that regulations banning discrimination in hiring and preferential hiring for disadvantaged categories of workers increases access to employment over the long term (Miller, 2017). Affirmative action in public-sector hiring and contracting would promote inclusion, improve the well-being of disadvantaged make government more representative. Promoting more women to public-sector leadership positions is long overdue. Only 11 members of the 180-strong 13th Party Central

Committee elected in January 2021 are women, and there is only one woman among the 18 members of the newly elected Politburo.

Notes

1 The figure for the Philippines refers to 2015. These data are from the World Bank's World Development Indicators.
2 Figures provided are in current 2020 US dollars.
3 The original five dimensions are education, health, housing, clean water and sanitation, and access to information.
4 In Vietnam xã hội hóa is almost always translated as "socialization," but the term "societalization" is more apt, as it more actually reflects the overarching aim: shift costs from the state onto society and to channel resources (particularly form households) into the health and education systems, as well as other sectors.
5 Enrolment rates are derived from VHLSS because the Ministry of Education does not publish official school enrolment and completion rates. However, VHLSS is not the ideal instrument to measure participation in education because its sample is not representative at the provincial level and, as noted previously, it does not include many migrants and other people who do not have official registration.
6 www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data

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19

EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM

A Glass Half Full?

Diep Phan and Ian Coxhead

Economic growth is typically accompanied by investments in education, and Vietnam, after a late start, has sustained a high rate of per capita growth throughout the *Doi Moi* era. Moreover the gains from growth have been relatively evenly distributed, in contrast with the experience of many other countries. What is Vietnam's record of improvement in education? Have educational gains also been broadly distributed? Is educational development laying a solid foundation for future growth? In this chapter we address these questions. We begin with a review of Vietnam's schooling achievements relative to other Asian developing countries, and then trace within-country trends in the 21st century. We find that Vietnam has made tremendous progress on many aggregate indicators of educational development, especially in attaining near-universal enrollments in primary and lower-secondary school (Grades 1–9). However, upper secondary (i.e. high school) completion rates remain low, and gains in enrollment and grade completion at high school level have been quite unevenly distributed. Ethnic minority groups in particular, and poorer subpopulations in general, lag far behind the Kinh majority and wealthy households; the latter account for a large share of overall educational progress. Turning to trends in the supply and demand for education, we find that the combination of two unique (or at least unusual) features of Vietnam's recent development – its very rapid increase in exposure to global markets, together with the dogged persistence of some key institutional features of the former command economy – contribute in significant ways to continuing inequality of opportunity, both in the labor market and, by extension, in the educational system.

Since space is a constraint, we limit our scope mainly to primary and secondary schooling levels. Trends in Vietnam's tertiary education sector, and the issues facing higher education, are sufficiently distinct as to merit separate treatment. We also limit our discussion mainly to recent years (the time of writing was early 2019). London (2011) provides an excellent and comprehensive survey of education in Vietnam from earliest times to the mid-*Doi Moi* period.

Basic educational indicators in an international context

In this section we assess some fundamental indicators of Vietnam's educational achievements in international context, with reference to comparable regional economies. Due to space constraint, we do not provide all data figures and tables; please refer to the full working paper for complete and updated data.[1]

Average years of schooling

Figure 19.1 shows average years of schooling for population age 15 and over, one of the most common measures of educational achievement used in international comparisons. It shows that in 1960, like many other low-income countries in Asia at the time, Vietnam had low average years of schooling. But it then fared comparably with Malaysia and the Philippines, and was relatively better than Indonesia, Thailand, and China, as well as better than Laos and Cambodia. From 1960 to 2010, Vietnam experienced a significant increase in educational achievement, yet it did not maintain its head start: it fell slightly behind Indonesia, Thailand, and China and fell considerably behind Malaysia and the Philippines. In the same interval from 1960 to 2010, average schooling years in the East Asian regional leaders (Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea) leaped significantly ahead, further widening their gap over Vietnam. As these data are for the entire population, they reflect the effects of investments made over a long period, which favors the East Asian economies since they have been wealthier for longer. On the other hand, Vietnam's population is relatively young, meaning that a big increase in educational investments over the past two decades should have had a correspondingly large effect on overall schooling attainment rates, as we observe.

Cross-country comparisons in a given year might be misleading because they ignore differences in economic conditions. In our working paper version, we re-base the data to take these differences into account.[2] Using data on gross national income per capita (measured in constant international prices of 2005), Vietnam's level of living was comparable in 1990 to that of Indonesia in 1970, Thailand in 1965, China in 1985, the Philippines in 1960, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea in 1955.

We then chart the progress in educational attainment taking these years as country-specific base periods. In this comparison Vietnam's trajectory seems more positive, increasing at roughly the same rate as South Korea, slightly slower than China, and perceptibly faster than most other regional neighbors. These data suggest that Vietnam's educational investments (by the years of schooling measure, at least) began earlier and reflect greater effort than in most neighboring countries at similar points in their own development.

Achievement at the primary level

In primary educational attainment, Vietnam has made tangible achievements. Its primary net enrollment rate, completion rate, and survival rate to grade 5 are high and comparable to those
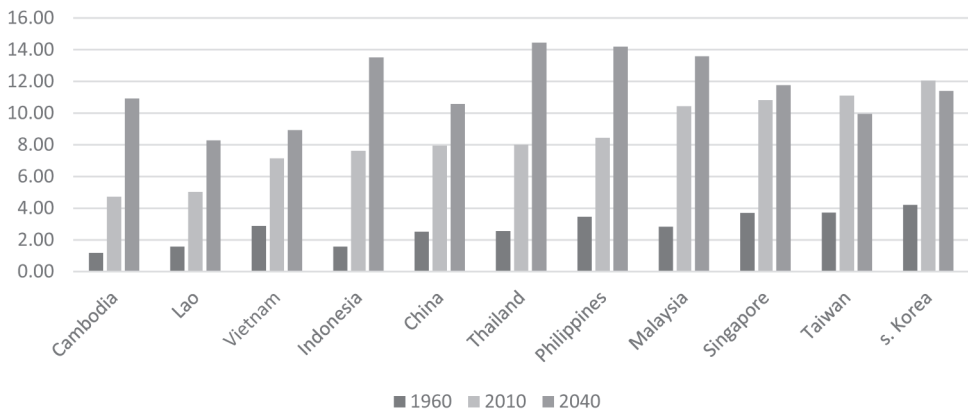
Figure 19.1 Average years of schooling for population aged 15+

Table 19.1 Primary school indicators

	Primary net enrollment rate (%)	Persistence to last grade of primary (% of cohort)	Primary completion rate (% of relevant age group)	Pupil– teacher ratio in primary schools
Thailand	89.6	85.0	90.6	16.9
Indonesia	90.9	81.9	98.8	14.0
Cambodia	92.8	73.5	92.4	42.5
Laos	94.7	79.6	100.4	23.0
Philippines	95.7	75.8	101.3	30.3
S. Korea	96.8	99.5	98.9	16.6
Vietnam	98.0	96.0	104.8	19.6
Malaysia	98.9	92.0	100.6	11.6
Singapore	99.9	98.7	99.8	17.4

Source: World Bank Development Indicators

Note: Most data are for 2016, although some are for the most recent year available.

Table 19.2 Lower and upper secondary school indicators for selected Asian countries

Transition rate to lower secondary school		Adolescents out of school (%)		Transition rate to upper secondary school		Youth out of school (%)	
China	72	Philippines	19	China	53	Philippines	56
Laos	79	Vietnam	19	Thailand	71	Laos	53
Cambodia	88	Thailand	17	Cambodia	76	Vietnam	46
Indonesia	91	Indonesia	11	Indonesia	77	Indonesia	34
Thailand	92	Cambodia	10	Vietnam	85	Thailand	22
Philippines	94	Laos	5	Laos	93	Cambodia	22
Vietnam	99	China	4	Philippines	96	China	19

Source: education-inequalities.org (accessed 8/6/2018) Year of data: Vietnam 2013, Thailand 2013, China 2014, Philippines 2013, Cambodia 2014, Lao's 2011, Indonesia 2012

of more advanced countries in the region (see Table 19.1). The primary school pupil–teacher ratio, a proximate indicator of education quality, is also on par with neighboring countries, even much richer ones.

Achievement at the secondary level

Secondary school enrollment rates for Vietnam are unfortunately not shown in international data sets. But data do exist on the transition rate from primary to lower secondary and from lower to upper secondary and on percentages of adolescents and youth who are out of school, as shown in Table 19.2. Vietnam's average school transition rates compare favorably with those of neighboring countries. But the prevalence of youths and adolescents out of school is relatively high. This indicates high dropout rates, particularly in upper-secondary education, which contributes to Vietnam's low overall years of schooling, as seen in Figure 19.1. Why teenagers drop out of high school at such high rates is clearly an important empirical and policy question; we return to it later in this chapter.

Achievement at the tertiary level

In contrast to its success in primary education and, to a lesser extent, in secondary education, Vietnam's record in tertiary education is much less impressive. The size of tertiary education in Vietnam has grown rapidly, as evidenced by the rapid increase in the number of institutions (from 178 in 2000 to 235 in 2017) and in the number of enrolled students (from 899,500 in 2000 to 1,695,900 in 2017).[3] But even this rapid growth does not seem sufficient in helping Vietnam improve its tertiary educational achievement. Data from Figure 19.2 show that in 2010 Vietnam's tertiary enrollment rate was higher than in Cambodia, about the same as Indonesia, China, and Laos, and considerably lower than Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan. Projections in the Barro–Lee database suggest that by the year 2040, Vietnam's tertiary educational achievement will remain among the lowest in the region. Furthermore, Vietnam ranks low in various measures of quality. It ranks at the bottom in World University Ranking 2014–2015.[4] Its score on university and industry research collaboration is 41.7, lower than most of its neighbors (Philippines 42.1, Thailand 48.6, Indonesia 55.3, Malaysia 69.6, China 56.5).[5] The country's number of scientific articles per trillion dollars of income (measured at purchasing power parity, or PPP) is also low at 4.9 compared to China 8.6, Malaysia 21.1, although this is higher than Thailand 4.6, the Philippines 1.1, and Indonesia 0.5.[6]

It is widely acknowledged that the higher education system in Vietnam has been slow to advance. The number of places offered has expanded rapidly, but the system overall has failed to produce quality research and skilled graduates that can meet the demand of industrialization, modernization, international integration, and the learning needs of the people (Tran, 2013; World Bank, 2008; MoET, 2009 cited in Do and Ho, 2015). Unemployment rates among graduates of universities and professional schools are high, and these two groups account for one-fourth of all unemployment, a proportion well over double their share in the labor force (GSO, 2015, Tables 1.4 and 4.2). Vallely and Wilkinson (2008) argued that the principal explanation for the state of Vietnam's higher education is not financial. Rather, they claim, the villain is governance: lack of merit-based selection, lack of autonomy and accountability for universities, lack of academic freedom for intellectuals, and relative isolation from the international academic community and standards.
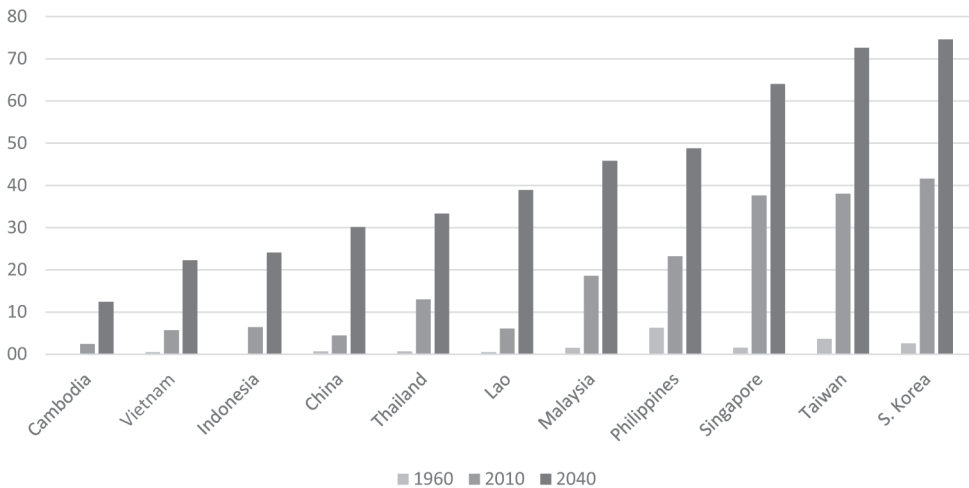
Figure 19.2 Percentage of population aged 15+ with tertiary education

Rankings in international tests and surveys: The results of the 2015 Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) test, a global survey of the achievements of 15-year-olds in core school subjects, provided a compelling "headline" indicator of Vietnam's educational progress. In a group of 72 countries, Vietnamese students were ranked 12th worldwide, in the middle of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country rankings and well ahead of many wealthier countries including Australia, the UK, and the United States.[7] The director of the PISA program attributed Vietnam's "stunning" performance to a menu of positive factors:

> Committed leadership, a focused curriculum, and investment in teachers. . . . Very few other countries have shown a similar level of forward thinking and determination. . . . The education ministry . . . is eager to learn from the best-performing countries . . . and is ready to commit the financial support that is needed.[8]

The results from STEP (Skills Toward Workforce Preparation), another internationally comparable measure of workforce preparation, also indicate high levels of learning among Vietnamese adolescents.[9] Similarly, results from the longitudinal Young Lives Survey of four developing countries including Vietnam confirm that Vietnamese grade 10 students perform well in critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and that they are not simply rote learners.[10]

If these results and the international tests themselves are representative measures of scholastic achievement, then Vietnam – in notable contrast to its regional neighbors, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia – appears to have leapfrogged middle-income levels of scholastic attainment. It has risen in just one generation from one of the world's poorest countries with commensurately low educational attainment to one whose adolescents' grasp of math and science now matches that of their German and Canadian peers and could soon catch up with the world-beating students of Singapore, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.[11] Many observers attribute this success to early emphasis on and heavy investment in education by the Vietnamese government, while others cite a more centralized educational system and cultural differences in student characteristics and parental involvement.[12]

However, many scholars and officials have expressed skepticism over Vietnam's surprising performance in these international tests. One major concern is the extent to which students taking the test are truly representative of their cohort. One recent study points out that the demographic characteristics of Vietnam's PISA test-takers do not match those of their cohort: they are wealthier, more urban, and more likely to be already in 10th grade than the general population of 15-year-old children (Glewwe et al., 2017). This suggests some selection bias (or worse) in the test-taking sample. One issue with the sample is well known: a large number of Vietnamese children exit the school system at or just prior to completion of lower secondary school, which is right before the age at which the PISA and Young Lives surveys survey samples are drawn. This early selection out of school can bias test scores toward better-performing teenagers. Similarly, the STEP data are clearly not representative of Vietnam as a whole since they survey only children in the two largest cities. Urban populations are wealthier and better-prepared for school, and rural-urban migrants, who account for a substantial fraction of the present-day population of those cities, are positively selected from the population at large on skills and ability (Coxhead et al., 2015).

Senior officials in Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training have expressed other forms of skepticism about the value and meaning of the PISA result, ascribing their country's success in large part to "the tradition of learning to pass exams."[13] Other reports, as well as narrative accounts from those familiar with the Vietnamese classroom experience, echo or even magnify these concerns (Baulch et al., 2012). Institutions and methods of tertiary education – arguably,

that part of the Vietnamese education system most visible to outsiders – have been assessed in far more negative terms (Chirot and Wilkinson, 2009; World Bank, 2008).

Summing up, we find in international comparisons that Vietnam has made some remarkable achievements; however, these are uneven, and in some cases their interpretation and even the data themselves are contested. Moreover, simple comparisons across countries are invariably confounded by heterogeneity of development experience. For a different and more detailed perspective, we now turn to measures of progress over time, and among heterogeneous groups within Vietnam itself.

Educational development in the *Doi Moi* era

In this section we consider Vietnam's educational development in the *Doi Moi* era. A great deal has changed in that time, but one item of contextual information is absolutely essential to keep in mind: throughout the liberalization experience, Vietnam's economy has grown remarkably rapidly. Since 1991, per capita income growth has been consistently high with an average rate of 5.5%. As a result, real per capita income (in purchasing power parity terms) has doubled twice in the space of just more than one generation: from $1,453 in 1990 to $3,000 in 2003, and then to $6,170 in 2017.[14] Vietnam's real GDP per capita growth rate since 1990 thus matches that of the so-called "East Asian Miracle" economies during 1965–1990 (World Bank, 1993). This growth has facilitated spending on the supply of schools, teachers, and education services. It has also been an important factor in demand growth from households.

Improvement in school enrollment

Improvement in the net enrollment rate (NER) – the number of children who are in school as a percentage of their population cohort – is a fundamental indicator of schooling development. For Vietnam, we borrow data from Table 1 in Dang and Glewwee, 2018 (also shown in the working paper online), which summarizes NER data from the early years of *Doi Moi* to the most recent available year.

Enrollments at all school levels increased rapidly in the 1990s, in line with rapid economic progress from an initially very low level of per capita income with widespread severe poverty. By 2004, primary and lower secondary NERs easily exceeded 90%, and the upper-secondary NER had crossed 70%. In the subsequent decade, the primary NER continued to converge toward full enrollment, and the lower-secondary NER toward 95%. However, the upper secondary enrollment rate fluctuated in the low 70s with no apparent trend.

The increases of the 1990s are remarkable but not unexpected. Perhaps the most striking feature of these data series is the leveling-off of the secondary enrollment rate after about 2004. From 1992–1993 to 2004 secondary enrollments increased at an average rate of more than 3.6 percentage points per year – but this growth accounts for almost the whole of the increase in secondary enrollments during *Doi Moi*. That growth in the secondary NER should have slowed so dramatically since 2004 is all the more surprising given that the growth of per capita incomes during the second *Doi Moi* decade, 2004–2014, was no less than in the first. If income growth was insufficient to drive the remaining one-third of adolescents into high school, what was the countervailing force? We will explore this question in a later section.

The inflection point at around 2004 may also be significant in terms of macroeconomic forces operating on educational incentives. As we will see in the next section, it coincides with a leveling-off and subsequent decline in rates of return to schooling, as measured by earnings per additional year of education estimated from a Mincer model.[15] It also coincides with a massive

boom in foreign investment directed mainly at industries employing blue-collar workers, for whom lower-secondary education is generally a sufficient qualification.

Unequal access to education

Equality in access to education matters for both equity and efficiency. That some groups in any population have fewer opportunities is both an injustice and, potentially, a policy problem. Furthermore, rapidly growing economies must be able to draw from talent pools that are increasingly deep and wide in order to supply their labor markets with the most skilled, productive, and creative workers. Thus inequality in educational opportunities has implications for individual earnings as well as aggregate economic growth.

"Access" and "inequality" in the context of education are hard concepts to define and harder to measure, beyond the clearest cases of explicit discrimination. Most international datasets rely on measures of differences in educational outcomes. According to these, Vietnam has successfully minimized, reduced or even eliminated some dimensions of educational inequality that remain major hurdles elsewhere in the developing is world. Gender inequality is one of these: girls in Vietnam have slightly higher educational achievement, as female average years of schooling (for population aged 20 to 24) is 10.71 years and that of male is 10.36 years.[16] Over the period 1997–2013, the rural-urban gap in average years of schooling was almost eliminated in Vietnam, as the gap in average years of schooling between urban and rural population aged 20 to 24 decreased from 2.19 years to 0.35 year.[17] That is not to say, of course, that quality differences do not persist, but such measures are much more difficult to obtain.[18]

In two other comparisons, however, divergence in measures of access seem to have persisted or even become worse. Vietnam's ethnic minority populations (excluding the ethnic Chinese or Hoa group) lag far behind the Kinh majority on every available indicator; large differences persist even after taking account of differences in incomes, location, and other covariates. Vietnam's ethnic minority population remains relatively isolated and farm-based, and as such is only peripherally engaged in the city-centered, trade-driven industrial boom that has largely defined Vietnam's dramatic growth since about 2000. Moreover, ethnic minority status is now almost coincident with poverty (Kozel, 2014). The distinct development path for ethnic minority groups – they have, in effect, been left behind by the globalization-growth machine – is associated with lower school retention rates and lower grade progression. Ethnic minority children, on average, start school at a later age, repeat grades more often, and quit school earlier than their Kinh counterparts. School attendance rates are substantially lower among ethnic minorities than their Kinh counterparts (Figure 19.3). Minority children aged 6 to 18 are many times more likely to be at work, whether alongside or instead of school attendance (Dang, 2012). Even before 15, the legal working age, minority children drop out of school at much higher rates than others. The ethnic gap in primary net enrollment rates has narrowed somewhat over time, but those in secondary and tertiary enrollments have persisted or even increased (Dang and Glewwe, 2018). Nationally, ethnic minority enrollment rates in tertiary education are very low (Vu et al., 2010). And in spite of gender parity in the aggregate data, schooling attainment within some minority groups is considerably more gendered than in the population as a whole, with girls faring more poorly than boys even on basic measures such as years of education (Rew, 2008).

Coxhead et al. (2022) present data highlighting differential experiences in additions to schooling attainment during Vietnam's economic boom. In the early 2000s, children from poorer households began to disappear from the school system in large numbers by age 13. They were also much later, on average, in completing each schooling level relative to children from upper income households. By 2016, upper-income children not only routinely competedgGrade 12,
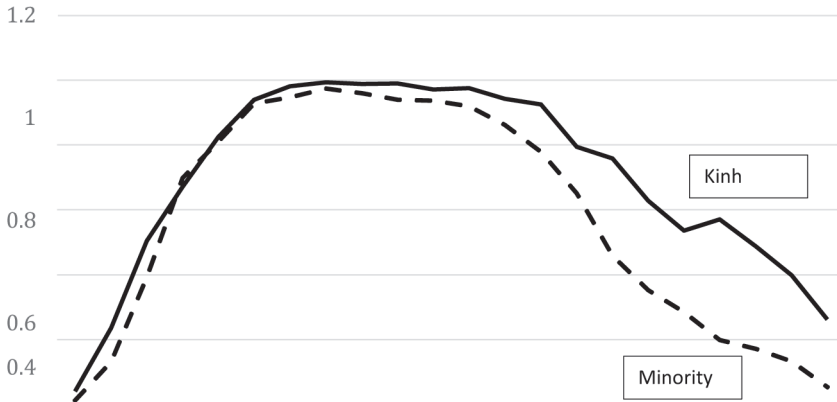
Figure 19.3 Average school attendance rates by age and ethnicity, year 2014

Source: Authors' calculation using VHLSS 2014 data

but also went on in large numbers to college education. Among children of poorer households, the progression was far weaker. In 2016, less than 40% of 18-year old children from the lowest income quintile were still in education, and numbers going on to tertiary remained low. The biggest drop in enrolments, by far, occurred at age 15, for most children the final year of lower secondary school. What applies to lower-quintile children applies equally to children of minority ethnic groups as well, since as we have seen the two groups overlap.

Finally, regional differences in educational achievements have always been marked, and Figure 19.4 shows they are also persistent in spite of broad-based economic growth and a huge increase in population mobility (Coxhead et al., 2015). The Red River Delta region has always had the highest educational attainment, even surpassing the southeast, which is, on average, the wealthiest region in the country. The Mekong River Delta (MRD), although poorer than the southeast and Red River Delta, is by no means the poorest region. Yet educational achievement in the MRD region is no better than in the North Mountains or the Central Highlands, Vietnam's two poorest and most remote regions. In addition, the MRD has by far the country's highest out- of-school rate for children; among 5-year-olds, this rate is 14.7% as opposed to 6.9% in the Central Highlands (the next highest) and 4.7% in the Northern Mountains region (UNICEF and Ministry of Education and Training, 2016). These differences suggest that factors other than income differences likely contribute to regional disparities in educational attainment. In particular, the economic dynamism of the MRD and its proximity to the booming greater Ho Chi Minh City region suggests that school dropout rates are likely to have labor market drivers in addition to other factors, exerting differential incentives on families and children to invest in education beyond a basic level. We explore these issues further later in the chapter.

In short, our survey of Vietnam's educational development has noted some commendable achievements, but has also uncovered some puzzling and worrying trends. The most troubling issue is the high dropout rate at the end of lower secondary school or early upper secondary school. We also call attention to the fact that most of the gain in educational indicators, in particular school enrollment rates, was made in the earlier period 1990–2004. Since 2004, little progress has been made. In addition, there is strong evidence of unequal progress: children of
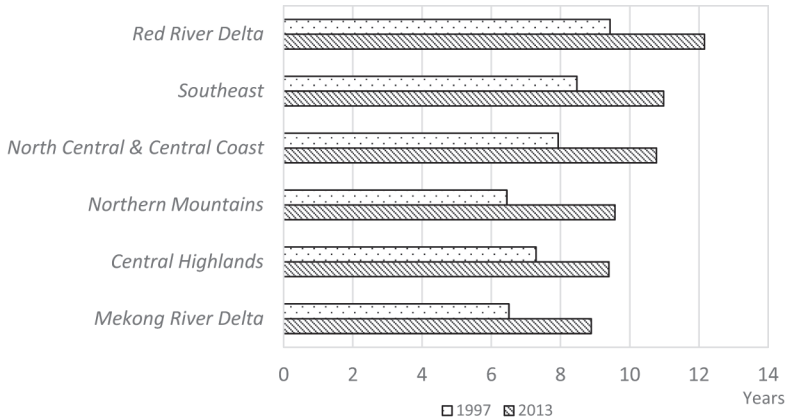
Figure 19.4   Average years of schooling by region

Source: www.education-inequalities.org

ethnic minorities and of households in the bottom income quintile drop out at a much higher rate and hence have much lower educational attainment. In the next section, we will examine some potential explanations for these trends.

"Miracle" growth and the market for education and skills

In this section we evaluate aspects of the interaction between education and high economic growth, and the rapid globalization and structural change that accompany it. Our analysis focuses mainly on unique or special features of the Vietnamese economy and its institutions, and helps resolve some of the puzzles identified in the previous section. It also points to policy challenges for the future.

Investment in education

Coincident with the onset of its economic growth miracle, Vietnam made an extraordinarily rapid recorded passage through the demographic transition.[19] The early *Doi Moi* era coincided with the peak of population growth, which reached its maximum in 1988 at 2.5% per year. The cohort of children that entered school in the 1990s was the largest in the country's history. Thus the 1990s saw very rapid expansion in demand for educational infrastructure and services. Excess demand for school places was pervasive, but was most severely felt in major cities due to large- scale rural-urban migration occurring at the same time. In response, urban schools in particular were compelled to apply rationing of various kinds: multiple school sessions per day, reduced schooling hours, and restrictions on enrollment based on the applicant's *hộ khẩu* (residence certificate). Problems of overcrowding and excess demand remain acute in the fastest-growing urban areas. In Ho Chi Minh City, a 2016 survey found that 61% of public primary schools were running two sessions per day, and even then, could not accommodate demand. All levels of public schooling in that city are characterized by class sizes as much as two times MOET guidelines. Migrant children have a very high out-of-school rate, and substitution of

private for public education is also very high despite well-known concerns about the quality and cost of the former (UNICEF and Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee, 2017).

Rapid growth in demand called for a commensurate boom in public spending on education, and in general, Vietnam's government has been responsive. Public spending on education was 5.6% of GDP in 2013, higher than neighboring countries (for example, Malaysia 4.83% in 2016, Thailand 4.12% in 2013, and Indonesia 3.5% in 2015). As a share of total government expenditure it is relatively high at 18.5%. Vietnam also has some of the highest government expenditures per student at primary and tertiary levels, measured as a percentage of per capita income.

As these comparative figures suggest, the Vietnamese government has plowed a substantial share of the gains from growth back into education. During the late *Doi Moi* era educational spending has risen much faster than overall economic growth. In real (inflation-adjusted) terms, education spending grew 14% per year from 2001 to 2012. This robust commitment to the expansion of public education certainly helped alleviate some – though by no means all – of the supply constraints on the school system. Although hard evidence is scarce, the persistence of overcrowding and other indicators of excess demand in urban schools is without doubt a reflection both of higher school and teacher quality in those areas, as well as a rate of migration to cities that is much higher than anticipated in official planning for school supply growth at subnational scale.

Overcrowding reflects sluggish supply response, but also big changes in education demand. Vietnam's rapid growth has seen average real per capita income rise more than fourfold since 2000 – and by an order of magnitude since the beginning of *Doi Moi*. Schooling is a merit good and so as family incomes rise, there are typically additional household resources to finance education and additional pressures on students to stay longer and work harder at their education. Edmonds and Pavcnik (2005) documented just such a trend among rural Mekong Delta households, during the early years of liberalization when price reforms substantially improved incomes from rice farming. Of course, Vietnam's urban populations have not merely grown faster than the national average, they have also exhibited higher average incomes and faster income growth. This disproportionate rate of increase undoubtedly accounts for much of the excess demand for urban school services.

Additional evidence of income effects is found in households' willingness to pay for additional schooling outside the public system. Education, especially pre-school and post-primary, is quite expensive in Vietnam. Although public education is theoretically accessible by all for a nominal price through grade 9 and for a relatively modest fee thereafter, the actual costs include significant spending on private, after-school classes, often taught by the teachers themselves. These are almost universally regarded as essential if students are to do well in their regular classes and especially to ensure good performance on the standardized tests required to enter upper secondary school and tertiary institutions. The World Bank notes that in Vietnam, private spending on preschool and post-primary schooling is both very high relative to public spending, but also high relative to many other countries, and identifies financial barriers as a source of unequal access between wealthy and poor households. Private spending on upper-secondary schooling is equal to more than 50% of public spending at the same level, and the per-student amount is equal to about 20% of annual per capita income (World Bank, 2017). These increases in private spending undoubtedly account for some of the inequality in educational growth documented in an earlier section. Household spending directly influences the rate of progression from ninth to tenth grade. Only about 40% of Vietnamese children who take the national tenth-grade entrance examination get a passing score. That a disproportionate share of those children come from the upper quintiles is unsurprising given their families' far greater capacity to pay for additional tutoring and other 'incidental' costs of education. While part of the household-level rise in schooling demand is due to income effects, another part is attributable to calculations of

returns to schooling investments. The latter depend on signals (or perceived signals) from the labor market. Accordingly, we now turn to trends in the market for skills.

Overall returns to schooling

Even if the supply of good-quality education is abundant, students need incentives to enroll in school and to complete each grade. In this subsection, we examine how the market for skills, which influences educational investment decisions, has changed in Vietnam during *Doi Moi*. We find, among other things, that changes in returns to schooling can help explain the slow-down in educational progress since 2004.

Prior to *Doi Moi*, formal employment was almost entirely in the public sector, and wages were determined by policy rather than by worker ability or productivity. Under this command– economy "wage grid" system, returns to education were uniformly close to zero (Gallup, 2002; Phan and Coxhead, 2013).[20] The economic reforms of the 1990s were accompanied by steady increases in returns to schooling, with the average return to an additional year rising, by most estimates, to a range of 6% to 10% by the mid-2000s. This range is broadly similar, though certainly not higher, to that in many similar countries. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) find a global developing-country average rate of return of 9%. Patrinos et al. (2018) present a table showing average returns for Vietnam at 6% (primary), 2% to 5% (secondary) and 18% to 21% (tertiary). The former two numbers are low relative to comparable countries such as Indonesia (primary 13%, secondary 10%) and the Philippines (10% and 6%), though the tertiary figure is roughly the same.

Looking more deeply, one big puzzle in the Vietnamese data on returns to schooling is that more than 100% of the rise in returns occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s, well before the boom in foreign investment that accompanied Vietnam's January 2007 accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). It is perhaps no coincidence that the timing of the leveling-out and subsequent decline in returns to education coincides with the decline in enrollment growth rates at upper secondary level, noted earlier. Since 2008, continuing economic policy reforms and a huge expansion of capital investment from abroad have seemingly failed to produce a corresponding increase in returns to schooling. Quantitative analyses by Doan and Gibson (2012) and Phan and Coxhead (2013) show only modest to zero increase during the 2000s, and Doan et al. (2018) confirm that returns actually declined after 2008 (see Figure 19.5). According to their estimates the return to an additional year of schooling was only 5.7% in 2014, significantly

Estimated average returns to schooling, Vietnam, 1998-2014
(percent per year)
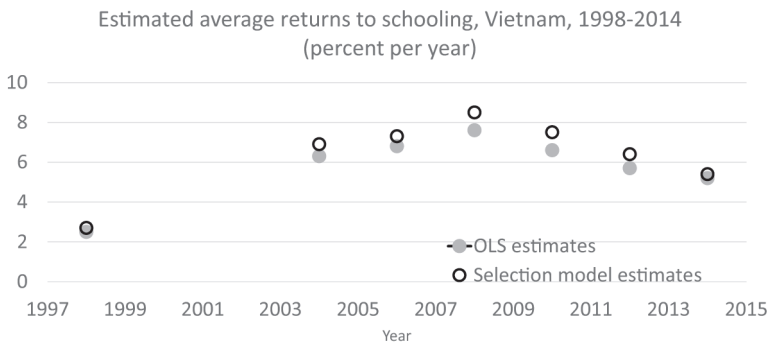
Figure 19.5   Estimated average returns to schooling 1998–2014 (percent per year)

Note: "OLS estimates" and "Selection model estimates" refer to alternate estimation methods. *Source:* Estimates with VHLSS data reported in Doan et al. (2018)

down from the peak of almost 11% in 2008, and substantially lower than the world averages discussed previously. The returns to upper secondary schooling in particular are very low, with wage offers to grade 12 graduates barely above those to job-seekers with grade 9 credentials.

Doan et al. (2018) attribute the decline in returns to schooling, in particular to college education, to the rising supply of college graduates. However, other comparable countries have experienced rapid growth in educational attainment without appreciable declines in returns. China, whose experience Vietnam's closely resembles in many ways, is one. From 1995 to 2014, college admissions in China increased more than sevenfold (Li et al., 2017), yet returns to college education increased (Gao and Smyth, 2015). The most likely explanation is the complementarity of skills and capital: growth of the skilled labor force raises the returns to (certain types of) capital investments, and the resulting increase in capital stocks in turn drives up skilled labor productivity – and so raises returns to educational investments.[21] In the course of such a process the structure of overall production increasingly favors growth of industries that are intensive in the use of capital and skills, a progression that is very evident in China's recent history but much less so in Vietnam. In Vietnam, tertiary enrollments increased from 1998 to 2013 by a factor of 2.5 (Doan et al., 2018): a substantial gain, but far smaller than was seen in China. So if returns to schooling have fallen in Vietnam in spite of a huge investment boom, then either the type of investment was not conducive to complementarities and/or its impacts were diminished or even overwhelmed by other factors efficient signaling and responses in the market for skills. In our view both the nature and pace of Vietnam's globalization, and the persistence of command- economy policies in capital markets, have been contributing factors.

Returns to schooling in state vs. private-sector employment

One potential explanation for lackluster growth in demand for skills can be found in policies governing Vietnam's state sector and capital markets. Estimates of average returns to schooling in Vietnam disguise wide variation across industries by ownership and type. Phan and Coxhead (2013) found that by the mid-2000s, average returns per additional schooling year were higher (at 5% to 8.7%) for workers in state-owned firms, most notably firms producing non-traded goods and services where international competition was effectively non-existent. Among privately owned firms, however, returns were far lower, at only 2.7% to 4.1% per additional schooling year. They attribute the difference to continuing distortions in Vietnam's capital market and the market for skills. These discrepancies have persisted into more recent years (Phan and Coxhead, 2020).

Despite liberalization and privatization efforts, the state sector (that is, public administration as well as state-owned firms) continues to dominate the Vietnamese economy, and government policies continue to strongly favor state firms at the expense of private enterprise and the overall economy. State firms receive abundant cheap credit from Vietnam's state banking system, and as in China and other well-known cases, this causes them to become excessively capital-intensive in their choice of technique relative to the economy's overall factor endowments. Moreover, and presumably because capital and skills are complementary inputs, state firms also employ more skill-intensive technologies relative to the rest of the economy. However, the growth of skilled jobs in state employment is limited because few state firms produce for the world market. Their potential for growth is thus constrained by domestic demand growth and especially by government spending, which has increased far less quickly than exports. The combination of few new jobs; high earnings per job; and additional benefits such as secure tenure, health, and retirement allowances in the public sector has produced an informal rationing system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the price of entry to a state job can be as high as one or two years of salary (confirming, in passing, that such jobs are capable of generating substantial rents).

Alongside this relic of the command economy Vietnam's private sector, which has generated the vast majority of new non-farm jobs during the transition, has faced far higher borrowing costs and more difficult access to loans from the commercial banking system. Without the means to upgrade and expand capital and technology, private firms remain low-tech, smaller, and less formal. As a result, they attract and employ mainly workers with low educational qualifications and offer much lower rewards to higher levels of educational attainment. This divergent system may help us understand contemporary patterns of variation in upper secondary school and tertiary educational attainment, as follows.

First, returns to schooling at upper-secondary and tertiary levels are contingent on expectations of state employment. For wage earners, as noted earlier, state jobs offer much higher earnings per year of education compared non-state employment. Family connections are robustly strong predictors of employment in state firms (Phan and Coxhead, 2013), so for the majority of students who lack such connections, the benefit–cost ratio of an additional year of schooling after middle school and into university is much lower. Schooling costs can be a major financial burden on families, so policy-induced segmentation of the skilled labor market raises the dropout rate among students who do not expect to have access to state jobs. This contributes to the lower overall rate of grade progression to upper secondary school, documented earlier.

Second, and as a consequence, families with connections to state employment invest much more heavily in their children's education (Coxhead and Phan, 2013). As long as the market for skills remains dichotomous, conditions in Vietnam are ideal for a deepening inequality of income and opportunity between those who have the right family connections and those who lack them.

Third, the requirement of a university degree for most skilled state jobs has sparked a race for higher education credentials, rather than for skills as such. On the positive side, diplomas are among the few tangible benefits that most students can expect from Vietnam's largely unreformed higher education system (Chirot and Wilkinson, 2010). But Vietnam's own Ministry of Education has estimated that only 30% of those receiving university degrees are adequately trained for the jobs they seek.[22]

An additional implication of this two-track market for skills is that investments in Vietnam's educational infrastructure may be less productive than the government, and the international donor community that supports it, may expect. With only a limited number of high-paying jobs for skilled workers, high school retention rates and university enrollment rates may be constrained as much by low demand as they are by lack of buildings, teachers and learning materials.

The role of globalization

Another explanation for Vietnam's weak demand for skills might come from the nature of its structural change, which in turn is shaped by globalization. Vietnam's export-oriented manufacturing sector has boomed in the past two decades, and continues to attract new capital. Moreover, each new green field investment generates many additional jobs in service industries such as construction, transport and personal services. From 2000 to 2014, the manufacturing labor force grew from 13% to 21.5% of the total labor force; over the same period, those employed in services rose from 24.8% to 32.2% (GSO, 2015, table 2.6), so the rate of new job creation was almost as fast in services as in manufacturing. These industries have two important features in common: they are mostly concentrated in just a few cities and industrial zones, and the majority of new jobs created require no more than a lower-secondary education, meaning that the expected returns to additional years at high school, measured in terms of wages or opportunities for promotion, are low. Coxhead and Shrestha (2017) find from an analysis of

provincial data that booming opportunities in the low-skill wage-labor market are the reason for many Vietnamese adolescents to attenuate schooling.

Migration is also likely to play a role in truncating schooling. In Vietnam as in most globalizing economies, most new non-farm jobs are created in cities or peri-urban areas. Since the majority of the population still lives in the countryside, migration for work is increasingly common.

According to census data, internal migration rates have approximately doubled each decade since the beginning of economic liberalization and reform in the late 1980s, from about 2% in 1989, to 4% in 1999 and over 8% in 2009 (Phan and Coxhead, 2010). Over this time farm employment has stagnated in absolute terms, and as a result has fallen sharply as a share of Vietnam's labor force. Migration destinations are highly concentrated: 63% of all interprovincial migrants in 2004–2009 moved to or within Ho Chi Minh City metropolitan area,[23] and another 20% moved to one of the other three large urban areas, Hanoi, Danang and Can Tho (*Cần Thơ*) (GSO, 2009, table 2.5). Migration rates are far higher for young people than for the population as a whole (Coxhead et al., 2015).

The reality of migration for work is that it effectively ends the possibility of continued schooling. There is a clear link between migration and labor force participation: according to the 2009 census, school attendance rates by children aged 11 to 18 are lowest among interprovincial migrants. Only 44% of interprovincial migrants aged 11 to 18 are attending school, against 64% of intradistrict migrants, 71% of interdistrict migrants, and 75% of non-migrants (GSO, 2009, fig. 2.24). These low rates have persisted in Ho Chi Minh City (UNICEF, 2017). Of course, there could be many reasons for lower school attendance by migrant children, but another study using microdata, the Urban Poverty Survey conducted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2012, found labor force participation rates (LFPRs) for migrant children that are far higher than for children who are registered city residents. For children aged 10 to 14, urban residents had a LFPR of only 2.3%, while that for migrants was found to be 14.7%. For youths aged 15 to 19, residents' LFPR was about 20%, while that for migrants was over 76% (UNDP, 2010, p. 50). Migrant LFPRs are also higher in all other age groups, but for adults aged 20 to 55, the differences are very small. The double-digit differences between migrants and urban residents are limited to children and teenagers.

In short, labor market opportunities created by export and investment booms concentrated in industrial zones exert significant pull on Vietnamese teenagers, especially those in the MRD and immediate northern hinterland of Ho Chi Minh City. Although their immediate incomes are improved, their long-term earning potential is reduced, and so is Vietnam's overall human capital investment and long-run economic growth potential. Furthermore, there is concern about income distribution. Children from poorer households or those whose parents are themselves poorly educated are more susceptible to opportunity costs and other things equal, will leave school in large numbers to pursue unskilled employment. The intergenerational effect on education, and thus on economic and social mobility, is highly persistent.

Conclusions and connections to policy

As a transitional economy, Vietnam has made great strides in raising incomes, health, and productivity. The country has made commendable achievements in primary and lower secondary school enrollments and grade progression. Although inequalities remain, basic education is widespread and seems successful at imparting literacy and basic skills to the majority of the population – evidently this has contributed to the country's ability to rapidly climb out of poverty and into middle income in the *Doi Moi* era. Much of the growth, however, has come from one- time changes due to policy reforms that removed or reduced inefficiency in

domestic markets, international trade, investment, and the allocation of labor and land. But to move through middle income is an entirely different matter, since the growth of human capital resources well beyond basic literacy is a necessary condition for the productivity increases that will contribute to most of that growth. The middle-income challenge requires, among other things, close attention to the quality and type of education and labor force training, and equally close attention to the interactions between economic growth, policies, and the market for skills.

Despite substantial gains to date, Vietnam's educational development still falls short of providing a stable base for middle-income growth. Beyond lower secondary school, whether measured by total years of education or transition to and completion of upper secondary, the country's educational attainment lags behind its neighbors. In tertiary education, its performance on enrollments alone can be considered poor – even before quality measures are considered. Early gains in educational attainment have given way to a relatively flat performance in the late *Doi Moi* era.

Some studies have attributed the dramatic dropout rate right after middle school to the (implicitly mistaken) perception that schooling has little value (Le and Nguyen, 2014). Under current policies and conditions, however, many poor children in Vietnam might be quite correct in inferring that returns to high school education are low – at least without a subsequent college degree. But at present, tertiary education is beyond the financial reach of most Vietnamese.

We have argued that current challenges are not exclusively due to lack of access to schools and teachers, though these are important problems. Factors such as globalization and distortions in capital and labor markets exert strong effects on the demand for education, through their influences on the returns to education and the availability of less skilled jobs. To address these issues, policy makers need to consider the broadest domain of policies affecting the market for skills, including trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), and industrial policies.

At first sight, the solution to the challenge of increasing human capital demand may seem most readily addressed by deploying a range of industrial policies to promote skill-intensive industries – and perhaps to discourage low-skill ones. However, a far more obvious, cheaper, and effective solution is to reduce existing distortions in the capital and labor markets that in turn generate distortions in the market for skills. Despite frequent reform plans, prospects for real progress are clearly constrained by the complex and opaque politics of the one-party state.

Continuing distortions constrain private-sector firms' capacity to create high-skilled jobs and weaken growth in overall demand for skills.

Regarding education policy, the rapidity of Vietnam's demographic transition to low fertility means that the pressure of population on educational resources that characterizes current and recent experience will diminish in the very near future. Population growth, which peaked in the late 1980s at 2.5% per year, has now collapsed to 1% per year. Future growth in school demand will come less from increase in raw numbers and more from increases in years of schooling per child and the quality of those years.

Instead, policies to increase incentives to stay in school, especially for children transitioning between lower and upper secondary schools, will be needed to counter the forces of globalization and structural change. These will be centered on improving school and teacher quality, reforming curricula, and (probably) modernizing pedagogical norms. Likewise, it is imperative that policy continues to seek effective ways to overcome inequality of opportunity, allowing children from Vietnam's less advantaged communities gain access to affordable, rewarding education.

Notes

1 The working paper version is available at https://uwmadison.app.box.com/s/l99e87k2xyuv656al850 7rtzku3mpfmg

2 This updates data using the same methodology in Phan and Coxhead (2015).

3 Data are from General Statistical Office of Vietnam, accessed in January 2019.

4 See detailed scores and ranking at www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings

5 The score is the average answer to a survey question: To what extent do business and universities collaborate on R&D? See detailed scores and ranking at http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-index-2017–2018/competitiveness-rankings/#series=EOSQ072

6 Numbers shown are normalized scores. Source: Global Innovation Index (www.globalinnovationindex.org)

7 Although Vietnam students participated in the 2018 PISA, its results were not ranked due to incompatibility issues caused by paper-based tests.

8 "Vietnam's 'stunning' rise in school standards." BBC News, 17 June 2015. www.bbc.com/news/business-33047924, last accessed 14 March 2016.

9 The STEP data for Vietnam, collected from a 2011–2012 survey of working-age individuals in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In these data, the subsample of 16- to 24-year-old respondents perform well in both literacy and numeracy by comparison with other countries, even those in the OECD (Bodewig, 2014).

10 The Young Lives school survey instrument and results are described in detail at www.younglives.org.uk/content/thinking-outside-box-do-students-vietnam-have-21st-century-skills.

11 Elsewhere, the PISA program offers these generalizations: "If you go to an Asian classroom you'll find teachers who expect every student to succeed. There's a lot of rigour, a lot of focus and coherence. . . . These countries are also very good at attracting the most talented teachers in the most challenging classrooms, so that every student has access to excellent teachers" ("Asia tops biggest global school rankings.' BBC News, 13 June 2015. www.bbc.com/news/business-32608772, last accessed 14 March 2016.).

12 www.businessinsider.com/vietnams-students-test-well-and-a-new-paper-has-figured-out-why-2016-

13 Thanh Nien News: "Vietnam deputy education minister not convinced by global test," www.thanhniennews.com/education-youth/vietnam-deputy-education-minister-not-convinced-by-   global-test-18276.html, last accessed 24 March 2016.

14 Source: WDI online.

15 The Mincer model (Mincer, 1974) posits that returns per year of schooling are an increasing function of schooling years and a quadratic (i.e., parabolic) function of job experience years. Empirical tests usually include a variety of controls for individual, community, and other features. In a regression model, the estimated coefficient of schooling years is a measure of the marginal earnings increase per additional year of schooling.

16 Data are for the year 2013 and are from www.education-inequality.org (accessed Jan 17, 2019).

17 Data are from www.education-inequality.org (accessed Jan 17, 2019).

18 UNICEF (2017) finds that on average children in rural districts around Ho Chi Minh City perform significantly less well on 10th-grade entrance exams than do city children. But this difference in levels does not by itself support any conclusion about differences in school quality.

19 Live births per woman fell from a peak of 6.5 in the 1975–1980 to under 2 from 2000 to the present, a decline that took Vietnam's fertility rate from highest in Southeast Asia to the third lowest within a single generation. The number of children aged 0 to 14 peaked in the early 1990s at about 27 million. It is now about 22 million and is projected to decline to less than 20 million by 2050 (source: UN 2017).

20 Phan and Coxhead (2013) review numerous prior studies of returns to education in Vietnam.

21 The capital-skills complementarity thesis is widely accepted, but empirical tests are rare due to data constraints that prevent rigorous attribution of causation. Parro (2013) provides causal evidence from international data.

22 www.reuters.com/article/2009/05/13/vietnam-education-idUSPEK46232520090513, accessed 13 May 2013.

23 This area includes Ho Chi Minh City itself, Ba Ria, Vung Tau, and Dong Nai.

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20

CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM'S HEALTH STATUS AND HEALTH SYSTEM

Tran Khanh Toan

Since the 1980s, Vietnam's economy has expanded rapidly and people's living standards and health have improved significantly. Demand for health care has also surged alongside increasing incomes and wealth, as well as changes in demographics, epidemiology, and disease patterns. During this time, Vietnam's health system has expanded impressively in scale and scope, and in this context has faced a succession of new challenges. Chief among these has been the need to promote the growth of the health sector and the quality of services on the one hand while ensuring equitable access to health care on the other. This chapter analyzes the health situation in contemporary Vietnam, reviews changes in the country's health system, and examines health sector challenges.

Health Status

Indicators of the Vietnamese people's health have improved remarkably over the past 30 years and compare favorably with other countries' income (Adams 2005; WHO 2019c). Next, health indicators and disease patterns, health determinants, and health equity are examined in turn.

Health indicators

Changes in life expectancy, maternal and child mortality, and child malnutrition reflect significant improvements. Life expectancy at birth has increased from 71.3 years in 1990 to 75.8 years in 2020. In this interval, life expectancy increased from 66.6 to 71.7 for men and from 76.0 to 79.9 for women (Worldometer 2021) (Table 20.1). These figures are relatively high compared to other countries in Southeast Asia (WHO 2016). The differences are less clear when viewed on the basis of health–adjusted life expectancy (HALE), which takes into account mortality and morbidity (WHO 2018a). The maternal mortality ratio (MMR) in Vietnam per 1000,000 live births has decreased from 139.0 in 1990 to 43.0 in 2017 (WHO 2015b; WHO 2019b). At the same time, the lifetime risk of maternal death has also declined from 0.56% (1990) to 0.11% (2017) (World Bank 2019). Similarly, the infant mortality rate (IMR) per 1,000 live births decreased from 33.5 in 1990 to 15.4/1,000 in 2020; the mortality rate of children under five years old (U5MR) dropped from 44.9 to 19.3/1,000 live births, respectively (United Nation 2019) (Table 20.1). As a result, Vietnam has achieved the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in terms of maternal and child mortality (MOH 2017; MOH and Health Partnership Group 2016).

Table 20.1 Key population health indicators, 1990–2020[*]

Indicators	1990	2000	2010	2020
Life expectancy at birth (year): Total (males/females)	71.3 (66.6/76.0)	73.3 (64.8/73.1)	75.1 (70.2/80.0)	75.8 (71.7/79.9)
Maternal mortality rate (/100.000 live births)	139	81	58	43 (2017)
Infant mortality rate (/1000 live births)	33.5	23.6	17.9	15.4
Under five mortality rate (/1000 live births)	44.9	29.8	22.4	19.3
Child malnutrition rate	—			
– Underweight (%)		33.8	17.5	12.0
– Stunting (%)		36.5	29.3	19.6

[*] *Source:* MOH, 2019. Figures from 1990, 2000, and 2010 from World Bank. 2020 data from Worldometers database. (Worldometer, 2021, www.worldometers.info/demographics/vietnam-demographics/)

Rates of child malnutrition indicate very significant, though uneven, improvements as well as new challenges associated with increasing incomes and consumption. As recently as the middle 1990s, rates of underweight malnutrition and stunting were among the highest in the region. Between 2000 and 2020, the rate of underweight malnutrition among children under five decreased from 33.8% to 12.0%. However, stunting rates have declined more slowly, from 36.5% in 2000 to 19.6% in 2020 (Table 20.1). This is alarming, as it indicates limited changes in the stature and fitness of Vietnamese adults. At the opposite end of the scale, the rate of over-weightness and obesity in children is on the rise, especially in urban areas, from 5.6% among children under five and 8.5% among children 5–18 years old in 2010 to 7.4% and 19.0% in 2020, respectively (National Institute for Nutrition 2021).

Burden of disease

As in other developing countries, Vietnam has been facing a double burden of disease with the emerging epidemics of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and some major infectious diseases. From 1990 to 2017, the burden of NCDs as a share of the total burden of diseases in disability-adjusted life-years (DALY) has increased from 51% to 74% (IHME 2018).

The four groups of NCDs with the most considerable burden of disease today are hypertension, diabetes, cancer, and chronic lung diseases; hypertension, in particular, has the highest incidence. The rates of hypertension in 2015 were 47.3% among adults 25 years old and above (Nguyen Lan Viet 2016) and 30.6% among those 30 to 69 years old. The rate of diabetes among adults 25 to 64 years old was 4.1%. However, 43.1% of hypertension patients and 31.1% of diabetes patients have ever been diagnosed. The percentages of patients managed at health facilities were 13.6% for hypertension and 28.9% for diabetes (MOH 2016a). The most common cancers for both sexes are liver, lung, stomach, breast, and colon. It is estimated that there were 164,700 new cases in 2018, with nearly 114,900 deaths from different types of cancer. Although the prevalence of cancer in Vietnam is moderate, the death rate is relatively high due to late detection and treatment (WHO International Agency for Research on Cancer 2018). The typical chronic lung diseases in Vietnam are mainly chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and bronchial asthma (IHME 2018). These NCDs cause not only the burden of disease but also a significant economic burden for households, especially for low-income families (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2016).

Accidents and injuries, along with drowning, are also a significant disease burden. There was an average of 12,000 deaths from traffic accidents a year, causing losses of up to 2.5% to 3% of gross domestic product (GDP) from 2000 to 2010. In recent years, the situation of traffic accidents has been significantly reduced, but every year, there are still nearly 20,000 traffic accidents, killing 8,000 to 10,000 people (Pham et al. 2018; GSO 2019; United Nations 2018). Drowning is the second most common cause of injury-related death among all ages (after traffic accidents) and the leading cause of death among children and adolescents (Luong 2014).

Infectious diseases have declined significantly. The incidence and mortality rates of tuberculosis have declined significantly. Vietnam aims to reduce the tuberculosis rate to 131/100,000 people by 2020 and strives to be tuberculosis-free by 2030 (WHO 2015a). Vietnam passed the peak of its HIV epidemic in 2007, and since then the number of HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths has declined by roughly half. HIV prevalence is below 0.3% and is most concentrated in such at at-risk populations as drug users, sex workers, men who have sex with men, and their female partners (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2016). The incidence of malaria has also decreased continuously. Since 2000, the number of cases and deaths from malaria has declined by about 90% (MOH 2018; WHO Western Pacific Region 2014). Currently, 16 provinces and cities have been declared malaria free, while another 33 provinces have been reported to have almost eliminated malaria (WHO 2018b).

Improving access to vaccines has contributed to declines in communicable diseases. Vietnam has eradicated polio since 2005 and eliminated maternal and neonatal tetanus since 2005. Compared to 1984, when the Expanded Program of Immunization (EPI) was implemented nationwide, the incidence rates have decreased 23 times for measles, 167 times for diphtheria, and 428 times for pertussis (MOH 2015; Jit et al. 2015; UNICEF Vietnam 2015).

Finally, in the context of globalization, Vietnam is also at risk of exposure to newly emerged infectious diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Ebola, and MERS-CoV. Though Vietnam won praise for acting swiftly to become the first country to control SARS in 2003 and had early successes in combating the COVID pandemic.

Health determinants

Changes in the determinants of health can be understood in relation to the country's demographic characteristics, as well as economic factors, social and cultural factors, environmental factors, and changing lifestyles. With respect to demographics, dramatic declines in fertility and mortality rates, along with rapid population aging, are the crucial demographic factors that have had the greatest impact on the health of the Vietnamese people over the past 30 years. The total fertility rate decreased from 6.35 children/woman in 1960 to 3.5 children/woman in 1990, and the replacement fertility rate has been maintained since 2000, The proportion of older people is expected to continue to increase faster in the coming years to 16.2% in 2029 and 24.8% in 2049 (Worldometer 2021), which will make Vietnam among the 10 countries with the fastest population aging in the world. Rapid population aging, together with the increasing burden of chronic NCDs and degeneration among the elderly, presents tremendous challenges, not only for the health system but also for the entire social security system (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2018).

Economic growth has played major roles in shaping the determinants of health. Sustainable economic achievements have permitted Vietnam to increase investments in the health system to serve the needs of the population. While the health system is not without problems, Vietnam's success in improving access to affordable universal health care is impressive (MOH 2016b). To minimize the adverse impact of the market economy, since 1998 the government has started implementing the Poverty Reduction Program. Whether owing to economic growth or social assistance, poverty reduction is among Vietnam's most significant and internationally recognized

achievements. Improvements in education and training have supported improvements in health, as have improvements in living conditions. By 2020, near all households had some access to electricity, more than 90% access to water, and 78% to hygienic latrines (UNDP 2018).

Socioeconomic inequality often results in inequalities in health. In broad terms, gaps in health indicators between rich and poor and urban and rural areas have declined significantly. However, the mortality rate among children under one year old and under five years old in rural areas is still 1.5 times higher than in urban areas and about 3.4 to 4.5 times higher for ethnic minorities. The rate of women without antenatal checkup sin poor households is three times higher than in rich households (GSO 2015).

With accelerating industrialization and urbanization, environmental pollution has become a major health hazard. The air environment in big cities is deteriorating quickly as a result of emissions from transport vehicles, construction, production, and daily activities. It is estimated that air pollution is associated with 13.7% of the burden of disease and 15.2% of deaths (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2015). In particular, Vietnam is one of the most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change. In addition, the problem of contaminated food is causing a deep concern in society, although its harms to public health have not been fully studied and evaluated.

Lifestyles are the most important determinants of health. The four groups of risk behaviors most impactful on health and creating the greatest disease burden for NCDs include smoking, harmful use of alcohol, physical inactivity, and inappropriate nutrition regimens. It is estimated that these four risk behaviors, in turn, caused 31.3%, 16.9%, 5%, and 2.5% of all deaths in 2010 (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2015). The results of a 2015–16 national survey showed that the smoking rate among adults aged 18 to 69 years is 22.5%, including 45.3% for men and 1.1% for women. The average daily salt intake per person is 9.4 g, nearly double the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended level. Nearly a third of adults are physically active below WHO recommended levels (MOH 2016a). In addition, Vietnam currently has more than 225,000 active drug users being documented, although the actual number of drug addicts in the community is predicted to be many times higher (MOLISA 2019).

Health System

The WHO's framework for the analysis of health systems is useful for the purposes of this chapter. The framework addresses six major themes, including governance, human resources, finance, the composite category of medicine, medical supplies, and equipment, in addition to health information systems and health services delivery. Services delivery itself is then addressed across four dimensions of performance, including coverage of services, access and utilization of services, quality of services, and equity and effectiveness of services. The account that follows uses this framework to contribute to an understanding of the features and performance of Vietnam's health system.

Governance and organization of the health system

Governance in the health sector refers to a range of functions related to health policy and strategy, system design, oversight, and coordination with stakeholders to achieve key national health goals (WHO 2007). In addressing these themes it will be useful to first establish the goals and orientation of Vietnam's health policies. This is followed by an overview of the health system's design and, finally, the development and reform Vietnam's health system over the past 30 years.

The overall policy goal of Vietnam is to develop an equitable, effective, and comprehensive health care sector that emphasizes prevention and strives to achieve universal health care coverage.

This is to be achieved through a well-functioning health system that combines grassroots health networks and hospitals and draws on both modern and traditional medicine. The government guarantees to provide basic health services to all people, but also to mobilize investment and contributions from various social sectors, while encouraging the active participation of society (Department of Social Affairs – Central Propaganda Committee and Hanoi Medical University 2014).

The health system's organization

Vietnam has transformed from a full public health care system to a mixed public-private system since 1989. The public health system is organized and decentralized across four levels, from the central to provincial, district, and communal levels. At the central level, the Ministry of Health (MOH) is responsible for issuing legal documents, professional regulations, and guidelines in health sector; making long-term health plans and strategies; and directly managing central hospitals and institutions. Local health levels are under the competence management of MOH, as well as the administrative management of the People's Committee at corresponding levels and the provision of health care services within its jurisdiction. The provincial level includes the Department of Health (DOH) and associated hospitals and centers. Each district has a District Health Department (DHD) and service providing district health center, combining a preventive health center and district hospital. Commune Health Stations (CHS) are the lowest local, publicly funded health units that provide basic and primary care services to people in their service areas.

Health sector reforms

Together with economic reforms, a series of health policy reforms have been implemented in the organization of the health system, modes of services delivery, and finance in order to increase the capacity of the health system to provide quality care for the people. The most important reforms included the introduction and subsequent development of service fees at public health facilities and the authorization of private medical practice (both in 1989), the introduction and subsequent development of health insurance (beginning in 1992), and the promotion of financial autonomy for public hospitals (beginning in 2002). All of these policies and others fit under the umbrella policy of "socialization," which refers the mobilization of societal resources for the health sector (Thanh et al. 2014). These policies have greatly enhanced the flow of financial resources into the health system in ways that have both improved the health system's capacity and created new challenges and problems, such as the rampant commercialization of health sector, which has increased barriers for accessing and utilizing care among lower-income households and other vulnerable groups.

Human resources

According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) data, the number of medical doctors per 10,000 people in Vietnam in 2016 was 8.21 – more than two times that of 1990 (4.04) (UNDP 2018). By the end of 2016, Vietnam counted 471,702 health workers, including 79,306 medical doctors (accounting for 16.7%) and 27,473 university-level pharmacists (5.0%). The majority of doctors, pharmacists, and high-level health workers are concentrated in big cities, especially Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Graduate doctors often prefer to work in large hospitals, in attractive specializations, leading to a shortage of doctors at grassroots public health facilities. As of 2016, only 84% of CHSs nationwide were regularly staffed with doctors (MOH 2018).

The quality of human resources has improved, owing in part to improvements in the scale and scope of training. Still, the number of highly qualified and specialized health workers remains limited. Shortages of medical personnel and difficulty in managing diseases are most evident in the remote areas, lower-level hospitals, and local health stations.

Health care finance

Health care finance has four goals: mobilizing sufficient resources, achieving fair and efficient management and allocation of resources, promoting service quality and efficiency, and providing protection for service users from financial risks posed by health costs through various measures, including risk pooling and sharing (insurance) (Schieber et al. 2006). Evaluating Vietnam's health system across these goals contributes to an understanding of its performance.

Health expenditure and resource mobilization

At nominal prices, Vietnam's total health spending has increased rapidly from US$ 1.5 billion (21.4 trillion VND, 4.8% GDP) in 2000 to about US$ 12.4 billion (276.9 trillion VND; 5.9% GDP) in 2017. Health expenditure per capita has also increased accordingly from US$ 18.8 in 2000 to US$ 129.6 in 2017 and is higher than the average for lower middle-income countries (WHO 2019a). Vietnam's total health spending (including people's spending on health services abroad) is estimated at US$16.1 billion in 2017 (7.5% of GDP), to US$ 17.2 billion in 2018 and nearly US$ 20 billion in 2020 (Jacob 2017).

Sources of health finance come from multiple sources, including the state budget, health insurance, out-of-pocket payments from households, aid, and other sources. Vietnam's state finances the vital functions of the public health system and is also used to promote public health and equity goals. Public spending on health as a share of total health expenditure has increased gradually from 34.9% in 2000 to 48.6% in 2017. Between 2000 and 2017, per capita public spending on health grew at an average rate of 9.0% per year, rising approximately threefold in the real term. This increase has primarily been from state budget spending on health and, in part, due to a rise in health insurance coverage. Since 2012, public spending on health has surpassed private spending, largely due to the government's social health insurance programs (WHO 2019a). Over time, government policies have sought to reduce hospitals' reliance on the state budget by encouraging them to develop their own sources of income.

Among the most significant and in respects encouraging developments in health finance over the last two decades has been the expansion and improvement of health insurance. From modest beginnings in 1992 as a compulsory scheme for salaried workers, health insurance coverage had increased rapidly, from 10% in 1995 to 87% in 2018 (GSO 2019). The coverage among low-income households is strong, owing to government schemes aimed at protecting the poor. However, it remains weakest among the large ranks of Vietnam's informal-sector workers and in state enterprises; in the latter, coverage remains only around 50% owing to poor compliance. In addition, financial contributions from health insurance to total health spending have remained limited. While low insurance premiums assist affordability, they limit both contributions and benefits for those insured (MOH and WHO 2016).

Out-of-pocket payments as a share of total payments rose sharply after 1989, with the introduction of fees collection for medical examination and treatment services at public hospitals and the authorization of private medical practice. From a peak of over 70% in the early to mid-1990s, out-of-pocket payments fell to 52.4% in 2008 and to 44.8% in 2010, but then increased to 48.8% by 2012 and have not declined since (Minh et al. 2015). Reliance on out-of-pocket payments remains a major source problem and has adverse effects for the lower-income strata of the population.

Foreign aid and preferential loans played a crucial role in sustaining the operation of the health sector during the fiscally lean years of the 1990s. More recently, foreign aid has declined as source of health finance, from 2.9% in 2010 to 1.6% in 2012 and around 1.0% by 2016 (MOH 2018). Be that as it may, foreign aid continues to play a role in the development of the health sector, particularly through various forms of technical assistance.

A final, albeit mixed, source of health finance includes various sources of private finance permitted and promoted though "socialization" policies aimed at channeling societal resources into the health sector. Notably, hospital autonomization schemes permit public hospitals to mobilize private resources to develop public health facilities through joint ventures, private investment in medical equipment, bank borrowing, and public–private partnership (Thanh et al. 2014). These sources have contributed to the upgrade of technical equipment and the proliferation of wings and hospitals offering "patient-requested services," often on the grounds of public hospitals. However, these schemes have also generated undesirable impacts on health equity and reflect a low appreciation of the ethical aspects and risks and costs of non-transparent commercialization.

Health finance management and utilization

A regular spending budget is allocated to each province and city by population and is adjusted by region and then allocated to health units based on input factors (payroll, number of hospital beds). An overwhelming share of the state budget for health is used for recurrent expenditures to pay salaries, allowances, and social insurance for health workers. In 2016, 87.11% of recurrent expenditure was used for health care spending. Among them, expenditure on medical examination and treatment accounts for the largest proportion (45%) (MOH 2018). In addition to granting autonomy to public hospitals, the state is trying to gradually shift budget support from service to service users through the subsidization of health insurance cards.

The scope of health insurance benefits in Vietnam is currently limited to treatments on benefit packages, including a list of approved medications, supplies, and technical and professional services, including emergency care, childbirth, etc. This benefit package has been expanded mainly based on proposals from health facilities rather than independent evidence-based analysis of the medical and cost-effectiveness of health treatments and technology. Co-payments of 5% and 20% are applied to the majority of target groups. Patients are only entitled to the entire norm according to the scope of HI payment when using health services within the network approved providers. In case of care by out-of-network providers, patients have to pay for all outpatient care costs and will be covered for 60% and 40% for inpatient treatment in provincial and central hospitals, respectively. The current allocation mechanisms of the HI fund have not promoted desired levels of risk-sharing, even leading to an "adverse subsidy" situation for rich areas (MOH and WHO 2016).

Effective use of health finance

Although Vietnam's health indicators are relatively good compared to other countries with comparable levels of health expenditure per capita, the efficiency of using resources in Vietnam's health system is limited both in terms of allocation performance and technical performance. The reasons include an imbalance in health spending between primary and specialty care and between preventive and curative care (72% of total spending on treatment), the limited capacity of the grassroots health network to meet primary health care needs, unsafe and irrational use of medications, limited management of the pricing of medication and medical supplies, convoluted service payment methods, and incentives toward overprescription and overspending associated with hospital autonomization. These factors undermine efficiency and equity (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2016).

One of the most important goals of health care financing is to prevent people from paying beyond their financial ability or to become impoverished due to catastrophic health expenditures and high health care costs. The proportion of households with catastrophic health expenditures and impoverishment due to health spending has tended to decline (Minh et al. 2015) but remains substantial. In 2016, 10.3% of Vietnamese households reported catastrophic health expenditures (health spending accounted for more than 10% of total household expenditure), higher than the world average (9.3%) (MOH 2018). This figure declines with living standards, and that of poor and rural households was 1.5 times higher than in urban areas (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2016).

As in many other countries, the health sector in Vietnam is particularly susceptible to corruption, especially in the context of socialization policies due to the lack of appropriate oversight mechanisms (Martini 2013). Although corruption may occur in different stages from policy making to resource allocation, service delivery, and procurement processes, informal payments and commissions for prescribers are the most typical types of corruption in the health sector (Nieves 2018). These can make the financial burden of health care increase significantly and could negatively influence health sector goals for access, quality, equity, and effectiveness (Vian et al. 2011). The Vietnamese government has demonstrated the political will to fight corruption by implementing a series of essential reforms in the country's health governance framework (Martini 2013). Although a recent survey showed a decrease in bribery in public health services (UNDP 2019), corruption in the health sector is still a concern of the Vietnamese population. Further efforts need to be made to link this with broader governance reforms.

Pharmaceuticals and medical equipment

Vietnam's policies on pharmaceuticals and medical equipment aim to ensure their adequate supply and rational, safe, and effective use. To achieve these goals, Vietnam has set policies regarding essential drugs, antibiotics, and rational use of drugs; drug quality assurance; and manufacturing, supplying, and importing drugs (Health Strategy and Policy Institute 2013). Hospitals provide more than 70% of prescription drugs. Drugs are also distributed through CHSs and private retail pharmacies.

By 2016, the growth rate of Vietnam's pharmaceutical market ranked 13th in the world and first in Southeast Asia, with an average growth of about 17%/year. The total value of Vietnam's pharmaceutical market has increased from US$ 280 million (1995) to US$ 417 million (2001) and US$ 4,194 million (2016) Angelino et al. 2017 even as Vietnam's per capita drug spending in 2016 was only about 50% compared to middle-income countries and one-third of the world average (147 USD/person). Imported drugs are still a major category of spending. From 2008–17, Vietnam imported about US$ 18.1 billion of medicines. Vietnam also encourages the development of a domestic pharmaceutical industry. There are currently about 178 drug manufacturing enterprises nationwide supplying up to 50% of domestic demands (MOH 2012) and producing exports mainly to Laos and Cambodia (MOH 2018). However, drugs are produced using outdated technologies, focusing mainly on generic medicines and low-value common drugs such as antibiotics, analgesics, and anti–inflammatory medicines.

WHO data shows that Vietnam's drug prices are relatively high. Compared with the international reference price (IRP), the price of generic drugs in the public sector is 1.09 to 3.40 times higher and 1.70 to 5.14 in the private sector. The prices of brand drugs are 10.53 to 38.62 higher in the public sector and 12.8 to 41.54 times higher in the private sector (WHO Representative Office in Vietnam). Still, with consistent attention to drug selection policy, centralized drug bidding, and drug price negotiation, drug price control has been significantly improved, especially for drugs supplied through hospitals. Improved access to affordable drugs will require more effective policy and legal responses (Nguyen et al. 2017).

As it stands, spending on medicines makes up an unreasonably large proportion of health expenditure, accounting for about two-thirds of total hospital expenditure, of which more than half is on antibiotics. Nearly 70% of inpatients are prescribed antibiotics, with more than a third of cases using more than one type. In the community, antibiotics are sold mostly without a prescription, and the most common source of information when making decisions to buy drugs is from personal experience or from that of relatives and friends. The overuse of antibiotics has led to an alarming increase in antibiotic resistance, and the most common antibiotics have reported resistance in some health facilities (Peters et al. 2019). The widespread use of antibiotics and lack of control in animal husbandry have also contributed significantly to this situation (Bordier et al. 2018).

The medical equipment market in Vietnam is growing rapidly, especially in the context of hospital autonomization and "socialization." As in other countries, Vietnam has seen a particularly steady expansion in the procurement and use of expensive diagnostic imaging equipment. However, procedures governing procurement, quality, and use of equipment are loose. Imported equipment is often outdated and of poor quality. The MOH is gradually improving the mechanism for the management of medical equipment, developing a list of essential medical equipment, building databases on equipment and standards of equipment quality, and encouraging the assessment of medical technology and analysis of cost-effectiveness when investing in purchasing medical equipment (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2016).

Health information systems

Vietnam has developed a routine system of statistical reporting forms with 88 basic health indicators that are commonly applied in health facilities. However, the compliance and implementation of reporting are not regular, the dissemination of information is slow and fragmented, and the quality of information is limited, leading to reduced efficiency. High-speed internet and an expanding intranet enable the MOH Health's Data Integration Center to be connected with the all DOHs, 100% of provincial hospitals, and an increasing number of district and commune health facilities. The implementation of electronic medical records and telemedicine is in progress. At present, Vietnam still lacks a unitary information technology design platform, resulting in the fragmented application of information technology in management and administration (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2018).

Health care services delivery

As of 2018, there were 13,583 state-owned health facilities, including 1,085 hospitals; 579 regional general clinics; and 11,830 health stations at communes, wards, agencies, and enterprises levels nationwide (GSO 2018). In addition, there are currently more than 200 hospitals and more than 35,000 private clinics providing health care services. The total number of patient beds in 2016 was 303,515, including 10.4% at the central level, 40.3% at the provincial level, 27.6% at the district level, and 15.7% at the commune level. In overall, there are 32.74 patient beds/10,000 people, of which 26.11 are public beds. The private health sector accounts for 8% of the total beds, serving 60% of all outpatient visits and about 4% of all inpatient visits (MOH 2018).

Curative care services delivery

With a wide network of health facilities, Vietnamese people have relatively easy access to health care services. The majority of basic health services for common health problems are provided at the grassroots level, including reproductive and maternal and child health services. This is also

the place for initial registration and medical examination for the majority of patients with health insurance. However, the Vietnamese health service delivery model is also generally characterized by an overreliance on hospital-based care. People tend to skip grassroots health facilities for their treatment, leading to overcrowding in higher-level hospitals, especially at the central level. In the meantime, many district-level hospitals and commune health stations have few patients, and their operation is not at full capacity. To deal with this situation, the MOH has expanded the facilities at central hospitals and has had various projects to support and increase the capacity of provincial hospitals and primary health care facilities (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2018).

The health service delivery capacity of the health system has gradually improved. The total number of medical visits has increased from 205 million in 2010 to nearly 230 million in 2016. Overcrowding at the central level has also been reduced when the bed occupancy rate decreased from 119.1% in 2011 to 113.77 in 2016, although the overall bed occupancy rate has increased slightly from 116.6% up 117.4% (MOH 2018). In addition, perverse incentives associated with overprovision of services can contribute to increases in the average length of stay with negative consequences for the quality, efficiency, effectiveness, and affordability of care.

The quality of health services in Vietnam has also been continuously improved. Many hospitals have bravely invested, deployed many machines and equipment, and applied high techniques in treatments such as laparoscopic surgery, robotic surgery, and organ transplantation. Some professional services such as heart surgery, hemodialysis, and laparoscopic surgery have been deployed at provincial hospitals. However, the quality of health care services in Vietnam, especially in lower-level hospitals, is still a matter of great concern, and large disparities exist between levels. Nevertheless, the service quality at private health facilities, especially private clinics with foreign physicians, is still inefficiently controlled (MOH and Health Partnership Group 2018).

Preventive care services delivery

Preventive care services at the primary level have been among the strengths of the health service delivery system in Vietnam. The EPI program was piloted in 1981 and has been scaling up freely since 1984 and is currently focusing on 12 preventable dangerous infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, measles, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, polio, and hepatitis B. Fee-for-service non–EPI vaccines are also implemented in parallel. It is estimated that vaccination programs have helped to protect 6 to 8 million Vietnamese children and prevented nearly 50,000 deaths from such fatal diseases. However, the EPI program is facing a number of challenges in terms of coverage and the adequacy and timeliness of vaccinations, leading to the possibility that some diseases preventable by vaccine could come back (Jit et al. 2015; UNICEF Vietnam 2015).

Under the maternal and child health protection program, pregnant women are currently recommended to have antenatal care at least four times and at least once in each pregnancy cycle. The antenatal care package includes many services and can be done right at the commune level. The proportion of women being cared for before, during, and after birth is high. In addition, district hospitals, especially in disadvantaged areas, are supported with training and equipment to be able to perform a cesarean section and blood transfusion when indicated. Additionally, Vietnam has also implemented the family planning program, provided contraceptives for couples of reproductive age, performed safe abortions, and prevented obstetric complications. Access to immunization and maternal and child health care services has gained significant momentum and contributed to significantly reducing maternal and child mortality rates according to the MDGs. In addition, programs to prevent malnutrition, diarrhea, and acute respiratory infections in children and to prevent epidemics have been widely implemented with increasing coverage.

As the first country recognized by WHO to be SARS-free in 2003, Vietnam had both the experience and infrastructure to manage emerging infectious diseases. A leadership committed to swift and effective responses to health emergencies, preparedness, and capabilities for managing and coordinating responses to the pandemic, and high levels of public trust in and cooperation with public health authorities have been considered as strengths of the health system that contributed to early successes in combating the first three waves of COVID-19 pandemic (Pollack et al. 2020). However, the fourth wave of Covid-19 that began in late April 2021 has caused 1.2 million infections and nearly 25,000 deaths and brought an overload to the health care system, especially in Ho Chi Minh City and the Southern provinces. Vietnam has currently changed the strategy policy from "Zero COVID" to "Safe and flexible adaptation and effective control of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Challenges in the health sector

Efforts to ensure equitable and effective health care in Vietnam face numerous challenges. These include population aging, changing disease patterns, and a health system that is both fragmented and excessively focused on hospitals. The country's health system is not yet ready to respond to such new health challenges. Despite remarkable improvements, the quality of health services is not yet high and remains uneven. While the flow of financial resources into the health sector has vastly expanded, the manner in which financial resources for health are mobilized and utilized is often inefficient, particularly with respect to the goals of providing quality affordable health services for all.

Changing disease patterns and the increased importance of NCDs change Vietnam's objective health care needs, recommending a shift of emphasis to outpatient treatment and greater attention to counseling, prevention, and health promotion, which are at present underfunded. While coherent on paper, the health system in practice is fragmented, lacks coherence, and is excessively focused on hospitals and higher-level hospitals in particular. Weak connections between health facilities at different levels causes the loss of continuity and reduces effectiveness of care at all levels while frequently increasing its cost. In preventive care, vertical implementation of health programs lacks coordination and connections and reduces the effectiveness of service delivery.

Insufficient attention to health care at the grassroots level risks further deteriorating quality and a breakdown of the referral chain, causing overloading in higher-level hospitals. Allowing higher-level hospitals to perform initial medical examinations and treatment and management of common NCDs makes it more difficult for grassroots service providers to attract patients.

The quality of human resources remains limited, leading to difficulties in ensuring the quality of health services, especially at the grassroots level. Quality control during training remains limited. Arrangements governing certification are ineffectively organized. Policies to encourage health workers to work at grassroots levels are weak. They typically lack opportunities to study and improve their qualifications.

Service quality has gradually been improved but yet not met expectations. The current mechanisms of health services delivery are not fully encouraging in terms of ensuring the delivery of quality services. Attention to quality control has only intensified in recent years, yet there has not been adequate attention from hospitals. The service quality management system at all levels needs to be improved. Greater emphasis is needed on strengthening quality control and monitoring compliance with standard treatment guidelines.

The mobilization and investment of financial resources in health care is beset with problems. Health insurance coverage is increasing, but a large share of the gains are the result of state

subsidies. As it stands, the contribution of health insurance to total health expenditure is inadequate. Use of financial resources from the budget and health insurance is inefficient owing to the lack of effective regulatory mechanisms, the broad absence of strategic procurement, and the misuse of health insurance funds. The service fee payment mechanism encourages the abuse of services, while other payment mechanisms such as capitation and diagnostic groups have only been implemented on a limited scale. The financial autonomy and "socialization" mechanism, together with the current pricing of health services according to current administrative and technical levels, encourages hospitals to provide a wide range of technical services while not creating an impetus to provide primary care at the grassroots level.

Despite the many policies to support economic development, social security, and health care for vulnerable people, inequality in health and access to health represent a dark side of Vietnam's market economy and a major challenge for Vietnam's health system. Household out-of-pocket payments for health still account for a large proportion, which hinders the implementation of sustainable universal health care coverage. Poor people, ethnic minorities, people in mountainous and remote areas, and people with little education tend to have poorer health conditions, as well as higher morbidity and mortality. In order to increase access to quality services for ethnic minorities, it is necessary to take into account factors such as awareness, opportunity costs, language barriers, customs and habits, and behavior (Oxfam 2017).

Against this background, efforts at reform should focus on reorganizing the health service delivery model and reforming the health financing mechanism. Efforts should be directed toward shifting the emphasis from provision of treatment services in hospitals to a service delivery system based on primary care so as to ensure the comprehensiveness and continuity of health care needs in the context of a change in disease patterns. This would include a stronger commitment to promoting the role of district health centers in both treatment and prevention and renewed efforts to enhance links between commune health stations and district health centers. Alongside this, provincial health departments should give greater emphasis on preventive medicine activities following the model of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It is necessary to strengthen the primary care system with a focus on primary care delivery at the district level through policies on human resource development, strengthening the coordination between health facilities and services, while enhancing the gatekeeping role of primary health care workers. To make this happen, it is necessary to strengthen capacity through further training for grassroots health care workers, including the prioritization of on-the-spot practical training with the guidance and support of higher-level medical facilities. In this way, the medical center can gradually transfer the task of providing technical services to the health station. The training should focus on the detection and management of common health problems in the community, with priority given to the management and treatment of common chronic NCDs such as hypertension, diabetes, and asthma.

In addition, it is necessary to promote the implementation of the family doctor model and strengthen its role through supportive mechanisms and policies such as regulations requiring grassroots health care before being transferred to higher levels, allow referrals based on disease needs, and the more widespread use of capitation payment mechanisms in primary care to encourage effective delivery of services on the basis of health outcomes. Financial mechanisms, administrative regulations, and technical measures are needed to strengthen the connection and feedback of two-way information on health status, treatment results, and patient care between levels to ensure continuity. Policies are needed to promote the participation of private service providers in the provision of primary care, including preventive services.

Efforts to achieve universal health insurance coverage and to improve the effectiveness of the health insurance system should continue. An effective health insurance system can generate a

sustainable financial source for the health sector while gradually reducing the burden of direct health care payments from out-of-pocket spending. In the meantime, investment from the state budget should focus on prioritizing disadvantaged areas and populations, allocating resources to service users instead of service providers. To move closer to the goal of 100% health insurance coverage by 2030 will require sanctions to elicit compliance of enterprises and allowances to informal sector workers. Health insurance premiums must gradually raise to expand the scope of benefits of the insured to increase the contribution of health insurance to the total health expenditure and to increase the attractiveness of health insurance overall.

Increasing the efficiency of health finance requires reform of procurement practices and the implementation of strategic procurement functions. Centralized procurement and better use of state purchasing power to negotiate prices under framework contracts with pharmaceutical companies will help control costs. Strategic procurement can be used to require hospitals to conduct transparent medical technology assessments and cost-effectiveness analysis in choosing investments of equipment and drugs through which it can control treatment costs and strengthen the effectiveness of resource investment. The efficiency of resource use also depends greatly on payment mechanisms for health facilities. Accordingly, the fee-for-service payment method needs to be gradually replaced by the capitation and diagnostic payment methods to contribute to reducing overuse of services and overtreatment. Policies on hospital fees and payment mechanisms of health insurance need to be adjusted in ways that encourage patients to use services at lower-level health facilities as well as encouraging lower-level health facilities to provide services. Health service pricing must ensure cost recovery. Incorporating quality criteria in pricing can encourage hospitals to invest in improving quality while encouraging patients to follow the appropriate levels of healthcare services to reduce costs.

Last but not least "socialization" policies – including the autonomization of public hospitals – are in urgent need for more effective regulatory mechanisms. While hospital autonomization has brought in new sources of finance, the manner in which it has been implemented has tended to increase service costs, encourage the abuse of services, and incentivize admissions and average length of stay to increase hospital revenue. Effective regulations will require full transparent accounting for the use of public hospital facilities, human resources, and time, as well as compulsory, enforceable mechanisms for cross-subsidization so that a share of hospitals' income is put to the purpose of promotes fairness in access and use of services by all Vietnamese citizens.

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21

POST-COLONIAL URBANIZATION IN VIETNAM

Urban Order and Unruliness

Erik Harms and Danielle Labbé

Contemporary Vietnam is increasingly urban. In 1976, the urban population comprised 19 percent of the total population; by 2017, the urban population had risen to 35 percent (World Bank, 2018). Since the 1990s, Vietnam's cities and towns have grown at an average rate of about 4 percent per year (World Bank Vietnam, 2011, p. 23). Given the speed and scope of this ongoing transition from overwhelmingly rural to predominantly urban population, territory, and economy, it is no exaggeration to say that urbanization is among the most important changes in social life in contemporary Vietnam.

In this chapter, we suggest that this ongoing transformation process in Vietnam is shaped by a tension between order and permissiveness; a tension that can serve as a conceptual theme for understanding a key aspect of urbanization in the country's recent history. Vietnamese urbanization and urban life both emerge out of the dynamic relationship between the planned and the spontaneous, control and resistance, and the formal and the informal (Leaf, 1999). For this reason, Vietnamese urbanization cannot be understood using static models, but must be approached as a dynamic process that oscillates between a clear compulsion to forcefully impose formal order on urban life and expressions of an urban society characterized by permissiveness and rule-bending.[1] While there is no shortage of official plans and rules in Vietnamese urban life, such rules are routinely transgressed. Certain elements of the Vietnamese state continuously produce new decrees and regulations, whereas other elements of the state exhibit a high degree of tolerance (or even permissiveness) for the transgression of those very regulations. Enforcement of regulations also seems to waver back and forth, with periods of permissiveness followed by periods of crackdown on rule-breakers. Such a situation closely mirrors the approach taken to pervasive bribery practices, many of which are connected to urban land transactions. On the one hand, corruption and bribery are regularly described as a normal part of doing business in Vietnamese urban development; on the other hand, newspapers are regularly filled with sensational headlines describing the prosecution of individuals accused of corruption and emphasizing the government's commitment to bringing order to urban business practices. Such tensions between order and chaos, furthermore, are not confined to the state, but also exist within Vietnamese society, as city residents simultaneously criticize the disorderly qualities of urban life and participate in the activities and processes associated with such disorder.

This chapter describes this oscillation between order and permissiveness by surveying colonial and post-colonial urbanization in Vietnam's two primate cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh

City. In the first section, we contextualize the urban transition in Vietnam and offer a brief background review of the two cities in order to highlight their diverse historical, cultural, and political features and to signal works for further reading. In the second section, we focus on the post-reform era and outline, in particular, the tension between efforts to discipline Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and persistent elements of permissiveness that continuously defy attempts to impose order. We illustrate how this dynamic shapes Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City with discussions of urban morphology in both cities, the relentless production of master plans, the movement of rural populations to cities despite the constraints imposed by residence permits (*hộ khẩu*), and tensions between planned and spontaneous urbanization (*đô thị hóa tự phát*) at the periphery of each city. If all of these aspects of urban life represent intense efforts to impose order on city life, all of them are also either applied with a remarkable degree of flexibility or subjected to persistent forms of resistance.

A tale of two "primate cities"

Vietnam is currently experiencing one of the most intensive urban transitions in the world. Its cities and towns are expected to grow at an average rate of about 3 percent per year over the next 20 years. During this period, the share of the country's total population living in places classified as urban is expected to move from one-third to one-half (Thayer, 2009). This shift from a rural to a predominantly urban society is closely associated with socioeconomic reforms instituted in the mid-1980s (*Đổi mới*) that have progressively liberalized the economy and relaxed the state's grip on population movements and activities. These reforms fostered a swift transition to an urban society through combined processes of rural-urban migration, occupational shifts away from agriculture, the physical expansion of existing urban areas, the rising importance of real estate, and the creation of new cities and towns in densely settled rural communes (Huynh, 2012; Gubry, Castiglioni et al., 2010; Labbé, 2014; Labbé and Boudreau, 2011; Luong, 2009a).

Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have long been and continue to be the key sites of Vietnam's urban transition, with respective populations of 7.3 and 8.3 million people in 2016 (Government of Vietnam General Statistics Office, 2016: a).[2] In most Southeast Asian countries the urban system is dominated by a single "primate city," but the colonial divisions of Indochina, and the historical division of Vietnam during the 20th century – where Hanoi and Saigon were once capitals of two separate countries – led to the development of two distinct primate cities. For this reason, we focus this chapter on these two cities, attending to their important differences but also using them to illustrate shared themes of urban development.

Background to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City/Saigon

Hanoi, called Thăng Long until 1831, is located at the head of the Red River Delta, about 100 kilometers inland from the coast of the South China Sea.[3] Ho Chi Minh City, known as Saigon until 1976, is situated on the banks of the Saigon River and is connected to the sea via the Nha Be (*Nhà Bè*) River and to the fertile plains of the Mekong Delta via smaller waterways. Due to their geographic locations, their roles as political hubs of large administrative regions, and their historical and cultural status, Hanoi and Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City are commonly understood as the centers of two of Vietnam's three general administration zones: the northern and southern regions (*miền Bắc* and *miền Nam*).

While the country's reunification means that these designations no longer signify a political division, enduring symbolic oppositions between north and south still frame how the country is imagined. Differences between the two cities are often set up as a series of contrasting

stereotypes: symbolically, Hanoi is to Ho Chi Minh City as "north" is to "south," collective-oriented is to individualistic, closed is to open, traditional to modern, and so on. Ho Chi Minh City is often depicted as the "economic engine" of the country, and Hanoi is understood as the political center (*trung ương*), where the seats of the Communist Party and central government are located. Today, despite these often stereotyped differences, the relationship between Hanoi and Saigon is also sometimes reconfigured to emphasize a sense of unity forged out of differences: both cities are often depicted as the civilizational center of the country's two major agricultural deltas.

Hanoi, like the Red River Delta region more generally, is widely regarded both by historians and by the general public as the "cradle of Vietnamese civilization" (Nguyễn, V. H., 1995). While archaeological evidence indicates that the site of modern-day Hanoi has been occupied by humans for several millennia, the origins of the city are officially dated to 1010, when the Lý dynasty established its capital on the right bank of the Red River. Progressively, a small agglomeration developed on this site which consisted of three distinct spaces: a citadel (home to the imperial city), a merchant quarter (now referred to as the "Old Quarter"), and a dense network of rural villages surrounded by a dike (Decoster, Klouche et al., 1995; Logan, 2000). With but few brief interruptions, Hanoi remained the main political and administrative center of imperial Vietnam until the last dynasty, the Nguyễn (1802–1945), who moved their capital south to Hue (*Huế*). Throughout the pre-colonial period, the city developed slowly due to state control of trade and a succession of tumultuous wars between competing dynasties (Logan, 2000; Papin, 2001).

In contrast to "ancient" Hanoi, Vietnamese today consider Ho Chi Minh City a "young" city and frame its history within a nationalist narrative trope of Vietnam's southern frontier expansion (e.g., Tran, 1987). Formerly the site of a Khmer settlement, the region first came under the influence of Vietnamese speakers in the early 17th century, and Vietnamese historians generally date the formal founding of Saigon as a Vietnamese city to 1698. From the 17th century on, the place that would eventually be called Saigon grew as an entrepôt and administrative and taxation center (Peycam, 1998; Tran, 1987). Over the course of the 18th century, the Nguyễn Lords consolidated control in the city, encouraged settlement of Vietnamese and Chinese Ming loyalists, expanded administration, and constructed earthen ramparts on the right bank of the Saigon River (in 1772), which were later replaced by a Vauban-style citadel built with the supervision of French engineers (in 1790). The right bank of the river emerged as the political and commercial center of the Vietnamese city, and a distinct spatial hierarchy emerged, distinguishing an inner city (*nội thành*) and an outer city (*ngoại thành*) (Harms, 2011, pp. 37–38). At roughly the same time, the nearby city of Cholon (*Chợ Lớn)*, predominantly inhabited by ethnic Chinese, developed alongside Saigon. As it grew wealthier and more populous than Saigon, Cholon continued to be administered as a separate city until 1931, when the two cities were consolidated into a larger urban agglomeration named Saigon-Cholon (Kim, 2015, pp. 35–37).

Colonial urbanism and the dynamic of order and permissiveness

In both Hanoi and Saigon, the formal urban layout apparent today emerged through a dynamic intermingling of pre-colonial forms of habitation, French colonial ideas about urban planning, the natural landscape, and the exigencies of 20th-century politics (primarily in the form of colonialism, warfare, socialism, and the market economy). Hanoi was the capital of French Indochina from 1902 to 1954,[4] during which time it remained a modest city both in size and population, never exceeding 400,000 inhabitants (Wright, 1991). Yet up to the early 20th

century, colonial authorities greatly transformed the appearance and functioning of the city. They developed large new urban zones toward the south and west that became the administrative and commercial center of Indochina (Logan, 2000, Chap. 3; Wright, 1991). This area, known as the "French Quarter," embodies key colonial urban planning principles with broad avenues organized in a grid system and flanked by spacious villas and gardens. The French also developed major infrastructures and facilities, including the Long Bien (*Long Biên*) Bridge, a railway and train station, a post office, and an opera house – hence the city's sobriquet: "Paris de l'Annam."

Similarly, Saigon would grow to be called a "Paris of the East," or a "Pearl of the Orient." The city fell to French gunboats in 1859 and Cochinchina was declared a French colony in 1864. Saigon served as the capital of Indochina until 1902 when the French relocated it to Hanoi. Thereafter, the city remained the capital of French Cochinchina, playing an important role in the rise of export-oriented colonialism – fueled especially by the regional rice trade and other aspects of colonial agrarian capitalism – and developing an increasingly heterogeneous ethnic makeup. By the beginning of the 20th century, the city was populated by Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, Khmer, French, and other nationalities and had entangled with colonial society at an earlier time than many other parts of the country (Peycam, 2012). In 1943, the population of Saigon was nearly 500,000 people; over half were ethnic Chinese, about a third were Vietnamese, less than 5 percent were French, and the rest were ethnic minorities (Nguyễn, Đ. Đ., 1998, pp. 136–137).

While the interaction between French and Vietnamese produced a sense of pluralism and cosmopolitanism within urban society, the master planned ideals of French urbanism often asserted a countervailing impulse to segregate people and functions. If cities might be understood as places of mixing, colonial administrators also continuously complained about the unruly, insalubrious, "uncivilized" behavior of citizens in both cities. In 1901 a French vice-resident in Tonkin complained: "Everywhere there is disarray"; and in 1921 "the first director of urbanism for Indochina, Ernest Hébrard also deplored the physical manifestation of this deep-seated disorder" (Wright, 1991, p. 166). As Drummond (2013, p. 208) has argued, the colonial discourse about the city, and about its public space in particular, was "bifurcated between danger and desire – the danger lurking in the city, which had to be avoided and eradicated, and the desires for grandeur and modernity, which must be embodied in the urban landscape." In practice, however, French policies, and native attitudes for that matter, oscillated between a strong will to eradicate indigenous urban forms and practices and a willingness to tolerate them, or even selectively embrace them as a solution to pressing urban problems.

Colonial housing policies in both Hanoi and Saigon provide a telling example of this tension. For most of the colonial period, indigenous housing forms (called "paillotes," or self-constructed "huts" by the French and "*nhà lá*" or "leaf houses" by Vietnamese) were derided as unhygienic, unsightly, and unbecoming of a modern "civilized" society. Nevertheless, attempts to institute social housing policies, which began to gather steam in the late 1920s, were marked by alternating periods of enthusiasm and disenchantment: some colonial officials expressed great zeal, and others promoted a more hands-off approach to housing (Herbelin, 2009, 2010). During the Second World War, multistory apartment projects were informed by the modernist ideas of Le Corbusier, but at the same time, in Cochinchina, temporary villages of "paillotes" were also built with the blessing of the colonial government as a way to house refugees. The same "huts" that had been repressed since the early 20th century were in this case being used as a solution (Herbelin, 2010). This dynamism between the will to control society and an impulse to resist authority played out within Vietnamese society itself. In Hanoi during the late 1930s and early 1940s, some Vietnamese intellectuals and novelists, like those associated with the

"Self-Strength Literary Movement" and the "League of Light," argued for the need to improve housing conditions, while others mocked such civilizing pretensions as a form of veiled elitism (Nguyen, M., 2016).

Similar oscillations between order and permissiveness during the colonial period were evident in regard to sidewalk regulations (Kim, 2015), local urban governance (Labbé, 2014; Papin, 2001, pp. 264–269), and attempts to segregate functions (commercial vs. residential) and people (French vs. indigenous) at the city and building scales while also incorporating "indigenous" motifs into colonial plans (e.g., Hébrard, 1928). Echoing the tension between spontaneous housing practices versus state-led constructions of urban space discussed earlier, colonial urbanism clearly expressed a dynamic relationship between the foreign and the local, and between a will to control urban chaos and a willingness to sanction improvisational urban life.

Decolonization, "the price of war," and socialist reconstruction

The tumultuous end of the colonial era was marked by the First Indochina War (1946–1954), which eventually blurred into the Second Indochina War, aka "The Vietnam War" (understood, variously, as extending from 1955, 1962, and 1965 to 1975), and was followed by the post-war implementation of socialism in unified Vietnam (1976–1985). In a valuable study of the period from 1954–1985, Thrift and Forbes (1986) show how the wars had different effects on urbanization in the north and south. In Hanoi, the capital of what was then known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, urban growth slowed down and then came to a halt at the height of American bombing (1965 to 1973) (Thrift and Forbes, 1986, pp. 89–91). The city's population nevertheless grew from roughly 450,000 in 1954 (Papin, 2001, p. 305) to about 1 million at the end of the 1960s (Turley, 1975, p. 389). In Saigon, then capital of the Republic of Vietnam, the trends were dramatically different. Large-scale population movement from the country to the city during the war against the French (1946–1954) more than tripled the population of Saigon from 500,000 to 1.7 million (Thrift and Forbes, 1986, p. 125). During the Second Indochina War, the violence of fighting in the countryside, combined with the inflated American-backed economy in Saigon, led to rapid urban population growth. By 1975, the city's population was well over 4 million (Thrift and Forbes, 1986).

At the end of the war, Hanoi was emaciated and underpopulated while Saigon was bloated and overpopulated. Over the next few years, Hanoi's population would grow slowly, mainly due to state control on rural to urban migration and the economic hardships the country endured in the 1980s (Thrift and Forbes, 1986). A boundary reorganization in 1979 would bring the population total to more than 2.25 million, a number that would rise to 2,674,000 by 1984 (Thrift and Forbes 1986, p. 149). At the same time, the former Saigon, renamed Ho Chi Minh City in 1976, declined in population until the early 1980s, primarily because of the forced movement of urban populations to rural New Economic Zones and because of the mass exodus of refugees fleeing the new regime. By 1984, the population of Saigon had fallen to 3.3 million (Thrift and Forbes, 1986, p. 125), which represented a loss of around a million people in less than 10 years.

Despite the chaos of the war period, urban authorities in both cities reproduced the modernist approach introduced by colonial authorities even if ideological visions driving their designs were quite different. In retrospect, American-era planning schemes in Saigon were in some important respects akin to centrally planned socialist solutions to collective problems in Hanoi. In Hanoi, the war years were architecturally marked by Soviet influences on master planning and organization of urban space, and the most emblematic forms to emerge were the "collective housing zones" (*khu tập thể*) (Logan, 2000, Chap. 6). In Saigon, a 1962 study sponsored

by USAID proposed to modernize the city's large stock of makeshift housing through modernist-inspired schemes that aimed to regularize housing and promote social cohesion (Doxiadis Associates, 1965, p. 78). While the history of social housing in Saigon has been less well documented than that of Hanoi, American agencies like USAID sponsored the construction of several apartment complexes, which although never branded using the socialist language of "collective housing," shared direct family resemblances. In Saigon, one modernist planner complained that while city blocks were laid out in an orderly grid "the interior of the block became the entrances to a hidden cluster of temporary housing . . . completely filling the interior of the block" (Doxiadis Associates, 1965, p. 84). Similar transformations were typical in Hanoi's collective housing stock, where households would alter the original structure of the building by adding on to their units, and occupying spaces originally designed for public use. As early as the 1960s, Turley (1975, p. 391) writes: "Some citizens and officials found it expedient to solve problems on private initiative or to take advantage of passing opportunities, resulting in self-indulgence, private aggrandizement and circumvention of socialist institutions."

A dialectic of order and permissiveness

The previous section focused on the dynamic between order and transgression in the colonial and early post-colonial history of Hanoi and Saigon. A similar dynamic continues to play out in contemporary Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In this part of the chapter, we focus on the way the dialectic of order and permissiveness has affected urbanization and urban life since the advent of market reforms (*Đổi mới*.). Over the last three decades or so, the Vietnamese government has in many ways sought to deregulate some aspects of life in order to free up economic market mechanisms, while also, in other important ways, maintaining a strong desire to regulate and control urban life and urbanization.

Reform-era urbanization

As market reforms began to take effect by the early 1990s, the urban population increased substantially in both cities. Between 1999 and 2009, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City grew at annual rates of approximately 2.4 and 3.5 percent, respectively, with rural migrants from surrounding provinces playing a major role in the population increase (World Bank Vietnam, 2011, p. 17). Between 1995 and 2016, Hanoi grew from 2.4 million to 7.3 million,[5] and Ho Chi Minh City grew from 4.6 million to 8.3 million (Government of Vietnam General Statistics Office, 2016). Most of the population increases in both cities took place in the rapidly urbanizing peri–urban areas (Luong, 2009b, p. 2; Saksena, Fox et al., 2014, p. 84).

Both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have experienced considerable economic growth since the reforms, and to this day, the two cities lead much of the country's economic development. Yet Ho Chi Minh City is a much more industrialized region than Hanoi. Illustrating this difference, Hanoi's gross industrial output in 2005 was 7.8 percent and in 2012 was 8.2 percent of the country's total output, while Ho Chi Minh City's was 24.2 percent and 17.5 percent for the same years (Government of Vietnam General Statistics Office, 2014). In recent decades, Vietnam's two largest cities also witnessed a surge in consumption (Hansen, 2017a). While a wide range of goods (and services) are now available in the two cities, none is more conspicuous than the millions of motorbikes that roam Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City's streets. In 2016, the rate of motorbike ownership in Vietnam was approximately 430 motorbikes per 1000 persons (Hansen, 2016, n. 4). In the last two decades, another modal shift has begun with the total number of cars and ownership rates on the rise in both cities (Hansen, 2017b).

The transformation of the Soviet-style socioeconomic system should not be misunderstood as a retreat of the state. In fact, the state's impulse to order urban places was reaffirmed during the reform era, yet under different parameters. Most importantly, the central government explicitly acknowledged the role of urbanization as a vector of national development and, consequently, turned its back on the urban containment approach which had guided city planning in Hanoi since the mid-1950s, and which was imposed on Saigon after the end of the Vietnam War. Instead of attempting to limit urban growth – or to deurbanize cities – state-backed plans since the 1990s have sought to accommodate a rising urban population into newly created suburbs, to industrialize the countryside, and provide major urban regions, such as those surrounding Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, with an extensive and modern infrastructural network (DiGregorio, 2011; Labbé, 2014, Chap. 4).

This renewed emphasis on cities as drivers of economic growth, however, has been accompanied by equally pronounced efforts to discipline them. To show this, we focus on two important aspects of the urbanization process in contemporary Vietnam: (1) the interaction of the natural landscape with both highly planned urban development and migration pressures and (2) contradictory approaches to controlling and under-regulating peri-urban expansion. Both of these examples are themselves infused by official attempts to impose ideas about "modernization" (*hiện đại hóa*) and "urban civility" (*văn minh đô thị*) and to regulate normative urban behaviors. Nevertheless, both examples are also marked by constant challenges to such normative efforts.

Interactions of natural landscape with master plans and migration pressures

Saigon and Hanoi both consist of vernacular landscapes of Vietnamese village organization, which have been overlaid by imperial Vietnamese, French colonial, and then successive 20th- and 21st-century visions of rational city planning. Historical records indicate the existence of hundreds of Vietnamese villages in the areas south of Hanoi's imperial citadel and the space between and surrounding Saigon-Cholon's two urbanized centers (Nguyễn, Đ. Đ., 1994; Papin, 2001). While the urban districts of Hanoi and Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City are today covered by a palimpsest of dense urban construction and have since been sliced and diced by successive transport corridors built over the course of several regimes, rural legacies can nonetheless still be seen in each city – in local toponyms, the names of preserved village communal halls (*đình*), and local markets.

On maps since at least the colonial period, much of Hanoi's and Ho Chi Minh City's "informal" space has been rendered invisible by an optic regime that privileges lines and borders, but struggles to account for social life (Kim, 2015, pp. 54–82). But the dynamics of spatial organization in each city have never remained static. Rather, urban space emerged out of the interplay of multiple forces, the most important being the imperatives imposed by complex environmental circumstances, ethno-political and socioeconomic structures, and the political imperatives and spatial ideologies of different regimes. All of these factors mutually reinforce and transform each other in a kind of "urban dialectic" (Bogle, 1972).

For example, the colonial core of Ho Chi Minh City, roughly centered around the orderly boulevards of today's Districts 1 and 3, was, like many French colonial river cities, largely concentrated on densely packed, elevated soils found along the outer bend of the river. It was here that the city was most explicitly laid out in accordance with the planning principles of the French, and where monumental architecture was constructed in ways that reflected French political ideals (Wright, 1991). While this original choice of sites can be attributed to the geomorphology of the landscape, fully realizing this vision of building a fixed terrestrial order

also depended on changing the landscape – it required filling in waterways and canals in order to solidify the fixed earth upon which to build. Meanwhile, other districts, largely inhabited by Vietnamese, developed in a fashion sometimes called "spontaneous" but which, historically speaking, were also constructed in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to the waterways.

A similar dialectic can be observed in Hanoi – a city where built form has been profoundly conditioned by its unique environmental circumstances. The need to create habitable surfaces out of the naturally inundated lowlands of the Red River Delta has given rise to two distinct yet intertwined urban building strategies (Decoster, Klouche et al., 1995). The first strategy is the hallmark of state-led and planned urban expansions. It consists in raising a large tract of the natural lowlands and then draining it to create a dry buildable platform. The construction of Hanoi's imperial citadel, the colonial residential and administrative quarters, the development of the socialist "collective housing zones" (*khu tập thể*), and the more recent peri-urban redevelopments called "new urban areas" (*khu đô thị mới*) all relied on this strategy.

A second strategy characteristic of Hanoi's spontaneous urbanization is typically carried out by individual households. Echoing the situation in Saigon, this strategy tends to negotiate with complex environmental circumstances rather than trying to obliterate them. It consists of building a sealed compartment next to an existing road (or main dike) and planting it with a bamboo-pile foundation. This foundation supports a small platform, raised over the soggy land, on which a modest building (generally a house) is erected. Most of Hanoi's ancient merchant quarter was built in this manner. This technique continued to be used over the next centuries. It is behind the densification of inner-city residential areas, the urbanization of the dozens of peri-urban villages, and the formation of linear urban extensions observed since the 1990s or so.

Master plans

Evidence of the will to assert order can be seen in the relentless production and dissemination of master plans. But all of these processes themselves are entangled with equally forceful elements that thwart the regulatory landscape they seek to impose. For example, despite all these plans and regulations, it is common for first-time foreign visitors to remark on the supposedly unplanned nature of Vietnamese cities. The Vietnamese Ministry of Construction has successively adopted numerous general construction master plans for Hanoi and Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City, all of which have resulted from extensive consultations and planning meetings at numerous levels of government and all of which are ultimately approved by the prime minister.[6] In theory, provinces and major cities should adopt a new construction master plan every 10 years, along with a revision of this plan at the plan's mid-term (Huynh, 2015, pp. 13–14). In recent years however, neither Hanoi nor Ho Chi Minh City has been able to follow that schedule,[7] showing just how politically contentious the production of master plans (let alone their enforcement) is in Vietnam.

While master plans have the potential to exert a great deal of influence into the urban development process (Burlat, 2001), they are also constantly subject to alteration because they commonly underestimate population growth, make unrealistic projections for the level of investment, continuously change their primary development direction, succumb to conflict between different government agencies vying for influence, and are undermined by the influence of private developers (Huynh, 2015, pp. 14–16; Leaf, 1999, p. 304). Moreover, one of the open secrets in Vietnamese planning is that the urban plans are always entangled with influence peddling, such that the buying and selling of information about future development directions has become a lucrative way for real estate developers to profit from land deals and for government officials to profit by selling information (Labbé and Musil, 2014). In different ways, too, the enforcement of

master plans is often undermined by the pressures of demographic growth, as well as a willingness to allow transgressions of zoning regulations, sometimes in order to earn bribes and sometimes out of sympathy for residents trying to gain a foothold in the city with tenuous land rights.

Rural-to-urban migration

Indeed, the recent history of migration and rapid population growth has constantly posed challenges to preconceived visions of order imposed onto the two cities by planners and state officials. The Communist Party leadership carried into the reform era the idea that distinctions between urban and rural lives should be carefully maintained, especially in large cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In official discourse and also in the view of many urban residents, the cities are described as being under constant threat of being overwhelmed by rural migrants (Harms, 2011, Chap. 6). To keep rural people in place, the Vietnamese government has maintained important aspects of a policy measure dating back from the 1950s. Known as "the household registration system," or *hộ khẩu*, this system is administered by the police and limits population movements by coupling access to social goods (education, health, food, etc.) to a specific place of registration.[8] While formal state controls over population movements are less stringent today (Nguyen, T. A., Rigg et al., 2012, pp. 1110–1111) than they were prior to *Đổi mới*, when access to rations for food, for instance, was tied to a valid residence registration (Hardy, 2001, p. 192), the *hộ khẩu* remains a major institutional boundary mechanism that delineates urban inclusion and exclusion (Karis, 2013).

The household registration system has not, however, prevented unprecedented migrations to large cities, especially Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. According to a recent governmental report, between 2004 and 2009, rural migrants contributed 3.8 million people to towns and cities across Vietnam, or 16 percent of the country's urban population (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2011, p. 25).[9] The largest proportion of this human tide flows to provinces where large cities are located (including Danang, Can Tho (*Cần Thơ*), Haiphong and Hanoi) with Ho Chi Minh City standing, by far, as the primary destination of migrants.

Recent reports have emphasized the beneficial role migrants play in filling the demand for labor created by industrial development, foreign investment, and the growing service industry in cities (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2011; UNDP, 2010). Yet urban authorities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City continue to frame rural-to-urban migration as a management problem and as an impediment to development in the context of rapidly expanding urban populations and overextended city services. Although aspects of the *hộ khẩu* system have been relaxed, the state still uses the household registration to exclude large numbers of rural migrants from important urban rights and entitlements. Evidence of formal residence in the city is still necessary, for instance, to register a motorbike, obtain a bank loan, build a house, gain legal access to electricity or water, or enroll children in public schools. Compounding these exclusionary administrative policies are negative perceptions of the "floating population" in cities widely shared among leaders and established denizens. A common idea, circulating in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, is the impending threat of "ruralization" of the city (*nông thôn hóa đô thị*). In this view, the swarming of cities with rural people and practices will progressively erode "urban civility" and contribute to a rise in disorder and "social evils" (Harms, 2011).

Nevertheless, rural-to-urban migration and the imagined opposition between urban and rural citizenship categories are also open for negotiation, transgression, and rule bending. For example, while rural spaces and lifestyles are regularly denigrated, they are often also idealized as important elements of a cosmopolitan urbanism, and rural themes are often central to urban leisure practices (Gillen, 2016). Recent studies have emphasized the relatively autonomous

spaces that migrants create for themselves on the (material and metaphorical) margins of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City through actual movement between country and city, everyday practices, and reliance on social networks (Hardy, 2001; Harms, 2011; Karis, 2013). Local state agents play a key role in making this possible, especially in the peri-urban wards of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, where unregistered rural migrants concentrate. Following a pattern discussed by Koh (2008, 2006), local cadres and the police routinely strike informal arrangements with unregistered migrants and local landlords who house them in extra-legal "boarding houses" (*nhà trọ*) while, at the same time, intentionally underreport the number of temporary migrants living in the locality under their jurisdiction (Karis, 2013; Nguyen, T. A., Rigg et al., 2012, p. 1118).

Unplanned urbanization and peri-urban development

Population growth, coupled with the transgression of zoning regulations has fostered the emergence of large areas of the city defined by what the Vietnamese call "*đô thị hóa tự phát*," a term most commonly translated into English as "spontaneous urbanization." Such unplanned housing has been generally denigrated by state planners for its supposed inability to reach desired human densities, protect peri-urban croplands, and provide basic urban services. This form of urban development has further been criticized because it hinders the expansion of infrastructure and generates an aesthetically unpleasing urban environment, often coded as being incompatible with modern or civilized urban life (Harms, 2014; Labbé and Boudreau, 2011). Nevertheless, unplanned housing has been made possible by a history of lackadaisical enforcement of regulations, which indicates the degree to which both residents and state officials see auto-construction as an essential part of urban growth. While loose enforcement might be critiqued as evidence of a disconnect between planning ideals and actual practices, recent studies suggest that unplanned housing has had certain positive effects for the city – such as increasing the housing stock available to low-income households, maintaining a level of urban density that actually minimizes sprawl, fostering mixed-use development, and curbing everyday commutes associated with the separation of work and home (World Bank Vietnam, 2011).

Peri-urban development

The pressures of urban population growth described earlier have been intimately connected to the rising importance of new urban areas (*khu đô thị mới*). This model of urban development was conceptualized in the late 1980s, but only began to be built in earnest in the late 1990s and early 2000s, following the reclassification of rural communes as urban wards on the edge of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and new legislation that facilitated the conversion of agricultural lands to urban functions. The model of New Urban Areas now occupies a central place in the current Vietnamese National Housing Strategy, and it has already been widely applied on the outskirts of urban centers across the country. At the end of 2005, an estimated 1,353 new urban areas were completed or under construction, taking up more than 11,500 hectares across the country (Vietnam News Agency, 2005).

This focus on New Urban Areas first emerged alongside the economic rationalism promoted by post-reform era policy leaders like Võ Văn Kiệt, who argued that large-scale master-planned projects would be able to impose order onto a largely unplanned form of urban expansion, and would be able to mobilize the untapped potential of real estate value to fund development. While these large-scale projects have been driven by a desire to impose order on the urban landscape, they have also been tied into processes that drive some of the most commonly cited practices of disorder in the country. Revoking agricultural land-use rights in order to convert

them to urban uses, for example, is one of the most common sources of public grievance among Vietnamese citizens (Kerkvliet, 2014), and large-scale real estate transactions often produce lucrative opportunities for speculation, corruption and graft (Labbé and Musil, 2014).

But this planned urban expansion has yet to supersede other urban building practices in the region of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Next to the New Urban Areas discussed previously, thousands of peri-urban households are engaged in a largely unplanned, in situ urbanization process. While large-scale projects are often billed as offering "solutions" to this kind of unplanned urbanization, it is also true that unplanned developments often emerge in tandem with large-scale projects, as residents and smaller-scale property developers seek to feed off of (*ăn theo*) the success of the developments. Just as often, the large-scale developments, despite projecting an image of self-sufficiency, depend symbiotically on connections with the rest of the city (Harms, 2015; Labbé and Boudreau, 2015). Quietly, and with limited direct support from the state, people living in "ordinary" alleyways and so-called spontaneous housing developments are tearing down traditional rural homes to replace them with multistory urban houses, and adopting what might be called "urban ways of life" (Gibert, 2018). Similar to the process observed in the historic cores of each city, the urbanization of the vast territories surrounding Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are starting to form a mosaic of demographic, economic, sociocultural situations wherein "modern," planned urban spaces sit cheek by jowl with "spontaneously" urbanized villages, and neighborhoods that have been improved through incremental improvements over multiple generations.

The combination of in situ urbanization and planned urban growth into such a diverse territory generates wide-ranging issues. These include land disputes; environmental and health problems associated with higher levels of water, land, and air pollution due to new or intensified industrial activities; a sharp rise in land values negatively affecting lower-income households' ability to access housing and other spaces to develop economic activities; and social stresses on rural communities suddenly receiving large numbers of rural migrants and suburbanizing dwellers (DiGregorio, 2011; Harms, 2011; Kerkvliet, 2014; Labbé and Boudreau, 2015).

Order, unruliness, and urban development

The histories of urban development in Hanoi and Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City have been marked by repeated attempts to organize life around principles of formal order, often imposed from above. Such attempts have undoubtedly left important marks on Vietnam's two largest cities. These include the gridlines of French colonial streets, American-era modernist planning schemes in Saigon, socialist attempts to build central planned solutions to collective problems in Hanoi, and assertions about the importance of a distinct form of "urban civilization" found in both cities. Since at least the colonial era, however, it has also been clear that attempts to impose top-down order have always existed in tension with more improvisational forms of urban life – auto-constructed housing, rule-breaking, and social and spatial porosity.

Two countervailing tendencies can thus be discerned in the way urban life and urbanization have played out in Hanoi and Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City. On the one hand, both cities have been described as desperately unregulated, "unplanned," "spontaneous," and historically marked by wild urbanization – what one author, referring to Saigon during the period of the American War, called "une urbanisation sauvage" (Quach-Langlet, 1991). Another author, referring to more recent city life in Hanoi, has called it "out of control" (Thomas, 2002). On the other hand, urban spaces are celebrated as engines of individual entrepreneurialism and innovation, as a site of political and ideological fence-breaking (*phá rào*) where people engage in experimentation with new forms of governance (Đặng, 2009).

Put simply, when it comes to governing cities, the Vietnamese state appears both authoritarian and *laissez-faire* at once. On one level, the history of Vietnamese city planning over the last century or so has been repeatedly marked by attempts by leaders or experts to implement visions of order onto landscapes of human activity deemed chaotic or out of control. Yet on another level, anyone who has ever visited a Vietnamese city knows that they are decidedly vibrant places with ebullient street life and an extensive vernacular housing stock. It is impossible to miss the importance of street life, the central role played by alleyways in urban life, the thwarting of zoning regulations, the ongoing flows of unregistered migrants from the countryside into the city, and the persistent dependence on a mixture of formal and informal housing. These vibrant practices of everyday life challenge any claim that Vietnam's modernist ambitions actually guide urban life in anything more than a superficial or "discursive" way. What we see in Vietnamese cities is not a static triumph of a singular formal vision over another more informal vision, but a dynamic relationship wherein everyday forms of urbanism imbue state-centered visions of urban order with a great deal of localized accommodations, exceptions, and adaptations.

Vietnamese cities are heavily regulated, thoroughly policed places where, despite the proliferation of rules and police, it may often seem that anything goes. This is a reminder of the fact that Vietnamese urbanites – old and new, rich and poor – continuously engage with this dynamic of order and chaos as they shape their urban living environment according to their own needs, interests, and aspirations. The dynamic is enacted on a daily basis in numerous ways, but is perhaps most vividly illustrated in the daily cat and mouse games that often transpire between street vendors and city police who routinely seek to clean up the streets of illegal vending. Officially, it is illegal to engage in commerce along city sidewalks in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Despite the bans, however, street traders openly sell their wares to commuting shoppers on sidewalks, and customers regularly crowd the shoulders of the streets where goods are sold. When police arrive, lookouts signal to the traders, who quickly scoop their goods into plastic bags and roll them up in tarps. Some traders scatter, but most simply move a few steps back, clutching their goods and watching as police wagons roll by. Policemen jump out, wave their batons, make menacing gestures, and grab goods that may have been left on the sidewalk. After a rush of excitement, the police continue rolling on and the traders unpack their goods and reclaim the sidewalk. This kind of relationship illustrates the dynamic interaction between state power and everyday forms of resistance in Vietnamese cities (Koh, 2008). On the one hand, the routinized enactment of police control suggests a will to control chaos and impose order on society (Jensen, Peppard et al., 2013, p. 115). But on the other hand, the traders almost always manage to come back, which reveals a certain degree of permissiveness on the part of authorities and no small amount of resilience on the part of the people (Drummond, 2000; Kim, 2015; Thomas, 2002). The game that transpires between police and street traders can in many ways serve as a symbol for urban life in Vietnam, which, as this chapter has shown, is defined by the pervasive will to impose order, as well as by an equally powerful and pervasive will to thwart such assertions of order.

Notes

1 Our focus on the dynamic between order and permissiveness does not mean that laws are always transgressed. In fact, there are many cases that show evidence for strong popular conformity to urban laws. Clear examples include the December 15, 2007 law requiring motorcycle riders to wear helmets and the 1994 law banning New Year's fireworks. It was assumed in both cases that there would be popular resistance to the laws, but in both cases compliance was nearly universal almost immediately after the laws went into effect.

2 The next most populous cities are Haiphong (1.98 million), followed by Can Tho (1.25 million) and Danang (1.05 million). These official figures exclude large numbers of unregistered rural migrants.

3 For more on the naming of the city as Hanoi, see Papin (2001: 198).

4 This period includes four years of Japanese occupation (1941–1945).

5 In 2008 Hanoi annexed the province of Ha Tay (*Hà Tẩy*). This more than tripled the capital's total area (from 900 to 3,300 km²) and doubled its population (from 2.6 to 6.4 million).

6 In recent years, spatial development plans in both cities have regularly also involved foreign consultants.

7 Since the 1990s the prime minister approved only two new construction master plans for Hanoi in 1992 (revised in 1996, 1998, and 2007) and 2013 and only one for Saigon in 1993 (revised in 1998 and 2010).

8 For further discussion of the hộ khẩu system, see Bélanger (this volume).

9 These figures do not account for temporary, seasonal, and returning migrants.

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22

SOCIOCULTURAL LIFE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN RURAL VIETNAM'S LOWLANDS

Hy Van Luong and Phan Văn Dốp

The Vietnamese lowlands include the Red River Delta and a small number of villages in officially classified mid-land provinces in the northern part of the country,[1] villages along the central coast, and most of the southeast region and the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam.[2] The overwhelming majority of inhabitants in the rural lowlands of Vietnam are ethnic Vietnamese (almost 40 million in 2009). According to the 2009 Vietnamese population census, they also included over 900,000 Khmer, 250,000 ethnic Chinese, and about 125,000 Chăm (Vietnam-GSO-Population and Housing Census Steering Committee, 2010, p. 134).[3]

Over the last three decades, Vietnam's lowlands have witnessed both rapid changes and remarkable sociocultural continuity. Virtually all lowland villagers have seen substantial improvements in their living standards, as they have seized new economic opportunities in the context of market economy, foreign investments, and rural electrification. Agriculture has been declining in importance, as villagers have diversified their income bases both in the village and through migration. More and more villagers have engaged in industrial employment, trade, and other services, both at home and elsewhere. Within each lowland rural community, many shops and stores have been opened, ranging from specialized wedding dress shops or fertilizer-insecticide stores to more commonly seen variety stores in different neighborhoods. With a reduced rural labor force due to migration and many villagers' switching to other occupations, agriculture has been mechanized to varying degrees throughout the Vietnamese lowlands (Luong, 2018).[4] With rising rural income, life-cycle ceremonies and community rites of solidarity have intensified (see Luong, 1994, 2013; Malarney, 2002, Digregorio and Salemink, 2007, among others). Villagers also gain greater access to public media through television, and among younger Vietnamese, through smart phones and the internet. However, in a remarkable continuity with the long past, sociocultural life in rural Vietnamese lowlands varies significantly from one region to another and from one ethnic group to another. This chapter examines these variations and discusses major analytical frameworks used to explain the sociocultural diversity in rural Vietnamese lowlands.

Political Economy, Ecology, and Rural Community Structure

The Vietnamese lowlands are less diverse ecologically and ethnically than the mid-lands and highlands of Vietnam, which deserve a separate and full discussion. The lesser diversity

notwithstanding, the lowlands' ecology ranges from the mangrove forest of the southernmost part of Vietnam, to the long sea coast with fishing communities, to deltas with agricultural villages. Among these villages, ecological conditions vary from the long-settled Red River Delta with an extensive dyke and irrigation system, to the Mekong Delta with less elaborate water control and a frontier environment until the early twentieth century.

The Red River Delta and the central coast, on the one hand, and the Mekong Delta, on the other, have distinctive land-holding and stratification patterns to this day. In the eighteenth century, southern Vietnam reportedly had many agricultural latifundia, cultivated in many cases by slaves and with up to 300 to 400 cattle (Lê Quý Đôn, 1977, p. 345; cf. Li Tana, 1998, p. 128, p. 144–46). The rice surplus from fertile southern fields and latifundia was regularly transported by boats to central Vietnam and to China (Lê Quý Đôn, 1977, p. 345). The sharp contrast between large landowners and landless laborers has continued for centuries in the southern third of Vietnam. In the 1930s, in Pierre Gourou's estimate, approximately two-thirds of the agricultural households in the Mekong Delta did not have any land, while less than 1 percent of the rural households (2.5 percent of the landowners) owned 45 percent of the land in estates of 50 hectares or more (Gourou, 1940, p. 272). If we include those owning more than 5 hectares of land, over 9 percent of the rural households (28 percent of the landowners) owned 87.5 percent of the agricultural land in this part of southern Vietnam (ibid., p. 272). In the 1930s, the Vietnamese landlord Trần Trịnh Trạch owned between 110,000 hectares and 150,000 hectares of rice fields, 50,000 hectares of salt fields, and even an airstrip for his private airplane (Phạm Trường Giang, 2016; Brocheux, 1972, p. 172). The private ownership and large concentration of land in the Mekong Delta resulted partly from the French colonial policy of quickly selling land reclaimed through water control in order to recoup the state's infrastructure investment costs.

With land concentration comes landlessness. Even after the land reforms in the southern half of Vietnam from the late 1950s to 1972, as well as further land reform and the attempt at collectivization by the government of unified Vietnam in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in 1998, the percentages of landless rural households were estimated at 21.3 percent in the Mekong Delta and 28.7 percent in the southeast (region around Hồ Chí Minh City) (Vietnam and World Bank, 1999, p. 24).[5] Large landholdings of over 100 hectares had re-emerged in the Plain of Reeds in southern Vietnam by the mid-1990s (Đặng Phong, 1995, pp. 167–168; Nguyễn Đình Hướng, 1999, pp. 425, 562).[6]

By contrast, in the northern Red River Delta, Gourou estimated that in the 1930s, only 12 percent of the rural households were landless and that 7.5 percent of rural households (or 8.5 percent of landowners) owned 54 percent of the private land (Henry, 1932, p. 109; cf. Gourou, 1940, p. 229). In the late 1990s, the estimated percentages of landless rural households stood at 5.1, 7.7, and 4.5 percent, respectively, in the south central coast, the northern panhandle of central Vietnam, and the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam, in contrast to over 20 percent in the southern third of Vietnam (Vietnam and World Bank, 1999, p. 24).

While land distribution in the southern third of Vietnam has become less unequal in comparison to that in the French colonial era, many other aspects of the historical pattern of land tenure there have largely withstood state interventions since the 1950s. Notwithstanding a uniform legal framework of a unified Vietnam since 1975 and a decade of experiment with collectivization, agricultural land in southern Vietnam has been under *de facto* private ownership, in contrast to collective ownership in other parts of the Vietnamese lowlands.[7] In the Red River Delta and the central coast, by the late 1980s, collectively owned agricultural land was under the control of agricultural cooperatives and local administrations.[8] In 1994, this collectively owned land within each village was allocated to agricultural villagers on a relatively egalitarian basis for 20-year use.[9] In the southern third of Vietnam, the short-lived experiment with

agricultural cooperatives had failed by the late 1980s. In the late 1980s, many southern rural dwellers with large landholdings in 1975 were able to reclaim the majority of their land (Luong, 1994, pp. 101–102; Dang, 2018, pp. 210–213; Lâm Quang Huyên, 1997, p. 175; Lâm Quang Láng, 2017, p. 382). Collapsing southern agricultural cooperatives, controlling little land, could not carry out the allocation of collective land in 1994 or thereafter as done in the central coast and the north. For the poor, in the late 1980s, authorities in the southern province of Long An gave each landless household 1.5 hectares of agricultural land in the newly reclaimed Plain of Reeds (Đồng Tháp Mười). Authorities in An Giang province also encouraged the poor to move to the Long Xuyên Quadrangle where the government conducted water control work from 1988 to 1995 in order to increase the cultivated surface (Lâm Quang Láng, 2017, p. 383). From 2001 to 2003, the central government and authorities in An Giang province also bought some land to give back to 4,850 Khmer households who had lost land in their flight from the border war with the Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s, filed grievances to reclaim their land, and refused to move away from their Khmer communities into the Long Xuyên Quadrangle (ibid., p. 384–390). However, in the Plain of Reeds, due to rat infestation and consecutive crop losses, many landless households sold their land at low prices, leading to the concentration of land and the emergence of many large private farms, some with over 100 hectares.[10] While not all landless households in contemporary rural southern Vietnam are poor, in general, rural southern Vietnam has been more sharply stratified than rural northern and central coastal regions due to historically rooted differences in land regimes.

Systematic analyses of landholding stratification across ethnic groups and within ethnic minorities in rural Vietnamese lowlands are not possible, neither for the French colonial period nor for the past few decades, due to the lack of sufficiently large and reliable data sets. In the colonial period, the reported largest landholding of roughly 1,000 hectares by a member of the former Chăm royal family (Phan An, 1990, p. 119) or by a Khmer landowner (Phan An, 1991, p. 134) was far below that of at least 110,000 hectares of rice fields and 50,000 hectares of salt fields by the ethnic Vietnamese landowner Trần Trịnh Trạch in the lower Mekong Delta. At the other end of the ownership spectrum, it is not clear what were the percentages of landless cultivators in different ethnic groups in the French colonial period. But in rural Vietnamese lowlands, socioeconomic stratification has been much greater in the southern third of Vietnam than in northern and central regions and seems to have been quite significant among ethnic Vietnamese in southern Vietnam. It is not surprising in this context if the divergence in sociocultural practices has been greater in southern Vietnam than in the central coast and the Red River Delta. Such a divergence is reflected, for example, in the practice of the well-off ethnic Vietnamese households in southern Vietnam not accepting cash donations at funerals (*miễn phúng điếu*), whereas such donations are commonly accepted by their counterparts in other regions and in other ethnic groups in the lowlands.

From a cultural ecological perspective, A. Terry Rambo has attempted to explain the sociocultural differences between the Red River Delta and the Mekong Delta up to 1945 on the basis of the long-term disparities in ecological and sociopolitical environments. Specifically, Red River Delta villages are considered relatively closed, in contrast to the relatively open communities in the Mekong Delta. The former were nucleated and socioculturally centripetal, while the latter were dispersed, strung along rivers, canals, and roads, and socioculturally open. As a reflection of this sociocultural difference, ethnic Vietnamese in the Mekong Delta preferred village exogamy (Hickey, 1962, p. 100), in contrast to the preference for village endogamy in the Red River Delta (other indicators of centripetality and openness to be discussed later). Underlying these patterns, suggests Rambo, are the differences in environmental and sociopolitical risks in the two regions. By his account, up until 1945, such threats as dyke

breaks, flooding, and banditry were more pervasive in the Red River Delta than in the Mekong Delta (Rambo, 1973, 1977).

While Rambo's analysis of sociocultural differences in the Vietnamese lowlands focuses on the French colonial period and on the Red River and Mekong Deltas, such differences have not been limited to ethnic Vietnamese and can be observed on a broader spatial and temporal scale. For example, in Ninh Thuận province in the southern central coast, ethnic Chăm communities (*palei*) have been highly nucleated and socioculturally centripetal (*palei* endogamy preferred and strongly practiced).[11] This stands in contrast to Chăm communities in the Mekong Delta, with stilted houses in settlements strung along rivers and canals and their much wider economic and social networks with many members engaging in long-distance trade, even across national boundaries (see Phan Văn Dốp and Nguyễn Thị Nhung, 2006; Taylor, 2006, 2007, this volume). Temporally, the differences in settlement patterns and sociocultural landscapes between the Red River and Mekong Deltas have persisted to the present, despite a general decline in environmental and sociopolitical risks in the Red River Delta and the partial dispersal of settlements in rural northern Vietnam to take advantage of new trading opportunities with the passing traffic on roads. Socioculturally, the rate of village endogamy remains higher in ethnic Vietnamese villages in the Red River Delta and in the central coast than in the Mekong Delta (see Luong, 2009, pp. 402–403 and also Krowolski, 2002) (additional data on the centripetality of Red River Delta villages to be provided later). However, it should be added that in the Vietnamese lowlands, the Khmer of the Mekong Delta have settled more often in nucleated villages on sandy knolls (*gins or phno)* that are usually 200 to 500 meters wide and 1 to 3 kilometers long (Đinh Văn Liên, 1991, p. 85).[12] A number of long-settled Khmer villages also have bamboo hedges (Phan An, 1991, pp. 152–153). Khmer village life centers on the *wat* (Theravada Buddhist pagoda), which serves as a strong centripetal force. Although a small number of Khmer have married ethnic Vietnamese or Chinese over the years, in five studied areas in Trà Vinh province, almost 90 percent of the 1,156 marriages examined around the turn of the century were still among Khmer only (Đặng Thị Kim Oanh, 2007, p. 127).[13] It remains an open question how a cultural ecological approach can explain the differences between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese villages in the Mekong Delta, not to mention a significant variation in family and kinship structure among ethnic groups to which I now turn.

Family and Kinship

In contemporary rural Vietnamese lowlands, significant variations in family and kinship exist, even within the same ecological environment and within an ethnic group. Family and kinship patterns among ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, and Chăm illustrate this diversity.

Ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese practice patrilineal descent, although among Vietnamese, this descent principle is stronger in the Red River Delta and the central coast than in southern Vietnam. As a reflection of this difference, among ethnic Vietnamese in the Red River Delta and the central coast and among ethnic Chinese in southern Vietnam, it is a son who normally assumes responsibility for worshipping deceased parents and other patrilineal ancestors, while among ethnic Vietnamese in southern Vietnam, married daughters occasionally take over some of this responsibility even when their brothers and the brothers' sons are alive.

Although strongly suppressed by the state at the height of the command economy, patrilineages among ethnic Vietnamese have been revived in the past three decades throughout the Red River Delta and the central coast, manifested in the renovation of ancestral tombs, the (re-)construction of ancestral halls, and annual ancestral worship ceremonies. Within a village, patrilineages compete with one another for prestige, though the tension from such competition

tends to be moderate owing to the high rate of village endogamy over centuries, which means that, in any given village, many women (mothers, wives) within a patrilineage come from other patrilineages in the same village. In the Red River Delta and the central coast, the strength of patrilineages and the higher rate of village endogamy also render kinship ties more extensive within a village and facilitate mutual assistance among villagers. In southern Vietnam, patrilineages are very rare. Many ethnic Chinese in this part of Vietnam have formed same-surname clans (*hội họ, hội tông thân, hội tông tộc*) which normally have ancestral halls and in which genealogical relations among members are not well specified (Nguyễn Duy Bính, 2005, pp. 30–31).[14] The Huỳnh clan in Vị Thanh district of Hậu Giang province even admits ethnic Vietnamese having the same surname (Nguyễn Đệ, 2015, p. 314).

Among ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese, the rule of patrilocal residence is strongly followed (Luong, 2009, pp. 398–401). However, in the Red River Delta and the central coast, with the high degree of village endogamy, many brides just move to other households in the same village and interact often with their natal families, close relatives, and childhood friends after marriage. In southern Vietnam, among ethnic Vietnamese, the higher degree of community exogamy means that, in combination with patrilocal residence, many brides live at a greater distance from their natal families, kin, and friends. The kinship network in the south is much less intricate within a village and spread more widely over a large landscape. It is *partly* in the context of this open landscape and a stronger tendency to marry outsiders in southern Vietnam that we can understand the fact that the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese women becoming brides in Taiwan and South Korea come from the Mekong Delta in the south of Vietnam.[15]

In the context of strong patrilineal descent, in rural northern and central Vietnam, the majority of ethnic Vietnamese families still want sons to continue the patriline. Eldest sons still tend to assume the primary responsibility for the care of elderly parents and for ancestral worship. Living with and caring for elderly parents, eldest sons also tend to inherit parents' houses. However, parents normally give some financial support to younger sons when the latter move out of the parental household upon or soon after marriage. One parent may also live with a younger son to help care for the latter's small children, as small grandchildren are normally entrusted to grandparents when the parents go to work. In the context of rural-urban and international migration, many married children also send their own children back to home villages for care by the grandparents (normally paternal grandparents). Thus, among ethnic Vietnamese, many households in northern and central Vietnam are joint or extended households, while the majority, established by younger sons moving out of parental households, are nuclear (Luong, 2009, p. 398).

In southern Vietnam, among ethnic Vietnamese, daughters normally move to their husbands' households upon marriage, and elder sons tend to move out of parental households when their younger brothers get married. The youngest son and his wife tend to stay with the son's parents in the parental household to care for parents in old age, to inherit the parents' house, and to assume a greater responsibility for parental worship after the death of parents. However, in southern Vietnam, ancestral worship can also be assumed more easily than in the north and the central coast by daughters if a deceased couple has no son or if a son does not fulfill his duty to his elder sister's satisfaction. Ancestral worship duties in the south can also be divided among different children and grandchildren, with one worshipping one deceased parent or grandparent and another/others taking care of the other deceased parent or other grandparents.[16]

Death anniversaries are major occasions for the gathering of relatives. Normally, among ethnic Vietnamese, all sons and daughters, their spouses, and their children, as well as siblings, nephews, and nieces of the deceased attend a death anniversary. Some friends of the children or children-in-law of the deceased and the children-in-law's parents as well as some neighbors may also be invited. If daughters are obligated to attend their parents' death anniversaries, the

obligation is reduced for their own children and grandchildren, while sons, paternal grandchildren, and great-grandchildren still have an obligation, reflecting a patrilineal bias in the kinship of ethnic Vietnamese.

In contrast to ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese, the Chăm in southern coastal Vietnam (in the provinces of Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận) continue to practice matrilineal kinship *de rigueur*. Descent is traced from mother to daughter. Inheritance goes the same way. However, some agricultural land may be lent to married-out sons (moving into their wives' households) until their death, either due to sons' hardships or to provide incentives for sons to stay close to natal families and to facilitate the sons' assistance to their parents' and sisters' families (see also Ngô Phương Lan, 2015, pp. 359–360 on the loan of agricultural land to sons; see Phan Xuân Biên, 1989b, p. 184 on marriages within a village). In inheritance, the daughter, preferably the youngest, who stays with the parents and takes care of the parents in their old age, will receive more land and the parents' house (Phan Xuân Biên, 1989b, p. 179; Ngô Thị Phương Lan, 2015, pp. 359–360).

Intriguingly, despite the difference in prevailing principles of descent, the kinship structure of a Chăm village (*palei*) in the southern central coast resembles that of a northern Vietnamese village in the importance of lineages, the multiplicity of lineages within a village, the strong encouragement of village endogamy, and the extensive kinship network within a village (see Phan Xuân Biên, 1989a, pp. 157–160 on Chăm matrilineages; and Phan Văn Dốp, Phan Quốc Anh, and Nguyễn Thị Thu, 2014; 408 on the number of matrilineages within Chăm villages in Ninh Thuận province). Chăm lineages in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận do not have ancestral halls like many Vietnamese patrilineages in the Red River Delta and the central coast. But they have lineage cemeteries or burial grounds (*kut or ghur*) where considerable financial resources have recently been invested (see Phan Văn Dốp, Phan Quốc Anh, and Nguyễn Thị Thu, 2014, p. 89–91). Among the Chăm, life-cycle ceremonies like weddings and funerals are major occasions for mutual assistance.

Among the Chăm in the southern third of Vietnam, all of whom practice Islam, descent shows a complex hybridity. On the one hand, sons receive much bigger shares of the parents' properties than daughters do (Phan Văn Dốp and Nguyễn Việt Cường, 1991, p. 298). On the other, almost two-thirds of the 400 surveyed marriages involve matrilocal residence, and less than 30 percent involve patrilocal residence (Phan Văn Dốp and Nguyễn Thị Nhung, 2006, pp. 138–139; cf. Taylor, 2006).

Among the Khmer, kinship is essentially bilateral. Land is bequeathed to both sons and daughters, and the daughter who takes care of the parents in their old age receives the parents' house. Postmarital residency is more flexible than among ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, and the Chăm of the southern central coast. The Khmers' stated preference for a matrilocal residence notwithstanding, a study in the mid-1990s in Trà Vinh province shows that matrilocal residence was only slightly more frequent than patrilocal residence (Nguyễn Khắc Cảnh, 1998, pp. 68–73). Another study of 1,156 marriages of Khmer people in four communes and a small town in Trà Vinh province reveals that 45, 30, and 25 percent of them involve, respectively, patrilocal, matrilocal, and neolocal residence (Đặng Thị Kim Oanh, 2007, pp. 131–132).[17]

Gerald Hickey has attributed the weakened patrilineal descent among ethnic Vietnamese in southern Vietnam to a washing-out process "where the traditional organization and social practices have tended to become simplified, less rigid, diminished, or completely disappeared" (Hickey, 1958, p. 415). Scholars in Vietnam tend to emphasize a historical-diffusion process, particularly the Vietnamese contact with the matrilineal Cham and the bilateral Khmer in their southward expansion. This emphasis on historically grounded contact and diffusion is also quite prevalent in Vietnamese scholarship on other sociocultural practices, ranging from "intangible"

cultural ones (for example, the worship of female goddesses like Thiên Y A Na, attributed to Chăm influence) as well as tangible ones like food and clothing (Phan Thị Yến Tuyết, 1991, 1993, among many scholars and publications). However, this analytical framework does not explain, among many sociocultural practices in rural Vietnamese lowlands, why the Chăm's matrilineal descent is not weakened due to the contact with the patrilineal ethnic Vietnamese, why ethnic Vietnamese might have been influenced by the Chăm and the Khmer in kinship but not in clothing, or why Chăm women's clothing has not been influenced much by the Vietnamese. In other words, cultural contact/diffusion may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the understanding of the variation in sociocultural practices in rural Vietnamese lowlands and elsewhere.

Beyond Family and Kinship

Among ethnic Vietnamese, the strong centripetal orientation of a northern community is reflected not only in the stronger village endogamy but also in the proliferation of village-based voluntary associations, most notably same-age, school alumni, same-military service, and credit associations (respectively, *hội đồng niên, hội đồng học, hội đồng ngũ, họ*) within the village and same-village associations (*hội đồng hương*) among migrants.[18] In Hanoi, same-village associations (mostly at the *thôn* level) proliferate among migrants from the Red River Delta.[19] These village-based associations serve as the bases for extensive and formalized mutual assistance among rural northern Vietnamese, ranging from interest-free loans to gifts and mutual labor assistance during house construction or at increasingly large weddings and funerals. In southern Vietnam, formal associations are much fewer in number (Luong, 2018, pp. 305–306), both in villages and in urban contexts, since southerners rely more on informal dyadic ties in both kinship and non-kinship relations. Among southerners, labor assistance and interest-free housing loans are also much more limited (Luong, 2016, pp. 55–56). In southern Vietnamese villages, credit associations, while as numerous as in a northern village, require members in need and receiving money early to pay indirect interest (say, receiving only 700,000 VND instead of the normal 1 million VND from other members). This amount of indirect interest is determined through a bidding process. In the central coastal province of Quảng Ngãi, this indirect interest is capped at 10 percent. In a northern village, by contrast, there is no bidding process, and whoever is considered to have the greatest need will receive the full amount from other members (Luong, 2010a, pp. 221–222). This difference reflects a higher degree of commercialization in southern Vietnam compared to other regions of the Vietnamese lowlands. Beyond rural communities, in Saigon, among migrants from the Mekong Delta, same-origin associations (*hội đồng hương*) are found mainly at the provincial level, rarely at the district and commune levels (*huyện & xã*), and are unheard of at the *ấp* level. (See Luong, 2010b, 2016 for a more systematic discussion of the differences in non-kinship relational pattern between ethnic Vietnamese in the Red River and Mekong Deltas.)[20]

Besides voluntary associations, the differences in ritual space also contribute to the significant variations in local Vietnamese sociocultural landscapes. In ethnic Vietnamese Buddhist villages in the Red River Delta, elderly women tend to gather at the Buddhist pagoda twice a month for prayer sessions. They also offer prayer services for the deceased. Elderly men gather at the communal house (*đình*) twice a month. In contrast, in rural southern Vietnam, in an ethnic Vietnamese community, there is seldom one ritual space for men and another for women. There are normally multiple ritual spaces, as there are multiple religious groupings, including different Cao Đài sects, Catholic, Protestant, and Hòa Hảo Buddhist congregations, among others (see Luong, 2017, 2007).

Among non-Buddhist Vietnamese and other ethnic groups, religious institutions tend to serve as powerful centers of gravity: the Catholic and Protestant churches among Christians (Nguyễn Đức Lộc, 2013; Nguyễn Hồng Dương, 2011), the Caodaist temple (*thánh thất*) among the followers of Cao Đài religion (Huỳnh Ngọc Thu, 2017), the *wat* among the Khmer (Taylor, 2014; Trần Hồng Liên, 2002b), the mosque among Muslim Chăm (Phan Văn Dốp, 2012; Taylor, 2007), the Chăm temple among Ahier and Awal Chăm (Phan Văn Dốp, Phan Quốc Anh and Nguyễn Thị Thu, 2014, pp. 96–119), and the Buddhist pagodas and non–Buddhist temples (worshipping Thiên Hậu, Quan Công, Ông Bổn, etc.) among ethnic Chinese (Trần Hồng Liên, 2005; Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, Trần Hồng Liên and Phan An, 2017).[21]

Among Khmer, *wên* is a group of a few kinship-related households which provides food for monks on a rotation basis. Much more elaborate in organization are the Catholics and ethnic Chinese. Among Catholics, a parish (*giáo xứ, họ đạo*) is organized in terms of quarters (*khu*), as well as groups based on age, marital status, and activities (like choir, musical instrument group, etc.) (Nguyễn Đức Lộc, 2013, pp. 54–69). Among ethnic Chinese in rural southern Vietnam, temples serve as the physical bases for *hội quán* (in effect, community associations). However, ethnic Chinese have also formed other associations: clans, ethno-dialectal associations (Cantonese, Teochiu, Fukien, Hainanese, Hakka), teacher–alumni associations of Chinese-language schools, and musical/sport associations, among others.[22] The proliferation of formal associations among ethnic Chinese bears a resemblance to that among ethnic Vietnamese in a Red River Delta village. In the past quarter of century, ethnic Chinese have also established *hội tương tế* (mutual assistance association) in many localities, rural districts, and provincial capitals that have served as umbrella organizations for many ethnic Chinese groupings (Nguyễn Đệ, 2015, p. 317).[23]

Analytical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks which have frequently been used to explain the variations in socio–cultural life in rural Vietnamese lowlands have been discussed: cultural ecology and cultural diffusionism. While insightful in certain aspects, they also encounter empirical anomalies, as previously discussed.

Focusing on enduring social relational configurations as a fundamental dimension of socio–cultural fabric among ethnic Vietnamese, Luong centers his analysis on the concept of social capital, the cultivation and maintenance of social relations which involve reciprocity and can be mobilized in daily life and moments of social crises (cf. Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). Luong suggests that among ethnic Vietnamese, people of the Red River Delta and the central coast have a different social capital configuration than southerners, with greater efforts of the former in cultivating and formalizing social relations, both in terms of obligations and organization (partly through the establishment of patrilineages and voluntary associations with their explicit rules). As a reflection of lesser commercialization in a northern and central coastal rural community, these rules specify obligations for mutual assistance in time, labor, and interest-free loans, as well as lesser monetary expenditures per event (Luong, 2010b, 2016). These formalized relations within organizational frameworks, together with the relatively high rates of community endogamy over centuries, lead to considerably denser and tighter social networks within the community, which facilitate collective monitoring of social behavior, enforcing local norms, and reducing transaction costs in social and economic exchanges (Luong, 2018). In contrast, in southern Vietnam, among ethnic Vietnamese, social relations are less formalized in terms of organization and obligations, with lesser mutual assistance in time, labor, and interest-free loans. At the community level, kinship and non-kinship relations tend to be dyadic and more centrifugal, leading to looser social networks *within* a community.

Northern and central coastal villagers' social capital investments tend to yield greater return, as reflected in more interest-free loans at the individual and household levels and their faster rates of per capita income growth since 2000 than among southern villagers (Luong, 2010b, 2016, 2018; see also Pannier, 2015; Tessier, 2010). If interest-free loans among southerners come primarily from shop owners in the form of purchase on credit, for northern and central coastal villagers, they come from a wider range of sources, including fellow association members, leading to a much higher percentage of debts being interest-free among northern and central coastal villagers (Luong, 2018, p. 299). The rising income of many northern and central coastal villagers, resulting partly from their migration and translocal linkages, has been thus used to strengthen intra-village relations through interest-free loans as well as through increasingly large weddings and funerals (Luong, 2016, p. 45). Many wealthy villagers make generous donations for the rebuilding of ancestral halls and other places of worship in their native villages, motivated partly by a strong sense of local identity and a competition with other patrilineages and other villages. The tighter intra-community networks in the Red River Delta and the central coast also facilitate the organization of village festivals with elaborate processions and ceremonies in competition with surrounding communities (Luong, 2017; Luong and Trương Huyền Chi, 2012; see also Nguyễn Thị Phương Châm, 2009; Digregorio and Salemink, 2007). In general, while social relations (*quan hệ*) are important in the social fabric of all ethnic Vietnamese communities, they take on different configurations, with varying degrees of effectiveness in mobilization.

One might hypothesize that the greater efforts of Vietnamese in the Red River Delta and the central coast to cultivate social relations result from more shortages of goods and services and greater institutional weaknesses in these regions than in southern Vietnam.[24] But there is no clear evidence to that effect (see Luong, 2016, 2018). Nor is there clear evidence that the conformity to institutional rules is weaker in northern and central coastal Vietnam than in southern Vietnam, leading to greater uncertainty in the socio-political environment and consequently to the greater reliance on social connections for problem solving in the two former regions.[25] It is simplistic to attribute the importance of social connections *solely* to shortages of goods and services and institutional weaknesses. We need to take into account different enduring models of and for reality in different regions in order to account not only for the greater investment in social capital but also, among other things, the greater strength of patrilineal descent in northern and central coastal Vietnam than in southern Vietnam.

It is possible that the different social capital configurations and enduring models for reality in the Red River Delta and the central coast, on the one hand, and the Mekong Delta, on the other, result from the long-standing greater spatial mobility in a frontier context in the latter region (see Taylor, this volume), which renders formal voluntary organizations less stable and less effective. We can attempt to analyze long-term historical and ecological reasons for the difference in the model for reality between the northern Red River Delta and the southern Mekong Delta in Vietnam (see for example, Rambo, 1973, 1977), but it is not clear that this variation can be reduced to short-term differences in political economy and institutional contexts.

Conclusion

Rural Vietnamese lowlands have been diverse ecologically, ethnically, and socioculturally. Communities in the rural lowlands have also experienced the transformative attempts of many colonial and non-colonial states and have become increasingly connected over time to other localities, other lowland regions, and other nations. The state's transformative efforts were quite intense in North Vietnam from 1954 to 1986 and in the southern half of the country for a decade following the reunification of the country. But these state efforts have mixed results at

best, since, for example, despite the state's promotion of gender equality, the strong patrilineal practices of northern and central Vietnamese and the matrilineal kinship of the Cham remain essentially intact. Regional sociocultural differences among ethnic Vietnamese have not been eliminated or significantly reduced. It remains to be seen to what extent globalization, increasing translocal linkages, and rising income will lead to a fundamental transformation of the diverse sociocultural landscape of rural Vietnamese lowlands. The ongoing interplay of diverse local dynamics, the state, and globalization in rural Vietnamese lowlands provides rich data for testing different theoretical frameworks and for theoretical reformulation in anthropology and the social sciences at large.

Notes

1 In the Red River Delta and the central coast today, a village (*làng* in vernacular Vietnamese) normally corresponds to a hamlet (*thôn*). Among ethnic Vietnamese, members of the same village worship the same village deity (*thành hoàng*). A commune (*xã*) is created from an administrative merger of many villages. In southern Vietnam, a village may correspond to one or many hamlets (*ấp*), although the sense of village identity is normally not as strong as in the north and the center.

2 The southeast region has a small number of communities in hilly areas, with fairly significant forest resources and with some ethnic minority population, mainly in Đồng Nai and Bình Phước provinces. The Mekong Delta also has some hilly areas near the southernmost part of the Vietnam-Cambodia border. These hilly areas are not considered a part of the Vietnamese lowlands under focus here.

   In this chapter, "southern Vietnam" includes the Southeast and the Mekong Delta, corresponding to "Cochinchina" in the French colonial period and *Nam bộ* in the current official Vietnamese discourse.

3 According to the 2009 population census, almost 50 million ethnic Vietnamese lived in rural Vietnam (Vietnam-GSO-Population and Housing Census Steering Committee 2010: 134). However, rural Vietnam includes both the lowlands and the midlands–highlands, and there is no further breakdown on the basis of this distinction in population census publications. In my rough estimate, rural Vietnamese lowlands had almost 40 million Vietnamese at the time of the 2009 census. According to the census (*ibid*.), there were also 1.06 million Khmer, 250,000 ethnic Chinese, and about 140,000 Chăm in rural Vietnam. Virtually all 250,000 ethnic Chinese lived in the rural lowlands. About 15,000 of the Chăm rural dwellers lived in the highlands of Bình Định and Phú Yên provinces. Probably over 100,000 Khmer rural dwellers lived in hilly areas in Tây Ninh, An Giang, and Kiên Giang provinces. Subtracting these estimates of Chăm and Khmer dwellers in the midlands and highlands, I arrive at the estimate of over 900,000 Khmer and 125,000 Chăm living in the rural lowlands of Vietnam in 2009.

4 In rural Vietnamese lowlands today, plowing is done mainly by tractors and harvesting and rice stalk thrashing, more and more by machines.

5 The 1958 and 1970–1972 land reforms of the Saigon government restricted landholding, respectively, to 100 and 15 hectares and distributed land appropriated from many medium and large landowners to the rest of the rural population. In the 1956–1969 period, 850,712 hectares of land were appropriated from landlords for distribution to over 400,000 tenants (Lâm Thanh Liêm 1995: 70). In the 1970 reform, the Saigon government restricted owner-cultivated agricultural landholdings to 15 hectares in southern Vietnam (*Nam bộ*) and to 5 hectares in the more heavily populated Central Vietnam (*Trung bộ*). Except for ancestor worship and religious land, land not directly cultivated by its owner and above the regionally specified limit was appropriated. 858,821 tenants received slightly over 1 million hectares of land in the 1970–1972 land reform under the Saigon government (*ibid*: 75–79). According to Lâm Thanh Liêm, with those two land reform campaigns, about 1.3 million tenants received almost 1.9 million hectares of land appropriated from landlords. However, Lâm Quang Huyên strongly disputed the beneficial effects of the Saigon government's land reforms. He argues that in the 1946–1954 period, as big landlords had fled to cities to avoid the armed conflict between the French and the anti-French forces, tenants had cultivated land for free or at a low rent as a part of the Hồ Chí Minh government's policy. In the 1958 land reform of the Saigon government, tenants receiving land had to pay for it over six years and those not receiving land had to pay higher rent (Lâm Quang Huyên 1997: 35–46). Lâm Quang Huyên suggests that the Saigon government's 1970–1972 land reform ratified communist land redistribution and even took back land held by communist-supporting cultivators (*ibid*: 46–62). According to Lâm Quang Huyên, in the southern third of Vietnam, from 1975 to 1982,

the government redistributed 271,785 hectares of agricultural land from the well-off to the landless and the poor (*ibid.*: 168–176).

6 Large private plantations, cultivating coffee and peppercorn, have emerged in the Central Highlands. However, the highlands are beyond the scope of this chapter.

7 This national legal framework of reunified Vietnam since 1975 specifies that land is under collective and state ownership and that people have only usufruct rights.

8 Even in northern and central Vietnam, residential land has always been under the control of families and individuals, not of villages or agricultural cooperatives.

9 The reallocation of agricultural land which was supposed to take place in 2014 in the Red River Delta and the central coast has been suspended for now.

10 A number of households allocated land in the Long Xuyên Quadrangle also sold their land due to farming difficulties (Lâm Quang Sáng 2017).

11 In Ninh Phước district of Ninh Thuận province, an area with a sizeable Chăm population, Chăm villages are frequently surrounded by brick walls and cacti (Phan Xuân Biên 1989a: 132).

12 These sandy knolls can be as short as half a kilometer and as long as 15 kilometers and can have more than one village (Đinh Văn Liên 1991: 85). A smaller number of Khmer live along rivers and canals (like ethnic Vietnamese in the Mekong Delta), at foothills along the Vietnamese-Cambodia border, or between the knolls. According to Đinh Văn Liên, many Khmer settlements between the knolls have involved human construction to elevate the settlement areas in a knoll pattern (Đinh Văn Liên 1991: 86–88). (See also Taylor 2014.)

  Ethnic Chinese in the Mekong Delta do not form exclusive spatial clusters and have settled along rivers, canals, and roads like ethnic Vietnamese and Chăm in this part of the country. They tend to live in ethnically mixed communities. Their interethnic marriages in the early days of migration and settlement in Vietnam due to a big gender imbalance among migrants may contribute to this phenomenon.

13 Data are not available regarding the percentages of village-endogamous and village-exogamous marriages among the examined marriages in the studied areas.

14 In the city of Biên Hòa, *hội họ* is not a clan but an ethno-dialectal group (*hội họ Quảng Đông, hội họ Triều Châu, hội họ Phúc Kiến, hội họ Hẹ*) (Nguyễn Đệ 2015: 314).

15 Hồ Thị Thanh Nga (2014: 80–81) has hypothesized that due to a weaker patrilineal kinship system in southern Vietnam, southern daughters feel a stronger obligation to support parents than their northern counterparts do and consider marrying foreigners a way to gain more income overseas and to support their parents at home.

16 Miyazawa (2016) has pointed out through her archival analysis that before the twentieth century, in Đông Ngạc village of northern Hà Đông province, properties were also divided to married daughters, and that daughters also had duties at deceased parents' death anniversary ceremonies and could assume the primary responsibility for their parents' worship if the parents had no son. In the contemporary Red River Delta, daughters and their family members (spouses and children) routinely attend deceased parents' death anniversaries. However, in the village of Sơn Dương in northern Phú Thọ province today, in the case of a couple with a daughter and no son, it is still common for the husband's patrilineal nephew (brother's son) to assume the official responsibility for the couple's worship after their death (Luong 2010a: 228). In the village of Hoài Thị in the northern province of Bắc Ninh today, brothers may divide the duties of worshipping deceased parents between themselves, with one organizing the death anniversary ceremony for the father, and the other for the mother (see Luong 2013). However, married daughters cannot share with sons the primary responsibility for the worship of deceased parents.

17 Nguyễn Khắc Cảnh has suggested that the Khmer practice bilateral kinship in a number of communities and lean more towards patrilineal descent or matrilineal descent in others (Nguyễn Khắc Cảnh 1998: 76–82). On the basis of her postmarital residence data, Đặng Thị Kim Oanh (2007: 131–132) hypothesizes that Khmer kinship in the Mekong Delta is in the process of shifting towards patrilineal descent under the Vietnamese influence. However, we need more comprehensive data, including on inheritance patterns and village endogamy/exogamy, in order to understand better family and kinship in Khmer communities in the Mekong Delta.

18 Same-military-service associations (*hội đồng ngũ*) are formed among villagers close in age, entering the armed forces in the same year, or serving in the same military unit. Smaller in scope, they differ from the large state-sponsored veteran associations (*hội cựu chiến binh* and *hội cựu quân nhân*), which include veterans of different generations. *Hội cựu quân nhân* have been established in the past decade for former military draftees who have served in the armed forces for a short period in the past quarter of century.

19 I cannot ascertain at this point whether same-origin associations also exist among migrants from the same northern central coastal villages in Hanoi or the extent to which same-origin associations at the village level exist among migrants from the Red River Delta or northern central Vietnam living in Saigon or Bình Dương. However, in Bình Dương, workers from northern central Vietnam are widely perceived to have formed very strong networks with concerted action, at times against employers, leading a number of enterprises to discriminate against them, especially male migrants, in the hiring process (Cù Quang Minh 2015).

20 Non-kinship organizations in central coastal communities are not well studied in comparison to those in the Red River and Mekong Deltas. In two Quảng Ngãi communes in the central coast where I have conducted research, patrilineages are powerful institutions.

21 A small number of ethnic Khmer and Chăm have become Christians (Trần Hồng Liên 2002a: 95–101, Phan Văn Dốp, Phan Quốc Anh, Nguyễn Thị Thu 2014: 83).

22 Among ethnic Chinese in rural Vietnam, the three biggest ethno-dialectal groups are Teochiu, Cantonese, and Fukien and the two smaller groups are Hainanese and Hakka (see Mạc Đường 1991: 220–221). Before 1975, there were five ethno-dialectal congregations (*bang*).

23 The mutual assistance association in Sóc Trăng town includes Hòa An *hội quán*, seven Chinese pagodas/temples, a Chinese-language school, and three clans (Nguyễn Đệ 2015: 317). The mutual assistance association in the city of Cà Mau encompasses 13 units: five ethno-dialectal associations (Cantonese, Teochiu, Fukien, Hainanese, and Hakka), three temples (Thiên Hậu, Quan Công, and ông Bổn), two Buddhist pagodas, one musical group, one sport association, and a teacher-alumni association of a Chinese language school (*ibid*.).

24 Some analysts have attributed the importance of social connections *(quanxi)* in the Chinese context to economic shortages and weaknesses in formal institutions, which lead to greater uncertainty and people's reliance on social connections in order to reduce uncertainty (Guthrie 1998, Walder 1986). This reliance on social connections can be seen as a rational choice on the part of individuals and households in the face of shortages and formal institutional weaknesses.

25 Beyond the case of Vietnam, Japan seems to have much stronger formal institutional frameworks than Vietnam and does not have any shortage of goods and services. Yet gifts and social connections remain a very important part of the Japanese sociocultural fabric and political economy.

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23

THE COSMOPOLITAN DELTA

Ethnic Pluralism at the Mouth of the Mekong

Philip Taylor

The Mekong delta is a region of remarkable ethnic diversity. Home to four main ethnic groups, Cham (*Chăm*), Khmer, Chinese and Kinh, it is Vietnam's most ethnically pluralist lowland region. Paradoxically this ethnic diversity flourishes in the region that historically has been Vietnam's most globally integrated. Long renowned for its production of agricultural commodities for export – most notably rice, and more recently, fruit and aquatic produce – the Mekong delta also is a prodigious importer of goods. For those who expect that greater global economic integration will bring about a corresponding decline in local cultural diversity, the Mekong delta provides intriguing evidence to the contrary. Examining the wellsprings of ethnic pluralism in the Mekong delta has the potential to yield important insights into the dynamics of ethnic differentiation in a globalizing Vietnam.

One way of interpreting ethnic pluralism in Southeast Asia is to consider it as a marginal phenomenon that flourishes at the ecological periphery of centralized states. In Vietnam, many observers see the rugged terrain and challenging ecological conditions of the country's mountainous fringes as a check on the diffusion of lowland migrants, political institutions and cultural standards into lands long populated by a host of autonomous and culturally distinct 'ethnic minority' peoples (Taylor, 2008). Cultural pluralism in the low-lying Mekong delta has also been interpreted in this manner. Until recently, the delta was a haven for refugees, sectarians, rebels and millenarian movements, and was subdivided by a patchwork of localized politico-religious and religio-ethnic fiefdoms (Fall, 1955; Ho Tai, 1983; Brocheux, 1995; Biggs, 2010). The Mekong delta's wide rivers, marshes, saline-prone coasts and mountains impeded the 'southward advance' (*Nam tiến*) of centralized rule and cultural institutions and served as a sustaining environment for such cultural heterogeneity.

An alternative way of understanding the delta's diversity is to understand it as a function of translocal linkages. In a world characterized by transnational flows and vast spatial extensions in social worlds (Appadurai, 1996; Werbner, 1999), translocal ethnicity can be seen as a set of cultural reference points, social resources and itineraries that produce affinity among members of a spatially dispersed ethnic group and which gain recognition as distinctive from without. The four major ethnic groups of the Mekong delta each trace their origins and sources of cultural inspiration to sites far beyond the delta. They participate in wide-ranging social, economic and political networks that transgress the boundaries that conventionally define the region. They are spatially mobile and consume cultural products and models that cross borders. The Mekong

delta is node for a variety of translocal ethnic projects each of which is greater in geographical scale than the delta itself or indeed the nation-state into which it has been incorporated.

This chapter offers a new way to look at ethnic particularism in the Mekong delta. Discussing each of the region's major ethnic groups in turn, it argues against views that frame this differentiation as an effect of the isolation of their region from exogenous political and economic forces. To the contrary it attributes this diversity to the plurality of translocal social networks that find a purchase in this region. Ethnic difference in the delta is reproduced in the context of intense translocal and intercultural exchanges.

Cham Muslims

The Cham Muslims of the Mekong delta number about 15,000 people, living in ten settlements along the Bassac River near its intersection with the modern Vietnam-Cambodia border.[1] Scholars tell us that the Chams originate from Champa, a kingdom formerly based in the central coast region of today's Vietnam, and moved to their present location some time after the Vietnamese annexed that land (Lebar et al., 1964; Nakamura, 1999). However, ethnographic investigations among this group suggest that their origins are more diverse than previously suspected. Residents of the Cham settlements trace descent variously to places within modern day Indonesia, Malaysia, Southern Thailand, the Middle East, Cambodia, China and Vietnam, in addition to the historical Champa. Contemporary residents maintain a variety of economic, cultural and religious linkages with many of these places, which are often considered to exemplify cultural ideals espoused as quintessentially Cham. A plurality of languages is spoken by members of this small group, attesting to the multiplicity of sites with which its members maintain linkages, as much as their diverse origins.

Islam is foundational to Cham identity in the Mekong delta. Cham people in this region routinely assert that to be Cham is to be Muslim. Attention to the ethnically composite nature of the community or to the diversity of places from which its members trace descent tends to be submerged by an ideology of common origins in Islam. Items of Islamic material culture such as mosques, saint shrines, gravestones, head coverings and Koranic engravings serve as material markers of Cham identity in the multi-religious context of the delta and orient the community in Islamic space. The rhythm of time in Cham settlements is set by the cycle of prescribed Islamic prayers, fasts, festivals and pilgrimages. Authority and status in the communities turn significantly on demonstrated prowess in such accomplishments as Koranic learning and teaching, knowledge of Arabic, and participation in the *haj*. As Muslims, Chams in the Mekong delta usually de-emphasize particularist ethnic or national identifications and are conscious of belonging to the universal community of the world-wide *umma*.

The Cham are the best travelers in the delta. At any given time, a high proportion of men from the Cham Muslim villages is away from home working as long-distance mobile traders. In the past they travelled by boat, selling textiles to rural settlements along the waterways in Cambodia and the lower delta. Today they tend to travel by land, selling items that have been smuggled across the border. Long-distance traders get to know a particular network of customers in a remote location and sell to them on credit, drawing on relations of trust and a common language. Cham traders affiliated with Mubarak mosque in Châu Giang have close relations with Khmer farmers living 150 kilometres away in Trà Vinh, to whom they sell second-hand shirts, rubber sandals and portable gas cookers. Residents of Châu Giang practice a diverse household economy, whose various components constantly are being adjusted in response to changing conditions at home and away. Income earned from women's local trade and craft activities supplements that earned from men's extralocal ventures. The sale of embroidered caps

to co-religionists in Malaysia has recently replaced the sale of locally woven scarves to rural Khmer communities. More recently, men and women have sojourned in Malaysia where they work in clothing factories and as petty traders. In addition to the *haj*, Chams undertake pilgrimages to religious centers and schools in Southeast Asia to study and profess their faith.

With their stories of origin in diverse, far-flung places, multi-lingualism, Islamic faith, and extra-local livelihoods, the Cham Muslims may well be Vietnam's most cosmopolitan ethnic group. This characteristic is particularly impressive considering their small population and the location of their settlements in an area frequently considered to be remote and culturally backward. Yet the Chams also offer an object lesson in how cosmopolitan transnational identities have been key to the consolidation of localities in the delta. Islam has been a unifying focus in villages whose members espouse disparate origins, speak different languages and spend much of their adult lives living and working far from home. Remittances from far-flung trading ventures support family members who stay behind as well as religious institutions that provide a community focus. People who spend much of their lives in worksites and markets far afield are keen to return to their home mosques to participate in local religious life, festivals, charity and mosque building, finding that these localities provide them a stage on which to demonstrate their piety and earn status within their translocal community. At the same time, it makes the Cham villages the center for constant comings and goings and a site for learning about an array of opportunities that lie beyond the local area.

Chinese

People from the southern coast of China have been migrating to the Mekong delta for several hundred years, lured there by the opportunities for trade and resettlement, and pushed out by China's late-imperial socio-economic decline, and by political crises from the Qing takeover in the seventeenth century to the civil war which ended in 1949. From the eighteenth century at the latest, the Mekong delta became an important port of call in Chinese regional junk routes, which spurred the extraction and trade in natural resources and consolidated the development of local society and polities (Cooke and Li, 2004). Chinese migration was further boosted by French colonial efforts to develop a rice export economy in the delta. Initially serving as manual laborers, the Chinese minority became pivotal in commerce, manufacturing and transportation in the delta and a key group in the formation of its urban centers. Chinese traders located in rural farming communities facilitated the exchange of credit for rice, providing imported goods to farmers on credit that were paid for in rice at harvest time (Purcell, 1951; Brocheux, 1995). As a result, the Chinese of the delta have gained a reputation as economic high achievers, possessed of commercial acumen and associated with prosperous urban living.[2]

An influential strand in elite representations of the Chinese in Vietnam has been to regard them as problematic aliens, whose economic monopolies, ties to China and segregated living arrangements were deemed threatening to the local socio-political order. In the French colonial period, the Chinese commercial monopoly and practice of usury were thought to be major factors behind the landlessness and impoverishment of farmers (Dubreuil, 1910, p. 71; Murray, 1980, pp. 449–457). During the war with France, Vietnamese nationalists portrayed the Chinese as more interested in making a profit by any means possible than participating in the anti-colonial movement (Engelbert, 2008). As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, nationalists had a tense relationship with the Chinese commercial minority, owing to their perceived focus on personal enrichment, sojourner mentality, residence apart in wealthy enclaves and supposedly apolitical orientation (Reid, 1997). After 1975, Chinese commercial networks in Vietnam and their supposed domination of the economy in the south were described as parasitical, and at

odds with the interests of the people and the revolution (Nguyen, 1978). Further compounding the perception of the ethnic Chinese as aliens was the view that emerged in the context of Vietnam's hostilities with China in the late 1970s that the 'Hoa' might serve as a fifth column for China. The response to this view was the mass expulsion of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam in the late 1970s, a pivotal event that damaged Vietnam's relations with China and significantly reduced the presence of ethnic Chinese in all walks of local society.

Conceptions of the Chinese as unassimilated aliens tended to focus on the once segregated and economically dominant commercial center of Chợ Lớn. However, a large proportion of the Mekong delta Chinese live in rural areas, where they long have been more socially integrated than their counterparts in Chợ Lớn. In many areas of the delta, the generic term Teochiu is used in preference to the term Hoa and can be loosely translated as 'integrated Chinese'.[3] By virtue of their economic activities as local rice merchants, creditors and grocery store operators the 'Teochius' live widely dispersed throughout rural areas, with at least one family found in most rural hamlets. Teochius married local non-Chinese spouses, spoke local Khmer and Vietnamese languages, participated in local religious and political networks and their children were socialized in local institutions, from Theravada monasteries to local state schools. Over several generations, descendants of Chinese migrants in many parts of the delta lost all facility in their ancestors' home region dialects, no longer knew the name of their ancestral hometowns, and in many cases began to refer to themselves as Vietnamese, Khmers or Chams. To a certain extent, this process of de-sinicisation may be attributed to national assimilation policies dating to the 1950s. However, it would be a mistake to neglect as a contributing factor the positive embrace by ethnic Chinese and their descendants of cultural identities and attributes associated with the other ethnic groups in the delta with whom their economic, religious and political lives have been closely entwined.

Since the mid-1980s, changes in state policy and the charting of new linkages with the wider Sinophone world have led to a revalorization of Chineseness in the Mekong delta. During an era in which many people in Vietnam were embarking on small family businesses for the first time, ethnic Chinese were held up for emulation as the consummate business class. In popular circles the key to economic success often was traced to such 'Chinese' virtues as hard work, honesty, patience and piety. The pantheon of gods believed to have underwritten the business success of the urban Chinese attracted a wide following among all ethnic groups in the region (Taylor, 2004). Films from Hong Kong and China were followed with enthusiasm and awakened speculative interest among locals in their own heritage as Chinese. Tens of thousands of young women from different ethnic groups in rural areas of the delta married Taiwanese husbands. This emigration, combined with labor migration to Taiwan and to Taiwanese invested factories to the northeast of the delta created a demand for learning Chinese. Mandarin classes were opened all over the delta and Chinese cultural centers were established in many of its towns that introduced locals to Chinese language, arts, culture and sports activities. Among the many participants in this Chinese renaissance in the delta were those who could trace ancestry to southern China. However, the category of Chineseness also was filled with new content, meanings and adherents, underlining the diffuseness and plasticity of this identity, and attesting also to the complexity of the linkages between this region and the greater Sinic world.

Khmer Krom

The ethnic Khmers, or Khmer Krom, differ from the other ethnic groups of the Mekong delta in that they identify as its indigenous people. People of Khmer cultural heritage, they commonly describe themselves as remnant subjects of the Khmer kingdom that held authority in

the lower Mekong delta until the delta and its people were incorporated under Vietnamese rule. Despite the national border that today separates them from their Cambodian counterparts, they continue to share many cultural and religious traits with Khmers in Cambodia. They often refer to themselves as the Khmers of Lower Cambodia (Kampuchea Krom), a self-conscious designation that sits uneasily with the Vietnamese government's view of this group as ethnic minority citizens of Vietnam.

Khmers live in most provinces of Vietnam's Mekong delta, but they are concentrated in areas southwest of the Mekong River (Taylor, 2014). The exact population of those who maintain an identity as Khmers is contested, however, it is unlikely to exceed 2 million or more than one-tenth of the region's population. The majority are poor farmers, residing in villages clustered around a Theravada Buddhist wat, which forms the social, cultural and religious center of Khmer rural communities. The Khmers of this region routinely are depicted in national and international development discourse as geographically remote, disengaged from markets and, by virtue of their low participation in state schooling, lacking the competence to overcome the challenges of modern life. In French and Vietnamese ethnological literature, they are deemed insular, culturally conservative and unworldly, owing to their strong attachment to their villages and temples and the detachment counselled by their faith. In self-representations, Khmer Krom intellectuals often emphasize their moral exceptionalism and disengagement from officially defined mainstream political, cultural and economic spheres. In short, little support exists for a view of the Khmers of the delta as cosmopolitans.

Although the presumption might be that innate or parochial characteristics have enabled the Khmers in Vietnam to survive the multifaceted incorporation of their world, I contend that their identity as Khmers owes a great deal to their sustained translocal and intercultural engagements. Indeed, the local Theravada *wat* has had a vital role as a center for cultural transmission. Khmer Krom people frequently emphasize that without their *wats*, which teach Khmer literacy and other cultural heritage and religious subjects, they long ago would have lost their language, culture and identity. However, the *wats* of the delta are interlinked in a sophisticated monastic education network, incorporating several hundred campuses, which requires student monks to travel from temple to temple over the course of many years to complete the full curriculum. Special classes held in local wats enable Khmer men and women in rural areas to study practical subjects such as computing and English, Thai and Chinese languages. Subregional festivals from annual monastic examinations to boat racing carnivals, and region-wide festivals such as the consecration of a new worship hall, regularly bring together Khmer people from different villages and provinces. These translocal networks have allowed Khmers in the delta to maintain a degree of unity and common identity without state support, and indeed in defiance of official assimilation efforts.

Cambodia long has served as the standard, source and exemplary center of culture for the Khmers of the lower Mekong delta. To this day, architectural, educational and ritual formats in the region self-consciously are modelled on those in Cambodia. Up until Khmer Rouge times, the supreme Buddhist patriarch (*samdeach song*) of Cambodia approved and assigned names to new temples built in the Mekong delta, and monastics and intellectuals travelled back and forward across the border for festive, educational and ritual purposes. Until such forms of cross-border travel were prohibited in the mid-1970s, monks and laymen routinely would travel to Cambodia to undertake higher studies in its secular and monastic schools or conduct meditative retreats. Those returnees who still serve as teachers, abbots and ritual experts are considered the most knowledgeable and authoritative people in local Khmer society. To the present, most of the books used to teach the Khmer monastic curriculum in Vietnam have been published by the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. A healthy flow of smuggled popular cultural products

makes it across the border, and Khmer people of the lower delta enjoy Cambodian language films, music and television programs as well as foreign films translated into the Khmer language in Cambodia.

The flow has not been only one way. The Khmers of the lower Mekong have been significant contributors to the intellectual, cultural and political movements that have shaped modern Cambodia. *Bassac Yu Ke*, a modernized variety of musical theatre which is popular in both Cambodia and Vietnam, is considered to have originated in the region of Sóc Trăng and Trà Cú. Dragon boat racing, which features during the water festival in Cambodia, also is believed by some locals to have originated in Sóc Trăng. Khmer Krom people who travelled freely to and from Cambodia during the French colonial era made contributions to the Cambodian language, culture, ritual reforms and arts. Khmer Krom people contributed to the creation of the first Khmer language newspapers in Cambodia and took part in the cultural modernization program that centered on the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. Major Cambodian nationalist figures such as Son Ngoc Thanh and Lon Nol, as well as not a few high office holders in the Khmer Rouge and the present-day administration in Cambodia have origins in the Khmer communities of the lower Mekong delta. The Khmer Krom diaspora in Cambodia and overseas includes many advocates for Khmer Krom interests who make effective use of the Internet, cellphone and radio broadcasts to communicate with Khmer people inside Vietnam.

Within the Mekong delta Khmer identity is sustained in a web of intercultural relations. Men and women of Southern Chinese origin living around the delta's coastal fringe long have participated in the ritual and social life of Khmer temples: taking part in festivals, donating to refurbishments and sending their sons to ordain. Often their descendants speak Khmer far better than their ancestral language and today a great many practically identify as Khmers. In turn, Khmers in some localities speak Teochiu as the lingua franca in preference to Vietnamese. Cham Muslim people's long-distance trading ventures frequently take them into the heart of Khmer rural communities, where they reside for lengthy periods of time while selling consumables of various kinds, counteracting the lack of markets in such areas. Ethnic Kinh patronize the shrines of Khmer exorcists and amulet makers, believing the Khmers to have mastery over ancient occult forces, and many urbanites have begun to attend Khmer temples, considering the Khmer version of Buddhism to be less corrupted by cultural accretions than the mainstream Mahayana tradition. In such ways these ethnic consociates of the Khmers buy into notions of the Khmers as insular, remote or religiously authentic. Inter-ethnic exchanges informed by such perceptions in turn contribute materially to the reproduction of Khmer localism and cultural difference.

Kinh

Ethnic Việts or Kinh are the numerically and politically dominant ethnic group in the Mekong delta. Known to the French as Annamites, and very often referred to in English as Vietnamese, this group's identity and presence in the delta are, more than any other group in the region, intimately associated with the southward projection of Vietnamese state power and with the myths of Vietnamese nationalism.

Dominant origin myths depict the Kinh of the Mekong delta as the descendants of people from the north and center of present-day Vietnam who, over the course of hundreds of years, escaped oppressive conditions in their ancestral homelands for the relative freedom of the southern delta (e.g. Son Nam, 1973). The new land upon which they trod is deemed to have been wild but fertile, allowing the pioneer settlers to develop a materially abundant and culturally untrammeled version of their native Confucianised tradition. This felicitous evolution was

interrupted by Siamese and Cambodian incursions, and then by French colonization, which imposed an exploitive economic system that favored the French and Chinese. After prolonged popular resistance, the French and the Americans who succeeded them were expelled and the delta was reclaimed for the Vietnamese, who embody a regional variant of national identity that, to this day, is considered close to nature and associated with simplicity, spontaneity and ease of living.

A very different reading of Mekong settlement history situates the Kinh as the principal beneficiaries of the colonial occupation of a region that previously had been dominated by various ethnic others, among them the indigenous Khmers. Through warfare, diplomacy, administrative fiat and sheer demographic pressure the exogenous Việts, backed by the precolonial Nguyễn court, displaced their predecessors and dismantled their political and cultural institutions (Choi, 2004). Far from representing an impediment to Vietnamese tenure in the region, French colonization promoted 'Annamite' immigration into the delta, opened for the benefit of migrants from the north vast new acreages for agricultural exploitation, and enacted policies that enabled Vietnamese administrators, language and cultural institutions to assume supremacy or mainstream status in the delta (Robequain, 1944; Brocheux, 1995). Under the American-supported national government of Vietnam, which succeeded the French, assimilatory policies were advanced that sought to inculcate among its ethnically and religiously diverse population an attachment to a unitary national identity modelled on the cultural competencies and mythic traditions of the ethnic Việts. Testifying to the strong ethnic bias in the approach adopted by the post-colonial Vietnamese state, older generation representatives of Khmer, Chinese and Cham groups still can be heard to remark that the identity of the state is Việt – not Khmer, Chinese or Cham – and that the country belongs to the ethnic majority Việts.

Enter the Vietnamese Communist Party, the most avowedly cosmopolitan of the Kinh-dominated political formations that have laid claim to the Mekong delta. The party has been situated by scholars within a lineage of Vietnamese anti-foreign movements and its own propaganda frequently emphasizes this genealogy; however, it also positioned itself as a proponent of cosmopolitan resistance to feudalism or imperialism, rather than as an ethnically particularist project as such. Hence in their struggle for power against its French and US-backed rivals, party leaders downplayed ethnic differences and emphasized solidarity among the Kinh, Khmer and Chinese peoples of the Mekong delta, the majority of whom were deemed in common to be victims of elite oppression. In the post-war years, the party emphasized unity, harmony and equality among ethnic peoples, portrayed as siblings in a multi-ethnic national family embarked on a common quest for modernity, economic growth and social equity. However, the cosmopolitan rhetoric has been contradicted by the communist state's dependence on Vietnamese as the language of governance, its continued reliance on Kinh-centric national origin myths and the promotion of Kinh migration into minority areas of the delta in the name of 'security' and 'development' (Taylor, 2014).

These official attempts to orchestrate national identity take place in a regional context of great socio-cultural fluidity. A characteristic feature of Kinh culture in the Mekong delta is the pattern of settlement along the multitude of natural and artificial waterways that intersects the delta. As sites for residence, trade and cultural exchanges, the waterways are associated with the emergence of a distinctly cosmopolitan way of being Vietnamese. This is a land of 'open peasant communities', whose outward-looking and urbane character can be distinguished from the bounded corporate villages of the Vietnamese north (Hickey 1964; Rambo, 1973). It is also historically an area of considerable waterborne mobility, with a substantial number of ethnic Việt traders, fishers and transporters living permanently on the waterways of the delta, extending as far west as the great lake of Cambodia (Brocheux, 1995). Here emerged *cải lương*, the

eclectic opera form that is said to symbolize the openness, novelty and hybridity of southern Vietnamese cultural identity (Huynh, 1992). The delta's so-called 'indigenous religions', the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo, exhibit markedly hybrid and universalist tendencies (Huynh, 1992; Taylor, 2001). The spirit beliefs of the Kinh people of this region have drawn inspiration from the Chinese, Khmer and Cham people among whom ethnic Vietnamese have settled as well as from western and pan-Asian sources (Do, 2003; Taylor, 2004). In consequence of interactions with neighbors and regionally specific exogenous influences, the content of Kinh ethnicity has undergone significant shifts.

In a country where governments long have attempted to exert power through assimilation, it is undeniable that a great many of the people in the Mekong delta who today identify as Kinh originate from once-distinct cultural traditions and have been assimilated into Vietnam's officially privileged ethnic identity. However, in this pluralist and communicatively interactive region, processes of integration – the mingling and fusing of multiple influences into a local amalgam – likely have been as important as state-directed assimilation. In this context, the dynamic cultural changes experienced by people who identify as Kinh are as significant as those experienced by their ethnic minority 'siblings'. If, indeed, Kinh residents of the Mekong delta include people whose grandparents might have identified as Khmer or Chinese, one should recall that what it means to be Kinh in this region is a continuing work-in-progress and differs significantly from what that means in Vietnam's northern delta.

The identity of the Vietnamese of the Mekong delta continues to be portrayed in contradictory terms. Some northern intellectuals depict the culture of their compatriots in the southern delta as parochial or localist; others see this identity as rootless and dissipated owing to excessive exposure to external influences. Perhaps no contradiction exists for the great particularity of local culture in the delta is itself a product of the distinct influences that have combined in unique ways to shape life in this region. However, as people drawn from the economically dynamic southern region increasingly have assumed national leadership positions, the distinctive cosmopolitan traditions of the Mekong delta have gained in prestige and recognition as Vietnamese. Once considered a place where cultural standards originating from the imagined cradle of civilization in the north were simplified or abandoned, the Mekong delta has a new status in the wider Vietnamese-speaking world as place where the Vietnamese tradition has been enriched.

The Mekong Delta's Translocal Ethnic Pluralism

Ethnic pluralism flourishes at the mouth of the Mekong River. Occurring in a region with a long history of trade, migration and water-borne connectivity, such diversity is not easily attributed to its residents' ecological isolation, social insularity or cultural conservatism and nor does it seem destined to fade away as a consequence of continued global integration. Instead, this pluralism owes much to the maintenance by each of the Mekong delta's ethnic groups of transnational social networks and connections to localities beyond the region that are perceived as the center or source of a group's cultural tradition. Ethnic difference is interculturally constructed, the result of intense interactions between peoples across mutually negotiated ethnic boundaries. Ethnicity is emergent: each of the four ethnic groups under discussion has gained recruits from people of different ethnic origins. Ethnic identifications in this region are dynamic and their contents are subject to constant change.

One can question whether this ethnic diversity results from the failure of a centralist state to gain purchase in a remote and contested frontier region or to implement the assimilatory policies for which Vietnamese states have been renowned. In 1975, a Hanoi-based government

defeated its domestic and foreign adversaries in the south and incorporated the Mekong delta under socialist rule. As is well known, the change of regime triggered a major refugee movement which was particularly voluminous from the southern third of the country. This exodus can be linked to the imposition of policies modelled on the experience of northern Vietnam, which stigmatized many of the transnational linkages cultivated in the southern region and also conflicted with the cosmopolitan, commercialized and urbanized orientation of much of its population. In fleeing the country, many refugees mobilized pre-existing social resources and intercultural competencies to relocate to other destinations within their transnational networks. The result is that representatives of each of the Mekong delta's ethnic groups are today found in many countries of the world.

Once national priorities changed to emphasize global market integration, these exiles were welcomed home, along with their money, new capabilities and ideas. The Mekong delta has received a lower share of foreign investment than other parts of the country; however, remittances sent by its multi-ethnic diaspora spurred local investments in business, agriculture, industry, services and construction. The landscape of the Mekong delta transformed as new houses, boat and truck fleets, storehouses, processing facilities and businesses of all kinds proliferated. Representatives of the delta's ethnic groups remitted prestigious cultural models from the diverse centers of modernity to which they had variously relocated. Ethnic pride was accentuated as each of the delta's ethnic diasporas activated their translocal linkages to refurbish mosques, temples, shrines, language schools and communal halls; burnish ethnic markers; and engage in the nostalgic consumption of ethnic difference. Ethnic pluralism in the delta flourished anew thanks to the renewal of these translocal flows and exchanges. Such dynamic processes have enlivened the Mekong delta and belie a theory of ethnic diversity as somehow rooted in isolation, stasis, poverty or conflict. The contemporary Mekong delta is an emblematic center of cosmopolitan modernity enriched by its tradition of translocal ethnic pluralism.

Notes

1 See Philip Taylor (2007) *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta*. This section summarises the findings of that work.
2 Parts of this section draw from Philip Taylor (2008) 'Minorities at Large.'
3 Originally the term referred to people from one of the localities in southern China that sent migrants to Vietnam, but in the contemporary Mekong delta this term has come to assume new meanings.

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24

ETHNIC MINORITIES IN VIETNAM

State Relations and Social Change

Pamela McElwee

Ethnic minorities comprise a small but significant percentage of Vietnam's population, esti- mated at over 14 million people total. This chapter reviews scholarship on the historical, cul- tural and political roles ethnic minority groups have played up to the present. The Vietnamese state has directed numerous policies at these communities throughout the country's modern history, often to bring them more in line with majority cultural standards or to achieve parity in economic development. These have ranged from strictly assimilationist policies to ones more focused on "cultural preservation" and improving living standards. Many of these policies are predicated on assumptions about the so-called "backwardness" of minorities, yet contemporary scholarship provides evidence that these communities are culturally vibrant and grappling with social change in creative ways. As this chapter will show, however, spaces and means for minor- ity groups to increase their voice and influence the policies applied to them remain limited, even as the rest of the world increasingly engages with the politics of indigenous rights.

Classification and Ethnological Projects

There are officially 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam: the ethnic majority Vietnamese (known as *Kinh*) and 53 ethnic minorities (*dân tộc thiểu số*). Many of these groups spill across Vietnam's borders into southern China and across mainland Southeast Asia, such as the Hmông and Tày (Miao and Zhuang in China, respectively), while others considered minorities in Vietnam are the ethnic majority in nearby countries (Khmer in Cambodia, Lao in Laos, and Thai in Thailand). The precise number of minorities in Vietnam resulted from a state classification exercise, similar to other projects on the peoples in Asia in the mid-20th century (Keyes, 2002). President Hồ Chí Minh himself reportedly pointed out the necessity of having an ethnographic institute to identify and classify minority populations (Hồ Chí Minh, 2000), resulting in the official founding of the Institute of Ethnology (IoE) in 1968, which was charged with putting together the number and nomenclature of ethnic communities (Viện dân tộc học, 1975). This classification project culminated in 1979 with the decision to recognize 54 ethnic groups, and the work of state ethnographers in this effort has received a great deal of scholarly attention (Ito, 2013; Koh, 2004). As these authors have pointed out, the number of minorities recognized is arbitrary, as any classification system imposes certain political and social assumptions through the standards used to define an ethnic group (Nguyễn Văn Chính, 2018). In the Vietnam case,

the classification project was highly influenced by Stalin's theories on nationality, whereby ethnic groups were to be based on three criteria: language, material life and culture, and "ethnic consciousness" (Rambo, 2003). The classification resulted in a number of communities being assigned new ethnic identities and names, many of which are still contested today, as well as some communities not being recognized at all (Stokhof & Salemink, 2009). As an ethnography of the Na Miểu people shows (they are not one of the 53 officially recognized minorities, but instead lumped in with the Hmông), ethnic consciousness can also arise as a consequence of being unrecognized (Nguyễn Văn Thắng, 2007).

For many years, those interested in life worlds, politics, and culture of minorities in Vietnam found mostly studies that treated these groups much as a natural history work might treat various species of birds, in their descriptions of quaint customs and colorful costumes (Nguyễn Văn Huy, 1998), while museum displays mirrored this focus on dress and material culture (Taylor & Jonsson, 2002). While these approaches often treated minorities as static and unchanging, other studies, particularly by state ethnographers, had more marked political leanings. Early ethnographic studies in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) had strong evolutionary and ethnocentric biases, in part due to the influence of Marx and Engels on anthropologists' thinking (Evans, 1985). These evolutionary influences are manifested in an informal hierarchy that has long existed, which places certain minorities who most resembled Kinh in culture and custom (such as planting wet rice, living in lowlands, and having patriarchal social and village organization) as being more developed. Further down in the evolutionary spectrum were those groups that traditionally engaged in rotational swidden cultivation (a system of intercropping agriculture with forests in upland areas), or groups with social organization such as matriarchy and clan-based lineages. In this hierarchy, rice farming is the pinnacle of civilized achievement, as it leads to political development like the Vietnamese imperial court, while shifting cultivation is a vestige of a primitive way of life (Rambo, 1995). The more extreme use of such an evolutionary ranking even asserts that ethnic minorities are akin to prehistoric ancestors of Kinh (Salemink, 2008), while milder forms of the hierarchy assert that Kinh are "big brothers" (*anh*) to the little siblings (*em*) of ethnic minorities (Pelley, 1998). This hierarchy also has a gendered component, as Kinh often stand in for masculinity, while minorities are often represented as feminized (Jonsson, 2012).

The Population and Housing Census of 2019 provides the most up-to-date figures on population and demography for minority groups. Out of a population of 96 million, Kinh were 81.2 million (85.3%) while the rest belonged to other ethnic groups (GSO, 2019). Five ethnic minority groups had over a million people (Tày, Thái, Mường, Khmer, Hmông, and Nùng), while several have fewer than 1,000 members. (Most smaller ethnic groups, rather than being more isolated, are in fact often quite assimilated and integrated with larger ethnic groups.) Education and health outcomes, including life expectancy, tend to be lower for minorities, and their rates of poverty have long been higher (Baulch, 2011). While traditionally most minorities lived in upland areas (with the exceptions of Chinese/Hoa, Khmer, and Chăm, who could be found in the Mekong delta, the central coast, and urban areas), migration and movement for education and work have brought many minority communities in close contact with Kinh and the Vietnamese state. Despite this increased interaction in what one commentator has called the "cosmopolitan periphery" of Vietnam (Taylor, 2007), some generalizations can still be made: most non-Chinese minority households still reside primarily in more rural areas, and nearly 65% of Vietnam's ethnic minority population lives in the Northern Mountains and Central Highlands regions. The Mekong Delta also hosts substantial minority populations, where Khmer are the largest group, accounting for 10% of the region's population.

State–Society Relations and Governance

The dynamics of historical interaction between Kinh and minority populations have been the subject of many studies, including examination of French ethnographical works on minorities during the colonial period (Salemink, 2003; Michaud, 2015; Davis, 2015); the importance of ethnic clans and lineages in historical political power (Failler, 2011); and the role of the state in identifying ethnic friends and foes (Salemink, 1999; Poisson, 2009). Histories of the Chăm and Khmer peoples have emphasized their world predating Vietnam's southern expansion and the roles of sovereignty, security, and history in influencing contemporary ethnic relations (Cooke & Li Tana, 2004; Wheeler, 2006; McHale, 2013). Numerous authors have discussed the historical ties between uplands and lowlands and ethnic minority and ethnic majority, through exchange, ritual and intermarriage (Li Tana, 2006; Salemink, 2011; Poisson, 2009).

Policies applied to minorities by successive state regimes, from the Nguyễn dynasty, the French colonial state, the governments of North and South Vietnam, to unified Vietnam today, have been remarkably similar over time. These have included establishment of governance structures through Kinh civil servants in minority areas (Poisson, 2009; Davis, 2015); expansion of borders and military policies as state dominion extended into new non–ethnically Vietnamese geographies (Davis, 2017;); attempts to abolish swidden agriculture in the highlands and remake the hills into rice and cash crop producing zones (Nguyễn Văn Chính, 2008; McElwee, 2016); and the encouragement of Kinh migration to minority areas to "help" spur economic development (Hardy, 2000a, 2005), among others. Many of these policies throughout the 20th century could be described as a type of "civilizing project" (Harrell, 1995). For example, there have been serious campaigns to try to change the "culture" of minority areas, rather than accepting culture as something that is historically produced and socially valuable (Pelley, 1998). This has cast the state in the role of deciding what cultural artifacts minorities should be allowed to retain and what need to be disposed of as archaic, feudal, or backwards, a process some have termed "selective preservation" (Salemink, 2000).

There have always been tensions between the push for these civilizing projects to remake minorities to be more like Kinh and projects to allow autonomy and support for indigenous rights and traditions. The pendulum has tended to swing from one approach to another depending on the political relevance of minorities at any one time. For example, there was a need to encourage minorities to fight in solidarity (*đoàn kết*) on both sides in the First Indochina War, and limited self-government was promised by both the French and Hồ Chí Minh's Việt Minh forces. French colonial representatives suggested at a 1946 conference that an autonomous *Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois* (PMSI) and a Thái Federation should be made crown domains under the emperor, thereby weakening the anticolonial resistance for national independence (Salemink, 2003). The later creation of two autonomous zones in North Vietnam (the Thái-Mèo and Việt–Bắc) from the early 1960s to 1976 were further testament to the need to incorporate minority concerns in the new North Vietnamese state (Lentz, 2019). Yet at other times, minorities were targeted for assimilation, such as in the early years of the Republic of Vietnam, when Kinh migration was promoted to the Central Highlands and refugees fleeing North Vietnam were settled in minority areas. The subsequent loss of land rights met with resistance and panethnic responses, including armed insurrections rooted in indigenous communities, like the Barajaka and *Front Unifié pour la Libération des Races Opprimées* (FULRO) movements (Hickey, 1982a). Overall, the toll that the Vietnam Wars of the 20th century took on ethnic minority groups in both North and South were significant, including dislocation and creation of refugees, exposure to Agent Orange and other war remnants, and destruction and devastation of local environments (Hickey, 1982b, 1993).

While state projects in the uplands to alter the customs, culture, or economies of minority groups have always been incomplete (Evans, 1992; Guérin, 2003; Rambo, 2003), some commonalities across time can be observed. For example, there has been near-universal disdain by successive state regimes for the practice of swidden agriculture, long viewed by many as backward and inefficient. The widespread belief that this practice has contributed to deforestation has meant that many minority groups have been targeted to be "sedentarized" into fixed houses and villages (Bế Viết Đẳng, 1987), no matter that very few minorities engaged in swidden agriculture have been actually nomadic in any way or were the main cause of deforestation in Vietnam (Lê Ngọc Thắng et al., 2006). Yet policies for sedentarization to establish "fixed cultivation, fixed residence" (*định canh định cư*) and to eliminate shifting cultivation have persisted, first among the French and then later successive regimes. This is despite the fact that investments in these sedentarization programs have not resulted in environmental gains and have generally been a waste of state money (McElwee, 2016).

The other commonality in policy across time has been the support of the state for Kinh migration to minority regions, ostensibly to "help" minority areas develop, but also to reduce population pressures in delta areas by scattering Kinh throughout the less populated highlands. In the early 20th century, the Northern Mountains and Central Highlands were almost entirely populated by minorities, although some were of relatively recent origin, as large waves of minority peoples had moved in the mid-19th century to what is now northern Vietnam to flee unrest in southern China (Michaud, 2000). The French first attempted resettlement of Kinh to mountainous zones, but were mostly unsuccessful (Hardy, 2000b). The most ambitious and best-known plans for Kinh migration occurred under the DRV and later Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) by designating large swaths of highland areas as New Economic Zones (*vùng kinh tế mới*), state farms (*nông trường*), and state forest enterprises (*lâm trường*) (Hardy, 2005). Lowlanders from the North and from crowded urban areas in the South were encouraged to move to these sites with preferential policies and mobilization pressures. The relaxation of rules on residency in the 1980s, and high world coffee prices in the early 1990s, brought even more Kinh to formerly minority areas of the Central Highlands in particular (Tan, 2000). While this movement was promoted by state officials as an attempt to bring development to "backward areas," many of the migrant receiving areas were not backwards, remote, or disconnected from economic chains in the first place. Further, Kinh migration to previous minority-dominated areas has brought its own set of problems, such as concerns that Kinh dominance in economic trade in highland areas keeps minorities indebted and poor (McElwee, 2008).

This migration has also increased land conflicts. New land policies emphasizing private property, combined with the large numbers of migrants, have made ethnic minorities' traditional land management systems nearly obsolete. Under new nationwide land laws implemented in 1993 and 2004, local systems of forest and other lands managed by communities have had imposed on them a highly restricted state system of land tenure and allocation where private households are the main beneficiaries (Mellac, 2011). Land markets reflecting amenity values and second homes in upland areas have also expanded and placed pressure on formerly minority-dominated communities (Tô Xuân Phúc, 2011). One result of these changes has been a significant increase in land disputes and land occupations since the 1990s (Vũ Đình Lợi et al., 2000). Large protests of several thousand minorities against the state of Vietnam centered in the Central Highlands in 2001 and again in 2004 had their roots in these land tenure conflicts. While officials attributed these uprisings to "outside agitators," particularly US-based refugee groups, and the rise of evangelical Protestantism among minorities (Writenet, 2006), the protestors themselves demanded land and other economic rights.

These protests were effective to a small degree, as migration programs slowed after the demonstrations, high-ranking officials began to regularly visit the Central Highlands, and new policies were designed for the Central Highlands and other minority areas. These included poverty reduction programs, programs to redistribute land to ethnic minorities (known as programs 132 and 134), increased bilingual education in schools and minority-language programming on TV/radio (Messier & Michaud, 2012), and policies to allow more liberalized freedom of religion for evangelical Protestants (Trần Thị Liên, 2013). Revisions to forest laws in 2004 additionally allowed for the assignment of forest land use rights to village communities for the first time. Yet despite increasing interest in, and political support for, land rights, self-governance, and autonomy for indigenous groups in other areas of Southeast Asia, land rights have been firmly uncoupled from indigenous people's rights in Vietnam. Discussion on land remains limited to trying to increase access for individual poor minority households, rather than a focus on territorial land as a basis for ethnic empowerment and indigenous rights, as is the case elsewhere. Further, analysis of the modest land redistribution programs that have been targeted at minorities show quite limited results, with insignificant impacts on poverty (Benjamin et al., 2018).

Poverty and Livelihoods

While Vietnam as a whole has seen dramatic reductions in poverty rates since the mid-1980s, data increasingly suggests that poverty is becoming concentrated among ethnic minorities, as the expanding gap between poverty rates of Kinh and others has grown, rather than shrunk, in recent years (Fujii, 2017). In 2010, ethnic minorities comprised 47% of all poor households (more than four times their share of the population), and this was a jump from composing 29% of poor households in 1998. In the 2010s, ethnic minorities had an overall poverty rate of around 66%, and 37% were characterized as the extreme poor, while the rates for Kinh populations were only 13% and 3%, respectively; this gap between Kinh and minorities has instigated much research and concern over how to eliminate it (Baulch, 2011; Fujii, 2017). One analysis has explained much of the poverty gap as being a function of disadvantages in access to education, mobility, credit, land, links to markets, and ethnic stereotyping by the Kinh, all of which work in concert in an often vicious circle to keep minorities poorer (World Bank, 2009). Research on the Northern Mountains has identified lack of wage labor and nonfarm employment opportunities among minorities as a deterrent to poverty reduction (Nguyễn Việt Cường et al., 2017), while other studies have particularly pointed to unequal access to education and language barriers as a more important factor in accounting for commune-level poverty outcomes than returns to endowments or investments in infrastructure (Nguyễn Hoa Thị Minh et al., 2017).

Numerous state policies toward reducing poverty in ethnic minorities have been implemented in recent years, most notably the Program 135 (P135) and Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) programs, which began in 1998. Most of the P135 money went to infrastructural development of the poorest communes in the country, such as building of roads, community centers, and marketplaces. While HEPR as a whole targeted all people living below a certain standard of living, there were small components within HEPR aimed exclusively at ethnic minorities. These included support for agricultural production, as well as subsidies for food, education, and health insurance for minorities. Most of these projects have focused on individual advancement (such as affirmative action in education) or village- and commune-level development, but there are no specific ethnic group policies that have been used to date (for example, a "Hmông preferential policy"). These anti-poverty policies were predicated on the assumption that minorities needed to "catch up" to the level of the Kinh, and strong ethnocentrism, such as ideas that minorities do not value education or markets, continue to trouble many of these approaches

(Trương Huyền Chi, 2011). Many officials continue to hold ideas that minorities are somehow culturally deficient (wasteful in ceremonies, unable to save, or too dependent on government support) (Taylor, 2004). Such thinking permeates development interventions, and the idea that Kinh could actually learn something from minorities is very difficult to persuade officials of.

While some studies have seen reductions in poverty as a result of state development programs in minority areas (Nguyễn Việt Cường et al., 2015), there have also been a number of critiques of the current approach. Policies based primarily on subsidies may only help people as long as the support keeps coming, and are often implemented in a top-down fashion. Many policies do not fundamentally change the unequal access to land rights and precarious work that characterize minority livelihoods (Nguyễn Quang Tuyến, 2014). Further, overemphasis on monocrops, high inputs of fertilizer and pesticides, and hybrid seeds are not a sustainable model for production in cash-poor areas remote from markets or in communities with little ability to negotiate for high prices or process goods to add value and are not in keeping with traditional cultural food preferences (Bonnin & Turner, 2012a; Bonnin & Turner, 2012b).

Development and poverty policy has also tended to ignore the dynamics of trade and markets actually engaged in by minority groups and has focused on building marketplaces – often used mostly by Kinh traders (Michaud & Turner, 2000) – as opposed to policies to help minorities engage in trade themselves. As a result, many of the markets built by state policy in uplands areas have been left abandoned (Bonnin & Turner, 2014). Kinh continue to dominate petty trading in minority regions as the private market economy has developed, and they often engage with minorities in buying on credit (*mua chịu*) and selling of crops in advance (*bán luá nón*), which result in high interest rates and cycles of dependency and debt for some (McElwee, 2008). Responses by minority communities to their poverty situations have included engagement in illegal activities, such as logging, as a form of resistance (Hoàng Cầm, 2011); concerns over increased social inequality (Trần Thị Thu Trang, 2004a); and engaging in alternative discourses of poverty and development (Turner, 2011a, 2011b).

Recent scholarship has also emphasized agency and flexibility in livelihoods strategies among minorities, from increased diversification into cash crops, the expansion of traditional forest products into global commodity chains (Tugault-Lafleur & Turner, 2009), and the role of family and ethnic networks in providing flexibility in agricultural production (Sowerwine, 2011a). Many minorities have taken advantage of expanded economic opportunities, particularly for female traders (Nghiêm Phương Tuyến & Yanagisawa, 2011). Expansion of road networks means borderlands are no longer remote, but increasingly part of the center, facilitating reduced distances to markets (Trincsi et al., 2014), and cross-border engagement of minorities with kin in China and across the lower Mekong has expanded rapidly in recent years (Schoenberger & Turner, 2008; Turner, 2010, 2013b).

What has been less well studied are the ways cultural beliefs and practices are being affected by these new systems of agriculture and commercial engagement and exchange. For example, in interviews the author did in Ede communities of Đắk Lắk in 2006, where coffee is now the dominant crop, traditional prayers and use of dreams for premonitions about cropping patterns and locations (previously used in choosing swidden fields) have not transferred to coffee, nor were there coffee harvest festivals, as previously there would have been yearly rice harvest festivals (*cúng lúa mới*). While there continued to be belief in spirits in traditional crops like rice, corn, or gourds, who were all worshipped appropriately, I was told by an Ede elder that coffee does not have a spirit "because it is a new crop and these are old customs." When asked how these changes and new crops affected cultural life, one village leader, only half-jokingly, stated that there was not much cultural change, as "We pray to the coffee everyday – we fertilize it, give it pesticides, water it. It's like daily prayer."

Yet there is only so much accommodation that minorities can do in the face of overwhelming change. The uplands have been the site of large-scale, state-directed natural resource exploitation (namely mining, hydropower production, and forest plantations), and the developers of these resources usually do not consult with affected minority populations, although these communities will bear the brunt of ecological damage and economic extraction that benefits others. Huge bauxite mines in the Central Highlands have given rise to civil society protest movements, although much of the outcry has centered on Chinese ownership of the mines, rather than impacts on local minorities (Marston, 2012; Morris-Jung, 2015). Hydropower development has also particularly impacted ethnic minorities, given their location in many upland watersheds. The Hoà Bình dam, begun in 1979 and completed in 1994, displaced 58,000 people, mostly Thái, Mường, Dao, and other minorities, and the Sơn La dam, built from 2005 to 2010 and now the largest hydropower plant in Southeast Asia, has displaced nearly 100,000 people, again mostly Thái and other minorities (Dao, 2011; Singer et al., 2014). Many smaller dams across the uplands have displaced minority households in the central coast and Central Highlands as well. Many of these resettlement decisions were made with little to no input from affected communities, and the impacts of this displacement have included loss of productive lands and compensation that was not adequate to cover asset damages, resulting in continued impoverishment for many resettled households (Bùi Thị Minh Hằng et al., 2012; Dao, 2011). These pressures are not confined to Vietnam, as development on the edges of states throughout the greater Mekong have resulted in displacement, impoverishment and concerns about processes of internal colonialism for ethnic minority peoples (De Koninck & Déry, 1997; Michaud & Forsyth, 2011). Indeed, some scholars have argued that the discourses on the borders and uplands as being remote and marginalized help create these landscapes of change, as it implies the need for jump-started development (Sowerwine, 2011b; Tan & Walker, 2008; Salemink, 2011).

Contemporary Issues in Ethnic Minority Scholarship

While much scholarship within Vietnam and among the development community remains focused on themes of marginalization, dependency, and isolation of ethnic minorities (Rambo & Jamieson, 2003), there has been a flourishing of academic attention to ethnic minorities' responses in the face of social change enabled by globalization, and on new forms of cultural production resulting from economic and technological shifts. Scholarship on minorities in the last 15 years in particular have seen the publication of several full-length ethnographies (Taylor, 2007; Taylor, 2014b; Turner, Bonnin, et al., 2015; Ngô Thị Thanh Tâm, 2016). This can be attributed to the opening up of Vietnam since *đổi mới*, the increased accessibility of research sites for foreigners in minority communities (Turner, 2013a), and increasing space for long-term ethnographic fieldwork, which holds the promise to engage in in-depth understanding of the different epistemologies and ontologies of Vietnam's myriad ethnic groups.

Social change is a key theme of much of this new scholarship. Shifting social and economic relations between minorities and Kinh, and how these have evolved over time, as well as the increasingly cosmopolitan nature of exchanges between minorities in Vietnam and cultural or religious brethren elsewhere, have been emphasized (Taylor, 2007; Tran, 2015). For example, Salemink has argued that the strong movement for Christian conversion among many minorities in the Central Highlands represents a desire to join transnational discussions about modernity (Salemink, 2015), a theme echoed in Ngô Thị Thanh Tâm's work on Hmông conversions, described by her informants as a way to reclaim their autonomy (2015). Transnational Islam is of increasing importance as well within Chăm communities (Yoshimoto, 2012; Taylor, 2007; Tran, 2015).

Human ecology studies of minority livelihoods and senses of place have also noted how environmental change is experienced and adapted to (Århem, 2015). For example, the Khmer in the Mekong Delta have unique cultural and spiritual adaptations to different micro-zones, such as hilly coastal dunes to salty river floodplains (Taylor, 2014b). Increasingly political issues, such as land rights (Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2014a; Turner & Phạm Thị Thanh Hiền, 2015), or political and economic resistance and critiques of the state among minority communities, have also emerged (Turner & Michaud, 2008, 2011; Michaud, 2011; Trần Thị Thu Trang, 2004b, 2011; Turner, Kettig, et al., 2015). For example, anthropologist Dương Bích Hạnh has argued that practices of engaging in tourist work by Hmông girls in Sapa was a way of contesting their own marginality, both as girls in a patriarchal society and as Hmông in a Kinh world (Dương Bích Hạnh, 2008). Nguyễn Thu Hương notes that there has been "selective disengagement" among the Bahnar as a form of passive resistance against state policies in the Central Highlands, "which might be explained by a history of mistreatment by and mistrust towards national governments" (2016, p. 196), while Michaud (2011) notes similar resistance strategies among the Hmông.

Another new area of study has been a move to consider the similarities among highland populations spread from South Asia to Southeast Asia under the rubric of Zomia studies (Scott, 2009; Michaud, 2010, 2017). The term was first popularized by Van Schendel (2002), derived from the word for highlander in many Tibeto-Burman languages to indicate the cultural, religious, and linguistic similarities among the massif running from India to China and across Southeast Asia. James Scott's work in particular furthered the idea of Zomia as a zone of refuge, where waves of subjects fleeing state control have relocated to hills, where fluid ethnic identities have persisted (Scott, 2009). There has been less attention within Vietnam to this idea, although recent papers have suggested the rubric as a useful term for thinking of the linkages of Vietnam's minorities across borders (Forsyth & Michaud, 2011; Turner, 2010).

Conclusions: Looking for Voice and Future

Although these approaches in scholarship have opened up some new horizons, much of this work is not conducted or read by minority groups themselves. For these communities, what are their great concerns? How can their own voices and issues be raised? For example, some minority groups often express concern over assimilation, with cultural practices dying out (*mai một*), particularly among the young who are more exposed to Kinh culture (World Bank, 2009). Yet responses to these concerns over loss of culture are usually not formulated by minorities themselves. As an example, in Hà Giang province, which is majority ethnic minority, the provincial Ministry of Culture devised a project in the mid-2000s to report on traditional practices of the 16 original minority groups of the province to see what practices were in danger of being lost. The "expert" group assembled from the ministry (nearly all Kinh) assessed such things as Hmông festivals, Lôlô songs, and other traditions to see what still existed from original practices. From there, a scientific committee would decide what cultural practices were still authentic, and thus would be promoted and preserved by the state. There was no participation of minority communities in choosing their own practices worthy of support, and this kind of top-down paternalism is found across Vietnam when minorities are not in positions of participation or influence on policies.

Further, the recognition of cultural traditions by some international representatives in Vietnam, such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) work in designating practices of intangible cultural heritage, like the Central Highlands gong culture traditions, has lent legitimacy within Vietnam to the idea that culture is something that can be preserved in time, and which is manifested in dress, dance, and ceremony, rather than

social relations and group subjectivity (Salemink, 2016). UNESCO designations are increasingly seen as important in Vietnam, and many festivals and practices are now encouraged, and even invented anew, in the guise of heritage. This "museumification" of culture (Taylor & Jonsson, 2002) and selective preservation by the state and other cultural institutions puts minority artists and artisans in an often impossible situation of trying to be authentic within a narrow focus on heritage (Salemink, 2008). Further, this museumification of culture also results in significant cultural appropriation, such as when minority music and traditions staged for tourists are simply Kinh dressing up as stylized minorities (Ó Briain, 2014), or in other cases, Kinh cultural traditions such as water puppetry adopt minority stories in an attempt to impress the theme of multicultural Vietnam (Rumsby, 2015), leaving little room for minorities to define themselves.

Globally, indigenous rights movements have strengthened in the past 20 years, now enshrined in the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, with its new recognitions of sovereignty, autonomy, and self-determination. Yet despite Vietnam's signature to this treaty, there remains little discussion of indigeneity and indigenous rights in Vietnam (McElwee, 2004; Salemink, 2006). The metaphors used domestically emphasize solidarity as a "great family of ethnic groups" (*đại gia đình các dân tộc*) or as a "multiethnic and multicultural country" (*nước đa dân tộc, đa văn hóa*) where everyone is equal under the law. Accordingly, there are few discourses on "indigenous peoples" (*người bản địa*, or *người bản xứ*) or "ethnic rights" (*quyền dân tộc*).

One result of this absence of political support for indigenous politics is that there is virtually no space for minorities to work together independently of the government; for example, there is no mass organization representing minorities at national or local levels, as there are for groups like youth, women, veterans, and the elderly. Any minority representation comes from the central government, such the Nationalities Council of the National Assembly or the state Committee on Ethnic Minorities (CEM). There is very little room in Vietnam for grassroots organizing around ethnicity; only a handful of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have ethnic minority issues as a key advocacy concern, and the space for them to lobby the government for changes in minority policy is very small. This is in contrast with Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, for example, where minority NGOs and coalitions play an active role in presenting representation of minorities as they would like to be seen. In the absence of minority-representing civil society groups in Vietnam, new venues, particularly in social media, may become increasingly important. There is some emergence of virtual communities to organize and connect on social media (such as online chatrooms for different ethnic groups that seem to pop up and disappear again regularly) and revitalizing of cultural forms through language and music via Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms (Ó Briain, 2015).

To conclude, more than 15 years ago I wrote a review of ethnic minorities in Vietnam that noted most policies were directed towards making minorities more like Kinh (McElwee, 2004). Unfortunately, much of this sentiment persists, with a focus on the need for unity and government-directed development among ethnic minorities, use of many long-standing tropes of "backwardness," and concerns that cultural autonomy is a pathway to disharmony between ethnic groups (Phạm Quang Hoan & Trần Hồng Thu, 2015). Although there has been minimal ethnic and religious conflict between majority and minority groups in Vietnam in the post–war era, unlike neighboring countries in Asia, there has also been a lack of space and acknowledgement that minority policy has been insufficient to address the specific needs of different populations. New research on minorities and the new spaces they are using to engage with one another and with transnational support groups may change this in the future, but for now, ethnic minorities in Vietnam remain challenged by uneven development, a lack of voice, and little room for representations of their own futures.

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25

ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Development, Crisis, and Responses

Nga Dao

Three decades of economic expansion have generated massive and perpetually increasing pressures on Vietnam's natural environment, sparking an ecological crisis and elevating environmental concerns from a marginal position to among the most pressing topics of public concern and policy debate. Contemporary Vietnam is facing hazardous levels of pollution, extensive degradation of natural land and water resources, and widespread ecological imbalance. To state that Vietnam is facing an acute environmental crisis is no exaggeration.

This chapter examines the deep and paradoxical connection of this crisis to Vietnam's recent economic development. It demonstrates that while economic expansion has permitted significant improvements in living conditions for many and in the state's financial powers and resources, the manner in which economic expansion has occurred has proved broadly and at times extremely damaging to the country's natural environment. Key drivers of environmental degradation have included intensive farming; industrialization; urbanization; steady population growth; and the overexploitation of land, water, forest, ocean, and mineral resources. Combined, these factors have generated massive negative externalities, severely degrading ecological systems and bringing acute harm to the entire biosphere. Environmental incidents, especially the ones due to wastewater discharge from industrial factories, have been increasing both in frequency and in level of impact. Water and air pollution have occurred not only in downstream and urban areas but have also expanded to rural and upland regions, while land degradation has become a nationwide concern.

This chapter provides an overview of the state of Vietnam's environment in the context of development, stressing the tensions that it has generated as well as the responses to these from the state and civil society. While Vietnam's development has been impressive, the environmental costs have been enormous and excessive. Moreover, they will be irreversible unless more effective and urgent strategies to address them are forthcoming from the state and society.

Economic development and environmental strain

Over the last 20 years, the size of Vietnam's economy has expanded nearly tenfold. In 1997 Vietnam's gross domestic product (GDP) stood at around US$ 27 billion. By 2017, this figure had surged to US$ 223 billion (WB 2017). In 2018 alone, Vietnam's economic growth

exceeded seven percent. This expansion is borne from a shift in the economy's composition over time. While the agricultural sector remains the largest employer, it accounted for only 13.96 percent of economic output, compared to 34.49 percent for industry and construction and over 41.64 percent for the service sector (GSO 2019). Similar ratios have held for the last few years. These figures reflect a trend whereby the service sector contributes the large share of economic output, followed by industry and construction, and then agriculture, including traditional and non-traditional agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. Among these three, industry, construction, and agriculture generate the most severe pressures on the environment. In industry and construction, a lack of advanced technologies leads to overuse and inefficient use of resources and energy while also generating greater volumes of untreated waste. In agriculture, intensification of growing methods and frequently unregulated use of agriculture inputs has poisoned the soil and waterways. Within the service sector, tourism and health care have the greatest adverse environmental impacts.[1]

Industry

Vietnam's development strategy centers on efforts to promote industrialization. In the last 10 years alone, the value of Vietnam's industrial output has increased almost 3.5 times (ThuHai 2017). By 2017, Vietnam was home to 325 operational industrial zones. In 2015, 75 percent of these had constructed proper waste treatment systems, with the remaining zones either in the process of building or planning such systems. In that same year, the country counted some 878 industrial clusters[2] with a total area of 32,481 hectares (MONRE 2015). Besides industrial zones and clusters, thousands of craft villages are contributing to air and water pollution across the country (Phan 2020; Le and Sajor 2011). The results of this pattern of pollution have been severe but unsurprising. Emissions and wastewater from industrial parks, industrial clusters, and craft villages have polluted the air and river systems nationwide. The Sêrêpôk River, for example, flows through once pristine areas in Đăk Lăk and Đăk Nông provinces and is now polluted to an extent that communities in its vicinity can no longer use river water for their daily needs (WARECOD 2018a).

Still another factor is the large factories located outside of industrial zones. Even though they account for less than 2 percent of businesses nationwide, they may contribute 30 percent or more of the economy's total industrial production and a sizable but undetermined amount of pollution and waste. They are mostly mining, energy, oil and gas, steel, cement, paper, and food processing operations, scattered across different regions – from northern to central and southern coastal areas and to the Mekong Delta. Many of them have not followed environmental regulations, leading to serious and various types of pollution in many locations (Dao 2018a).

Patterns of pollution and environmental impacts from industry vary across provinces, but experiences from Thai Nguyen province (in the north) and Dong Nai province (in the southeast) are illustrative. Between 2011 and 2015, industrial factories and enterprises in Thai Nguyen are estimated to have released about 19 million m^3 of waste per year; this figure is forecast to increase annually by 22 percent. In Dong Nai, the Dong Nai River system receives 111,000 m^3 of wastewater daily from industrial zones, production sites, and residential areas, and is estimated to contain approximately 15 tons of suspended waste (TSS), 19.6 tons of biochemical oxygen demand (BOD), 76.9 tons of chemical oxygen demand (COD) and 1.6 tons of nitrogen (MONRE 2015). Research conducted by an environmental group reveals that with 21 coal-fired thermal power plants in operation, Vietnam annually consumes about 45 million tons of coal, emits more than 16 million tons of ash and gypsum, and ash dumps cover more than 700 hectares. It is expected that with an additional 12 plants in operation by late 2020, total ash is estimated to be 22.6 million tons per year (WARECOD 2018b).

Agriculture, fisheries, and forestry

With about 65 percent of the population living in rural areas, agriculture plays a crucial role in Vietnam's economy. Agricultural activities (including agriculture, fisheries, and forestry) have fostered the increasing use of chemicals, especially fertilizers and pesticides – two key factors contributing to land and water degradation and pollution. The efficiency coefficient of fertilizer use is a statistic that measures the efficiency of fertilizer use in agriculture. According to statistics from the Department of Crop Production, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), Vietnam's efficiency coefficient for fertilizers remains low, with 45 to 50 percent for nitrogen, 25 to 35 percent for phosphorus, and 60 percent for potassium (Cuctrongtrot 2018). In parallel with the uncontrolled use of fertilizers is a spike in pesticide use. In 2018, expenditures on imported pesticides alone averaged more than US$ 2.2 million per day, with more than half of the stock imported from the People's Republic of China (PRC). A significant but unknown portion of these agricultural inputs are banned in Vietnam for environmental reasons (VoV 2018). Furthermore, up to 80 percent of pesticides are employed for the wrong purposes, leading to serious side effects – benign insects are killed while harmful diseases and pests become stronger and spread more widely (VoV 2018). Overuse of fertilizers, pesticides, and weed killers has led to environmental pollution (especially of soil and water), but has also impacted human health, caused ecological imbalance and soil acidification, and has reduced crop production in the long term. Long unattended to in the name of rapid development, these environmental problems will become increasingly visible if not effectively addressed (McElwee 2016).

Urbanization and population growth

Rapid urbanization and population growth have also generated environmental stresses. In Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, population expansion has occurred at a rate of 3.8 percent and four percent annually, respectively (see Harms's chapter in this volume). In 2020, Vietnam's population is approaching 100 million. Environmental impacts of urbanization and population expansion include exponential growth of wastewater, dust and air pollution. Today, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City rank among the world's 10 most polluted cities (Kenh14 2019)

Key environmental sectors

Water

Each year in Vietnam, approximately 80.6 billion m³ of water is exploited for human use, of which about 80 percent (65 billion m³) is used for agriculture, 70 percent of which is used in the Red and Mekong River Deltas. Outside of the agriculture sector, water is used for domestic consumption, power generation, aquaculture, industrial production, tourism, and in the service sector (Nguyen 2014).

In recent years, downstream areas of Vietnam's largest river basins have experienced water degradation both in terms of water quality and quantity while water shortages have increased in frequency. This, in turn, has fueled conflicts over access to water among different groups, placing interests in agriculture, hydropower, industry, aquaculture, and domestic use in increasingly intense competition. In the Sesan River basin in the Central Highlands, besides the issues of deforestation, resettlement, and conflicts among water user groups, hydropower development has raised the public's concerns about the destruction of cultural landscapes and the ecological

environment as well as water resources degradation in the area. The Gia Long and Dray Nur waterfalls in Buon Ma Thuot, for example, dried up due to upstream hydropower water use (Dao and Bui 2016). In the meantime, water management at all levels remains relatively weak.

In geographic terms, water pollution and degradation are most concentrated in middle and downstream regions where the water receives discharge from urban residential areas, industrial zones, and craft villages. In the Red River basin, for example, mining and industrial activity in Lao Cai, Yen Bai, and Phu Tho has led to increases in the volume of suspended waste matter to levels that far exceed the national limit standard (QCVN08-MT/2015). The quality of surface water in urban areas has also emerged as an issue due to wastewater discharge from residential areas and services (Figure 25.1). Water pollution due to organic matter (i.e. raw sewage) has become quite common, especially in lowland areas.

Downstream, near river mouths, salt intrusion has emerged as a major problem, especially in the central, southwest, and southeast coastal regions. Salinization has affected both soil and ground water, especially in the Mekong Delta. In Tra Vinh province, for example, recorded levels of chlorine (Cl$^-$ have increased over the last few years from 251 mg/L to 287 mg/L (Tra Vinh DONRE 2015). In Kien Giang, the amount of Cl$^-$ recorded fluctuates from 58.49 to 59.56 mg/L, of which 8 out of 10 sites where samples were taken were above Vietnam's national standard of 250 mg/L (Kien Giang DONRE 2015). In Vinh Long province, the amount of Cl$^-$ fluctuated between 65.41 and 693.92 mg/L (Vinh Long DONRE 2015).

Land

Vietnam has a total area of 33.1 million hectares, classified into three key groups: agricultural land, non-agricultural land, and unused land. Agricultural land (for agriculture, fisheries, and forestry) accounts for approximately 26.8 million hectares or 81 percent (Nguyen 2018). However, formal and informal (i.e. illegal) conversion of land to other uses has occurred
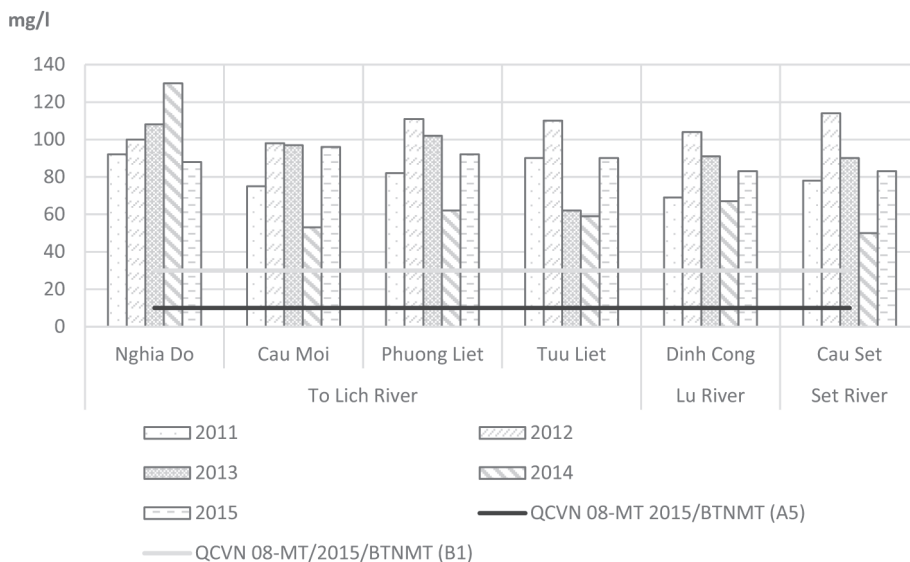
Figure 25.1   Chemical oxygen demand (COD) levels in some of the rivers in Hanoi (2011–2015)

Source: MONRE 2015

intensively across the country. The most common types of conversion are forest land to agricultural land or industrial crops (such as rubber); agricultural land for urban and industrial uses; mangrove forests to aquaculture (mostly shrimp farming); and barren land to forest. The conversion of forest land to agricultural land mostly occurs in the northern uplands and the Central Highlands. According to McElwee (2016), forest cover change has decreased by more than 50 percent in the second half of the twentieth century. By the end of 2013, 37 provinces had converted 9,528.48 hectares of forest land for other land use purposes, of which 2,868.57 hectares were for agricultural use (MONRE 2015). Forest land conversion included the conversion of protected and special forest lands, sometimes causing serious environmental damage and contributing to land erosion and landslides. A decrease in forest coverage has intensified pressure on the environment and wildlife of affected areas while degrading soil and diminishing land fertility. In the Northwest, by 2018, state-directed rubber companies had converted more than 50,000 hectares of agricultural and forest land into rubber plantations (Dao 2018b), while mining activities affected thousands of hectares of forest and forestland nationwide (MARD 2014).

Conversion of agricultural land to urban development, industrial zones, and economic zones has been rapid, especially in large cities such as Hanoi, Hai Phong, Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong, and others. Research shows that the central government's policy – "Land for Infrastructure" – gives privilege and encourages private investors to invest in public infrastructure in exchange for land (Dang 2016). While these projects have made certain positive contributions to the country's socioeconomic development, they have sometimes threatened both the environment and local people's livelihoods. One example is the ironically titled EcoPark Satellite City project on the outskirts of Hanoi. Conceived as a gated green oasis, the project appropriated 500 hectares of agricultural land in the Van Yen district of Hung Yen province, leading to the eviction of some 4,000 families with woefully inadequate levels of compensation. Dang (2015) points out that the investor, Vihajico neither had to pay any land-use related fees to the local authorities when the allocated land is used to develop public infrastructure nor compensation to land acquisition for that purpose. As a consequence, the Ecopark project generated massive difficulties for local livelihoods and became a source of social upheaval (ejatlas 2015).

Beyond the conversion of land, land pollution has been attributed to poor treatment of wastewater and overintensive farming, as well as the overuse of fertilizers and pesticides (Merrey et al 2018). Waste from industrial production, construction, the service sector, and residential use has contributed significantly to land contamination, especially in suburban areas of large cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, or in highly concentrated industrial and mining areas such as Dong Nai, Bien Hoa, Thai Nguyen, Lao Cai, etc. According to MONRE's environmental report in 2015, in areas adjacent to a landfill in Bien Hoa, for example, measured arsenic levels were 4.12 times higher than the permitted level. Test results show that land in areas receiving wastewater from the Ho Nai and Bien Hoa industrial zones has heavy metals concentrations many times above the permitted level (MONRE 2015). Similar problems occur in craft villages. Agricultural land in Chau Khe craft village, Bac Ninh province, for example, contains amounts of heavy metals that are 1.2 to 1.4 times higher than the national standard. According to formal newspapers of the Vietnam Communist Party, the amount of solid waste generated nationwide is about 25.5 million tons/year, of which urban solid waste is about 38,000 tons/day. The volume of domestic solid waste generated in urban areas nationwide increases at an average of 10 to 16 percent annually. In some large cities, domestic solid waste accounts for up to 90 percent of the total urban solid waste (Báo điện tử ĐCS 2019).

Forests

McElwee's (2016) study shows that forested areas, especially naturally forested areas, have significantly decreased in the last few decades. In the late 1990s, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization ranked Vietnam as having the second highest rate of deforestation in the world (McElwee 2016). According to Vietnam's General Statistics Office, deforestation due to illegal logging, economic development (hydropower, mining, farming) and fire reaches 2,000 to 4,000 hectares annually, of which 40 percent occurs in the Central Highlands, followed by the northern central and central coastal areas, at about 21 percent (GSO 2014). There are many contributing factors including, but by no means limited to, logging, the timber from which is used for upmarket residential construction, furniture, and other high-end products.

In 2014, 11,312 hectares of forest and forest land were converted to mining sites, while there has been no activity to recover mined land or reforest areas where mining has ended (MARD 2014). Hydropower is another key factor contributing to deforestation in Vietnam. Dams have not only flooded farmland and houses, they have also submerged thousands of hectares of forest (Le and Dao 2016). In the Central Highlands alone, dams have caused the deforestation of 22,770 hectares, and only about three percent of this land has been reforested (MOIT 2013).

In coastal regions, mangrove forests have declined rapidly in both area and quality. In 1943, mangrove forests were distributed extensively over an area of 400,000 hectares (Hong and San 1993). Nearly 40 percent of the mangroves in South Vietnam were destroyed by U.S. herbicides (Hong and San 1993). After the American war, rapid population growth and increasing demand for economic development caused the mangrove forests to shrink further. According to MONRE, mangrove forest in the Mekong Delta alone had dwindled by 80 percent over the last 50 years (Xuan Long 2017). One of the key drivers of this devastation is commercial shrimp farming, which plays an increasingly important role in Vietnam. In many coastal areas, especially in the Mekong Delta, the conversion of mangrove forest and brackish water areas to shrimp farming has been expanding rapidly. Phung and Pham (2018) found that shrimp farming in Vietnam is dominated by small-scale and fragmented farms. This means that the rate of mangrove forest conversion into shrimp farms has accelerated and is hard to control. In Ca Mau and Ben Tre provinces, for example, this activity even went beyond the control and management policies of the local authorities and fisheries departments. People cleared mangrove forests to turn them into shrimp farms, affecting the shore and sea dyke systems, increasing erosion and salt intrusion, and intensifying damage caused by typhoons and storms. Consequently, the area used for shrimp farming in 2014 reached almost 700,000 hectares, an average increase of 3.12 percent per annum over a 10-year period from 2004 to 2014. The Mekong Delta is home to 91 percent of the country's shrimp farms, making Vietnam one of the top five shrimp exporters in the world (MARD 2015).

Oceans

Similar to freshwater, ocean water environments in Vietnam have degraded in recent years. Even though results from water tests show that most pollution indicators are within the limits set by MONRE, nonetheless these measures have been subject to questions about its reliability, and it is widely known and accepted that pollution from river mouth areas and discharge from factories and other economic activities in coastal areas has had visible deleterious effects on the marine environment and have greatly escalated levels of suspended waste in many places, especially along the northern coast. Other parameters, such as COD and NH^{4+}, have risen since 2015. A report from a non-governmental organization (NGO) working on water pollution

caused by a coal-fired thermal power plant in Duyen Hai (Mekong Delta) reveals that even though the quality of the coastal water environment did basically comply with the national standard for ocean water quality, it did not meet the requirements for aquaculture, with levels of cadmium, chromium, and iron all above the allowable limit (WARECOD 2018b).

In port/pier areas, water has become more polluted in recent years due to oil and gasoline residues from ships and boats. For example, at the Cua Luc-Bai Chay Bridge, the level of oil and gasoline residue in water increased from 0.012 mg/L in 2011 to 0.826 mg/L in 2015, compared to the Vietnam standard of 0.2 mg/L. Oil and gas exploration and shipping activities have also caused oil pollution at sea. Marine oil spill pollution has seriously affected the ecological environment. For example, coral bleaching in the Phu Quoc Marine Conservation area has reached 56.6 percent due to oil pollution and destructive development activities (KACNE 2015).

In April 2016, a large-scale ecological disaster unfolded along the coastline of four central coastal provinces (Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, and Thua Thien-Hue). Signs of the disaster appeared in the form of a massive fish kill that stunned local populations and captured the nation's and international attention. Damage to the region's marine ecological systems has been severe. After weeks of silence, the Taiwanese-owned Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation officially acknowledged in late June 2016 that it had leaked toxic chemicals into the ocean from its plant. The chemicals contained phenol, cyanide, and iron hydroxide, which are very toxic for fish and marine ecosystems. Thousands of tons of fish were killed by this spill in April and May 2016 and the viability of the local fishing industry collapsed, causing a major loss of income for hundreds of thousands of fishermen in these four provinces. In the most affected areas, corals were 100 percent bleached. In Ha Tinh, 90 percent of the corals were killed; in Quang Binh and Thua Thien Hue, it was 66.7 percent (Nhandan 2016). This was one of the worst environmental disasters in the country's modern history and generated lasting political effects.

Climate change

International analysts agree that Vietnam is among the countries most vulnerable to climate change and most likely to experience its most severe impacts (Le and Dao 2016), but this Southeast Asian nation is also an increasingly important contributor to climate change. To say that this is due to its extensive coastline and river deltas is only partly accurate as environmental degradation within Vietnam heightens the country's vulnerability; that the deltas are susceptible to flooding and salinization and the highlands to severe erosion is the result of local human activity in combination with global climate change. At the same time, Vietnam contributes to global warming, and it is estimated that annual greenhouse gas emissions from energy, agriculture, land use, and land use change plus forestry and waste in 2020 will be about 446 million tons of CO_2 and will grow to 760.5 million tons in 2030; the energy sector will be the largest emitter (MONRE 2014a,b).

In recent years, researchers have conducted many studies (Merrey et al 2018; Deb et al 2016; Schmidt-Thome et al 2015) to determine the scope and extent of predicted climate change threats in Vietnam. Most have focused on the Mekong Delta, due to its higher vulnerabilities, followed by the Red River Delta and coastal areas. The studies' findings show that Vietnam is vulnerable to sea-level rise, temperature increases, precipitation changes, and extreme weather events. According to a 2013 Asian Development Bank report, climate change is expected to worsen the impacts of natural disasters in Vietnam, which are primarily felt by the poor and vulnerable (women, children, and the elderly) (ADB 2013).

The most obvious problem is the phenomenon of droughts and unpredictable precipitation, both in the northern and southern regions. Saline intrusion has become more and more

serious in the south central region and especially in the Mekong Delta. The problems have been accelerating over the last few years. In the 2019–2020 dry season, the Mekong Delta provinces have experienced the most severe drought conditions and saline intrusion to date – millions of hectares of paddy rice were lost. In Tra Vinh province alone, the provincial government provided relief worth US$ 1.7 million to more than 28,000 farming households who were severely affected (Vietnamplus 2020).

Climate change has affected Vietnam and its population in many other ways. Sea-level rise and more frequent weather events are expected to increase climate-induced migration. It is estimated that a 1-meter sea-level rise could displace more than 7 million people and flood the productive lands of more than 14.2 million in the Mekong Delta alone. That 1-meter sea-level rise could submerge half of this region's agricultural land (Le and Dao 2016), and about 300 km^2 of mangrove forest – 15.8 percent of the total forested area nationwide (MONRE 2012). Changes in precipitation patterns will lead to changes in water resources in terms of quantity and quality in both rainy and dry seasons, significantly affecting water resources in Vietnam. Studies show that climate change will reduce hydrological flow in the Mekong Delta by 4.8 percent in 2020, and about 14.5 percent by 2050 (MONRE 2015). Thus, key sectors such as agriculture, energy, and industry will be negatively affected. Conflicts over water use have arisen among these sectors and between upstream and downstream communities.

State, society, and environment

Emergence of health as a driver of concern

Environmental degradation and climate change have affected Vietnam's population in many ways. According to a report by the Asian Development Bank (2011), there are four main health impacts from climate change: (i) extreme weather events causing injuries and deaths, water contamination, infectious diseases, food shortages, and mental health problems; (ii) droughts and heavy rainfall causing significant reductions in crop yields and productivity of subsistence agriculture, which may lead to malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, or, in more extreme cases, starvation; (iii) an increase in the number of very hot days in large cities, along with forest fires and dust storms adversely impacting air quality over broad areas (both urban and rural); and (iv) changes in temperature and rainfall patterns impacting the occurrence of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue (ADB 2011). Until today, the issues that this report raises remain valid.

Indeed, these four main health impacts from climate change largely coincide with impacts from environmental degradation, including air, water, and land pollution. Respiratory diseases caused by air and dust pollution have become increasingly common. The number of people who became ill due to air pollution is the highest in the whole country (MoH 2014). The elderly, pregnant women, and children under 15 are most susceptible to air pollution. Workers employed in mining, coal-fired plants, construction, and industrial zones or who live in the vicinity of related businesses, factories, and installations are directly or indirectly affected. Water pollution from existing industrial production is already very severe. For example, water used by textile and garment factories and the pulp and paper industry typically has an average pH of 9 to 11. COD can be up to 2,500 mg/L, the suspended solids content is many times higher than the Vietnamese limit. These industries produce wastewater that contains cyanide 84 times greater than the allowable limit, H_2S (4.2 times the limit), and NH_3 (84 times), all which cause serious pollution of surface water sources for residential areas (Duy Chinh 2014). Water-borne diseases and poor hygiene kill approximately 9,000 people annually, and there are some 200,000 new cancer cases; water contamination is believed to be one of the main causes (IPHE 2015).

Together with air and water pollution, land contamination can significantly affect human health, both directly and indirectly. Land contaminated with heavy metals can negatively impact community health, especially children's health. In some villages where workers specialize in metal recycling in Hung Yen province, 207 out of 317 children suffered from lead poisoning and required treatment (IPHE 2015). Raw ash residue of coal-fired thermal power plants and post-mining disposal sites of mining waste usually contain toxic heavy metals such as arsenic, lead, zinc, nickel, copper, manganese, cadmium, chromium, and selenium – these are sources for land contamination and for diseases stemming from such pollution. In agricultural land, tests have found microbial contamination as well as various effects of the excessive use of chemical fertilizers, growth stimulants, and pesticides, among others. These substances persist in the soil and plants, accumulate in fruits, vegetables, and leaves, and enter people and animals through the food cycle, causing negative and long-term effects.

As a consequence, environmental pollution has become a hot and even emotional topic, drawing attention from all over Vietnam and visible across traditional and new media platforms. Concern about environmental degradation and pollution has led to more active work by a number of environmental groups, such as the Center for Water Resources Conservation and Development (WARECOD) CIRUM, GreenID, iSee, PanNature, and Vietnam Rivers Network (VRN), among others. On a broader level, concerned citizens have organized protest demonstrations of all sizes across the country. Early in 2015, a tree hugging movement sprung up in Hanoi in response to the city's decision to chop down 6,700 of its 50,000 trees (Vu 2017).

The most notable and widespread was a series of protests held in 2016 and 2017 in response to the toxic chemicals leak from the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation's factory. Thousands of people gathered in large cities and in various locales in the four provinces affected by the incident to demand a more transparent release of information and effective solutions to the problem. Key issues that were raised as a result of this disaster include corruption and top-down decision making as the norm in most large-scale projects. Community participation has, in general, been utterly neglected. In some cases, there have been tensions between the state and civil society movements to push for better environmental management. Hundreds of protesters have been arrested, and some even imprisoned in the summer and fall 2016. Environmental disputes have become a sensitive issue for the government, leading to a silencing of the public voice, which in turn adversely affects their fight for a better and healthier society.

State responses to environmental challenges

Over the last two decades, the Vietnamese government has made efforts to raise the profile of environmental sustainability in its national and international dialogues. MONRE has been revising various laws, including the Law on Environmental Protection (2014), Law on Water Resources (2012), and others. The revised laws enable new policy tools and remedies for pollution prevention and cleanup, as well as to promote adjustments to include the responsibilities related to environmental management in the private sector. The central government also published a National Strategy for Environmental Protection reaching to 2020 with a vision to 2030, a National Strategy on Biodiversity up to 2020 with a vision to 2030, and a National Green Growth Strategy (GoV 2012a, 2012b, 2013), as well as many other programs, strategies, and plans that help promote green growth.

In response to the dramatic forest loss mentioned earlier, Vietnamese government has spent US$1 billion to promote reforestation over the last two decades, including a massive campaign to plant "five million hectares of forest," initiated in 1998. Between 2011 and 2015, forest land increased by 472 million hectares as the result of actively allocating non-used land (empty land,

sand land, semi-flooded land) to households for reforestation. Even though the green coverage area seems to have increased to 40.43 percent in 2015 compared to 39.5 percent in 2010 and 27.8 percent in 1990, these forests don't have a high value in terms of biodiversity. The quality and quantity of natural forest continue to decrease (MONRE 2015).

Unfortunately, despite signs of incremental progress, Vietnam has not realized substantial improvements in its policy framework for environmental sustainability. Progress in achieving results has been slow due to weak commitment by sectoral agencies. The Law on Environmental Protection is the highest legal document in the field of environment, and the provisions of the law basically cover all of the issues related to management, control, and environmental protection. However, to date there is still a lack of specific regulations on the management and control of air pollution, soil environment, and environmental protection issues in general.

Importantly, the conduct of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) or Strategic Environmental Impact Assessments (SEIAs) continue to be regarded by most as formal procedures or obstacles to business rather than as essential tools for addressing societal needs. Many new EIAs have been copied and pasted from EIAs of other projects in different locations. The manner in which EIAs are completed reflects this – in many instances, EIAs submitted to local authorities have been found with the same copy-and-pasted text, complete with identical misspellings (VanLinh 2017). One of the important steps in the EIA process is the need to consult the communities who will be affected by the proposed development project or program. However, rarely have project owners conducted proper consultations for an EIA. This is due in part to the very general provisions found in the Law on Environmental Protection. According to the regulations, project owners must consult the agencies, organizations, and communities directly affected by the project, and the EIA report must contain the content of the consultation results. However, the law does not specify what "directly affected by the project" actually means, so consultants can freely interpret the law in ways that are convenient for them.

In addition, environmental management faces constraints and challenges at all levels of government. At the central level, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment's role of coordinating and unifying the state's management of the environment has not been promoted effectively because there is no clear legal basis. The responsibility for environmental protection at the federal level has been assigned to many different ministries and sectors, which in turn has certain positive aspects. Nevertheless, officials actually implementing environmental protection face many difficulties due to the lack of coordination and overlapping functions. At the local level, the organizational structure and capacity of the professional bodies responsible for environmental protection do not meet the management requirements, especially in terms of human resources. Roles and responsibilities on environmental issues are not clearly divided among related agencies, which lessens the effectiveness of their efforts in environmental protection.[3] Thus, until Vietnam can create effective mechanisms with clear roles for functional offices and enforcement, the country's environmental problems will continue to mount.

A time for action

This chapter has provided an overview of impacts of socioeconomic development on Vietnam's natural environment while surveying existing and prospective impacts of climate change and natural disasters. As the chapter has shown, while Vietnam's economic expansion has generated significant economic benefits, it has placed massive and perpetually increasing pressure on Vietnam's natural environment. Contributing to these problems, the state's capacity to manage environmental protection remains inadequate and continues to lag far behind the emergence and increasingly complex nature of environmental issues. More damaging still, there has been

limited space for voices from citizens, local communities, and NGOs to call attention to environmental issues, let alone shape policy through elections.

In this context, the rapid expansion of scholarship and media reporting on environmental concerns in Vietnam is a welcome development. In the scholarly literature and across the natural and social sciences, scholars within and outside of Vietnam are devoting increased attention to environmental issues. For the first time, issues on environmental rule and governmentality related to forests were thoroughly discussed in McElwee's book (2016), which helps audiences better understand how power has been exercised and enabled rules and regulations, and according framings and policy. Other issues that researchers have highlighted include land grabbing, environmental injustice that disadvantages upland and rural marginalized people, resistance to changes, and grassroots environmental activism (Dang 2015; Dao 2016; Vu 2017). In particular, almost one year after the Formosa disaster, the Third International Conference on Environmental Pollution, Restoration, and Management was held in Quy Nhon in 2017. It brought together scientists and scholars to discuss environmental management challenges. Topics that are considered sensitive in Vietnam, such as the impacts of hazardous chemical emissions and environmental contamination, were presented and well received by Vietnamese government officials (Hoang et al 2019, Do and Ly 2019).

While still subject to state control, Vietnam's press and state-managed and independent social media have expanded. It is now easy to find articles or online posts on almost any environmental issue in Vietnam, ranging from incidents where hundreds of tons of fish died due to pollution in Hau Giang (May 2019), Kien Giang (October 2019), Hue (Oct. 2019), and Quang Ninh (December 2019), to water contamination in Hanoi (October 2019), illegal deforestation in Dong Nai province (December 2019), mining in Yen Bai and Lao Cai (April 2019, May 2020), as well as problems caused by hydropower (Lao Cai, November 2019)/coal-fired thermal power development (even though still limited) (Vinh Tan and Tra Vinh, July 2020). Press and social media have helped to raise awareness and concerns over environmental issues and created/enabled actions accordingly, such as the tree hugging movement in 2015 or the "fish for life" protest in 2016. VRN organized a livestream on issues related to overexploitation and risks to the Dong Nai River in July 2018, which attracted tens of thousands of views and offers of support. Other NGOs have organized similar events. A dialogue with National Assembly members on river pollution in May 2019 highlighted impacts of coal-fired thermal power plants in the Mekong Delta. Even the online portal of the formal Communist Party newspaper underscored:

> A hot, pressing issue in the national public opinion today is the environmental pollution caused by production and human activities. This problem is becoming more and more serious, directly threatening the sustainable socio-economic development of the country, the existence and development of current and future generations.
>
> *(Báo điện tử ĐCS 2019)*

To achieve positive change, Vietnam will require action on multiple fronts. More adequate and responsive policies must be accompanied by more effective laws and enforcement. Responsible policy leadership needs to be combined with bottom-up monitoring and anti-corruption efforts in the interest of a healthier environment. The Law on Environmental Protection is an encouraging start, but its implementation must be improved. Silencing public concerns about the environment must desist. Enlisting popular support is vitally important and can be achieved by facilitating rather than suppressing meaningful participation from community and civil society organizations. This would be a welcome development indeed, as popular concerns about the environment have developed rapidly if belatedly as crisis conditions have intensified.

Whether progress on these fronts will materialize remains in doubt. At the very least, the scope and urgency of Vietnam's environment can hardly be overstated.

Notes

1 There are more than 13,500 hospitals and medical centers across the country that discharge 47 tons of toxic waste daily. The amount of wastewater from hospitals and clinics that requires treatment was 125,000 m^3 per day in 2015 (Ministry of Health 2015).
2 Unlike industrial zones and parks, industrial clusters are not government planned; rather, they are areas where businesses voluntarily set up in close proximity to each other.
3 Interviews from fieldwork in May 2017 and April 2018.

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26

THE FAMILY IN CONTEMPORARY VIET NAM

Nguyen Huu Minh

This chapter presents some of changes in the Vietnamese family over the past few decades and the characteristics of the current Vietnamese family. Starting with some basic concepts, the content of the chapter then describes the basic characteristics of traditional Vietnamese families, followed by major socioeconomic changes that underlie the changing of Vietnamese families, and finally the main characteristics of the current Vietnamese family. The main sources of data used are national-scale statistics and the results of large family surveys conducted in recent years.

Basic Concepts

Family and Household

Basically, the connotation of the concept of family includes the following elements: a social unit formed on the basis of marriage, bloodline or nurturing relationships to perform biological and economic functions, culture, society, religion, etc.; family members relate to each other on the basis of clear ethical rules, duties, obligations, responsibilities for what to do, what is allowed, and what is prohibited; have close relationships with each other emotionally; share interests and responsibilities; and have legally binding terms recognized and protected by the state.

In this chapter, the author uses the definition stated in the Viet Nam Law on Marriage and Family 2014 (NAV, 2014): "*A family* is a group of people bound together by marriage, blood relation or adoption relationship to support and create rights and obligations among them according to the provisions of this Law" (according to Chapter I, Article 3, Clause 2. General provisions, Viet Nam Law on Marriage and Family, NAV, 2014). The concept of family mentioned in the law has quite a broad connotation, based on this concept:

> Family members include spouses; natural parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, step-moms, partner's parents; natural children, adopted children, step children of spouse, daughter-in-law and son-in-law; siblings of the same parents, siblings of different mothers, siblings of different fathers, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law of the same parents or with different parents; paternal grandparents, maternal grandparents; grandchildren from father's side, grandchildren from mother's side; aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews.
>
> *(Article 3, Clause 16)*

In practice, the concepts of "family" and "household" (in the census terminology) are sometimes understood and used interchangeably, especially in administrative reports. However, these are two different concepts. In the census, the unit is a household. Household includes a person or a group of people living and eating together, who may or may not be a blood relation, may or may not be married, raising children, with or without a general revenue and expenditure fund, and is usually legalized through household registration. Basically households and families have a large overlap; however, the concept of family is more social and the concept of households is more administrative.

Marriage

Marriage is considered a union between two individuals (usually of different sexes), widely recognized legally or socially, and is sexually and socially (involves parenting) or economically interrelated. The concept of marriage is not heterogeneous in different societies. In Viet Nam, according to the Law on Marriage and Family 2014, marriage is the relationship between a husband and wife after marriage (Article 3, Clause 1).

The Traditional Vietnamese Family

The traditional Vietnamese family in this chapter is implied by the characteristics of the family before 1945, a turning point in Vietnamese history.[1] In the traditional Vietnamese family, marriage was universal. Marriage was an especially important matter, not only because of its relation to the lifetime happiness of the couple but also because of its effects on the extended family and the kin network. One of the most important functions of marriage and the family was to produce male offspring to assure continuity of the patrilineage and to perform the rites of ancestor worship, which was the highest expression of Confucian filial piety (Tran Dinh Huou, 1991; Phan Dai Doan, 1994).

Because of the importance of marriage to the family and kin, marriage was seen primarily as a transaction between two families, rather than as a matter between the couple. Therefore, it was usually arranged by parents or family elders. The intervention of the family of origin into the marriages of young couples was even acknowledged by the feudal laws, from the Le Code in the 15th century and the Gia Long Code in early 19th century, to the three Civil Codes applied to the three regions of Vietnam before 1945 (Vu Van Mau, 1962).

Women had a complex position in the traditional family and social life. On the one hand, they were very effective in the family economy by their activities in farming and small trade activities. They brought home a significant amount of income. More importantly, Vietnamese women played a major role in the financial management of family resources once they became a wife and mother. They were considered a "*Noi Tuong*" [Commander of the Interior, meaning a person who is responsible for everything within the family] or the person "*nam tay hom chia khoa*" [held the key to the cash box] of the family (Tran Dinh Huou, 1991; Nguyen Tu Chi, 1993).

On the other hand, under the influence of Confucianism, there was no basis of equality between males and females. In a Confucian society, the eldest man in the family is the head of the family. In relations with the outside world, only men can represent the family. Family chores are the responsibility of women. Vietnam was not an exception in these cultural precepts.

The elderly were usually cared for by their own family members. The social norm of filial piety required that children not only provide for their elderly parents' subsistence but also pay them respect and treat them with love so that they could live happily during their old age. Therefore, the common expectation was that children should not live far from their parental home while their parents were still alive so that they could take care of their parents.

The eldest son was expected to live with his parents to support them in their old age (usually in the North; in the South, it was the youngest). Younger sons, however, left their parents' house a short time after marriage to settle in a private house. This could be considered a custom of "rotation" in living arrangements of Vietnamese families (Nguyen Tu Chi, 1993).

The traditional Vietnamese family, as briefly described earlier, survived with few changes until the arrival of the French in the late 19th century and even then continued on with only a few modifications (mostly in newly urban areas) during the French colonial period. Subordination of children to their father was still recognized by law (Coughlin, 1950). It was not until 1945 when Viet Nam became independent country that the traditional marriage norms began to be undermined by the period's dramatic socioeconomic changes and turbulent political events. With the advent of a new republic-democratic government in 1945, the greatest change lay not only in the introduction of a totally new concept of marriage but also in the steady introduction of the new marriage movement to the workers and peasants, whose family life up to that point had remained largely untouched by the new ideas about marriage.

Socioeconomic and Legal Change in the Last Decades

Family change has always been associated with socioeconomic and legal changes related to the family, especially for more than three decades after Doi Moi 1986.[2] Playing a prominent role in that transformation are the factors related to the education system, economic transformation, and urbanization, as well as the legal system.

Data from the National Censuses conducted in 1999, 2009, and 2019 indicate that the proportion of the adult population that has gone to school has increased gradually. In 2019, the literacy rate for the male population aged 15 or older was 97 percent, compared to 93.9 percent in 1999, for female population aged 15 or older was 94.6 percent, compared to 86.9 percent in 1999 (VCPHCSC, 2019; VGSO, 1991). Higher education created an atmosphere facilitating the spread of new ideas about marriage and the family, especially among young people.

Economically, Viet Nam moved from the group of poorest countries to the group of countries having average income levels with gross domestic product (GDP) per capital about 1,020 USD in 2009 and 2,800 USD in 2019 (VG, 2011; Nguyen Xuan Phuc, 2019). Economic development opened up non-agricultural employment opportunities for people, especially women, and significantly increased the economic independence of children from their parents. Since 1986, women aged 20 to 49 who participated in economic activities has been around 80 percent (VGSO, 2014, 2017a). This helped young men and women prove their self-reliance in matters such as deciding their own marriages. The increasing participation of women in the labor force is also causing difficulties for the elderly and child care systems that usually depend on women.

Urbanization has taken place speedily in Viet Nam. According to the National Census data, the proportion of the urban Vietnamese population had increased from 19.2 percent in 1979 to 19.4 percent in 1989 and 34.4 percent in 2019. Differences in living standards, education, employment, etc., between urban and rural areas have created a lifestyle for urban inhabitants that is different from the rural lifestyle, among them in terms of the family relationship (Nguyen Thanh Liem and Nguyen Huu Minh, 2011, 2018). The role of love in marriage became increasingly significant for urban inhabitants. Domestic work service developments have created advantages for people in caring for family members. Many people now are living far from their parents, they also have fewer children and a higher income, and therefore they more easily accept having domestic workers take care of elderly relatives and children.

In the past decades, migration has accelerated. The interprovincial migrant population increased from 2 million in 1999 to 3.4 million people in 2009 and 2.8 million in 2019

(VCPHCSC, 2010, 2019). There was clear evidence of the feminization of migration with more than half of the migrant population being women in almost all types of migration and flows of migrants between urban and rural areas. In the period of 2012–2018, about 800,000 people went to export labor and in the first six months of 2019, 66,983 workers were sent abroad (DOLAB, 2012–2019). The data also suggest that the receiving areas are gaining young workers through migration, while the sending areas are increasingly facing problems associated with population aging such as the increase in the dependency ratio and challenges of providing social security for the aged population (Nguyen Thanh Liem and Nguyen Huu Minh, 2011; VCPHCSC, 2019).

In terms of laws, policies, the party and the state of Viet Nam always consider the stability of the family as one of the determining factors for the success of the country's industrialization and modernization process. Therefore, the platform for national construction in the transition to socialism (supplemented and developed in 2011) emphasized "build[ing] a prosperous, progressive, happy, really healthy family as a fine cell of society and an important environment for direct lifestyle education and character formation" (VCP, 2011).

On May 4, 2001, the prime minister issued Decision No. 72/2001/QD/TTg making June 28 the annual Family Day of Vietnam. On May 29, 2012, the prime minister issued Decision No. 629/QD-TTg approving the Strategy for Development of the Vietnam Family until 2020, vision 2030, and stressed that building a prosperous, progressive, and healthy Vietnam family is an important goal of socioeconomic development strategy in the period 2011–2020.

Institutionalizing the party guidelines and policies, many laws have been promulgated to build and develop the Vietnam family in the past few decades, for example, the Law on Marriage and Family (2000 and 2014); Law on Gender Equality (2006); Law on Domestic Violence Prevention (2007); Law on Protection, Care and Education of Children (amended 2004) and Children Law 2016; Law of Elderly (2009), etc.

In 2003, the Department of Family Affairs, which is responsible for national family management, was established under the National Committee for Population, Family and Children (now the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism). After the state apparatus was established, a lot of activities were implemented to build a Vietnamese family of "prosperity, progress and happiness". Besides, many programs and policies on family building have also implemented, for example, a family planning policy, hunger elimination and poverty reduction policies, some propaganda such as "light up the love in each family", "for a family without violence", etc.

Demographic Characteristics of the Family

Family Size

The results of the 1989 to 2019 census show the trend of reducing family size, with the average number of people in a household in 1989 4.84 people and in 2009 it was 3.8 people. This trend continued in 2019, but at a slower pace, with the average number of people in a household being 3.6 (VGSO, 1991; VCPHCSC, 2010, 2019).

Number of Generations

The 2006 Viet Nam Family Survey, which is so far the first and only survey at a national scale with a sample of 9,300 households (Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism-MOCST et al., 2008), stated that at the stage of the survey, a two-generation household type (including parents and children) was quite popular, at 63.4 percent. The two-generation household

type has a higher rate in rural areas than in urban areas. One of the reasons is that land and housing conditions in urban areas are limited, so the number of generations living together in a household increases. In addition, many families in rural areas have separate households so as to divide the land.

According to the 2017 Family Survey (with about 2,000 households), after 10 years the percentage of the number of generations in the family had no significant change. The general trend is that two-generation families still prevail in both urban areas (58.8 percent for two gen-erations and 4.6 percent for one generation) and rural areas (64.8 percent two generations and 10.0 percent for one generation) (Nguyen Xuan Thang, 2018).

Dependency Ratio

The census data show that the child dependency ratio has decreased from 80.8 percent in 1979 to 35.7 percent in 2019. Meanwhile, the dependency ratio for the elderly increased slightly, from 9.1 percent in 1979 to 11.3 percent in 2019. That makes the total dependency ratio decreased from 89.9 percent in 1979 to 47.1 percent in 2019 (VCPHCSC, 2010, 2019). As such, Vietnam is still in the period of a golden population structure and that creates good conditions for the national economy and the family economy to have savings for development investment.

Due to declining fertility and increasing average life expectancy of the population, the aging index of the Vietnamese population has increased rapidly over the past three decades. The pop-ulation aging index (60+) increased from 16.6 percent in 1979 to 48.8 percent in 2019 (Ibid). This shows that the population aging rate is increasing faster than the "working age population" growth rate. Decreasing "child dependency" and increasing "elderly dependency" will create different opportunities and challenges for the whole family and society.

International Marriage

One of the new types of families that appeared more popular during last two decades is marriage of Vietnamese to foreigners. From 1995 to 2016 (data in 2011 and 2012 not including Nghe An province) there were about 365,197 cases of Vietnamese citizens marrying foreigners or marrying Vietnamese citizens residing abroad, of which over 80 percent are Vietnamese women (MOLISA, 2011; MOFA-IOM, 2017). The majority of these marriages are through brokers. There are also many Vietnamese women who get married to foreigners so they can live and work in Vietnam (Dinh Hung, 2017).

Studies of foreign-based marriages via brokers often show that the main purpose of the foreign marriage is to improve the family's difficult economic situation. Although some studies emphasize the positive effects of this type of international marriage, especially in the economic aspect, many consequences of this type of marriage have also been shown. Some legitimate points of interest can be raised as follows: (1) the lack of preparation of brides before leaving the country limits their ability to adapt to a new life, educate and take care of children, which increases the risk of violence; (2) Vietnamese brides face many difficulties in obtaining citizen-ship and exercising the right to freedom of immigration; (3) children born to brokered families are facing difficulties in schooling, health care, and normal development like other children in foreign countries; and (4) the trend of women getting married abroad through brokers has increased the gender imbalance, limiting the chances of male marriage in the locality (Nguyen Huu Minh, 2011; MOFA-IOM, 2017).

Marriage and Divorce

Universal Marriage

Data from censuses 1989–2019 show that the percentage of people who have ever been married is increasing. In 1989, this percentage of men aged 15 or older was 67.6 percent and in 2019 it was 73.4 percent; the figures for women were 73.3 percent in 1989 and 81.5 percent in 2019. As for urban and rural areas, the percentage of the population aged 15 or older in rural areas is always higher than in urban areas. The percentage of the population aged 15 and older who has ever been married in Vietnam has been relatively high for last few decades, which indicates that marriage in Vietnam is quite universal.

Age at Marriage

Singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) has shown an increasing trend during last few decades, from 23.8 in 1989 to 25.2 in 2019. However, SMAM increase in males is higher than that of females, and this has widened the SMAM gender difference. The SMAM difference for men and women was 1.2 years in 1989 and gradually increased to 4.1 years in 2019 (VGSO, 1991; VCPHCSC 2010; 2019).

Modernization factors such as increased education, higher opportunities for non-farm employment, the prevalence of urban lifestyles, state policies, wars, and more freedoms for individuals in terms of marriage choice have contributed to the increasing age at marriage. At the same time, the marriage age also depends on regional cultural characteristics (MOCST et al., 2008; Nguyen Huu Minh, 2018).

However, early marriage (before the age of 20 for men and before the age of 18 for women, based on the Vietnam Marriage and Family Law) also occurs in most sociodemographic groups (more common in lower education groups and those living in rural and mountainous areas), although this phenomenon has decreased over the last 30 years. Figures are particularly high in some areas of ethnic minorities in the northern region, Central Highlands, and some provinces in the Mekong Delta (VGSO, 1991, 2017b; VCPHCSC, 2010, 2019).

Marriage Selection

The nature of Vietnamese partner selection has changed substantially over the past few decades. The power of parents to choose marriages for their children is diminishing, while young people are becoming more independent in deciding their lives. The decision-making right of children in terms of marriage is most evident in recent marriage groups, well-educated groups, and those living in urban areas before marriage. According to the 2017 Marriage Survey, the percentage of children who decided to marry completely on their own or in consultation with their parents was 66.6 percent for the period before 1975, 77.6 percent for the period 1976–1986, 81.2 percent for the period 1987–1999, 85.3 percent for the period 2000–2009, and 90.1 percent for the period 2010–2017 (Nguyen Huu Minh, 2018).

However, the increase in freedom of choice of partners in recent marriage cohorts does not mean that from now on, young people have completely decided to marry. The prevailing trend is that children decide their marriage in consultation with their parents. This suggests that the traditional norm of marriage as an important family issue is still maintained. Seeking family help in choosing a spouse not only reflects the pressure to uphold society's traditions but it

also demonstrates the rationality of the decisions made by individuals taking into account the importance of marriage in Vietnam. It is believed that the continuity and unity of the extended family will be better maintained if all the important family members share the decisions about choosing the bride and groom for the family (Nguyen Huu Minh, 2009, 2018). This trend harmonizes the interests of parents, families, and individuals who come to the marriage, so it will certainly last a long time in Vietnam, especially in rural areas.

Together with the change in marriage decision rights, there has been a corresponding change in people's marriage-selection criteria. The traditional notion of selecting a suitable daughter- or son-in-law, based on the concept of a "suitable alliance" between the bride's and bridegroom's families, has been replaced by individual compatibility in aspects such as emotional compatibility, lifestyle, and occupation. The criteria for choosing a partner based on personal characteristics such as "know how to behave/good morality," "healthy," and "know how to do business" are agreed to by the majority of respondents. Meanwhile, a number of criteria associated with family circumstances and villages are no longer appreciated as before. However, the overall pattern is a blend of personal and family circumstances in the choice of marriage (MOCST et al., 2008; Nguyen Huu Minh, 2018).

Significant impacts to the changes in marriage formation in Vietnam are the positive change of the education system, the process of industrialization, and urbanization with the restructuring of the socioeconomic structure. Improving educational attainment strengthens the aspirations of young men and women to be less dependent on their parents and reduces the parents' power over their children. The process of industrialization and urbanization with socioeconomic restructuring also creates many new career opportunities outside of agriculture for people, and especially women, making children less dependent on the economic side of parents and enriches the range of out-of-family communication by children. The urban environment gives people living there many opportunities to access new information and ideas that emphasize the right of a person to choose a partner.

Studies have also shown the impact of state-related factors on the transformation of marriage formation. The influence of the state on marriage formation is often through marriage and family laws and policies, as well as measures to implement these laws. This directly provides the legal basis for the freedom to choose a partner and decide the appropriate time of marriage for young people and political support for that aspiration.

Along with structural transitions such as increased education, broadening the scope of careers outside the home, urbanization, etc., the tendency to marry later, the increasing freedom to choose a partner, and the criteria for partner selection are more closely tied to the demands of the new socioeconomic context in recent generations. This shows a real cognitive change in people toward individual decision-making power and more attention to personal characteristics in terms of marriage.

Living Arrangements After Marriage

The trend of living with the husband's family after marriage is still the dominant pattern of housing arrangements of newly married couples in a patriarchal family system. The 2017 Marriage Survey data show that the percentage of respondents living with their husband's family is 64.7 percent. The proportion of people living with their husband's family was higher in the period before 1975, slightly decreased in the period of 1976–1999, increased in the period 2000–2006, and decreased even more in the period 2007–2017 (MOCST et al., 2008; Nguyen Huu Minh, 2018). For matriarchal families, the practice of living with the wife's family is still maintained. However, the picture of housing arrangements is getting more diverse. There has

been an increasing number of son/daughters of the families that were traditionally patriarchal now live with the wife's family, and those that traditionally belonged to matriarchal family now live with the husband's family. There is also a significant proportion of families living separately after marriage (Nguyen Huu Minh, 2018).

The pattern of living with a husband's or wife's family after marriage in Vietnam is not simply a continuation of traditional norms but also a product of modern rational decisions. Therefore, this pattern will exist for a long time, especially in rural Vietnam.

Divorce

Divorce has gradually become a normal social phenomenon, demonstrating the growing importance of personal happiness compared to the integrity of the family in Vietnam. Comparison among recent census data shows an increase in divorce cases. Only 0.5 percent of the population aged 15 and over was divorced in 1989, and this rate was 1.8 percent in 2019. An upward trend has been identified in both urban and rural areas and for both men and women (VGSO, 1991; VCPHCSC, 2019).

The reasons for divorce are very diverse. The lack of satisfaction with each other, differences in personality, emotional disagreements in the changing social context, and personal factors may be the cause of the outbreak of family conflict, separation, and divorce. In addition, adultery; domestic violence; reasons related to the economy, income, or job; lifestyle mismatches; etc., also make the decision to divorce easy.

In general, the socio-economic changes such as a better-off living standard; the importance of individualism, privacy, and liberalism; and legal and policy reforms in terms of women's empowerment were attributed to the development of new perceptions on divorce that make it more easily accepted. People with a better education are a smaller share of the divorced population compared with those with a lower education (MOCST et al., 2008; Vu Manh Loi, 2019). Studies also show that the proportion of women who initiated the divorce request is more than men (Ibid). This fact partly shows that the status of Vietnamese women has changed, awareness of their rights has been raised, and women are becoming more and more autonomous in their married life.

Regardless of the reason for divorce, the consequences are quite serious for the family in general, and women and children in particular. Findings from recent studies show that there are certain upsets and difficulties after divorce for the ex-husband or wife, children, and parents. These are changes in mood, emotional feelings, caring for family members, economic life, and work. Children from families with divorced parents face certain difficulties in housing, studying and reduced living standards; have psychological problems and reduced social interactions with family and friends; or are fearful and experience a lack of concentration (Vu Manh Loi, 2019). In addition, conflicts in terms of property-related issues have had a significant impact on the couple. It is also a fact that children often live with the mother and the father is responsible for alimony. However, the divorced husbands often do not execute their responsibility for alimony and cause financial difficulties for the mothers (Pham Thanh Van, 2004; MOCST et al., 2008; Phan Thi Luyen, 2018; Vu Manh Loi, 2019).

However, Vu Manh Loi (2019) shows some new findings when assessing the consequences of divorce. A significant portion of divorced people said their personal life has not changed much in some aspects such as emotional life (41.8 percent); physical safety (56.4 percent); relations with children (53.9 percent); and relationship with parents, as well as the original family (63.2 percent). This requires a more thorough assessment of the social consequences of divorce.

Intrafamily Relationships

Spousal Relationships

In the relationship between husband and wife, the traditional gender-based division of labor is still maintained, although there is a more balanced share between the sexes in terms of household production and family business. The wife continues to be the main person responsible for housework, child care, money keeping, care for the elderly, etc. The husband is considered to be more suitable for production, business, guest receptions, and to communicate with the authorities on behalf of the family. The participation of men in housework and child care has not increased significantly and is not commensurate with the increase of women in the labor market. The "dual" labor burden, with limited time funds and poor health, keeps women from developing their capacities, and thus reduces the quality of the spousal relationship (MOCST et al., 2008; Nguyen Xuan Thang, 2018; Nguyen Huu Minh, 2018).

The decision-making power between husband and wife in various fields has been maintained fairly stable over many years, with the dominant role of husband over wife, though the proportion of both husband and wife sharing decisions in terms of housework has increased in recent years. In decisions related to production, business, buying expensive goods, and expenses for funerals and weddings, the husband is still the main decision maker in most families. The existence of the pattern that the husband makes the main decision of the family to show that the male is the head of the household continues to be popular in society even though the government and Vietnamese society have made great efforts in ensuring and encouraging the enhancement of the role and position of women in the family (Ibid).

The transition from the traditional pattern of division of labor between husband and wife in the family and decision-making power (decisions are mainly made by men) to a gender equality pattern (with the equal participation of both spouses) takes place more in urban areas, in highly educated population groups, and in families where wives contribute more than husbands to household economy. It can be predicted that, along with the increase in material life and educational attainment, as well as the strong integration with global values of gender equality, the relationship between husband and wife will increasingly be more equal (Ibid).

Demonstrations of spousal affection may be verbal or nonverbal, direct or indirect, and it has great meaning in married life. It is indicated that a way of showing closeness and affection between husband and wife in a private way is a main choice for many Vietnamese couples, and this was a reservation of a traditional lifestyle for Vietnamese people. There has also been a tendency to increase slightly new emotional behaviors between a husband and wife, such as organizing entertainment activities and travelling together and giving gifts to each other on birthdays or wedding anniversaries. These behaviors reflect a new trend in interactions between husband and wife that are associated with the process of modernization and international integration. However, this trend also depends on the education or age of each couple. The older the couple, the less likely they are to show openly affection to each other than young couples. People with higher levels of education show more attachment to their partners than those with lower levels of education (Nguyen Huu Minh, 2018).

Violence in marriage can have adverse effects on the psychology health of a husband and wife and negatively affect the development of children. The research results show that the conflicts in marriage expressed through quarrels and curses have a high proportion among Vietnamese couples; however, the proportion of couples in which spousal abuse occurs is quite small and tends to decrease. This is probably due to the widespread dissemination of information on domestic violence prevention activities in the media in the years after the Law of Domestic Violence

Prevention went into effect (NAV, 2007). For most types of violence (such as quarreling, cursing, beating), people with a lower education (primary school or lower) have a higher incidence of domestic violence compared to those with a higher education, and those living in poverty have a higher proportion of domestic violence than those with better living standards (Ibid).

Parent–Child Relationships

There have been certain changes in the parent–child relationship in terms of parents' caring and educating their children (Nguyen Xuan Thang, 2018).

Regarding the *attention and caring of children*, in the context of market economy and international integration, the percentage of parents who pay attention to their children, take time to care for them and invest more in learning and creating friendships is increasing. However, there are still many parents who do not have time to take care of their children and do not pay attention to participating in activities with their children to increase cohesion and communication between parent and children.

As for *educational content*, the main content of parenting focuses on issues of a moral education, lifestyle, and life skills for children. In addition, a significant proportion of parents are more interested in teaching their children how to spend money and how to dress. There are differences among parent groups in terms of educational content, but these are not significant. A significant proportion of parents have tended to educate their children to listen and respect their elders but also know how to express their own opinions, not just listen and follow as before.

Parents' teaching methods have had a certain change. The percentage of parents teaching their children by the method of imposition and prohibition has decreased significantly; instead, they remind children and help them to understand what is right or wrong. Parents' educational roles also change in a more equal way. The status of the children has gradually increased. However, the parent–child relationship basically still adheres to the traditional hierarchy, and the parent is the one who decides all the issues related to the children. This can lead to disrespect for children's rights or to a violation of their physical freedoms.

Along with the change in family structure, as well as the difference in the conception of life and values between parents and children, a significant number of parents find it difficult to educate children in terms of morals and ethics. The lack of parental knowledge about development and psychological changes of children in adolescence and the lack of effective methods of educating children are an important cause to increase the risk of conflict between parents and children.

Relationships With Elderly Parents and Descendants

The aging population trend in Vietnam, on the one hand, confirms that the quality of life of people has increased, but from the perspective of caring for the elderly, it poses new care needs that must be met. In the current period, families have been trying to fulfill their responsibility to support and care for the elderly and maintain a harmonious relationship between the elderly and their descendants, both physically and emotionally. The family is still considered the most important environment to care for the elderly. It also means that a significant proportion of older people have no choice but to depend on their children when they cannot continue to care for themselves. Most older people live with their children and see this as an age-old security solution despite differences in lifestyle and interests. However, in the process of industrialization and modernization, the care of the elderly tends to shift from spiritual and material to just material, from direct to indirect care. Mental loneliness is an issue that needs more attention for the elderly today (Nguyen Xuan Thang, 2018).

The family's support system for the elderly in the near future will face obstacles due to changes in family structure and function. Reducing the number of children in the family will reduce the source of support for parents in old age. The participation of women in the social workforce, divorce, and many young migrants seeking employment make the elderly more lonely and lacking support. Many elderly people will have to live alone and take care of themselves, facing many financial difficulties and illnesses. In the meantime, the service centers of elderly care provided by the state mainly stop at social protection centers for policy beneficiary groups, leaving the elderly without support. Paid elderly care services are only popular in big cities, and the cost is high (about VND 7,000,000 to 10,000,000/month), which is not suitable with the income level of the majority of elderly people (Thien Duc and Nhan Ai, 2018). The majority of elderly Vietnamese lives in rural areas and do not have pensions. In the context of limited social security, this is a great difficulty for households caring for elderly members.

Conclusion

In general, the traditional Vietnamese family pattern, characterized by a rather big size and interdependence between family members, materially and emotionally, under the impact of modernization and global integration has been transforming towards a modern family pattern, with a reduction in family size, combined with a reduction in material dependency among members, while continuing to maintain a coherent emotional relationship, along with an increase in personal autonomy.

Notes

1 On September 2, 1945, President Ho Chi Minh read the Declaration of Independence, ending 80 years of French aggression, establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
2 Doi Moi (Renovation) is a new policy initiated by the Sixth Viet Nam Communist Party Congress held in December 1986. One of its main orientations is to shift Vietnam's economy from a centralized, bureaucratic, and subsidy-based economy strictly dependent on public and collective ownership to a socialist-oriented multisector commodity economy placed under state management.

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FEMINISM IN VIETNAM

Women's Studies, Gender Research, and Intersections

Hương Thu Nguyễn and Helle Rydstrom

The study of women and of inequalities between women and men in Vietnam can take many routes. In this chapter we approach this subject through the lens of feminism. We address the manner in which feminism is understood, observing intellectual currents that resonate with global trends in some respects and those reflecting conditions more specific to Vietnam in others. Affinities with global currents, for example, are seen in the ways in which Vietnamese intellectuals have understood the long-standing societal and political goal of reaching 'equality between men and women' (*nam nữ bình quyền*), in which we observe a shift from focusing explicitly on women – in the tradition of women's studies, to a greater focus on relations between women, men, and other groups – in the tradition of gender studies, and still more recently to an approach that highlights intersectionality, i.e. one focused on intersections of gender and other socially defining parameters such as age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and class and their implications for individuals, groups, and at a societal level. The specific meanings of feminism, gender, and intersectionality in Vietnam reflect conditions, experiences, and tensions that are more specified even to particular regions and identities within it.

We begin the chapter by addressing understandings of feminism and its relation to gender and intersectional studies. This is followed by a historical overview of three waves of influential state-feminism that traces developments from the colonial/anti–colonial period to the present. The chapter concludes with an exploration of feminism, gender studies, and intersectionality across key societal themes, including family, population control, masculinity, gendered violence, LGBTQ (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer),[1] labor, economy, migration, and the middle class. One provocative question that emerges is to what extent feminism is viewed as state ideology, or whether the differentiation of social life in Vietnam associated with its market transition and international integration has transformed the relationship between varieties of feminism and state power, as shaped in the borderland between the state and non-state realms.

Feminism, gender studies, and intersectionality

Women's studies, gender research, and intersectional analysis are all indebted to feminism. Feminism simultaneously refers to scholarly work and activism. It concerns a commitment to equal opportunities for women – and anybody else – and therefore inevitably includes a policy dimension. Feminism also refers to critical theoretical examinations of societal conditions and

how these frame the lives of women and underprivileged groups. Feminism does not refer to an overarching epistemological framework or method, neither to a unified political standpoint. Rather, feminism takes multiple shapes and directions due to the ways in which it is informed by particular politics, movements, and academic traditions (Crenshaw, 1989; Endres, 1999; hooks, 1987; Pollock, 1999; Roces, 2010).

Research concerned with feminist issues has grown out of social sciences in particular and encapsulates established interpretations of feminism as well as grassroots perspectives. Not unlike women's movements elsewhere in the world, thinking about women and the development of various women's movements in Vietnam have been informed by larger political struggles and ideologies (Lê, 1992; Mai and Lê, 1978; Hồ Tài, 1996). As will be discussed later, Vietnam Women's Union (*Hội Liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam*) is an illustrative example of institutionalized feminism (Waibel and Gluck, 2013). From the sideline of governmental institutions, local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots movements, independent research institutes, and aid agencies interact with governments to provide critical feminist views on official policies and priorities (London, 2014).

Gender and feminism in Vietnam

While the term 'gender' (*giới*) is widely used by Vietnamese scholars, organizations, and agencies, in the Vietnamese language there is no word for 'feminist' or 'feminism'. There are numerous ways of translating 'feminism' into Vietnamese, though. *Lý/chủ thuyết nữ quyền* translates into a 'theory of women's rights', while *phong trào* and *lý thuyết phụ nữ* means 'women's movement' as well as a 'theory of women'. A recent translation of feminism into the Sino-Vietnamese term *thuyết vị nữ* is derived from the root of *vị* which is *vì*. *Vì* means 'for' while the word's other pronunciation *vi* means *là* 'to be'. *Thuyết vị nữ* thus translates into 'a theory *for* women'. These translations tend to reflect the prevailing reading of feminism in Vietnam as a social movement, which is aimed at changing the position of women only; thus being *about* women, *for* women, and *by* women. This is the light in which 'feminism' in Vietnam, as seen elsewhere, occasionally is viewed as being 'anti-male' (see Dương, W., 2001; Dương, L., 2012; Khuất, Lê and Nguyễn, 2009).

That there is no immediate equivalent Vietnamese term for the English notion 'feminism' does not, however, mean that the notion is without relevance in the Vietnamese context. The term captures the ethos of a movement in Vietnam, which historically has been devoted to improve women's status through policy initiatives and scholarly work and eventually has been consolidated as a state feminism represented by the Women's Union. An established version of feminism is continuously challenged by alternative feminist approaches, though.

As for terminology, we would propose the Vietnamized term *chủ thuyết feminist* as the most adequate term to capture the English notion 'feminism'. *Chủ thuyết feminist* qualifies as a notion, which allows for a broader and more complex understanding of feminism; as the study of women and other underprivileged groups as those are socioculturally and economically configured through the 'intersections' (*tính giao thoa*) between 'gender' (*giới*) and other influential categories such as age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and class (Molony and Nelson, 2017).

For various reasons, some observers have cast doubt on the value or desirability of defining the study of women and gender as 'feminist'. Nhung Tuyết Trần (2012), for example, contends that we should refer to studies on women and gender in Vietnam as sociological research on women in development rather than feminist studies. While development studies cover a significant part of studies on women and gender in Vietnam, Trần (2012) also seems to imply that the term feminism potentially runs against Vietnamese research traditions.

However, it is equally worth considering the insights of postcolonial and decolonial critique (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1990). These critical perspectives show how political traditionalists have appropriated critiques of feminism put forward by women as a means of shutting down counter-hegemonic views on gender or perpetuating an image of the so-called 'authentic' Asian female; an image stereotypically contrasted to what is seen as intruding Western ideas about liberated womanhood (Bayly, 2007; Dương, W., 2001; Roces, 2010; Stivens, 2010). Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương (2008), for instance, observes a strong and consequential affinity between global and local varieties of masculinities and conservatisms, which both perpetuate ideas about 'the true' Asian female and promote conditions for the oppression and exploitation of women with a trasnationally linked market mode of governance.

Beyond the fields of development studies and sociology, women, gender, and intersectionality have been undertaken in a range of other established disciplines by state affiliated and non-governmental research institutes, and various international organizations in Vietnam such as ethnology, culture studies, economics, political economy, and philosophy. Among state-affiliated research institutes, the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Family and Gender Studies (established in 1987), has been particularly influetial in developing the field of gender studies.

A large number of NGOs and research institutes in Vietnam address gender, women, and intersectionality through a more multidisciplinary development perspective including the Institute of Social Development Studies (ISDS); Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE); Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender – Family – Women and Adolescents (CSAGA); and Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP). These organizations frequently address the situation of marginalized and precarious groups in Vietnamese society as well as gender-based violence.

International development agencies also have engaged in shaping the field of women's studies, gender research, and intersectionality in the Vietnamese context. From the mid-1990s, agencies such as the Ford Foundation, the Population Council, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) provided financial support to strengthen social science research and training in Vietnam. Reflecting tendencies elsewhere in the Global South, donors from the Global North launched development projects in Vietnam, which stimulated the mainstreaming of a gender perspective (e.g. ADB, 2005; Allen and Tran, T.Q., 1992; FAO, 2019; Himmelstrand, 1981; UN Women and IFGS, 2016).

Waves of state feminism

Understanding feminism as a combination of activism and research on women and underprivileged groups, and in view of our reading of contemporay Vietnam's social history, we see three distinctive, if at times overlapping, waves of feminism, losely but not strictly related to three distinctive historical periods.[2] Given features of Vietnam's political and intellectual landscape, the development of these waves of feminism is closely associated with the history of what we might call 'state feminism' naming perspectives on women endorsed by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). While we acknowledge that feminism in Vietnam cannot be understood exclusively in terms of state-feminism, the dominant role of state-feminism is obvious. For the purposes of the present chapter, we focus our attention on this dominant strand and how other strands have grown out of its shadow.

Along these lines a first insurgent wave of feminism in Vietnam corresponded to women's fight for liberalization and rights prior to the political unification in 1975. A second wave, extending from 1975 through the period of *Đổi Mới* and into the 1990s, reflected the CPV's consistent emphasis on the announced goal of 'equality between men and women', which

it maintained even in the context of a transition from a centrally planned to market-based economy (Ljunggren, 1997). Dating from the early 1990s, a third (and still current) wave of feminism reflected a shift from an explicit focus on women to gender in its various intersected constellations. In practice these waves of feminism are coinciding. Thus, the third wave of feminism, which is distinguished by its concern with how intersections between gender and other social categories shape life, incorporates or runs parallel with concerns at the core of second wave feminism, defined by its explcit focus on women's situation, and typical 'first wave' concerns with equal rights. In this section we provide an overview of the first and second waves of feminism, highlighting the prominent role of Vietnam Women's Union.

Feminism's first wave

As the ideological and intellectual backbone of classical Vietnamese society up through the colonial and anti-colonial periods, the critique and overthrow of Confucian directives to women and girls figured centrally in the first wave of recognizably feminist struggles for women's emancipation (Trần, 1991). The 'Three Submissions' (*Tam tòng*) thus assert that "Daughter: she obeys her father; Wife: she obeys her husband; Widow: she obeys her son" (*Tại gia tòng phụ, xuất giá tòng phu, phu tử tòng tử*) (quoted in Trịnh, 1992, p. 83). These principles for girls and women are specified further, for instance, in the 'Four Virtues' (*Tứ đức*), according to which "every young woman must fully practice and scrupulously conform to four virtues; be skillful in her work, modest in her behavior, soft-spoken in her language, faultless in her principles (*Phận gái tứ đức công, dung, ngôn, hạnh, giữ gìn chẳng sai*)" (quoted in Trịnh, 1992, p. 83). David Marr (1981), however, tells how women were not passively obeying Confucian instructions but often converted those into manageable do's and don'ts of daily life.

Beyond objections to immediate conditions, Vietnam's social history and literature provided first wave feminists certain inspiration with stories of female heroines and rebel leaders, such as Hai Bà Trưng, Bà Triệu, and Bùi Thị Xuân. While the characters of Thúy Kiều and Thúy Vân in Nguyễn Du's *Tale of Kiều* famously explored the plight of women, the literary work of Hồ Xuân Hương excluded themes of political criticism and empowerment. In this spirit, the first women's group was established in 1926 as the Association for the Study of Domestic Arts (*Nữ công học Hội*). It focused on women's education and engaged women in French occupied territories (i.e. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). This occurred in a context where girls had almost no access to education (Marr, 1981, p. 206).

During this period, large numbers of women were engaged in reading and publication groups in which women's issues were addressed.[3] In 1930, when opposition to French colonialism was becoming increasingly well-organized, the Women's Union for Emancipation in Vietnam was founded to represent women in the fight for independence. In the Liberation War, the Union joined forces with the Communist Party (established in 1930) and its leader Hồ Chí Minh (Hồ Tài, 1996).

Between 1930 and 1950, the Women's Union went through various name changes, and from 1941 took on the name Women's League for National Salvation (*Phụ nữ cứu quốc*). At the First National Women's Congress held in May 1950, the Women's League for National Salvation (*Phụ nữ cứu quốc*) was renamed to Vietnam Women's Union (*Hội Liên hiệp Phụ nữ Việt Nam*), a name it retains to this day (Hồ Tài, 1996; Turley, 1993; Women's Union, 2013).

The advance of feminism in Vietnam is part and parcel of efforts to bring about revolutionary transformation. In critical steps toward obtaining 'equality between men and women', the National Assembly passed on December 28, 1959, the Law on Marriage and the Family. The law aimed at eradicating pre-revolutionary Confucian moral values and thus prohibited parental forced and early

marriage, mistreatment of women, concubinage, and wife-beating. A special section focused on women's rights to obtain divorce and the protection of children (Mai and Lê, 1978, pp. 214–223). After the reunification of Vietnam in 1976, a new overarching political goal would be to establish 'Happy, Democratic and Egalitarian Families' (*Gia đình hạnh phúc, dân chủ và bình đẳng*) (Mai and Lê, 1978). However brief, this account of Vietnam's first wave of feminism reflects its emphasis on expanding the formal rights of women and eliminate oppressive and exploitive ideas and practices.

Vietnam Women's Union and postwar state-feminism

Due to its long-time involvement in a prolonged struggle for equality for Vietnamese women, even in wartime, the Women's Union appears as the primary promotor of Vietnamese state feminism (Allen, 1990; Bergman, 1975; Chiricosta, 2010; Lê, 1992; Mai and Lê, 1978). The Women's Union was recognized as an important force during the war against the United States, playing a particularly important role in organizing women's participation in the struggle, as encapsulated in the slogan "when war comes, even the women must fight" (*giặc đến nhà, đàn bà cũng đánh*) (Taylor, 1999; Turner and Phan, 1998; see also Rydstrom, 2012). Today, the Women's Union remains the largest of Vietnam's mass organizations with its about 300 staff members and 13 million mainly female members. Membership comes through employment in the public sector or through registration and members become part of the widespread network of the Union which covers the central, provincial, district, and commune level (Waibel and Gluck, 2013).

Even though the Women's Union is the *primus motor* of state feminism, the Union increasingly has casted itself as an NGO (London, 2014). In that capacity, the Union has become a collaborator of various international aid projects dedicated to improve the situation of women in Vietnam economically and socially (Waibel and Gluck, 2013; Vijeyarasa, 2010). Inexorably, the Union similarly has become a critical point of reference for aid initiatives aimed at improving the socioeconomic conditions for women and obtaining equal opportunities for women and men. The Union thus reaches out to international and local researchers, who study women and underprivileged groups in Vietnam. This is the backdrop against which Stephanie Scott and Trương Thị Kim Chuyên (2007) call for vigilance stressing the importance of selecting research topics in the Vietnamese context independently from official ideology and policy.

Feminism's third wave

What we are identifying as Vietnam's third wave of feminism is a differentiated field, distinguished by its more nuanced analysis of women, gender, and society, comprising a multiplicity of perspectives, and drawing on a variety of sources, including state-feminism, social activism, and domestic and international scholarship. Substantively, this third wave has contributed a large body of advocacy and research on women, gender, and intersectionality across a diversity of themes. The remainder of this chapter provides a survey of this research. We first consider studies on women, motherhood, family, and reproduction. We then focus on expanding field of intersectional studies concerned with masculinities and sexualities. Finally, we direct our attention towards gender and intersectional research on labor, economy, mobility, and the growing middle class in industrializing Vietnam.

Motherhood and difference

Motherhood is portrayed in public discourse as a quintessential female capacity. The central role assigned to motherhood in Vietnamese state feminism captures two parallel, yet contradicting,

tendencies; one which essentializes women and their bodies in biological terms while the other equalizes women and men by stressing the socially constructed ways in which they are ascribed specific gendered roles (Bousquet and Taylor, 2005). Thus, it is in the family that "the most profound sentiments are expressed" (Lê, 1999, p. 15) because it is appreciated as a nexus for solidarity, psychological, and sexual harmony which enables the building of family happiness. Such views grant women a 'Natural Vocation' (*Thiên chức*), i.e. a Heavenly Mandate with regard to becoming pregnant, giving birth, and raising children (Phạm, B., 1998).

In an environment which celebrates motherhood and (heterosexual) family life, childless single women often find themselves in an awkward situation. Before advanced fertility techniques such as in vitro fertilization were fully introduced into Vietnamese society, single women would, as explored by Harriet Phinney (2022), cope with motherhood expectations by 'asking for a child' (*xin đứa con*). If a man would agree to father their child, these women would become included into a discourse which tends to equalize womanhood with motherhood (see also Bélanger, 2004). In a similar vein, Melissa Pashigian (2012) highlights how women who are deemed to be infertile nurture hopes for the development of more sophisticated fertility technique. Waiting for these women thus means to perpetually negotiate their marital situation and reassure for others that they remain committed to motherhood.

Shaping ideal families

In official rhetoric, the traditional and pre-revolutionary family has been considered a nest for 'backward' (*lạc hậu*) Confucian values, which allow for men's continued domination over women and other dependents (Barbieri and Bélanger, 2009). Legislation has been dedicated to fight such tendencies and implement policies, which have been stipulated to obtain equality between women and men. In this spirit, the most recent Law on Marriage and Family of 2014 defines the fundametal principles of the socialist mariage and family regime as the perpetuation and promotion of the Vietnamese nation's fine cultural traditions and ethics on marriage and family (Art. 2, item 3).

Thus, over the years families have been taught how to live up to such ideals by building a 'Happy Family' (*gia đình hạnh phúc*), a 'Cultured Family' (*gia đình văn hóa*), and a 'Happy and Harmonious Family Life' (*gia đình hạnh phúc hòa thuận*) (Drummond and Rydstrom, 2004). Education campaigns have employed a bouquet of techniques, as Ann Marie Leshkowich (2008) discusses, including the use of billboards, pamphlets, courses, and recreational activities to convey information to women about how to manage a household emotionally, nurture their husband and children in daily life, and ensure that their family remains small.

Keeping families small is a goal which continuously has been challenged by a widespread preference for sons in Vietnamese society. In a survey on son preference, UNFPA (2011) thus found that 70.7 percent of male respondents in Vietnam prefer to have a son because of 'lineage'; while 51 percent refer to old-age support, and 49 percent refer to 'ancestor worship'. Producing male progeny tends to be seen not only as an 'obligation' (*nghĩa*) of a woman but even as a critical way of generating 'honor' and 'good morality' (*đạo đức tốt*), for herself, her husband, and his patrilineage (Rydstrom, 2003a).

Population control

In 1963, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam introduced birth control and the government encouraged couples to have two to three children with five to six years of spacing. Abortion was legalized already in 1945 and became increasingly available in public health services with the

introduction of the family planning policies (Gammeltoft, 2014). Thus, in 1970, the government put women with more than two children under pressure to have an intrauterine device inserted. Nominally, early birth control initiatives were recommendations, though these could be both insistent and invasive. In 1988, the government launched a comprehensive family planning policy which dictated that couples should have no more than two children. Pervasive family planning campaigns were carried out to convey information about the new policy with the female body in the fore as a site for contestations over ideas about tradition vis-à-vis progress.

Studying family planning, Catherine Scornet (2009) sheds light on the role of the mass organizations (see London, 2014) in implementing the official family planning policy. They held a critical role in realizing the family planning policy by promoting various contraceptive methods including abortion. The mass organizations would ensure that all households were aware that "the consequences of demographic explosion are harmful both to individuals and their families as well as to the whole of society" (Scornet, 2001, p. 123). Not following official policy would result in punishment, for instance, in terms of fines, losing one's job, or exclusion from a round of land distribution (Bélanger and Khuất, 2009; Rydstrom, 2003a).

Research on reproductive health care and abortion concerns women's right to their bodies and has typically been an important issue of women's studies. Danièle Bélanger and Khuất Thị Hải Oanh (2009) explore how abortion resonates both with family planning policies and a desire for male progeny. In her research, Annika Johansson (1998) shows how sex-selective technologies have allowed for a dramatic rise in sex ratios at birth. In 2013, the sex-ratio at birth in Vietnam had thus reached 113.8 (Den Boer and Hudson, 2017, p. 119; Guilmoto, 2012). Abortion, however, refers to more than numbers. Young women in northern Vietnam who have undergone late-term provoked abortion, Tine Gammeltoft (2006) shows, struggle with experiences of multilayered pain. Narratives, she suggests, help these young women to overcome the psychological and physical implications of the intervention.

A gendered order

Considering the relations between women and men in a patrilineally and heterosexually organized universe, Ngô Thị Ngân Bình (2004) highlights the challenges which young newlywed women encounter when moving from the home of their natal family into the household of their new husband and his parents. Not only gender but also age, class, and masculinity are at play when mothers-in-law hold out conservative understandings of The Four Virtues (*Tứ đức*) and how these should be implemented by their daughter-in-law. Such gender intersected power relations within the household, Jayne Werner (2004; 2008) argues, reinforce social hierarchies among women. Mothers-in-law tend to take official images of womanhood disseminated by the Women's Union as directives to be lived by, while daughters-in-law refer to these as ideals with which it is not always possible to comply (Nguyễn, H.M., 2018; Nguyễn, H., 2012).

Exploring gender dynamics in transforming Vietnam, Helle Rydstrom (2003a, 2006a, 2006b) examines the ways in which women and girls negotiate their position in the patrilineal kinship system due to what is recognized as their 'exterior' position. Embodying his father's patrilineage, a son is recognized as 'inside lineage' (*họ nội*), and he therefore holds a privileged position. Daughters are seen as belonging to the 'outside lineage' (*họ ngoại*) because it is assumed that they cannot reproduce the patrilineage. The demonstration of *tình cảm* (sentiments/emotions/feelings) provides a social tool for women and girls by which they cannot only compensate for their inferior position in the patrilineal hierarchy but also contribute to the building of harmonious families. While a son is celebrated as a future 'pillar of the house' (*trụ cột gia đình*), a daughter is praised for her caring capacities. From a young age, girls learn to adjust to gender

expectations, which they, however, also contest in daily life by applying a pragmatic view born out of practice (Rydstrom 2003a, 2006a, 2006b).

This is the backdrop against which not only femininities but also masculinities are configured within a predominantly heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). A typical young 'male character' (*tính cách nam*) is defined as masculine in terms of being 'active' (*hiếu động*) and a 'female character' (*tính cách nữ*) as feminine in terms of being 'gentle' (*hiền*). Through daily life socialization in the home and school, children learn about the binary qualities ascribed to girls and boys, women and men (Rydstrom and Drummond, 2004; Rydstrom, 2003a, 2006a, 2006b).

Masculinities and privileges

Research concerned with relations between the genders also includes critical studies of men and masculinities. Prior to the introduction of the *Đổi mới* policy, as Khuất Thu Hồng (1998) explains, premarital and extramarital sex used to be condemned in Vietnam as being immoral and was punished by various kinds of demotion such as losing one's job. Female sexuality would be ignored while male sexuality would be associated with the demonstration of (heterosexual) masculinity (Rydstrom, 2006a). Globalization, urbanization, and economic change challenge established norms regarding sexual behavior, marriage, and partnership (Braemer, 2014; Nguyễn, A., 2007; Phinney 2022). An increase in disposable incomes, for instance, has led to a surge in men, who engage in premarital as well as extramarital sex especially with sex workers from whom they purchase various heterosexual services (Horton and Rydstrom, 2011; Nguyễn and Harris, 2009; Phinney, 2009).

Power constellations between men and women and between men and other men take multiple expressions. Hùng Cẩm Thái (2012, p. 57) shows that most men, on the one hand, tend to 'benefit from the patriarchal dividend of dominance over women' but, on the other, they themselves need to maneuver male hierarchies under which their position is shaped along the lines of age, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Some men thus claim more powerful positions in a heterosexual male hierarchy, which impacts the production of hegemonic images and narratives of (heterosexual) masculinity vis-à-vis femininity (Connell, 1987). Such constructions of masculinity even are reflected in media discourses, job distributions, and political decision making.

Vũ Hồng Phong (2010) discusses a masculinity shaped by alcohol consumption. Alcohol is assumed to enhance male virility due to its 'hot' qualities and is related, albeit remotely, to alcoholic medical tonics used to stimulate male potency (Avieli, 2019; Craig, 2002). Alcohol is popular amongst men, as a means by the aid of which male friendships can be developed and networks established. As highlighted by Nguyễn-võ (2008) and Phinney (2009), at 'drinking parties' male bonding is facilitated and a particular type of heterosexual masculine sociality produced; a sexuality which not unusually involves men's collective purchase of female sex. Masculine power galvanized by the consumption of alcohol and sex has been identified as one of the root causes for men's abuse of women (ISDS, 2020; Jansen et al. 2016).

Gender, harm, and violence

In an early study, Khuất Thu Hồng (2004) describes how men and women occupy space in significantly different ways. Men might dominate, or even control, public areas such as the workplace, the educational setting, and the streets. Male ways of appropriating space might even include men's sexual harassment of women. Especially younger women are susceptible to male attacks when in public spaces; they might be cornered by men in the more isolated areas of the

office and the campus, or they might be groped when on their motorbike stopping for red traffic light in the packed city streets (ISDS, 2015).

Men who inflict themselves upon women in public spaces tend to minimize their actions by referring to their grappling and groping of women as nothing but a matter of 'teasing' (*trêu chọc*) thereby implying that these actions of harm are consental. Such assumptions are not necessarily countered by official strategies regarding how to deal with sexual harassment. In the era of #MeToo movement (e.g. BBC 2018), the discourse of 'social evils' (*tệ nạn xã hội*) conspicuously obscures whom to hold responsible for sexual harassment of women by removing focus from the perpetrator to a larger social category composed of a variety of morally condemned or legally prohibited practices such as addiction, gambling, buying sex, and violence (McNally, 2003; Vijeyarasa, 2010).

Fear of social stigma and repercussions tends to mute female victims of sexual harassment and even rape, as discussed by Nguyễn Thu Hương (2012). The Vietnamese terms for 'rape' (*hiếp dâm*) or 'forced sex' (*cưỡng dâm*) are circumvented in everyday conversation to avoid drawing attention to violent acts of misogyny. Sexualized violence against women is perpetrated by known and unknown men in the home or in the public sphere (MOLISA, GSO and UNFPA, 2020). A woman who has been raped might decide against reporting the crime and instead silence the gross harm to which she has been subjected. If the perpetrator is her male partner, it is even more likely that the violence will be neglected because a husband's 'right' to sex tends to be seen as irrevocable; consent to marriage is equalized with consent to sexual intercourse as long as the marriage is considered to be legally valid.

Lynn Kwiatkowski (2008, 2011), amongst others (e.g. Rydstrom 2003b, 2017; Schuler et al., 2014; Yount and Krause, 2017), studies intimate partner violence in Vietnam. Focusing on recent health care initiatives and international development projects carried out in the country, Kwiatkowski (2008, 2011) sees tendencies of an increased understanding in Vietnamese society of how gender-based abuse violates women's rights. However, all the while female survivors of violence receive well-intended messages about rights and expectations from kin and community regarding complicit female behavior, which makes abused women reluctant to report the violence to the authorities.

Studies on gender-based violence among ethnic minority groups resonate with such tendencies. Gender-based violence is, above all, perpetrated in the household by men against their female partner and against other female household members (Nguyễn, H., 2012). Like the majority of Vietnamese women, minority women tend to endure the suffering they experience due to male violence hoping that such a survival strategy will prevent them from future beating and, in addition, help them to stimulate a 'harmonious' family; or manage to project an image of such an ideal family to the outside world (Phan, 2008).

Besides the severe psychological and physical harm suffered by an abused woman, there is an economic dimension to domestic violence. The costs of violence are equally high with significant out-of-pocket expenditure and contraction of household income with missing work (Duvvury et al., 2012). Abused women detail experiences of depression, illness, and inability to perform their usual tasks which also mean loss of income for a household and society. Despite a surge in the number of divorces in contemporary Vietnam, it is still rarely considered an option due to the stigmatization and economic difficulties which a divorce might cause (Gammeltoft and Nguyễn, 2014; Nguyễn and Rydstrom, 2018; Perkins, Cotrel-Gibbons, Nguyễn, 2016).

LGBTQ

The misrecognition experienced by LGBTQ people has been examined in the Vietnamese context (Horton, 2014; Newton, 2016; Nguyễn, V., 2015) and so have the intersections between

LGBTQ and ethnicity (Nguyễn, H., 2016) and how journalists consider and represent LGBTQ issues (Faludi, 2016; Nguyễn and Angelique, 2017; Trần, R., 2014). Intersectional insights into discrimination of homosexuals and transgender people have been provided by Nathalie Newton (2016), who studies the lesbian community in Ho Chi Minh City. She shows how these women experience a dependency upon the income of their natal family. Legalization of same-sex marriage would mean an opportunity for lesbians, Newton argues, to reinsert themselves into the national realm, discourse, and narrative as recognized members of society.

Moving feminism from an explicit focus on women, iSEE has pushed for studies of LGBTQ in Vietnam, including public opinion on same-sex marriage, same-sex households, and how printed and online media treat same-sex issues. iSEE studies, in addition, document the situation of lesbians, transgender people, and men who have sex with men, Nguyễn et al., 2012). Other non-profit organizations, such as ISDS, CCIHP, and CSAGA similarly have contributed important knowledge about the LGBTQ movement (Oosterhoff, Hoang and Quach, 2014); stigma, health, and livelihood (Hoang and Oosterhoff, 2016); and violence (Bùi et al., 2010).

These organizations convey knowledge about LGBTQ policies and campaigns and also organize the annual VietPride Parade (launched in 2012). A critical aim has been to project a positive image of the LGBTQ community to the public, as indicated by the slogan *Normalcy, Love, Community Identity and Human Rights* (Faludi, 2016; Nualart, 2016). The government has engaged with the LGBTQ movement and promulgated a series of legal initiatives. In 2014, for instance, the Marriage and Family Law of 2000 was amended to lift the ban on same-sex marriage, though without legalizing such marriages (Horton and Rydstrom, 2019).

In 2015, the Civil Code was amended to legalize gender reassignment surgery and the recognition of transgender people, however, without the law being enforced (Nguyễn, H., 2019). LGBTQ organizations such as It's T Time and iSEE as well as international experts have discussed how to revise the draft Gender Affirmation Law in line with international rights and best practice codes. An Amended Labor Code has been drafted to incorporate a section on non-discrimination at the workplace based on sexual orientation and gender identity (UNDP and USAID, 2014). Nevertheless, the Code is not necessarily implemented on the ground as experienced by transgender people when trying to find a job or when at the workplace (Asia Pacific Transgender Network, 2018).

Gender and labor

As a result of the *Đổi Mới* policy, Vietnam took the first steps to move from a centrally planned economy to a global market economy. Hence, in 1986, a new Law on Foreign Investment was introduced, which allowed foreign companies to enter Vietnam as part of an overarching development strategy devoted to shift the country's economy from import substitution to export orientation (Nguyễn et al., 2019).

Agricultural production was transferred to individual households by virtue of a number of wide ranging agricultural reforms (Kerkvliet, 1995). Households could now make decisions regarding fertilizing, plowing, irrigating, transplanting, and harvesting without joining the local cooperative. Such farming tasks were divided along gender lines as men usually would do the plowing (previously mainly by the aid of a buffalo today by a tractor), while women would be in charge of transplanting the rice plants (Rydstrom, 2003a). While all hands of a household would be needed for the harvest seasons, women generally oversee the agricultural work as men often take up work as daily laborer outside their community (UN Women and IFGS, 2016).

Vietnam's rapid industrialization increasingly has demanded a new workforce with qualifications which do not resemble skills required in the agricultural sector (Bousquet, 2016; FAO,

2019). The societal transformation process has implications for both women and men, however, in different ways. While about 70 percent of women in Vietnam are engaged in the labor market, the occupational structure between women and men differs with more women working in manufacturing, education and health, the service sector, and as domestic hired laborers. Gender stereotypical divisions of labor inform the choice of occupation in the sense that women often take up jobs located in close proximity to their home to be able to take care of children and ailing kin (GSO, 2017). A gender gap in salary and social security insurance renders women more vulnerable on the labor market, yet the gap is narrower for younger generations, who appear to contest cemented assumptions about gender defined occupations and obligations (ISDS, 2015). Income-generating jobs can both allow for increased independence for women but also result in a gender specific double burden of work because of women's typical household responsibilities (CARE, Oxfam and SNV, 2019). Holding a job, while at the same time being the main caregiver, might prevent women from fully engaging in labor opportunities; they are hindered from participating in professional training and in developing skills necessary for promotion and for jobs, which typically are considered to be more suited for men such as leadership and management (ISDS, 2015).

Young female garment factory workers, Danièle Bélanger and Katherine Pendakis (2010) show, appreciate the independence from their family gained through their job. With a stable income, they experience a certain level of empowerment, which, however, goes in tandem with concerns about as to whether their family and society recognize them as responsible daughters (Lương, 2003).

The ways in which (heterosexual) gender roles are reproduced at the workplace are examined by Angie Ngọc Trần (2004), who focuses on male workers in the garment industry. Work is gendered by task along a masculinity and femininity dichotomy. Thus, male workers are assumed to be more skillful in regard to the handling of machinery and electronic equipment which are heavy and call for physical strength to operate. Sewing, on the other hand, is perceived as a task which is suitable for women. Dexterity and flair for details are seen as typical female characteristics, and thus opposed to those of men (Nguyễn-võ, 2010; Ong, 1987).

Entrepreneurship

The economic liberalization in Vietnam has enabled a generation of entrepreneurs, and firms owned by women in Vietnam are accounting for over 21 percent of the total number of registered enterprises in the country (International Finance Corporation, 2017). Among these 57 percent are micro-enterprises, 42 percent are small and medium enterprises, and 1 percent are large enterprises. Misconceptions about women entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses are countered by such figures and assumptions that women are averse to run any risks, would prefer to have small businesses, and are hampered by motherhood (Endres, 2019; Nguyễn, N. M., 2019).

At the Bến Thành marketplace in Ho Chi Minh City, as discussed by Anne Marie Leshkowich (2015), female stallholders perpetuate as a gendered entrepreneurial strategy 'essential truths' about women – and men. These women see themselves as being inherently adept at buying and selling thereby holding particular female qualifications, which men are not assumed to have. Portraying certain female values as incorporated female qualifications, Leshkowich (2015) argues, offers a "strategic essential" (cf. Spivak 1990), tool by which women traders can construct themselves as hardworking and skillful entrepreneurs. While increasing their income, female traders are coping with volatile political and economic circumstances by narrating female capacities (Sasges, 2013).

A study survey (International Finance Corporation, 2017) shows that risk-taking is similar between women and men, who are small and medium enterprise owners; the size of these enterprises in terms of revenue is about the same in businesses owned by women and men; and

while most women entrepreneurs are married or have been married at one time, they manage to take care of their businesses and family at the same time not least thanks to support from relatives and friends.

Such biases continue to affect women's ability to access formal financing and other desired services while societal barriers and patriarchal norms also impede female-ignited economic growth potentials. As Lê Vũ Quân and Peter Raven (2015) suggest, professional and social support for women entrepreneurs, for example, in terms of a woman entrepreneur club, may facilitate their wider economic success.

Migration and mobility

Women from the countryside seeking a job in urban areas carry, according to Nghiêm Liên Hương (2010), a rural identity. Rural communities might encourage a move to urban areas because these are thought of as places that can offer migrants an income and improved living conditions (Lê and Khuất, 2008). Women who make the move from the rural areas to take up work in the cities, for instance, in the garment industry, retain close ties with their home-town. These connections, however, also mean that they must negotiate ideas about gendered responsibilities (Nghiêm, 2010). Leaving rural life reflects dreams of independence and expectations about economic support for the family in the countryside, and is thus ambiguously both imbued with freedom and constrains (ISDS, 2015).

Through the lens of interethnic relations, Dương Bích Hạnh (2006) analyzes the intersections between gender, economy, and ethnicity. Young Hmong women who are earning a living by engaging with the tourist industry in Sapa experience the ways in which globalization materializes as a commercial paradigm that shapes local livelihoods. These young women take up commercial tourist activities as an opportunity for generating an income but also as a task which perpetually stimulates feelings of obligation to provide for their family economically (Lê, 2018; Ngô, 2016).

As Anne Jerneck (2010) notes, women's contribution to the informal economy tends to be downplayed in economic calculations. Informal economic activities and transactions are governed by obligations and opaque agreements, as Nguyễn Thị Nguyệt Minh (2015) illuminates. Women travel long distances to take up work in the urban spaces, for instance, as a housemaid, an *ô sin*. These women struggle to deal with a labor market which tends to be informally regulated by values rather than by formal agreements between employer and employee. They are expected to display qualities which typically are associated with femininity such as showing forbearance and accepting an asymmetrical order of reciprocity between employer and employee (Nguyễn, N.M., 2015).

Becoming a housemaid is a possible occupation defined by social constraints as those are juxtaposed with less attractive options on a fluctuating labor market in a transforming and growing economy. Women's role as nurturers and regulators of harmony in the domestic sphere are valued in Vietnam's economic transformation process, as these qualities are assumed to compensate for increased cut-backs of public social services. Affluent middle-class women might hire an *ô sin*, while others rely on kin such as a daughter-in-law (Nguyễn, N.M., 2015).

Gendering the middle class

The crafting of a modern urban middle-class woman has been central in Vietnam's transformation process (Nguyen-Marshall et al., 2012). Launching the modern urban family, Ashley Pettus (2003) shows, is an ideal which is construed in stark contrast to a 'backward' (*lạc hậu*) and feudal

rural organization of social life. Conflicting values are conveyed to women by the Women's Union when encouraging a domestic model of middle-class femininity, which does not necessarily stimulate women's economic independence (Pettus, 2003). Such norms of femininity are circulated through various channels, including women's magazines, as Lisa Drummond elucidates (2004). These magazines project a state version of womanhood, Drummond argues, which is construed as a blend of consumption and devoted caregiving in the home.

Vietnamese media thus perpetually attempts to govern the production of ideal heterosexual urban middle-class femininity, as Nguyễn-võ (2008) shows. A growing body of self-help literature offers women suggestions which are supposed to be useful in their efforts to preserve a happy, healthy, and harmonious family. These publications project to aspiring middle-class women an image of womanhood that celebrates the smooth running of a household, being a good mother, and appearing appealing to one's husband. Women are thus encouraged to care for and spend money on their own well-being in order to sophisticate and improve their roles as mothers and housewives.

Middle-class engagement in good mothering expands to consumption of food, which epitomizes ideas about motherhood and the caring of children, as shown by Judith Ehlert (2019). A widespread food anxiety on the side of mothers and mothers-to-be arises from the conflicting demands imposed upon these women, according to Ehlert (2019). Industries in contemporary Vietnam promote their products as symbols of love and care to stimulate consumption. Public health campaigns in contrast urge mothers to regulate their children's appetites, as do social blogs which propagate for 'responsible mothering' and their own mother or mother-in-law. Such anxieties, especially amongst the urban middle class, are enmeshed with stories about pesticides, food pollution, and global concerns such as the coronavirus pandemic (Nguyễn-Marshall et al., 2012; Phạm, 2018).

Worries among the middle class speak to current transnational concerns about climate change and its impact on people and environments. While the urban middle class has easier access to information about globally debated issues such as food safety, environmental pollution, and climate change, the perils imbued in extreme weather crosses class boundaries. Vietnam has implemented elaborate coping and mitigation strategies to deal with extreme weather. However, climate disasters interlock with gender-specific antecedents such as limited privileges, social exclusion, poverty, and maybe even domestic violence. Not only by fueling but even by exacerbating the difficulties under which women and precarious groups were already living prior to a catastrophic event, a climate disaster harms in gender-intersected ways (Fordham, 2011; Nguyễn and Rydstrom, 2018; Rydstrom, 2020).

Trajectories of feminism and gender studies in Vietnam

Against the backdrop of global feminisms, we have in this chapter discussed 'feminism' in Vietnam, which we defined as *chủ thuyết feminist*. Also in Vietnam, feminism is the result of political movements and academic scholarship. State feminism has grown out of a history of inequalities between women and men as shaped during prolonged struggles for independence from a Confucian male-centered heritage, French colonialism, and the war against the United States. Vietnamese state-feminism revolves around the situation of women and has remained an official political agenda.

Voices from the third wave of Vietnamese feminism are more diverse, including organizations, institutes, scholars, and activists from Vietnam as well as foreign observers. Third-wave feminism reflects a more dynamic and varied consideration of feminism that includes but also extends beyond the study of women. As demonstrated in this chapter, third-wave feminism focuses on the gender relations between women, men, and non-binary persons and the multiple intersections of gender with other life-defining parameters. As such, feminist scholarship in Vietnam

represents a diverse and lively area of study within which issues pertaining to women, gender relations, marginalization, privileges, and other concerns can be identified and examined.

More than three decades after the introduction of the *Đổi Mới* policy, Vietnam has become increasingly integrated into the global economy and undergone far-reaching societal changes all the while the country rapidly is transforming from an agricultural to an industrialized society. Among others, these tranformations have permitted a continuous dialogue between women in the country and beyond, while encouraging explorations of characteristics of women's situation in Vietnam from a more nuanced and globally informed perspective. In providing an arena for critical analysis, solidarity, and political action, Vietnamese feminism invites us to address concerns around rights and equity while identifying, analyzing, and addressing the multilayered and complex ways in which intersections of gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, economy, class, and relations to state power can shape opportunities, the life course, and broader patterns of societal change. In so doing, Vietnamese feminism can be viewed as a social field committed to addressing and improving the status not only of women, but of all in Vietnam.

Notes

1　See also Asia Pacific Transgender Network (2018).
2　While Gabi Waibel and Sarah Gluck (2013) refer to two waves of feminism in Vietnam (i.e. state feminism vis-à-vis NGO feminism), we have identified three waves of feminism in the Vietnamese context (see also Pistor and Le, 2014).
3　Rydstrom's personal communication with Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương.

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28

MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE IN VIETNAM[1]

Helle Rydstrom

Men's violence against their female partner is a problem of 'pandemic' proportions (UN News 2018) and the most prevalent human rights violation experienced by women and girls in the world today (UNFPA 2019). Pre-corona figures on intimate partner violence vary in the WHO defined regions from 22% in high-income countries and Europe to 25% in the Americas and 33% in Southeast Asia (WHO 2022). Such numbers are reflected in the Vietnamese context where 31.6% of women in a 2019 study reported that they had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner within the last 12 months (MOLISA, GSO, and UNFPA, 2020, 23).[2]

Intimate partner violence, including sexual, however, tends to be underreported in Vietnam, as elsewhere in the world thus making the estimation of the frequency of men's abuse of women exceedingly difficult (UNFPA, 2019). Over the past several decades, I have collected data on gender, masculinity, and violence in Vietnam. In this chapter, I draw on these findings and observations to reflect on their meaning and implications for understanding continuity and change in patterns of intimate partner violence in contemporary Vietnam.

Current discussions in Vietnamese society of men's violence against women elucidate both efforts to deal with a societal problem and manage it in ways, which tend to maintain the gendered asymmetries within which it occurs. Take, for example, a comment such as "women also beat men" (*phụ nữ cũng đánh đàn ông chứ*), which men from time to time have stated to me when I have conducted fieldwork in Vietnam. The comment may be understood as a disarming way of dealing with an emotionally, morally, and legally loaded topic. It also could be seen as an attempt to challenge an image of men as being inherently abusive, as the comment often has been followed by another statement, namely the fact that "not all men beat women" (*không phải tất cả đàn ông đánh phụ nữ*).

However pedestrian, the comment "women also beat men" inevitably also appears as an attempt to diminish men's violence against women by implying that the extent to which men and women are subjected to violence, including sexual, is identical, regardless of figures convincingly verifying that this is not the case (see Kelly and Johnson, 2008; Kimmel, 2002; UNFPA, 2019; WHO, 2022). I take the comment as an entry point into an examination of men's abuse of their female partner and the configurations of gendered and masculinized

powers and privileges, which provide the conditions that allow for the perpetuation of violence against women.

As this chapter will show, the distribution of powers and privileges in a patrilineally and heterosexually organized universe, which favors men over women, have taken form and been institutionalized over time, generating ideas and images of women and men, femininity and masculinity that together condition the production of a pervasive masculinity (Connell, 1995; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009).[3] This encompassing masculinity even lays the foundation for the fostering of an exaggerated type of masculinity which uses physical violence as a forceful tool to dominate women. Such an exacerbated masculinity has been conceptualized as *machismo* (Horton and Rydstrom, 2011), 'hypermasculinity' (Hickey, 2016), or as 'toxic masculinity' (Veissière, 2018) to capture its divergent and harmful character.[4]

In/Visible Violence

By neglecting human integrity and transgressing physical boundaries, violence transforms those it targets from fellow human beings into naked life (Agamben, 1998; Mbembe, 2003; Rydstrom, 2012, 2015). Globally, gender based violence and its effects exhibit similar features. Yet the manner and institutional contexts in which such violence occurs differ as to the responses it elicits. Men's violence against women can be seen as contestations over images of masculinity and femininity and domains of power (Connell, 1995; Gottzén et al., 2020; Moore, 1994). Such violence tends to be rendered mundane as an integrated condition of the ordinary as a 'banal' (Arendt, 1970) and normalized dimension of daily life (Das, 2000; Rydstrom, 2017); as a routinized pattern of interaction, which turns the home into a 'Zone of Exception' (Agamben, 1998) and constitutes a state of crisis permanency; a chronic crisis (Rydstrom, 2020; Vigh 2008).

Such tendencies prompted in 1992, Le Thi Quy, an official voice of the National Women's Union (*Hội Phụ nữ*),[5] to introduce the term 'family violence' (*bạo lực gia đình*) into public and scholarly debate (see also Le T.Q., 2007; Pister and Le T.Q., 2014). In discussing family violence, a euphemism for domestic violence, Le Thi Quy made a distinction between visible and invisible violence. Physical abuse, she defined as 'visible violence' because of the bruises it may leave on the victim's body and non-corporeal abuse as 'invisible violence' as it ruins in more subtle ways as symbolic violence (see Bourdieu, 2001; Stoler, 2013). Even though the distinction might cause confusion partly because some physical violence is invisible and partly because any kind of male-to-female abuse tends to be rendered invisible in Vietnamese society, Le Thi Quy voiced a serious problem which previously had been circumvented in public discourse.

Violence against women, Le Thi Quy (1992) linked to the introduction of the policy of *Đổi Mới* and the societal changes it brought to the country (London, 2014). One consequence of the opening of Vietnamese society to a global world, Le Thi Quy argued, was that "many social evils – including domestic violence – are [. . .] on the rise" (Le Thi Quy, 1992:263; see also Le Thi Quy, 2007). Adjacent to identifying 'social evils' (*tệ nạn xã hội*) as a reason for intimate partner violence, men's abuse of their female partner was to be seen as an expression of 'feudal' (*phong kiến*) and 'backwards' (*lạc hậu*) Confucian vestiges which existed alongside official politics prohibiting violence in the household and beyond. Successfully socialized citizens would be those who could follow the principle of 'equality between men and women' (*nam nữ bình đẳng*) and in doing so build a 'happy and harmonious family life' (*gia đình hạnh phúc hoà thuận*), which did not suffer from conflicts and violence (Barbieri and Bélanger, 2009; Drummond and Rydstrom, 2004; Leshkowich, 2008; Rydstrom, 2003a).

The Sound of Silence

Le Thi Quy's article was published during a period when the Vietnamese government was anxious about the country's increased integration into the global economy (London, 2014; Nguyen-vo, 2010; Werner, 2008). Foreign influence was assumed to be able to pollute Vietnam's "pure morals and beautiful customs" (Koh, 2001:286) and infuse a 'poisonous culture' (*văn hoá độc hại*) into Vietnamese society (Nguyen-vo, 2008). This was the spirit in which the Vietnamese government in 1995 launched Resolution 87, which sought to eliminate activities that were deemed to fall under the category 'social evils' (*tệ nạn xã hội*). Hence, the label 'social evils' has been applied to a variety of behaviors which either are legally banned or morally condemned such as domestic violence, alcohol consumption, gambling, drug addiction, prostitution, pornography, and criminal actions (Marr, 1997; Soucy, 2000; Vijeyarasa, 2010).

The text of Le Thi Quy (1992) appeared at a time of increased international attention to men's abuse of women, as indicated by the United Nations General Assembly's Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) launched in 1993 (December 20) and by the Beijing Declaration adopted in 1995 (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995) by the Fourth World Conference on Women (China, September 4–15). With her publication, Le Thi Quy broke the silence that prevailed, slowly but surely taking the study of gendered violence in the Vietnamese context off of the list of sensitive topics and more squarely into the arena of public debate.

Elaborating on Le Thi Quy's argument, Ho Thi Phuong Tien (1993) from the Center for Family and Women Studies drew attention to the pain experienced by abused women and girls, arguing that the existence of gender-based violence should be acknowledged and dealt with by Vietnamese society. Le Thi Nham Tuyet and Thi Phuong Tien (1996) searched for strategies to combat and prevent men's violence against women in the home, and the National Women's Union initiated in 1997 a study to review documents on gender-based violence from across the country to gather information about the prevalence of men's abuse of their female partner (World Bank, 1999). Doan Bao Chau (1998) highlighted how men's violence against women and children caused a silent suffering, while Le Thi Phuong Mai (1998) identified the destructive impact of men's violence on women's reproductive health.[6]

These interventions were followed by the World Bank study *Gender-Based Violence: The Case of Vietnam* (1999), which offered a first overview of the prevalence of men's abuse of women in the domestic sphere. Since then, a large number of studies on men's violence against women have been conducted and the results published.[7] On November 25, 2010, on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, almost 20 years after Le Thi Quy sounded the alarm regarding gender based violence, the General Statistics Office (GSO) published the large-scale and comprehensive study *Keeping Silent Is Dying: Results from the National Study on Domestic Violence against Women in Viet Nam.*

Legal Protection

As in many aspects of social life in Vietnam, the gaps between idealized representations of state policies and the actual effects can be wide (London, 2014). While an elaborated legislation on the prevention of violence is in place in Vietnam (Schuler et al., 2014; Yount et al., 2015), in reality, the laws do not efficiently prevent violence in the home, as illustrated by the *Nước mắt Cười* (Smiling Tears) exhibition held in Hanoi in 2012. Here, a variety of horrifying means used by men to perpetrate various kinds of violence upon their female partner were on display (see *Thanhnien,* 2012).

Vietnam ratified the CEDAW in 1982.[8] In the spirit of CEDAW, both the Penal Code of 1999 (No. 15/1999/QH10) and the Law on Marriage and Family of 2000 (22/2000/QH10; cf. Chin, 1973) stipulate that the use of violence is prohibited. According to The Civil Code of 2005 (No. 33–2005-QH11), the civil rights of a person entitles that person to request the court or other relevant agencies to protect them (Article 9). In 2006, The National Assembly debated the draft law on preventing domestic violence which was passed in 2007 as the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control (No. 02/2007/QH12). With the government beginning its implementation of the new Law in 2008, an important step was taken in the prevention of household violence.

When domestic violence breaches the criminal law, the Penal Code of 1999 (No. 15/1999/QH10) may apply. The seriousness of violence is defined in accordance with a number of stipulated infirmity rates required for an action to be a criminal act.[9] The seriousness of the abuse is determined in accordance with Article 104 of the Penal Code which clarifies that "those who intentionally injure or causes harm to the health of other persons with an infirmity rate of between 11% and 30% [. . .],[10] shall be sentenced to non-custodial reform for up to three years or between six months and three years of imprisonment". The infirmity rate is determined by a medical examiner who issues a certificate to verify the level of harm. Such a certificate may come with an additional cost, though, in terms of an unofficial pay. Those who cannot afford such an expense – or refuse to pay what might appear as an arbitrary price – will have to leave the clinic emptyhanded (see also Borgstrom, 2012; Rydstrom, 2017; Vian et al., 2012).

The infirmity rate informs understandings of violence both officially and on the ground and provides a backdrop for frequent justifications of 'some' male violence being inflicted upon a female partner. Men's violence is recognized as serious if it leads to hospitalization of his female partner or if the abuse has lethal consequences, Nga from the Women's Union in northern Quang Vinh explained. In this vein, local Women's Unions, Reconciliation Units, and Health Care Clinics might dismiss a case of domestic abuse if the damage of the violence is deemed to fall below the 11% infirmity rate and if nothing else can be proved by the aid of a certificate issued by a medical examiner (Rydstrom, 2003b, 2017; see also GSO, 2010; Kwiatkowski, 2011; UNODC, 2011).

Gender and Violence

Gender provides an analytical lens for critical assessments of how sociocultural logics stimulate the fabrication of particular images, narratives, and practices in regard to men and women but male-to-female violence encourages a specific focus on masculinity (Butler, 2004; Bretell and Sargent, 2016; Mascia-Lees, 2017). A contextualized masculinity approach helps us to unfold the intimate ways in which male privileges and powers are intertwined with violence. Even though not all men adhere to a pervasive version of masculinity, or embody it, and may engage with alternative masculinities, it provides an influential sociocultural framework for the crafting of maleness and femaleness (Connell, 1995; Gottzén et al., 2020; Hearn, 2015; Ruspini et al., 2011).

As a refracted type of masculinity, *machismo*, 'hypermasculinity', or 'toxic masculinity' comes into shape by subscribing to stereotypical and essentialist ideas about men's strength and contentious 'nature'; as an exaggerated type of masculinity which "is strongly related to male virility and dominance" (Stobbe, 2005:109; see also Horton and Rydstrom, 2011; Phinney, 2009; Nguyen and Harris, 2009). Considered as the result of the merging of 'physiology' (*sinh lý học*), 'psychology' (*tâm lý*), and a person's 'character' (*tính cách*), male bodies are associated with the forces of *Dương* (Yang in Chinese) and female bodies with the forces of *Âm* (Yin in Chinese). The forces of *Dương* would make a man 'hot' (*nóng;* also meaning bad tempered), while a female

body would be 'cold' (*lạnh*) due to the forces of *Âm*. 'Hot' bodies are associated with active and centripetal energies, or masculinity, and 'cold' bodies with passive and centrifugal energies, or femininity. These two forces ideally complement one another and ensure harmony in the household and ultimately in society (Rydstrom, 2003b; see also Jamieson, 1993; Luong, 2003; Louie and Low, 2003).

Gendered energies, those associated with masculinity and femininity, however, also are assumed to be able to ignite conflicts between women and men. At the Health Care Clinic in northern Thinh Tri, the medical staff thus told that because of "their hot character and hard work it is normal that men get angry". 'Hot characters' contain 'hot' blood which produces male strength' (*mạnh mẽ*) and 'energy' (*năng lượng*) due to which men might become 'aggressive' (*gây gổ*) and even worse 'explode' (*hăng lên*) in terms of being violent. Because of these energies, Linh, one of the nurses at the Health Care Clinic explained, "women should hold back [*nhịn*] themselves and [. . .] not explode" if their partner gets angry. In such situations, it is recommended, according to Linh, that a woman stays calm by adjusting her behavior appropriately (Rydstrom, 2003b, 2009, 2017; see also GSO, 2010; Kwiatkowski, 2008; Pells et al., 2016).

Influential conceptualizations of women and men, their behavior, and responsibilities inform a widespread tendency to place the onus for men's violence upon the abused woman rather than on the perpetrator. The ways in which victims of abuse tend to be blamed for the violence they have experienced was highlighted by a male interviewee in the *Keeping Silent Is Dying* (GSO 2010,76) report, who suggested that "women are often mean and often fuss about small things. That is why violence occurs. The main cause of conflict in the family is women". What is perceived as a woman's nagging style, or 'grumbling'/'complaining' (*càm ràm*) attitude (Nguyen and Rydstrom, 2018; Rydstrom, 2020), and inability to balance her angry 'exploding' husband are not uncommonly seen by men, women, and even by officials as justification for a man's beating of his female partner (Dao et al., 2012; Kwiatkowski, 2011; Rydstrom, 2003b, 2017; Trinh, 2008; Yount et al., 2015).

The Pillar of the House

Although single-headed households (Le T., 2008; Phinney, 2022), long-distance employment (Nguyen T.N.M., 2015), co-habitation prior to marriage, same-sex partnership (Horton, 2014; Newton, 2012), and transnational engagements (Braemer, 2014) challenge a prevalent (nuclear or extended) patrilineal, heterosexual family organization, this arrangement remains common in Vietnamese society. Descent traced along the male line means that male progeny is valued as also registered in demographic studies (Bélanger and Khuat T.H.O., 2009; Den Boer and Hudson, 2017; Guilmoto, 2012). Recognized as 'inside lineage' (*họ nội*), a son materializes as a tempo-spatial site which connects the deceased and future members of his patrilineage; as a link which embodies the 'morality' (*đạo đức*) and 'honor' (*danh dự*) of his entire patrilineage (Rydstrom, 2003a, 2006, 2019; see also Brittan, 1989; Chanh C.P., 1993; Sandgren, 2009).[11]

Daughters, on the other hand, come to stand in a position of exteriority to the patrilineage as 'outside lineage' (*họ ngoài*). A female inferior position in the patriliny might be balanced through a sociality of femininity called *tình cảm* (sentiments/feelings/emotions) and the various qualities by which it is composed, including showing 'respect' (*kính*), 'self-denial' (*nhường*), 'endurance' (*chịu*), and 'holding back oneself' (*nhịn*). While *tình cảm* is appreciated also in men, living with *tình cảm* becomes conditional for girls and women as a social capacity by which their 'good morality' (*đạo đức tốt*) can be demonstrated and the asymmetrical reciprocity inherent to the patriliny navigated.[12] The femininity associated with *tình cảm* is acknowledged as a critical female means to ensure the creation of 'Happy and Harmonious Family Life' (*gia đình hạnh phúc*

hòa thuận) (Rydstrom, 2003a, 2006, 2017; see also Leshkowich, 2008; Werner, 2008; Yount and Krause, 2016).

The most senior male of a household is supposed to hold the role as the 'Pillar of the House' (*trụ cột gia đình;* literally the pillar of the family). The position indicates both a moral and economic responsibility of the man in charge, who, if living up to such expectations, even might be appreciated as a competent and caring patriarch (*gia trưởng*) (Nguyen and Rydstrom, 2018; Vu H.P., 2010). The 'Pillar of the House' allegory is empowering while also implying vulnerability, as not all men are able to fulfill the obligations associated with the position (Martin, 2013). Hence, expectations regarding the ability to "handle everything better than women and children", especially in situations of pressure, as Van, an inhabitant from central Long Lanh, summarized, might be challenged.

Periods of unemployment, for instance, splinter the image of a man as the economic pillar and breadwinner of his household (Hoang T-A. et al., 2013; see also Thai, 2012; Yount et al., 2015). An unemployed participant in a study conducted by Tu-Anh Hoang and colleagues (2013, 86), for instance, told that "as a man I like to be the pillar in the house. I do not like to be dependent on my wife . . . as a husband I should never be dependent [on my wife]. The saying, 'Man is the Pillar of the House', means that a man should be able to make money to support his wife and children". If men are unable to earn money, a male interviewee in the *Keeping Silent Is Dying* report (GSO 2010,75) commented, they would find other ways to show their power, for instance, by being abusive. Violence, he clarified, is a way in which a man can regain his position within the household (cf. Luke et al., 2007).

Statements like these subscribe to assumptions about the power and 'right' (*quyền hạn*) of the male head to discipline and 'bring up'/'educate' (*giáo dục*) members considered to be inferior in the patrilineal order (Rydstrom, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Yount and Krause, 2016). In a study on men's violence conducted in the Hue area (Dao et al., 2012,30), one of the men, Chuong, noted that a husband holds the right to "hit his wife if she refuses to back off when he is angry and stressed". In a similar vein, another male participant in the same study, Hung, justified how he once had hit and kicked his wife to teach her a lesson because she had talked back to him (Dao et al., 2012,30; see also Thai, 2012; Trinh, 2008).

Modalities of Violence

Exaggerated demonstrations of manliness are particularly clear when considering the modalities of violence. In a study conducted in northern Vietnam by Kathryn Yount and colleagues (2015) on male–to–female violence, 36.6% out of 522 interviewed men (18 to 51 years) reported to have perpetrated some form of abuse, especially physical violence against their wife. Only 0.2% said they had perpetrated sexual violence against their wife. In the same study, 12% out of 533 interviewed married women (18 to 51 years) reported about sexual violence committed by their husband.[13] Such discrepancies in men and women's reporting of sexual abuse reverberate previous findings on sexual violence in Vietnam, according to which, sexual violence "was seen as a problem to be tolerated by female focus groups, while the male groups did not consider it to be a serious issue" (World Bank, 1999:2; see also Khuat T.H., 1998, 2004).

Duong, from central Long Lanh, told about her 'jealous' (*ghen tuổng*) husband, who is frequently away working at sea. In an attempt to manage his jealousy, Duong has increasingly withdrawn from social life by avoiding visiting her friends, neighbors, and even her parents who live in a nearby community. She is confined to the home, waiting for a husband, who, in her words, "is not violent, but he scolds me and shouts a lot; he also forces me to have sex with him" (see Rydstrom, 2020). When a man forces his female partner to have sex with him this

might not be recognized as violence and partner/marital rape thus frequently goes unnoticed and unacknowledged in Vietnamese society (Nguyen T.H., 2006, 2011; Rydstrom, 2017).

In studies on violence in Vietnam, men tend to refer to sex as a rather uncomplicated physical need, while women consider sex as a contested field of power, pain, and moralities because of the ways in which it might be enmeshed with a husband's abusive behavior (Hoang T-A. et al., 2013:89; Nguyen T.H., 2011). The modalities of violence thus tend to be bypassed, and organizations estimate that sexual violence between intimate partners in Vietnam is hugely underreported, partly because it might not be recognized as violence and partly because sexual issues might be perceived as matters which should be kept secret and thus silenced (Dao et al., 2012; Nguyen T.H., 2011; Nguyen D.V., 2008; Phan T.T.H., 2008; WHO, 2022).

Reconciliation

However silenced, the magnitudes of men's abuse of women in the Vietnamese context are implicitly recognized, as elucidated by experiences of violence and by responses to it at various societal levels. Throughout the country, local branches of the Women's Union and Reconciliation Units, as well as health care clinics, encounter cases of domestic violence and provide support to battered women. The northern Quang Vinh Women's Union, for example, disseminates information about legal rights and organizes club meetings to reduce the number of cases of intimate partner violence (cf. Kwiatkowski, 2011; UNODC, 2011).

The small clubs are particularly important, according to Nga from the Quang Vinh Women's Union, as they offer a space for violence survivors to voice their experiences and, moreover, for the Union to identify households in which gender based violence occurs. The club meetings especially consider issues which concern "how to behave oneself in regard to one's husband and parents-in-law".[14] This is necessary, in Nga's view, as "some cases of violence are due to women who cannot get along with their relatives". Knowing about the appropriate way to behave oneself as a woman is of significance, she explained, because "this is a way of preventing conflicts and violence [. . .]. It is important to know about the [social] hierarchies (Rydstrom, 2017; see also Ngo T.N.B., 2004; Schuler et al., 2014).

Such advice discourages women from reporting violence by holding a beaten woman responsible for conflicts and harmful interaction rather than acknowledging the violence as the problem. This is the light in which the tendency to reconcile cases of abuse between intimate partners across Vietnam should be seen. When an abused woman seeks help at her local Women's Union, Reconciliation Unit, or health care clinic, she would not uncommonly be advised to return to her violent partner and create household harmony by showing even more *tình cảm* and understand the necessity of 'enduring suffering' (*chịu đau khổ*) in a relationship (Rydstrom, 2003b, 2017). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2011), the majority of cases of intimate partner violence in Vietnam; i.e. 61 percent, has been "reconciled, mostly by the Woman's Union but also by the family or the head of the commune or village in which the case took place". Under such circumstances, pursuing with legal charges against a perpetrator is a huge challenge for an abused woman and the procedure might even be costly both in terms of money and dignity (cf. Nguyen, 2011; Kwiatkowski, 2011; Waibel and Gluck, 2013).

Combatting Gender-Based Violence

In collaboration with Vietnamese non-governmental organizations (NGOs), some local units of the Women's Union have directed their attention towards the role of the male perpetrator

in the fight against gender based violence (Nguyen and Rydstrom, 2018; *Vietnam News*, 2013). In the Long Lanh area of central Vietnam, for instance, various governmental bodies have joined forces in an initiative aimed at reducing incidents of violence between intimate partners. According to Mai, a representative of the Long Lanh Women's Union, there has been a decrease in the number of cases of domestic violence in the area after the strategy was launched. The strategy involved a variety of initiatives such as meetings at which the Union and the Law Center informed about legal protection from violence and told about the pain, which abuse inflicts upon those it targets (Rydstrom, 2020).

In addition, the campaign 'Say No to Violence' (*Nói Không với Bạo Lực*), which reached out both to perpetrators and survivors of violence was inaugurated and as yet another measure, households suffering from violence were offered a reward of 500,000 VND (about 22 US dollars)[15] provided the violence would be terminated. Even other means were used to end men's violence against their female partner such as competitions, role plays, and various public events to raise awareness about intimate partner violence. Even graded means of legal punishment were employed: first, a perpetrator would be notified by receiving a warning from the local authorities. If the violence continued, he would second, be fined; third, be sent to a 're-education center' (*trung tâm giáo dưỡng*); and finally, he would be interned at a 'mental hospital' (*bệnh viện tâm thần*).[16]

International and national agencies and NGOs working to combat and prevent men's violence against women in the Vietnamese context increasingly have begun to use social media as an efficient forum through which they can convey knowledge and disseminate information to abused women about possibilities for support and thereby help them to break with their isolation. Thus, organizations and agencies such as the Vietnam Women's Union have set up hotlines and social media platforms, including a Facebook page called 'Families without Violence' (*Gia đình Không Bạo lực*) to reach out to women and inform them about anti-violence legislation, legal rights, and programs which support violence survivors (*AsiaLife*, Feb. 3, 2016).[17]

As part of the ongoing national campaign, 'Say No to Violence' (*Nói Không với Bạo lực*), various activities are organized in Vietnam by NGOs and institutes dedicated to mobilize resistance to men's violence against women including meetings and lectures. This national campaign corresponds with the worldwide campaign 'Say NO – UniTE to End Violence against Women'; an international initiative taken by the UN Women which runs every year, beginning in late November (UN Women 2022). These campaigns have gained broad public support in Vietnamese society, as a large event called 'Zumba Festival: Love's Steps' held in the Thong Nhat Park in Hanoi in 2017 exemplifies. Thousands of girls and women participated in the manifestation against the tendency to silence gendered and sexualized violence to encourage abused women to share their testimonies.[18]

Conclusion: Masculinity and Violence

In a patrilineal society like the Vietnamese, sons and men are assigned certain powers and privileges, which result in gendered asymmetries shaped as discourses and practices that permeate both system and lifeworld. This is the backdrop against which an influential masculinity has taken form and been institutionalized. Such a pervasive masculinity (Cornell, 1995) produces gendered hierarchies, privileges, and powers that condition the configuration of stereotypical and essentialized ideas about men, masculinity, and maleness, on the one hand, and women, femininity, and femaleness, on the other and, in doing so, even creates "openings towards violence [and] towards misogyny" (Connell, 1987,185–186).

Men's violence against women in Vietnam, and beyond, epitomizes a refracted masculinity characterized by abusive attempts of manifesting a sovereign position in regard to his female

partner, and by extension women more generally. Such an exaggerated masculinity, *machismo* (Horton and Rydstrom, 2011), 'hypermasculinity' (Hickey, 2016), or 'toxic masculinity' (Veissière, 2018), is nurtured by gendered asymmetries which inform socio–economic and political life, including legislation and the interpretation of harm (Nguyen and Rydstrom, 2018). While "not all men beat women", if "women also beat men", it happens only rarely and refers to singular incidents (Kelly and Johnson, 2008; Kimmel 2002) rather than repeated patterns of interaction (UN News 2018; UNFPA 2019; UN Women Vietnam, 2012); routinized interaction which is rendered mundane as a 'banal' (Arendt, 1970) and normalized dimension of a woman's life.

When men abuse their female partner by using violence as a tool to fortify power, the woman targeted transmutes from a fellow human being into a naked life (Agamben, 1998; Rydstrom, 2012, 2015). Domestic violence turns the household into a 'Zone of Exception' (Agamben, 1998), a domain of impunity where the laws protecting against violence do not apply. In ruining the foundation of social life and obscuring the horizon of possibilities, violence instantiates a state of chronic crisis (Rydstrom, 2017, 2020; Vigh, 2008). By inflicting severe harm upon victims and their lifeworlds, violence hampers an abused woman from full participation in society's various sectors (Nussbaum, 2000) and thereby impairs individual as well as societal development (UN Women, 2016; UN Women Vietnam, 2012).

While men's violence against women in the domestic sphere has been brought into the public domain as a serious issue to address and prevent (Le Thi Que, 1992), current debates and strategies to combat intimate partner violence in Vietnamese society reflect both efforts to cope with a societal problem and manage it in ways that often appear ambiguous in simultaneously contesting and sustaining gendered hierarchies that either explicitly or implicitly justify men's dominance over women. However, such tendencies also are countered and resisted in various ways by agencies, organizations, institutes, and movements. Recent campaigns and manifestations devoted to combat and prevent gendered and sexualized abuse have gained traction in Vietnamese society as important and promising steps in the fight to end men's violence against women.

Notes

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2 For a definition of violence see WHO (2002, 5); of gender-based violence, see the UN Declaration (1993) on the Elimination of Violence against Women; and for a definition of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), see WHO (2012).

3 On the notion 'hegemonic masculinity', see Connell (1995).

4 Kelly and Johnson (2008:481) distinguish between 'situational couple violence' as an occasional and sudden clash between partners and 'coercive controlling violence', which refers to abuse of power and the repeated use of violence against a partner.

5 As one of the mass organizations, the Union is responsible for identifying women-specific problems in the household and in society at large (see Endres, 1999; Vietnam Women's Union, 2019; Waibel and Gluck, 2013).

6 On early reproductive health research, see e.g. Bélanger (1998); Gammeltoft (1999); Scornet (2001).

7 For studies by Vietnam–based scholars, see Dao et al. (2012); Hoang T- A. et al. (2013); Hoang B.T. (2005); Khuat T.H. (1998, 2004); Nguyen D.V. (2008); Nguyen T.H. (2011); Romedenne and Vu (2006); Phan T.H.H. (2008); Trinh T.Q. (2008). Examples of studies produced by scholars from abroad

include Kwiatkowki (2008, 2011); Luke, N. et al. (2007); Martin (2013); Pells et al. (2016); Rydstrom (2003b, 2006, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019); Schuler et al. (2014); Waibel and Gluck (2013); Yount et al. (2015); Yount and Krause (2016). Examples of studies produced by national and international organizations include various reports produced by CCIHP; CSAGA, *iSEE,* PLAN, Save the Children, Sida, UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCO, UNICEF, UN Women, Vietnam Women's Union, WHO, and the World Bank.

8 Adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly (UN Women, 2016).
9 For details on the infirmity rate, see Penal Code No. 15/1999/QH10.
10 That is, "or under 11% but in one of the following circumstances". These include, among others, using weapons; causing harm to more than one person; causing minor permanent paim to victims; and committing the crime more than once or against children, pregnant women, and other people considered to be weak, or against parents. For details, see Penal Code No. 15/1999/QH10, Article 104.
11 For further discussion of the configuration of sons, see e.g. Rydstrom (2003a, 2006, 2012).
12 On asymmetrical reciprocity, see Lévinas (1979) and Young (1997).
13 See the WHO 2022 for definition of sexual violence.
14 The comment connotes the Confucian dictum, 'Showing Respect for the Superior and Self-denial for the Inferior'(*Biết kính trên nhường dưới*) (see Rydstrom, 2003a).
15 The amount is given in 2019 rates. See Rydstrom 2020 for further details.
16 A discussion of the juridical status of the perpetrator is relevant but goes beyond the scope of this chapter.
17 On the #MeToo movement in Vietnam, see *BBC,* May 16, 2018; *The Diplomat,* May 15, 2018.
18 The Zumba event was launched by the Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents (CSAGA) in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Department of Gender Equality under the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), and Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union in Hanoi, among others. Even international NGOs and agencies supported the initiative (*Vietnam News,* December 3, 2017).

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29

MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND KINSHIP IN VIETNAM

Shadows and Silences

Tine M. Gammeltoft

"I think this is normal," Thoa says, stroking her baby's head gently.[1] The infant is lying fast asleep between us. We sit in a small, dark side-room to the main room that Thoa's parents would normally use when guests visit. The room has no windows, and the only piece of furniture is a large bed covered by a mosquito net. Thoa's baby does not use diapers, so a faint smell of urine clings to the rice mat on the bed. Our excuse for conducting our conversation here is that we watch over the baby, but this small room at the margins of the house also offers us a more private space to talk. In the main room the television is on, running loudly enough for us to talk confidentially.

The condition that Thoa finds normal is her husband's beatings of her. Whenever he comes home drunk, he beats her. Sometimes it is just a slap, sometimes more serious beatings. Thoa has grown used to it, she says. She still loves him. When he is not drunk, he is a good and gentle man. He has a stable job and provides well for their children. She knows that she can count on him. The only people who know about her husband's behavior are her parents-in-law, her parents, and her sister. This, Thoa says, is a family matter (*chuyện gia đình*). It's an ordinary part of family life, not something that others need to know about.

Together with Nguyễn Hoàng Thanh, a PhD student from Hanoi Medical University, I met with Thoa on March 29, 2015, in her parents' home in Dong Anh (*Đông Anh*) district, Hanoi. As we left the house, after a couple of hours' talk, I felt dizzy and uncomfortable. This conversation had been unsettling in itself, but it also closely and eerily resembled my encounters with another woman who was also named Thoa. This Thoa was my neighbor in the rural Ha Tay (*Hà Tây*) village where I did my first fieldwork in Vietnam in the early 1990s. Thoa not only recounted her husband's violence to me, I overheard it myself. As our houses lay closely clustered together, it was difficult not to hear what happened next door. Thoa's husband struggled with alcohol addiction. When he died in a workplace accident, falling from a five-meter-high pole, Thoa's grief seemed to be tinged with a certain measure of relief.

This chapter is about family matters, about the ways in which families in Vietnam are imagined and lived. Thoa's claim that violence is a normal part of family life is supported by evidence from numerous studies (e.g., Gammeltoft, 2016, 2021; Kwiatkowski, 2011, 2016; Nguyen, D. V. et al., 2008; Phan T. H., 2008; Rydstrøm, 2003a; Trần, T. N. et al., 2018; Vu, M. L. et al., 1999). Domestic violence appears to be a widespread and enduring phenomenon in Vietnam, something that is woven into the textures of social relations within families. Still,

"the Vietnamese family" is often described as a benign entity; a warm and close-knit community of people who support, care for, and cherish one another, a "cosy nest" (*tổ ấm*) that forms the foundation for individual thriving and societal order (cf. Gammeltoft, 2019). In this chapter I argue that in order to comprehend the persistent nature of marital violence in Vietnam, we must consider the ways in which political economies of kinship generate specific domestic dependencies and modes of endurance. Taking this approach may also, as we shall see, provide a window onto otherwise silenced and subdued aspects of social life in contemporary Vietnam.

In what follows, I first briefly outline how "the Vietnamese family" has been depicted in popular and scientific accounts, focusing particularly on the moral-political meanings that have been attached to this social institution. The second section explores the everyday experiences of violence and endurance that research on family life in Vietnam has documented, experiences that trouble official images of the family as a site of unity and harmony. In the third section, I examine how intimate partner violence (IPV) is accounted for by organizations and researchers in Vietnam, showing how such violence is often seen as a matter of gender norms and values; as a problem that should be addressed through attitudinal change. Finally, in the fourth section, I discuss how women tend to be placed in positions of social and economic disadvantage within local systems of family and kinship and consider the consequences of this for women's responses to the violence they encounter.

"The traditional Vietnamese family"

Contemporary ideations of the family (*gia đình*) in Vietnam reflect centuries of social history. In Vietnamese social science scholarship, "the traditional family" has often been represented as a moral unit in which social relations – between parents and children, husbands and wives – are governed by Confucian principles and ideals (e.g., Pham, V. B., 1998). In Confucian moral doctrine, hierarchy and deference are central principles – children are expected to respect and obey their parents, wives should show submissiveness towards husbands, and citizens should be loyal and obedient to rulers. The prescribed roles for women are defined by the "three submissions" (*tam tòng*) – to father, husband, and eldest son – and the "four virtues" (*tứ đức*); labor, physical appearance, appropriate speech, and proper behavior (Marr, 1981, p. 192). The proper conduct of family members vis-á-vis one another, Confucian doctrines hold, will produce a stable society – if families are orderly, then society will be so too. In present-day party-state discourse, the orderly and harmonious "traditional family" continues to be depicted as the cultural cornerstone of Vietnamese society: drawing close and analogical links between family and nation, official discourse emphasizes the necessity of family stability for overall social order (cf. Bélanger and Barbieri, 2009; Gammeltoft, 2019).

Despite its discursive persistence, however, the idealized "traditional family" has not gone uncontested. In the early twentieth century, Vietnamese socialist revolutionaries defined women's liberation and a more egalitarian family system as preconditions for the formation of a new, independent, and socialist society. According to this view, the Confucian family, with its hierarchies between genders and generations, was a feudal (*phong kiến*) and backward (*lạc hậu*) mode of organization, a remnant of an unjust and oppressive society (cf. Malarney, 2002; Marr, 1981; Werner, 2009). In its place, Vietnamese revolutionaries envisioned a family that granted women the freedom to act as citizens along with men; women were summoned to take part in the anti-French resistance movement and to contribute to building a new, socialist society. The 1945 August revolution and the Communist takeover of power in 1954 entailed systematic efforts to reform family forms. In 1946, women attained the right to vote, and in 1959, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam issued a new family law, abolishing child marriage, polygamy,

and arranged marriage. These family reforms were supported by the 1959 land reforms that collectivized private landholdings, thereby undermining the power of local lineages. The intention was to produce "happy, democratic, and harmonious families, in which all members were united, loved each other, and helped each other in a progressive manner" (Vietnam Government Gazette, 1960; cited in Malarney, 2002, p. 149).

Despite these efforts to institute a new and more egalitarian family system, the gendered moral ideals set forth by Confucian doctrine were, historians have shown, perpetuated in the socialist era. While encouraging women to take active part in public life, socialist authorities also stressed women's special responsibilities for their families, defining feminine virtues of modesty, endurance, and self-sacrifice as central to national development (cf. Pettus, 2003; Werner, 2009; Shohet, 2021). In the 1960s, the Three Responsibilities Movement (*ba đảm đang*) reminded women of their traditional responsibilities for children and families, with the addition of responsibilities for warfare and production (cf. Marr, 1981, pp. 192–199). As Jayne Werner observes, "Maintaining the family unit was the *sine qua non* of revolutionary and socialist power during both resistance wars, despite radical collectivist discourse to the contrary" (Werner, 2009, p. 38).

In 1986, Vietnam's turn towards a market economy reinstalled the household as the core unit of economic productivity. Tying national development agendas closely together with family welfare and responsibility, the *Đổi Mới* reforms entailed increased policy attention to the nuclear family rather than the cooperative or the extended family. In 1988, the state rolled out a national one-to-two child family planning campaign: couples were encouraged to have no more than two children and to take personal responsibility for their upbringing. "The Happy Family" (*Gia Đình Hạnh Phúc*) – small size, morally wholesome, materially well off – was defined as the foundation for social order (cf. Gammeltoft, 2021; Phinney, 2005; Shohet, 2017). In the 1990s, the country's mass media voiced intense concerns that the increased contact with the world outside Vietnam would lead to anomie and cultural degradation. "Social evils" (*tệ nạn xã hội*), that is, drug use, gambling, sex work, and pornography – framed as being associated with a foreign lifestyle – were depicted as threats to individual and societal well-being. As a bulwark against such negative cultural influences, state discourses admonished, traditional family values must be upheld.

In present-day Vietnam, official discourses continue to depict the family as the foundation for society and as a moral bulwark against negative developments. The government's *Strategy for Development of the Vietnamese Family to the Year 2020, with a View to 2030*, issued in 2012, for instance, began with this statement: "The family is the cell of society. It is an important environment in which individuals are formed, brought up, and educated. It maintains and promotes beautiful cultural traditions, resists social evils, and creates the human resources that serve to build and defend the nation" (Thủ tướng chính phủ, 2012). Such state visions of the family as a stable, orderly, and protective social unit are, however, often disturbed by mass media reports of the violence that plagues Vietnam's families. In 2010, a national study found that 58% of ever-married women in Vietnam reported exposure to partner violence (General Statistics Office, 2010).[2] In the wake of this study has followed an avalanche of mass media reports offering detailed portraits of women who are beaten and maltreated by their husbands (e.g., Nguyễn, T., 2015). These stories usually represent domestic violence as exception and aberration, as a monstrous distortion of the true Vietnamese family. An article in the party's journal *Nhân Dân*, for instance, noted: "Good communication campaigns will help to change people's family awareness and behaviors, so that family violence is gradually eliminated and the beautiful traditions of Vietnam's people and families are highlighted" (Phùng, T., 2010). Yet for many women, violence is not an exception, but part and parcel of ordinary family life.[3]

The family as a site of conflict and distress: women's experiences

Lý's three-year-old daughter is crying in a piercing tone. "Come and beat him," she whines repeatedly, pointing to her cousin who is standing in the bright sunshine in the yard, looking perplexed. A few minutes earlier, the two children were playing peacefully together, while I was talking to Lý inside the house, together with Nhị, a PhD student from Hanoi Medical University. "OK then," says Nhị, "I'll take care of him." Outside in the yard, she disappears around the corner with the cousin. A few minutes later, she returns and says to Lý's daughter – "So! Now I have punished him." Apparently content, the girl stops crying and leaves the room.

This brief scene of (postured) violence unfolded on April 4, 2015, while Nhị and I were talking to Lý about the marital abuse that she lived with. To me, this incident illustrated what I had noticed many times before – that violence between family members is not a rare occurrence in Vietnam. To Lý's daughter, corporal punishment seemed to be a routinized part of family life, a habituated way of resolving conflicts. Similarly, as Lý described it, her husband's violence was a conventional and expected part of their marital life. "I'm used to this," she told us, "I don't think my husband will ever change." During her last pregnancy, Lý had become involved in the research project on IPV and reproductive health that I was conducting together with colleagues at Hanoi Medical University.[4] When going over her questionnaires, I found the abuse that she reported alarming: she had told our interviewer that she lived with physical, sexual, and emotional partner violence and that on several occasions her husband's violence against her had resulted in injuries that required medical treatment. When Nhị called Lý, she immediately agreed to meet with us.

Lý lived in a village in Dong Anh district on the outskirts of Hanoi together with her husband and their three children, two daughters aged three and four years and an infant son. Their house consisted of one sparsely furnished room with a kitchen. It was part of a larger compound; next door lived Lý's brother-in-law with his wife and children. Seated on a mat on the cool floor, Lý told us that she had grown up in the neighboring province, Vinh Phuc (*Vĩnh Phúc*). She met her husband when she was eighteen years old, and two years later they got married. In accordance with cultural convention, Lý then left her natal family and moved into her husband's household. She soon gave birth to their first child, a daughter. Shortly after, the three of them moved into a separate house, located next to the house of her parents-in-law. During Lý's second pregnancy, the ultrasound scan indicated that the fetus was male – but at birth the child turned out to be female. Her husband was furious. He scolded her for lying to him and became cold and indifferent towards her. In the time that followed, his consumption of alcohol surged. One evening, when their second daughter was a couple of months old, he came home late, drunk. Lý complained about his drinking habits, and he responded by demeaning her parents and her family, ending by shouting: "Piss on all your generations!" Lý answered, "What's wrong with *your* family, since you talk in that way about my family?" and he exclaimed, "So, you're still talking?" Then he beat her. Afterwards, she had purple marks all over her body and her mouth was bleeding. Later, other episodes of violence followed. In some cases, Lý had to seek medical treatment for her injuries, but she never told health care staff how she had been injured. Her husband accompanied her to the hospital, and she did not want to place him in an embarrassing situation.

Even though her husband's violence against her – and the threat of it – was painful for Lý, the social isolation that she experienced seemed to be even more painful. Listening to her story, I found the loneliness she described chilling. Living in this community, Lý said, she felt intensely alone. She missed her friends and the relatives she had grown up with, and she did not feel that she could trust anyone here. Her husband preferred her to stay at home with the children, so he hardly

ever brought her along when he visited friends or family. "Other people say that I am lucky," she said, "as I can stay at home with the children all day and don't have to work." Lý herself, however, did not feel lucky. She missed someone to talk to, particularly about her husband's behavior. But she feared that if she told others about her predicament, this would be turned against her: "If I tell people my story in one way, they will recount it in another." Like Thoa, Lý defined her husband's violence against her as a "family matter," something that was not to be shared with outsiders. She sometimes confided in her mother, who would usually be quite curt, telling Lý that marrying a man who lived far away from her natal community had been her own decision, not her parents'. So now she had to endure: "You had many suitors at home," her mother would say to her, "but you decided to marry someone far away. Now what are you complaining about? Whether you feel happy or miserable, you have to endure (*sướng khổ thì phải chịu*)."

Following her mother's counsel, Lý tried to endure. She did this, she said, by looking at her children; it was the feeling of their warm bodies nestled into hers in the morning; their laughter when she tickled them; their appreciation of the food she cooked for them; their attachment to her, that kept her going. Her children, it seemed, made her feel that she belonged here, that she was a person of value. They turned this domestic arena into a family, a site of attachment and love. Since their son was born, it seemed that her husband had begun to see her as a person of value too. Before his birth, Lý's husband would often remind her that her social position in this family depended on her capacity to produce a male child.[5] When he was angry, he would shout at her: "Two daughters! So don't demand too much (*hai đứa con gái thì đừng đòi hỏi gì nhiều*)." Their daughters, they both knew, would be moving into another household and kin group when they got married, like Lý and generations of women before her. Their son, in contrast, would grow up to stay with them, taking care of them in their old age, inheriting their possessions, and carrying on his father's family name and lineage. Therefore, only the birth of a son could integrate Lý into this family. Without a son, she was – like her daughters – in a position of inherently fragile attachment (cf. Gammeltoft, 2019). Her husband and his parents owned the house and the land; none of this was hers. During their fights, her husband would often remind her of this precarious belonging. "You can take your clothes and go home to your parents," he would yell at her. Shrugging her shoulders, Lý said: "It would be easy to leave this place. But it would be difficult for me to find somewhere to go."

Lý's experiences are not unique. As mentioned earlier, the prevalence of IPV in Vietnam is well documented, as is the tendency for women to keep experiences of abuse to themselves (e.g., Gammeltoft, 2021; General Statistics Office, 2010). Violence seems, in other words, to be a habituated – and yet silenced – part of many marriages in Vietnam. How, then, can we account for this form of violence and its routinized nature? Answering this question requires, observers have suggested, that we consider the notions of masculinity and femininity that suffuse day-to-day family lives.

Accounting for marital violence: the importance of gender norms

Canh's Story: Overcoming Domestic Violence in Vietnam is a short film documenting an Action Aid project aiming to combat domestic violence in Vietnam through gender equality workshops.[6] In the film, Canh's husband, a gentle-looking farmer, explains how the workshops taught him and other men to "successfully change our views." Through the training, he realized that marital violence is not acceptable and that husband and wife should share housework equally. At the end of the film, Canh concludes, "Now family life is better and the emotional life of our family is more happy and stable." The final scene depicts a family meal; we see the family peacefully eating together, Canh's husband carrying out the tray after the meal and their son wiping the table.

This Action Aid intervention is based on a theory: marital violence, this project seems to assume, is rooted in gender norms – in Confucian-derived expectations that women should be gentle and compliant, while men should assert authority. If only these gender norms are changed, then violence will disappear. The film documents this process: when Canh's husband was educated on gender inequality, he altered his behaviors and his violence was brought to an end. Similar assumptions seem to inform many other interventions undertaken to address gender-based violence in Vietnam. Over the past decade, domestic violence has received intense attention from government institutions, non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies, and researchers in Vietnam. In 2007, the government issued a new law on domestic violence prevention and control, and numerous projects have been implemented to address and combat violence perpetrated within the family. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), for instance, has made domestic violence a key priority area for program activities in Vietnam. Like the Action Aid intervention, UNFPA activities seem to rest on an assumption that if only individual attitudinal change in the realm of gender is attained, then violence can be combatted. A discussion paper issued in 2014, for instance, states that gender-based violence (GBV) is caused by "persistent attitudes and beliefs that see women as inferior to men and less worthy of rights and control over their own lives" (UNFPA, 2014, p. 3). Seeking to explain what drives gender-based violence, this document places emphasis on gender norms, values, and attitudes, noting that violence is driven by a culturally determined "under-valuing of girls and women": "Gender norms and attitudes, including norms of masculinity, femininity, gender roles and expectations. . . provide the structural context for GBV" (UNFPA, 2014, p. 14; see also UNFPA, 2015).

Such assumptions regarding the social and cultural mechanisms underlying partner violence underpin not only intervention projects and programs; they also prevail in the academic literature. Most research has approached IPV as a matter of gender norms, considering marital abuse as a manifestation of deeply rooted masculinity and femininity ideals (e.g., James-Hawkins et al., 2016; Luke et al., 2007; UNFPA, 2015; Yount et al., 2015). Nancy Luke and her co-authors, for instance, frame marital violence as a consequence of the gender attitudes held by husbands and wives, finding that violence against women is closely linked to "traditional attitudes that support inequitable gender relations" (Luke et al., 2007, p. 15). Khanh Ngoc Do and her co-authors emphasize the roles played by cultural traditions such as Confucianism in legitimizing violence against women: "Confucian tradition emphasizes harmony and self-restraint in interpersonal relationships, yet also supports patriarchal beliefs and traditions that can place women in submissive and vulnerable positions" (Do, K.N. et al., 2013, p. 149). Writing about IPV, Laurie James-Hawkins and her colleagues conclude: "Attempts to reduce IPV in Vietnam must address constructions of masculinity and the socio-historical context of IPV by providing gender-sensitivity training and opportunities for men to evaluate critically how constructions of masculinity in their families and communities contribute to IPV perpetration" (James-Hawkins et al., 2016, p. 1).

In short, research on IPV has offered important insights into the gender norms and ideologies that underpin and legitimize husbands' violence against their wives. Yet in order to attain a fuller understanding of the persistence of violence in domestic lives in Vietnam, I suggest, we must consider not just dominant notions of masculinity and femininity, but also more mundane and material practices of kinship (cf. Hy, V. L., 2016; Kwiatkowski, 2016). Since the 1970s, the study of kinship has, as Janet Carsten (2003) has observed, in many ways been eclipsed by the study of gender. Although classical feminist scholarship includes important critical studies of marriage, property, and the political economy of kinship (cf. Collier and Yanagisako, 1987), recent academic and public policy attention has focused mainly on gender – as illustrated by

the case of IPV in Vietnam. Yet at issue when domestic violence is exercised are not merely mind-sets or cultural norms and values but also kinship practices (that is, habituated practices of residence, inheritance, and descent) involving concrete and material distributions and flows of people and resources. It is to this political economy of kinship that I shall now turn.

Domestic dependencies: kinship as a defining matrix for day-to-day lives

"You can take your clothes and go home to your parents," Lý's husband would yell at her when he was angry. This remark illustrates the larger system of inequality in which this conjugal relation was embedded: Lý's husband was in a position to expel her from their home. She was not in a position to expel him. He possessed privileges that she did not: he had an extensive social network in the locality where they lived; his parents owned their house and the land it was built on, and he – not his wife – would be inheriting these assets. For Lý, it would, as she said, be easy to leave but difficult to find somewhere to go. These social and economic inequalities placed her in a position of dependency, a position that made it difficult for her to protest or protect herself against her husband's abuse.

In Vietnam, as elsewhere, families are embedded within larger systems of kinship – and kinship modalities have significant economic and material consequences for women's lives (e.g., Brandstädter and Santos, 2009; Collier and Yanagisako, 1987; Hy, V. L., 2016). In present-day Vietnam, kinship practices take many different forms. In the northern part of the country, where Lý and Thoa live, prescribed kinship is patrilocal and patrilineal, whereas in other parts of Vietnam, kinship takes more bilateral or female-oriented forms (Guilmoto, 2012; Hy, V. L., 1989).[7] Patrilocal residence refers to living arrangements where married couples reside together with or close by the husband's kin. For female children, an important consequence of patrilocal residence is that they tend to be regarded as merely temporary members of their natal families; when a woman gets married, she will be leaving her family of birth and joining her husband's family instead. In northern Vietnam, girl children are therefore designated as "flying ducks" that are destined to leave their parents of birth. A folk song notes, "Your daughter is someone else's child. Only a daughter-in-law is your true child for whom you have paid", or, as a popular saying puts it, "To raise your daughter is to raise her for others" (Pham, V. B., 1998, p. 29). Patrilineality refers to modes of reckoning descent in which children are considered to belong to their father's family and kin group. Family lines are, therefore, held to be continued only through sons.[8] This turns male family members into insiders in a way that females can never be; while men embody the lineage, women are merely attached to it (cf. Rydstrøm, 2003b; Sangren, 2013). In Vietnam, this distinction is reflected in the designation of paternal relatives as "inside" (*nội*) and maternal relatives as "outside" (*ngoại*) kin. Even though both maternal and paternal ancestors can be venerated at domestic altars, it is usually the spirits of the husband's ancestors who, as insiders, are considered to belong to the household. When at home, in other words, men will usually find themselves among generations of kin, whereas women – particularly in the early stages of a marriage – will often be residing among strangers. Further, patrilineal descent has important implications for inheritance practices. In most families, the parents' house, land, and other significant assets will be taken over by their sons, while daughters usually inherit only a minor share of their parents' property. Since a daughter is expected to join her husband's household on getting married, what is given to her is considered to be lost to another kin group.[9] When it comes to inheritance and other forms of resource allocation, in other words, males tend to be granted privileges and favors that females do not receive. As Hy Van Luong observed in his classic article on Vietnamese kinship: "The domestic domain still seems

primarily the preserve of women; authority and resources are still allocated in favor of men in numerous circumstances" (Hy, V. L., 1989, p. 752). A study on agrarian transitions in Vietnam found significant differences between women's property ownership in northern Vietnam compared with a southern community characterized by more bilateral forms of kinship. Women's access to land, the study concluded, is in large part determined by the kinship system:

> Inheritance patterns documented in this study showed that in the northern community, women almost never inherited anything from their parents. Since women were constructed as "the children of others" and were transferred to their husband's family upon marriage, inheritance was given only to sons. This was justified because the sons were considered to be responsible for the care of parents in their old age and for ancestor worship after their death. In the numerous stories we collected, it was noted that when parents wished to give land (agricultural or residential) to a daughter, male elders opposed this decision, and this sometimes created a conflict between the female heir and her male relatives. In such cases, women either gave up their inheritance or sought redress from the courts. Using the legal system to solve a conflict usually resulted in the woman having to leave the community. Women who used the justice system were often stigmatised and ignored by their kin following a court case.
>
> *(Scott et al., 2010, p. 256)*

Like practices of patrilocality, these habits of inheritance turn marriages into terrains of profound socioeconomic inequality: most often, the bulk of a married couple's possessions will be regarded as the husband's property. This was what enabled Lý's husband to threaten to expel her – he knew that he was the one who belonged here; spiritually, socially, and economically. Being acutely aware that their chances of survival outside of the household that their marriage had placed them within were limited, women such as Thoa and Lý did not seem to expect to be able to change their situations.[10] Rather, they endured – adapting to the conditions in which they found themselves, finding meaning and happiness in the joys of being with their children and in the moments of companionship that they found with their husbands.[11] When families become sites of conflict, in other words, women living within patrilineal and patrilocal kinship systems tend to be placed in structurally vulnerable positions, their lack of economic resources and their fragile social belonging rendering it difficult for them to opt for any other mode of action than adaptation. Seen in this perspective, kinship becomes a source of vulnerability as well as support; a mechanism of marginalization and exclusion as much as a force of integration (cf. Gammeltoft, 2021).

Conclusion

In present-day state discourse, the family is placed at the heart of Vietnamese society. State messages depict the country's families as the vital cells out of which the social body is built; as the very foundation of society. The ideal of the happy and harmonious family is, it seems, a rhetorical figure of considerable force. At the same time, idealized accounts of the orderly and wholesome "Vietnamese family" are challenged by personal stories of the shadow sides of family lives; stories that emerge through research reports, literary accounts, and the mass media. These stories indicate that families are not simply the cosy social collectives suffused by love, care, and devotion that official rhetoric conjures; they are also sites of neglect, exclusion, and violence. Members of families themselves, however, often tend to silence experiences of violence and distress, framing these problems as "family matters," private problems that are not to be shared

with outsiders – thereby also contributing to upholding and reaffirming official visions of family and nation as harmonious, stable, and orderly.

Family members' silencing of violence is, this article has shown, accompanied by a tendency among researchers and donor agencies to highlight gender norms and values while paying less attention to the socio-economic inequalities that kinship practices produce and perpetuate: to date, the ways in which women in Vietnam are systematically placed in positions of socioeconomic disadvantage within their families have received surprisingly scant academic and policy attention. While the gendered norms and values that justify men's violence against women have been thoroughly analyzed, the kinship modalities that systematically place women at economic and social disadvantage, compelling them to silently adapt to domestic abuse, have rarely been addressed. This suggests that the gendered socioeconomic consequences of prevailing kinship practices need further attention, in research, policy, and programming.

Notes

1 Like all other names of research participants, "Thoa" is a pseudonym.
2 The UNFPA Vietnam later commissioned a secondary analysis of the data from the national study in order to explore why, in the same national context, some women are at higher risk than others of exposure to partner violence (UNFPA, 2015). This analysis found striking regional patterns in women's reports of partner violence: women living in the Red River Delta, Southeast, and Central Highlands Regions were twice as likely as other women to report partner violence. These risk patterns may be associated with regional variation in kinship practices, as has been found in the case of gender-biased sex selection (Guilmoto, 2012).
3 In *Paradise of the Blind*, Dương Thu Hương describes the habituated nature of family violence in Vietnam in the 1980s: "Many landscapes have left their mark on me, but one in particular haunted me [. . .]: a certain vision of duckweed floating on the surface of a pond. An ordinary pond, like the kind at home. A pond lost in some godforsaken village, in a place where the honking of cars and the whistling of trains is something mysterious, exotic. A place where young women bend like slaves at their husband's feet. A place where a man whips his wife with a flail if she dares lend a few baskets of grain or a few bricks to relatives in need. A strip of land somewhere in my country, in the 1980s" (Dương Thu Hương, 1994:30).
4 Combining ethnographic and epidemiological methods, this research project investigated the impact of intimate partner violence on women's reproductive health. The project was funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and titled *The Impact of Violence on Reproductive Health in Tanzania and Vietnam* (PAVE); https://anthropology.ku.dk/research/research-projects/completed_projects_/pave/. Accessed April 3, 2022.
5 In this area, as in many other regions of Vietnam, son preference is strong (see Bélanger, 2002; Gammeltoft, 2019; Guilmoto 2012, 2015).
6 www.youtube.com/watch?v=15XhgXRF8Tw. Accessed April 3, 2022.
7 Anthropological research conducted in northern Vietnam shows that even though prescribed kinship is patrilineal and patrilocal, informal social relations with the wife's kin often play significant roles in day-to-day kinship practices and engagements (see for instance Gammeltoft, 2021; Hy Van Luong, 1989; Jellema, 2007).
8 When discussing the reasons for the strong son preference that prevails in many parts of Vietnam, people will often explain that while daughters can care for their parents in their old age and worship the ancestors almost as well as sons can, a daughter cannot carry on the lineage (see UNFPA, 2011). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, when ultrasound scans became widely available in Vietnam, sex ratios at birth (i.e., the number of male births per 100 female births) have risen steadily (see Guilmoto, 2015).
9 This is reflected in the saying "to build a house for charity" (*xây nhà tình nghĩa*). This expression is used if sonless parents build a new house; they are then, people suggest, making fools of themselves by building a house that will be donated to another family (see UNFPA, 2011).
10 Lý's words about it being "easy to leave but difficult to find somewhere to go" resonate with the findings of Steffanie Scott and her co-authors. In their study of northern Vietnamese women's access to

land they note: "Many women who found themselves in abusive relationships or with husbands with gambling or drinking problems did not leave because they had nowhere to go following a divorce" (Scott et al., 2010:259; see also Gammeltoft, 2021).

11 In a study of intimate partner violence and women's mental health in five Vietnamese provinces, Khanh Ngoc Do et al. (2013) found considerably lower levels of emotional distress among women who believed that nothing could be done about their husband's abuse than among women who believed that the abusive situation could be changed. Acceptance of abuse seemed, in other words, to enhance women's well-being (for research on similar issues in an Indian context, see Snell-Rood, 2015).

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30

THE AFFAIRS OF MEN

Masculinity in Contemporary Vietnam[1]

Linh Khanh Nguyen and Jack Dash Harris

Extramarital relationships in Vietnam mean something quite different from the Western understandings of such relationships. Unofficial statistics from health research (Tran et al., 2006; Elmer, 2001) have shown that approximately 70% of Vietnamese men have had extramarital relationships. In Vietnam, the concept of extramarital relationships has a wide range of actions and meanings, from a man going to a masseuse, seeking a sex worker or party girl, to having a sweetheart or sweethearts, and even having a "second" wife. In fact, Vietnamese men are *not* likely to see most of these forms of extramarital relationship to be adulterous or an act of infidelity. As this research demonstrates, extramarital relationships in Vietnam are seen as a form of male privilege and a process of male identification and bonding than the result of a failed relationship between a husband and a wife.

Extramarital relationships are an important signifier of masculinity in Vietnam. In the past, having more than one wife indicated a man's high status and wealth; at present, for many men and their male audiences, having sexual relationships with women other than wives indicates "maleness," sexual potency, and prestige. Sociologically, extramarital affairs go beyond the dyadic relationship of a husband and wife. They are a phenomenon of men in groups: they are about male friends, business-relations, and colleagues, what each of these male cohorts think and admire, how men cover for each other and keep it secret from wives, and how men reproduce the masculine identification in one another. These male relationships, so tellingly reinforced in such reference groups, are an essential component of Vietnamese culture and its regulations about sexuality.[2]

Based on survey field research and in-depth interviews, the concept of extramarital relationships is revealed to be culturally framed and enacted in Vietnam in the broader context of the reproduction of masculinity and gender relations.

Marital and Extramarital Relationships in Language

Ca dao, a special form of traditional literature in Vietnam, is the genre used by peasants using Vietnamese language in contrast to the poems in Classical Chinese by scholars and the mandarins which were inaccessible to the majority of Vietnamese. *Ca dao* was orally transmitted

and dates back more than a thousand years ago. Because *ca dao* remained outside the purview of feudal governments, it was a truthful source of everyday life and revealed concerns of ordinary Vietnamese. Therefore, *ca dao* was candid about many topics that were highly regulated by Confucianism, such as arranged marriage, polygamy, concubines, wives complaining about husbands and mothers-in-law, and conjugal infidelity.

For example, take this traditional *Đông Hồ* wood block print (Figure 30.1), over 500 years old, which tells the story with this accompanying text:

> The wife says to the husband's sweetheart: "*Măng non nấu với gà đồng. Thử chơi một trận xem chồng về ai*"

You're the bamboo shoot [young]; I'm a field hen [old and experienced]. Let's fight and see who'll win him.

The son says to his mother:

> "*Mẹ về tắm mát nghỉ ngơi. Ham thanh chuộng lạ mặc thầy tôi với dì*"

Mom, let's go home and take a rest. If Dad wants adventures, let him be.

The husband says to his wife:

> "*Thôi thôi nuốt giận làm lành. Chi điều sinh sự nhục mình nhục ta*"

My dear, let's calm down – You make a fuss out of this, we all will be embarrassed.

Note the emphasis on permitting the husband to have his extramarital relationship, affirmed by the young son as merely an adventure, and expressed by the husband who exhorts his wife that *her* jealousy is an embarrassment (not his behavior) and will dishonor the family. A reading of a husband's extramarital behavior is not anachronistic even today. Vietnamese women are taught by both Confucian values and the Vietnamese state to shoulder the responsibilities for family harmony and happiness and Vietnamese femininity often entails virtues of face-saving, endurance, self-sacrifice for the sake of the family (Gammeltoft, 2022; Nguyen and Rydstrom, 2022; Rydstrom, 2022). In other words, Vietnamese wives must endure, and when she is confronted with her husband's extramarital relationships, whether it is a sex worker or sweetheart, she may look inward to understand her "failure" rather than demand that he terminate his extramarital relationships.

The regularity in *ca dao* proves that the relationships between a man and several women is not a new phenomenon but has roots in Vietnamese tradition. Today, even though polygamy and prostitution are illegal, extramarital relationships are common. While only 18.2% of respondents in the interviews said that they have had extramarital relationships, 92% said they knew people who have had extramarital relationships. This suggests that many respondents were probably not being honest and that extramarital relationships are ordinary for Vietnamese men. In fact, the contemporary language about sexuality and extramarital relationships is rich and can be divided into several categories such as food, animals, and even family.

Figure 30.1   Traditional *Đông Hồ* wood block print

Food Analogies and Metaphors

The Vietnamese refer to the wife as "rice" (*cơm*), the staple they eat every day, and the sweetheart as "noodle" (*phở*), another form of rice but fancier, that the Vietnamese have often but not daily. The concept is filled with imagery:

> The husband takes his "rice" (wife) to have noodle for breakfast, take his "noodle" (sweetheart) to have rice for lunch. In the evening, "rice" returns to rice's home, and noodle returns to noodle's home; the husband eats rice but thinks of noodle.

The wife is also sometimes called "*cơm nguội*," the rice left over from the previous meal that is old and is no longer delicious, and premarital sex is described as eating the rice before the dinner gong is beaten (*ăn cơm trước kẻng*). Similar to "rice and noodle" (*cơm phở*), but used mainly in the South is "*nem*" and "*chả*." One male respondent explained that *nem* and *chả*, one a roll, the other a pancake, have different tastes but both are made from pork. Because *nem* refers to a woman other than the wife, the man's relationship with her could be described as "meaty *nem*" (*nem mặn*) if sex is involved, and "vegetarian *nem*" (*nem chay*) if it is not. Understood in the context of Buddhism, vegetarianism is related to the diet of monks, men who do not eat meat and do not have sex. Vegetarian *nem* is most stereotyped as, though not limited to, a relationship between a man and a woman working at the same office, and both are sharing emotional intimacy. These emotional liaisons are threatening to the marriage because vegetarian *nem* can later turn into meaty *nem*, and the woman could become a sweetheart. Going to sex workers, for most Vietnamese men, only means a kind of service, and they call it "if you eat the cake, you pay for the cake" (*ăn bánh trả tiền*). These relationships are absent of emotional intimacy. Finally, if one is engaged in an extramarital relationship, one is said to "eat on the sly" (*ăn vụng*).

The Vietnamese have a whole metaphorical field taken from food language to talk about the relationship between a man and many women. The food analogies go hand in hand with how women talk about their relationships with men. They often use slang such as to catch a fish, to go hunting, or to trap. Because the men like to eat, the women give bait to trap, to hunt, or to catch men. The language shows the naturalization process of the men as the eaters and the women as the feeders.

Animal Analogies and Metaphors

In addition to food, Vietnamese men and women associate themselves and their relationships with language about animals. Many Vietnamese men assume that they have the "blood of the goat" (*máu dê*), an animal that is believed to be hyperactive sexually. It is no surprise that they drink wine mixed with goat blood and eat goat testicles to increase their sexual ability. If a man is being cheated on by his wife, he is a cuckold or he is "wearing the horn (*cắm sừng*)." The wife after having children is "an old sow (*lợn sề*)" whose breasts become unappealingly flabby.

Extramarital relationships are expressed as "chasing the bird, catching the butterfly" (*đuổi chim bắt bướm*). "The bee and the butterfly" (*ong bướm*) is a phrase used to indicate the wife and the other women, and "the cat eats fat" (*mèo mỡ*) implies one cannot say no to an attractive person just as the cat never says no to fat. Vietnamese men also say that they expect, after several years of marriage, "the cat wants fresh fish with which to play."

Forms and Hierarchies of Extramarital Relationships

The concept of extramarital relationship is divided into sexual and non-sexual relationships and has a wide range of meanings. The meanings in the sex relationships create a hierarchy: at the bottom of that hierarchy may be having manual or oral sex with the masseuse (many Vietnamese men do not consider this an extramarital sex), followed by seeking sexual liaisons. These liaisons have three socioeconomic levels: (1) low-income sex workers who work on the street, (2) middle-income sex workers in small restaurants, hair salons, clubs, cafes, and (3) high-income

sex workers in discotheques, night clubs, and other expensive entertainment venues (Rekart, 2002). Another way of talking about levels is to refer to the party girl who is a young and attractive "girlfriend" who has no commitment and easily leaves one man for another man, depending on who spends more money on her. The next level involves emotional attachment: a sweetheart or a "second" wife.

In Vietnamese language, a party girl is called "*em út*," translated as the youngest sister in the family who is young and often gets a lot of attention and money from older people; and a "second" wife is called "small wife" (*vợ nhỏ/vợ bé*) which indicates a strong relationship and commitment that is slightly less than that with a (big) wife.

In Western culture, there are normally four main categories of adult male–female relationships: wife, mistress, affair, and prostitute.[3] It significantly ruptures the boundary for a married man to engage in an extramarital relationship, i.e. engaging in one or more of the three "illegitimate" categories. However, in Vietnam extramarital relationships have a hierarchal and categorical structure so that moving from one category to another does not create such a great rupture. Consider the following chart (Figure 30.2) as a summary of the relationship patterns just identified.

As the chart shows, the categories of extramarital relationships could be considered consumption categories, and they also mirror the process of industrialization and globalization that creates a class-based society. In the class-based system, the masseuse is at the bottom and the small wife is at the top. As the category goes up, the monetary investment increases, and so does the emotional attachment and responsibility expected from the man. When a man has a sweetheart or a small wife, he is also having the status of a boyfriend or a husband, and the role of a provider. That is why having a sweetheart or a small wife entails both money and responsibility. The class system and its connection with industrialization also mean that some of the categories of extramarital relationships did not exist in the past (such as masseuse, party girl, and small wife) and in rural areas (such as the differentiation of sex workers into low-income, middle-income, and high-income).

The Construction of Vietnamese Femininity

Vietnamese women are constructed as the morality keepers. The strongly held Vietnamese belief of "*phúc đức*" (merit and virtue) works against the interest of women. *Phúc đức* is a kind of karma concept which states that the merits one gains can pass on to succeeding generations, born and unborn. The Vietnamese believes that "*Phúc đức tại mẫu*" (merit and virtue are caused by the mother): a good woman of proper conduct and ethics can bring happiness and good fortune to her family and a bad woman brings tragedy and despair. Men, not restricted by this belief, are freer and not judged if they engage in bad conduct such as drinking, gambling, or cheating. When being asked whether they were angry when finding out their spouses had had sweethearts, 48.2% of male respondents said yes because it means their wives were unethical, while only 38% of female respondents said the same thing of their husbands. The gap between male and female respondents if their spouses had sought sex workers is bigger: 54.7% versus 34%. Women as the morality keepers were also used as by men to excuse venturing outside of marriage: many male respondents said if the women with whom they hoped to have extramarital relationships said no, then they (the men) would not have engaged in extramarital relationships.

Second, there is a double standard regarding sexuality for men and women. Only women are expected to remain a virgin until marriage. According to Go et al. (2002), when questions on premarital sex were posed, immediately focus is on the women and only the consequences
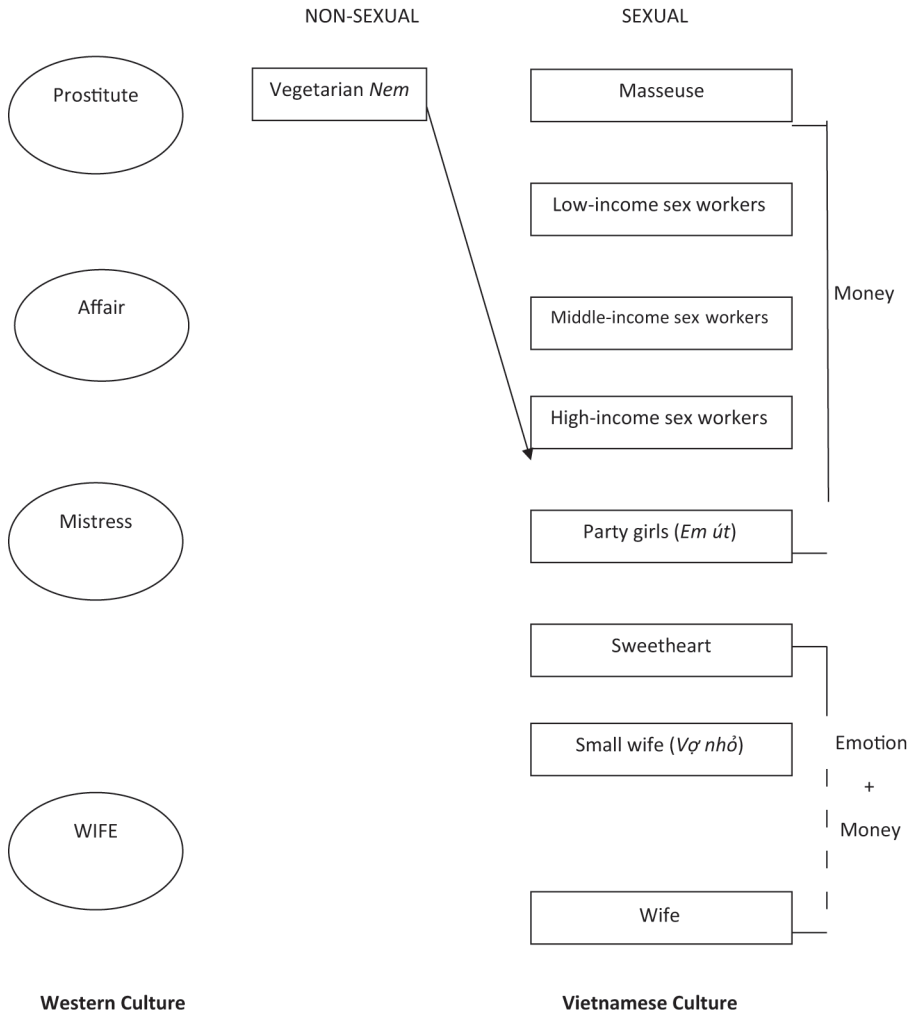
Figure 30.2   Diagramming Vietnamese men's extramarital relations
Source: Authors

to the women are discussed. The omission of men in these discussions suggests two possible options: (1) the Vietnamese have an underlying assumption that men are inherently sexual and therefore premarital sex for them was socially acceptable or (2) a Vietnamese woman is considered property that needs to be protected before being given to the owner – the husband. Most women and men believed that a woman should not have premarital sex in order to maintain the respect of their boyfriend, future husband, and husband's family. The double standard means that women's sexuality is supposed to only serve the men. Respondents, male and female alike, believed that women, unlike men, have few sexual desires and are able to restrain their sexual passions and therefore should not have extramarital relationships. This belief masks the cultural construction of femininity and naturalizes the cultural construction: the Vietnamese do not

want the women to have much sex, so they attribute that Vietnamese women naturally have low sex drives.

Third, Vietnamese women are family-oriented and family-bound. The Vietnamese believe that women cannot find happiness outside of marriage. Once in a marriage, the wife is the main caregiver who is responsible for family happiness and healthiness (Gammeltoft, 2022; Nguyen and Rydstrom, 2022; Rydstrom, 2022). Because the role of the woman in the family is so important, she is not allowed to have extramarital relationships and must make her family a priority.

> It is said that a man in the family is like the roof of a house and the woman is like the shoulder strap to raise the roof. A house has one roof but many shoulder straps. The woman has to take care of many tasks. If a woman has a love affair, she might not have time for her duty to look after the children so her sins would be considered more serious than a man's.
>
> *(A man in Go et al's research)*

In the national contest "Vietnamese Women of the 21st Century" launched by the National Television Network to exemplify the "model" of a modern Vietnamese woman, one of the criteria is "a woman has a career but her family is still the base" or "being successful in social work but still manages the family well." This criterion reinforces the double burden Vietnamese women have been shouldering (domestic unpaid work and paid work), and makes the family most important for Vietnamese women.

The construction of women as family keepers has prevented women from having extramarital relationships. In the survey, 93% of male respondents believed that their spouses have been completely faithful to them; however, the corresponding number for female respondents is only 61.1%.

Contemporary literature reinforces Vietnamese women's attachment to the family. It is depicted in Vietnamese short stories that women's search for love outside of marriage would end in disillusionment first because even though men talk about love, their love extends only as far as the bedroom, and second, happiness in extramarital affairs are illusions, not the solutions to marital problems. The society generally still assumes that women can only find happiness within their marriage, not outside of it (Phan and Pham, 2003).

However, as more women become independent and educated, many of them choose not to follow the rules imposed on them. As A.O. Hirschman claims, instead of loyalty, one has other alternatives: exit the system or voice their discontent (1970). More and more Vietnamese women are getting married to foreigners, particularly Taiwanese and Korean. They choose to exit because as one young woman puts it,

> Is it possible in this economic-driven time to still believe in "one cottage and two golden hearts"? If I stay home and marry a farmer who says he loves me but gambles, and drinks all day, makes one but spends ten, would I be happy?
>
> *(Female, 23, Ho Chi Minh City)*

These women are being widely criticized for going after money. In fact, they are being attacked for their disloyalty and lack of nationalism and authenticity (they choose materialism over love), and for the insult to Vietnamese masculinity (Vietnamese men feel ashamed and angry for not being able to "protect" their women). Other women exit by choosing not to marry and be confined in all the family obligations. Those who do not exit voice their discontent. Many

female writers have begun to challenge whether marriage really brings happiness to the women by writing on the bitterness and disappointment in marriage and its consequences on women, both married and unmarried (Phan and Pham, 2003) Yet these authors do not know what the way out is for their female protagonists. Others, such as the famous director Le Hoang, publicly support women getting married to Taiwanese men and criticize Vietnamese men's behaviors:

> It is true that before judging a woman, the men have to judge themselves first, and 1000 times more seriously. I go to the countryside many times, and I am very frightened to see that at 5, 6 pm, most of the men go drinking. I see them going along the streets and singing as they are drunk. If I were a woman marrying such a man and had to tell myself that I was happy because I married a Vietnamese man, that would be impossible for me.
>
> *(Le, 2003)*

At the same time, the Women's Union, government institutions, and international organizations have been funding research on gender, particularly on marital relationships, family, and prostitution (Nguyen and Rydstrom, 2022). These efforts to reshape masculinity and femininity may in the long run help create changes in gender relationships.

Male Sexuality and Extramarital Relationships

The dominant construction of women as the morality and family keepers and as sexually inferior is complementary and necessary to the construction of men as familially disconnected and sexually superior breadwinners. This complementarity hinges on the Vietnamese binary view of *Yin* and *Yang*, two different parts that create a harmony. In other words, men and women have to be different; they cannot be the same and equal in order to have harmony. N. Jamieson comments that:

> Yang is defined by a tendency toward male dominance, high redundancy, low entropy, complex and rigid hierarchy, competition, and strict orthodoxy focused on rules for behavior based on social roles. Yin is defined by a tendency toward greater egalitarianism and flexibility, more female participation, mechanisms to dampen competition and conflict, high entropy, low redundancy, and more emphasis on feeling, empathy, and spontaneity.
>
> *(Jamieson, 1993: 12–13)*

Vietnamese men believe that sexuality is one indicator of masculinity, as they assume that they have "the blood of the goat" and that the wife could not satisfy their sexual needs, so they have to engage in extramarital relationships, particularly with sex workers (who are believed to be different from other women in terms of sexual ability). While more respondents, regardless of gender, said the wife is not obligated to have sex with the husband than did those who said she is obligated, the response to the sexual obligation of the husband is different. More than half of female respondents said the husband is not obligated to have sex with the wife, but half of male respondents said the husband is obligated (the statistic is significant at the 0.005 level). This data shows that sexuality is an important component of masculinity.

Sexual drive is also one of the reasons respondents used for extramarital relationships of the husbands: 20.9% of respondents agreed that a husband could have a sweetheart, and 30.5% agree that a husband could seek sex workers because of his sexual needs.

The construction of masculinity based on sexuality is so strong that this construction becomes quite homogeneous: gender, economic condition, education level, and age do not have significant relationships with the ideology about extramarital relationships. The only significant variation is along the urban/rural line. More men in rural areas said it is acceptable for men to have extramarital relationships than those in urban areas. In fact, 31% of rural men indicated it was acceptable to have a sweetheart if the wife did not provide satisfying sex, versus 18.8% of the urban respondents, while 49.1% of rural men approved of using a prostitute versus 29.2% of the urban respondents under the same circumstances. This data is interesting given that when a man refuses to go to seek sex workers, his friends label him "countrified" or "rural" (*nhà quê*). Ironically, while men engage in extramarital sex to become "sophisticated" and "urban," it is the rural men that may practice it more.

Sexuality is one of the main components of a Vietnamese "real" man, though it is less important for married men (who have their sexuality confirmed by their marriage and children) than unmarried men. Therefore, going to seek sex workers is considered as a rite of passage: married men will take unmarried men to houses of prostitution to initiate the transformation to be real men (Tran et al., 2006). Sexuality is also related to male groups: men going together for bonding and to keep places in the social network, after doing business with colleagues, or as a "bribe" for bosses. Ninety-five percent of respondents said that they went to sex workers with other men, and that their male friends know about their ventures but no one tells another's wife. This means that going to sex workers is usually a group activity and if one is not in a group, one rarely indulges.

The reasons for engaging in extramarital relationships vary from adventure, sexual needs, sustenance of jobs and social groups, proof of masculinity, or having a son, to marital problems. Even when men are satisfied with their marriage lives, many of them still have extramarital relationships. The conflicting attitudes and reasons demonstrate a strong masculine ideology: strong sexual desires (blood of the goat), bonding with other men, and family distance.

When a man refuses to go with other men to sex workers, he is judged as cheap, scared of his wife, weak (in sexuality), chicken (coward), countrified (old-fashioned). The real man, then, must be rich or generous, authoritarian over his wife, strong in sexuality, fearless, and modern (which mirrors industrialization and urbanization). Vietnamese culture shows a binary view about masculinity and femininity. For example, a female name is normally a kind of flower or fruit, moon, charming, jewelry, while a male name is a king, dragon, strength, or big tree. In other words, a woman should be beautiful, sweet, charming, and gentle, while a man should be strong and powerful (see also Rydstrom, 2022). If a man is not masculine enough, he is said to have the mix of both a man and a woman. He will be considered to have "eight lives" (*tam vía*) since a man is believed to have seven lives and woman has nine lives, "gasoline mixed with oil" (*xăng pha nhớt*), hi-fi ("hi" is pronounced similar to number two in Vietnamese, so hi-fi refers to the mixed of two different things), a hen (as opposed to a cock), or *pê-đê* which, though originally coming from the French word *pede*, a short form of *pederasty* (boy lover), means homosexual. By calling an unmanly man a homosexual, the Vietnamese also imply that a gay man is not a real man, invoking the definition of a real man: being strong sexually with women:

> A real man is the one that feels desirous when looking at women, wants to see women that are scantily clad, and dream of women's bodies.
>
> *(Male, 29, Ho Chi Minh City)*

This association of masculinity with heterosexuality also indicates the extent to which LGBT is discriminated in Vietnam (for more information, see Horton and Rydstrom, 2022). Moreover,

the double standard in the construction of masculinity and femininity regarding sexuality (a "real man" has a high sex drive and a proper woman has a low sex drive) suggests that a homosexual man is a feminine man, and a sex worker is a masculine woman.

It can be concluded that sexuality and extramarital relationships are strongly emphasized in Vietnamese culture as a component of masculinity. However, there is some resistance to this value system from both Vietnamese men and women. Some men have never had any extramarital relationships and refuse to go to sex workers when asked by friends. They come up with excuses, such as physically tired, too drunk, not in the mood, or having to go home to have sex with wives (to do "homework" – "*trả bài*"). The wives have their own prevention strategies: have sex with the husbands before they go out or calling them at predetermined times. But it is also notable that those who have never had extramarital relationships are not sure how long they can maintain their behaviors.

Conclusion

Heavily influenced by the ideology of *Yin* and *Yang*, Vietnamese masculinity and femininity are culturally constructed as inherently different but complementary. The women are caregivers, creating stability and harmony through their female networks. They are traditionally confined to households and small business economies within the villages. They are also constrained by the ideology of karma and merits (*phúc đức*), saving merits for generations to come. Borrowing the concept of "integry" from Boulding (1980), Vietnamese women, working in their small female networks (space), are the glue among generations (time) to create stable families, the essential foundation and support of Vietnamese life. In other words, women in the past have often been restricted in their domains, primarily the household, the paddy, and the village market, and the public spaces dominated by men are not frequented by women.

Vietnamese men, on the contrary, are not the glue, do not need to save up merits, and are distant family breadwinners. They spend more time working outside of home, engaging in social interaction at the *bia hơi* (beer hall), café, or karaoke with their male friends, and they may also engage in extramarital relationships. They have little responsibility for critical matters of the past and future, which would include caretaking of the old and the young. Relating to all the Vietnamese analogies between extramarital relationships and eating, it is not stretching to say that a Vietnamese man spends his life moving in spaces out of home and "eating out." This present orientation of a Vietnamese man is distinct and contrary to the generational responsibilities of a Vietnamese woman. The lives of Vietnamese men and women can be illustrated as followed with men plotted horizontally and women vertically (Figure 30.3).

The family is the key social institution in Vietnamese culture. Immediate family and extended kinship ties are important for business and income-generating activities, which are often controlled by women. However, women's household economies have often been rendered invisible or undervalued. After 1945, the Vietnamese government directed women to leave their homes and work at companies and factories because it assumed that Vietnamese women did not work (work for the state means paid work). Now instead of liberating the women as claimed, the government has put a "second shift" on the women: the work outside of home in addition to the domestic work (Pettus, 2004). At the same time, industrialization has increased social mobility, breaking up the traditional extended family into the nuclear family. A Vietnamese woman's life goes through a significant transformation of space and time: an extension in space (work out of home) and a decrease in time (a move from a multi-national family to a nuclear family). This transformation obviously creates a strain on the traditional femininity, and therefore, an adapted
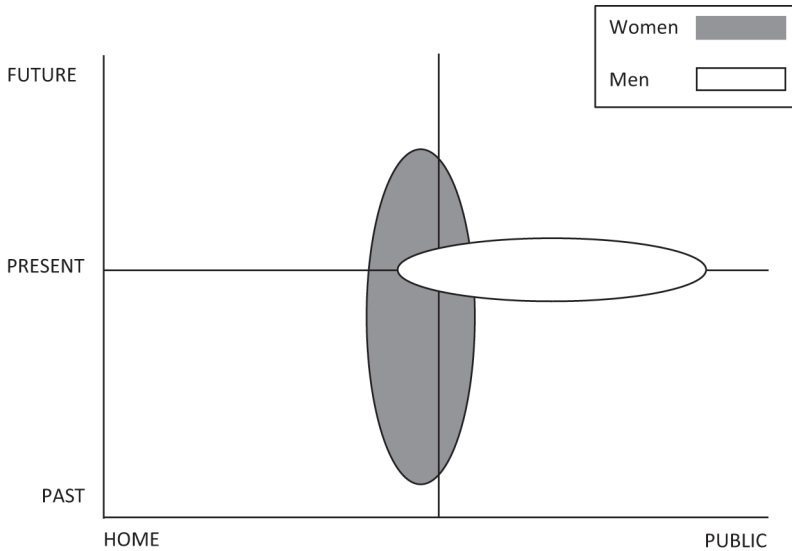
Figure 30.3   Temporal and spatio-social orientation of men and women

Vietnamese femininity is being built: a Vietnamese woman of the 21st century must be able to manage both domestic work and social work well.

To a certain extent, industrialization has contributed to the growth of the sex industry. Industrialization has increased the gap between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, thus creating a supply of poor young women from the countryside willing to work as prostitutes and the demand of rich men who are looking for a leisure activity to spend their money. Yet the sex industry is not only limited to prostitutes and its clients are not limited to rich men. It is the sexual identity of Vietnamese men that enables a market of sex where women are commoditized in different forms ranging from a masseuse to a small wife, and where men of all classes, ages, and education levels are involved as consumers. The relationship of sexuality to the construction of Vietnamese masculinity is rooted in tradition, expressed in the past as legal polygamy, and expressed in modernity as a menu of possible extramarital relationships. Masculinity as constructed by the cultural forms, not industrialization, is the primary cause of the commonness of extramarital relationships. However, industrialization does play a role in transforming the traditional polygamy and prostitution into a highly structured sex market that mirrors industrialization and modernization.

The social and educational improvement of women is threatening Vietnamese men's identity and privileges claimed by men because they are the "breadwinners" and the "head" of the household with responsibilities and rights as the male adult. The double burden women bear is creating strain for women, and also for their husbands, and women are now suggesting that their husbands share more domestic work, including both housework and childcare, with them. As Le Thi Nham Tuyet states, expressing this harmonizing ideal,

> The new Vietnamese "good husband" shares in the responsibility for family happiness. He . . . provides economic and social care for his wife and children, and supports the social and economic life of his wife, demonstrated by showing confidence in her

abilities and taking some of the domestic burden. The task is to nurture equality and
equity in gender relations while embracing male-female difference.

(Le, 1996)

It is noticeable that even though the new "good" husband is required to share domestic burden,
his identity as the main provider remains a priority. This model pairs well with the ideal Viet-
namese woman of the 21st century: she might be working out of home but her family is still
her primary responsibility. In addition, Le Thi Nham Tuyet still holds a binary view of gender
roles that embraces an essentialist view of the differences between men and women. After all,
the cultural roots of *Yin* and *Yang* continue to influence the construction of gender identity in
Vietnam, and the "new" gender models have so far been just a small step forward from traditional
gender roles. It may be unlikely that young women will find this harmonizing ideal, with its
reification of gender roles, satisfactory. One young financially successful mother indicated in an
interview that she expected a say in *all* things inside and outside of their marriage, that sharing
decision-making represented her husband's respect for her, and that she is capable of leaving the
relationship if he does not show this respect. This includes divorcing him if he participates in
extramarital relationships.

Vietnamese men are facing significant role strain. The status they have claimed based on
being the main provider is eroding with the increasing financial contribution that women make
to the family income and the new independence of women. On one hand, there has been
some pressure on husbands from their wives to be a new "good husband." On the other hand,
husbands continue to be embraced by their male networks, tied to the cultural demands of mas-
culinity, including the pressures of being loyal in defending the rights and privileges of men.[4]
According to J. Pleck (1981), men experience a "paradox of power" in which men have power
over women but have little power over their own lives, especially in power relations with other
men. In defense of their manhood, a key dynamic of masculinity is shame. Michael Kimmel
explains that men are always afraid that

> [o]ther men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not
> measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear. Fear
> makes us ashamed, because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof that we are not
> as manly as we pretend . . . our fear is the fear of humiliation.

(Kimmel, 1995: 131)

The anxiety about masculinity and the fear of not measuring up suggests that men will continue
to conform to male norms and, in the Vietnamese context, this means asserting their authoritar-
ian rights at home and over their wives, and seeking extramarital relationships that foster male
bonding and demonstrate, sexually, that they are "normal" men. Indeed, two senior male inter-
viewees in Ho Chi Minh City argued with certainty that industrialization was forcing Vietnam-
ese women into commercial and industrial roles that made them unhappy (because, presumably,
they were happier in their traditional role), and that modern ideas of gender equality would result
in the break-up of the valued extended family and higher divorce rates. In this reading, tradi-
tional gender roles should be affirmed and women should be blamed for destabilizing the family.

The communist political ideology of gender equality, the rapid process of industrialization
and globalization, the embedded traditional culture, and the pressures to conform to gender
ideals are exerting different and conflicting forces on Vietnamese men and women. Within
the limit of this research, it is very hard to tell if, how, and when gender roles in Vietnam
may be reconstructed. Further research is needed to explore and detail how power is actually

renegotiated within families by the husband and wife, how it includes other extended family members, and how this patriarchal system may be restructured publicly and privately.

Notes

1 This article is based on a survey research that included 220 participants and a follow-up qualitative research that added 22 in-depth interviews.
2 While masculinity is reinforced in relationships among Vietnamese men, it also manifests in the dominance of Vietnamese men over women, especially through domestic violence. See Rydstrom (2022) for more information.
3 The "West" is a very complex concept with many complicated and conflicting ideas. The simplification of this concept is used here only as a theoretical device to illuminate the Vietnamese context.
4 There has been a growing number of studies on Vietnamese masculinity in the last twenty years. See, for example, Harris (1998) and An, Waling, & Bourne (2022).

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31

LGBTQ IN VIETNAM

Heteronormativity and Resistance

Paul Horton and Helle Rydstrom

Recent political, legal, and social changes have served to illustrate shifting understandings of sexualities in contemporary Vietnam. Such changes have included pride demonstrations, the establishment of organizations working with LGBTQ rights, debates around same-sex marriage and LGBTQ rights, new legislation, and increased openness about same-sex preferences among young people. Despite these recent shifts, however, established societal norms regarding the importance of the family and the patrilineage still loom large over the daily lives of many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people (Asia Pacific Transgender Network, 2018; Bohane, 2021).

In this chapter, we explore the political, legal and social exclusion of LGBTQ people in contemporary Vietnam and consider the myriad ways in which LGBTQ people have navigated such exclusionary practices. In the first section of the chapter, we outline the heteronormative context (Butler, 1990) and discuss the political, legal, and social changes that have taken place. We then discuss how our research participants explained their attempts to navigate the familial politics of pressure. Finally, we consider the ways in which they have resisted the heteronormative framework and how such resistance has sometimes served to co-opt the very framework within which it occurs.

The chapter is based on legal documents, secondary sources, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted during 2012 and 2013, which involved participant observations in various settings, informal interviews, and semi-structured group and individual interviews with employees at organizations dealing with LGBTQ issues, leaders of same-sex clubs, and LGBTQ people between the ages of 20 and 50. Ethical guidelines have been followed, and informants were informed about the focus of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, that the information provided would be treated confidentially, and that their identities would remain anonymous.

Same-Sex Sexualities in a Heteronormative Context

It was not until recently that same-sex sexualities became an issue of debate and concern in the Vietnamese context. Prior to the late 1980s, same-sex sexualities were not mentioned in the governing laws and did not receive much attention within the cultural and religious frameworks of Confucianism, Buddhism, or Taoism (Khuat et al., 2009). In the late 1980s and early 1990s,

in connection with the opening up of the country that came with the implementation of *Đổi Mới* (renovation) in 1986, the Vietnamese government became increasingly concerned about external influences that were claimed to have a polluting effect on Vietnam's otherwise "pure" traditions and cultural customs (Nguyen-vo, 2008).

In 1987, for example, the Ho Chi Minh City Police Department published a reportage on the issue of male same-sex sexuality entitled *Tình Pêđê* (Pede Love),[1] warning that homosexuality was a disease that was spreading throughout the country (Tran, 2014). In 1990, the first case of HIV was reported in Ho Chi Minh City and served to reinforce the coupling of homosexuality and disease and add to the concern about negative external influences polluting the social fabric of the country. In 1995, the government initiated a campaign against "social evils" (*tệ nạn xã hội*), and the label has since been used to categorize a wide range of social practices, including domestic violence, gambling, sex work, drug use, and homosexuality (Colby et al., 2004; Khuat et al., 2009; Newton, 2012; Nguyen, 2016; Vijeyarasa, 2010).

In 1997, the issue of same-sex sexualities was thrust into the spotlight when two men hosted a same-sex wedding party in Ho Chi Minh City, and again in 1998 when two women attempted to register themselves as a married couple in Vĩnh Long. The attempt at marriage registration was unsuccessful, but did raise important questions about the legal status of same-sex couples in Vietnam (Horton, 2014; Horton and Rydstrom, 2019; Khuat et al., 2009; Luu and Bartsch, 2011; Nguyen, 2016; Oosterhoff et al., 2014; Pastoetter, 2004). While the 1986 Marriage and Family Law made references to "husband and wife", the law did not explicitly forbid same-sex marriage (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1986, Art. 7). When the Marriage and Family Law was amended, in the wake of these events, the category of "people of the same-sex" was included as a fifth category of circumstances where marriage would henceforth be forbidden (National Assembly of the Socialist republic of Vietnam, 2000, Art. 10).

In 2000, a number of ministries, mass organizations, and government departments also combined forces to combat the threat of HIV as part of the Committee for AIDS, Drugs and Prostitution Prevention and Control (Khuat et al., 2004; National Committee for AIDS, Drugs, and Prostitution Prevention and Control, 2012). In 2004, the National Strategy on HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control in Vietnam until 2010 with a Vision to 2020 was released (National Committee for AIDS, Drugs, and Prostitution Prevention and Control, 2012). Decree 54 was also issued in order to raise public awareness about the risk of HIV. This decree identified men who have sex with men (MSM) as a group that was particularly at risk and served to reinforce the perceived connections between same-sex sexualities and disease (Blanc, 2005; Colby et al., 2004; Khuat et al., 2009).

The revision of the Media Law in 1999 also inadvertently served to reinforce these perceptions, as it allowed media outlets greater freedom with regards to what they could focus their attention on (Khuat et al., 2009). The issue of homosexuality began to gain increased media attention, with much of that attention negative in tone. A review of newspaper depictions of homosexuality in 2004, 2006, and 2008, for example, highlighted that 41 percent of more than 500 newspaper articles during those years were discriminatory in their portrayal of "homosexual people" (iSEE, 2011, p. 30). Such negative portrayals were partially counter-balanced during those years by the publication of a number of Vietnamese-language books, and later by a number of documentaries and films (Horton and Rydstrom, 2019).

Following the first pride event in 2012, a number of workshops were organized to discuss LGBTQ rights, and calls were made for changes to Vietnam's Marriage and Family Law (see also Bohane, 2021). The following year, on 24 September 2013, the National Assembly of Vietnam issued Decree 110/2013/ND-CP. This decree allowed for same-sex cohabitation and

same-sex weddings but still did not allow for same-sex marriage (Horton et al., 2015; Nichols, 2013; Oosterhoff et al., 2014). The step to decriminalize same-sex marriage was taken on 19 June 2014, with the amendment of the Marriage and Family Law, which came into effect in January 2015. While the ban on same-sex marriage was removed from the Marriage and Family Law, same-sex marriage has still not been explicitly legalized (Horton and Rydstrom, 2019; Rydstrom, 2016; UNDP and USAID, 2014). While the amendment of the Marriage and Family Law is a positive step towards more positive recognition of same-sex sexualities, legal recognition does not necessarily translate into societal acceptance. This was highlighted by a 2014 study of more than 5,000 Vietnamese people that found that more than 50% of participants were against the legalisation of same-sex marriage (Gay Asia News, 2014; Tuoi Tre News, 2014; see also Asia Pacific Transgender Network, 2018).

The HIV epidemic, the campaign against "social evils", the revision to the Marriage and Family Law, and the discriminatory portrayal of homosexuality in the media have contributed to negative societal views regarding same-sex sexualities in Vietnam. Such views are also reinforced by the ways in which same-sex sexualities challenge long-standing religious and cultural beliefs related to the organization of family and understandings of the embodiment of masculinity and femininity (Nguyen, 2020).

Navigating the Heteronormative Familial Context

The family is perceived to be particularly important in Vietnam, with "good families" seen to provide the foundations for a "good society", which in turn contributes to "better families" (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2000, preamble). The notion of a good family incorporates a monogamous, heterosexual married couple with no more than two children (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2000, Art. 2). Confucianist ideas about the patrilineal organization of family life prioritize sons, as the lineage is believed to be passed on via the son through the procreation of their sons, while the relative importance of daughters is tied to their ability to attract a suitable husband and give birth to at least one son. Failure to provide a son for the family line may lead to charges of lack of respect for the family and selfishness (Hirsch et al., 2012; Liu, 2001; Rydstrom, 2001, 2002, 2003; Werner, 2004). This was pointed out by Duc, a 27-year-old only son:

> This is how you respect your parents in Vietnam. If I don't get married for some reason . . . then it shows disrespect to my parents. The idea is that you have somebody who can have a son, for example, and that son carries the name of the family. So, if you don't do that, then that is going to be a problem.

This has important implications for LGBTQ people, as they attempt to navigate the pressure brought to bear by family members. The amount of pressure to which a son may be subjected by his parents and/or wider family depends on whether there is more than one son in the family and on the son's relative aged position. In families where there is only one son, the son may be under a great deal of pressure to marry and have a son, as the continuation of the family's lineage is dependent on that son (Horton and Rydstrom, 2019). As Cham, a 46-year-old only son who had come out to his family 10 years earlier, put it:

> I can say that if I were the second son in the family, it would be much easier. It is easier to come out as the second son. The first son, in Vietnam especially, is tasked very heavily. There is a lot of pressure.

In families where there is more than one son, the eldest son generally receives the greatest attention from parents and is expected to continue the family line by getting married and having children, including preferably at least one son. Second or third sons may not feel the same degree of pressure from their parents to continue the family line, as that pressure has already been brought to bear on the eldest son. However, in cases where the eldest son does not get married and/or have a son, there will be increasing pressure on the next son in the family to do so. While sons are considered "inside lineage" (*họ nội*), daughters are considered "outside lineage" (*họ ngoại*) (see Rydstrom, 2001, 2002, 2003). This means that when daughters have sons, those sons are perceived to contribute not to the mother's natal family, but rather to the family of the son's father. However, while daughters may not be under the same pressure to get married and have sons, they are still subjected to the familial politics of pressure, as their decisions may reflect negatively on the collective face of the family (Horton, 2014, 2019; Horton and Rydstrom, 2021). Twenty-two-year-old Hien explained that her mother was unhappy that she did not behave like other girls her age because it could reflect badly on the face of their family:

> When she shouts at me, she uses examples of friends and says, "Look at her room; she's decorated it in a very nice way. You don't do that." And also, "They've started dating; why don't you do the same? You should do that soon or you could become left over. If you are in that situation, you will make our family lose face." She's really serious about losing face.

A number of lesbian women suggested that saving the collective face of their family was a main reason for why they had not yet come out to their parents or other family members (Horton and Rydstrom, 2021). While 29-year-old Vi suggested that there were benefits in coming out (such as greater ease in finding a partner), she also stated that coming out might not only damage her relationship with her parents but also cause a great deal of discomfort for them:

> [I]f I came out, people would talk about it and it might affect my parents in a negative way. My parents themselves might accept my sexuality but if people talked about it too much and kept talking about me behind my back, it would be very uncomfortable for them.

While Vi was unsure about how her parents might react to her sexuality, 23-year-old Linh suggested that she was not worried about her parents' reaction. Instead, she held back from coming out to her family because of the reactions of other people and how that would negatively affect her parents:

> I don't fear that my parents would turn their backs on me. I am sure that they would be very supportive and very loving and they would definitely accept me, but other people would look at me and I don't want to make my parents feel uncomfortable seeing other people.

While findings suggest that there is increasing acceptance of same-sex sexualities amongst younger generations (iSEE, 2011), the perceived linkages between same-sex sexuality and disease are still evident in the ways in which some parents or other family members talk about same-sex sexualities (Horton, 2014, 2019; Horton and Rydstrom, 2021). This was highlighted

by 25-year-old Bui, who suggested that some of her family members suspected she was lesbian and that this affected how they talked with her mother:

> When [the rest of the family] talk to my mother, they say a lot of strange things, like, "You know it is the greatest curse of a family to have a gay child. It is even worse than having a drug addict; it is worse than having a prostitute; it is worse than having criminals", etc. . . . I think mostly they believe that homosexuality is a pathology, whereas drug addiction or prostitution is a choice. That means that the person is still fine; he just chooses to behave that way. But homosexuality is a pathology, like you are born with a certain cancer, or you are insane.

Here Bui highlights not only the perceived connections between same-sex sexualities and disease, but also the relation between same-sex sexualities and other so-called "social evils" like drug addiction and prostitution, and suggests that, for some families at least, same-sex sexuality may be perceived even more negatively due to its supposed roots in the individual's character (see also Nguyen, 2020). As 20-year-old Viet pointed out, the ways in which parents talk about same-sex sexuality may deter young LGBTQ people from telling their parents about their sexuality:

> My parents are from a different generation and sometimes they have a very old-fashioned thinking about homosexual people. Sometimes my parents see a programme on TV talking about homosexuals and my parents make comments that homosexuality is like a disease; that it is like a social disease. I cannot tell my parents after hearing them speak like that.

The sense of not being able to tell parents is exacerbated by a context within which the topic of sexuality is often taboo within the home and where, when it is discussed, it is most often talked about heteronormatively and in terms of the risks associated with heterosexual intercourse (Ha and Fisher, 2011; Horton, 2014; Khuat et al., 2009; Nguyen, 2009; Trinh et al., 2009). Findings from the Centre for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP) highlight that parents may react extremely negatively to the news that their son or daughter is gay or lesbian, by locking them up, beating them, or seeking medicinal or spiritual solutions (CCIHP, 2011). Quan, a 22-year-old only son, for example, explained that when his parents realized that he had feelings for another boy, they sought to medicate him but when that did not seem to work, they then sought spiritual help from a monk at a pagoda:

> They tried everything to get me back. They even tried to ask the monk in the pagoda to do some magic on me. They think that a female spirit is following me and making me behave like a girl.

The idea that Quan's behavior may have been influenced by a female spirit reflects Taoist understandings of the difference between male and female characters, whereby the male bodily force of *Dương* is understood to be "hot" (*nóng*) and the complementary female bodily force of *Âm* is understood to be "cool" (*lạnh*) (Rydstrom, 2003, 2004; see also Jamieson, 1995; O'Harrow, 1995). In this sense, then, Quan is perceived to behave too much like a female and thus be *bóng lại cái* (with a female spirit) (Horton, 2019; Tran, 2014).

Lack of understanding from parents is augmented by a lack of information about sexuality in schools. While population and family life studies have been part of the official curriculum since the 1980s, there was a lack of focus on sexuality until the HIV epidemic of the 1990s, which led

to a focus on sexuality in relation to health and HIV prevention (Ha and Fisher, 2011; Horton, 2014; Khuat et al., 2009; UNESCO, 2010; Zaman and Frances, 2009). While there has been increasing focus on sex education in Vietnam (Janrut, 2012; The Stewardship Report, 2013), generally there is still a lack of information about sexuality in schools, which contributes to non-inclusive school climates. The CCIHP, for example, found that more than 40 percent of the young LGBTQ people they surveyed had been subjected to discrimination and violence at school and that 35 percent of those had either considered or actually attempted suicide (Horton, 2014; Viet Nam News, 2012).

The rigid heteronormative framework and the familial politics of pressure means that some LGBTQ people may attempt to fit into the framework by engaging in heterosex (Horton, 2019). Nam, a 44-year-old only son, for example, explained that he had engaged in heterosex in his early twenties in an attempt to conform to heteronormative societal norms, despite knowing that he was gay:

> The worst thing was I tried with my best friend, so afterwards I felt really bad because I tried with her. Afterwards, I tried many girls that I didn't even know when I was a student. I just said, "ok, maybe I don't know because I haven't tried."

In a similar way, 36-year-old Sang explained that pressure to conform to heteronormative norms had led him to engage in heterosex in his younger years in response to heteronormative provocations from his friends:

> Even though I knew I was gay, I still wanted to try. I thought maybe it would get better for me, but it didn't, because when I went to university, a lot of my friends said fucking bad words. They said, "oh, you are a fucking girl, a chicken, a fucking girl", and "you do not know how to have sex with a woman." We went to parties together and they tried to introduce me to another girl, so I tried, but after one night together, it was not ok with me.

The reactions of Sang's friends, and his subsequent decision to engage in heterosex despite already knowing he was gay, point to the perceived importance of heterosex to understandings of masculinity in the Vietnamese context, as well as the negative implications of perceived failure to perform masculinity in recognizably heterosexual ways (Horton, 2019; Horton and Rydstrom, 2011).

Contesting the Heteronormative Framework

While some LGBTQ people may experiment with heterosex in an attempt to conform to heteronormative expectations, others may seek to deflect focus by engaging in "tacit subjectivities", whereby they seek to fit in while at the same time resisting attempts to make them conform (Tan, 2011, p. 868). In doing so, they may co-opt the heteronormative framework and use it to their advantage, playing on societal and familial expectations of heterosexuality (Horton and Rydstrom, 2019). Hien, for example, suggested that the heteronormative context made it easier for her to hang out with her partner in public:

> It's not difficult because, as you know, even in Western countries, girls hang out together, no problem. For intimacy, we often go to my room. I am from the country-side, so I rent a room in Hanoi.

However, dealing with parental questions about marriage and children may become increasingly burdensome, especially for men who may face questions well into their thirties or forties (Horton, 2019; Horton and Rydstrom, 2019). This was highlighted by Nam:

> When you are 18 or 20 and you don't have a girlfriend, when you are gay, people ask you and you can say, "Oh, it's too early" or "I'm thinking about my studies." Then when you finish your studies, you get the same question and you say, "Oh, I have to find a job." When you find a job, you say, "Oh, I don't have enough money." Then, at age 40, what can you say? It's really hard.

In a similar way, Sang pointed to the pressure on men over the age of 30 from their families and suggested that the pressure is such that most gay men over the age of 30 end up getting married to a woman as a means of relieving the pressure:

> Because you know, after 30 years of age, they have a lot of pressure from the family. "You have to marry!" "You are a man!" "Marry! Marry!" If you came out and said, "Sorry, I am gay, and I cannot marry because I am together with a boy that I like", they would be sad. They would ignore you. They would worry a lot. Most of the gay men over the age of 30 in Vietnam get married to a woman.

While familial pressure may be such that many gay men feel obliged to get married to partners of the opposite sex, this does not necessarily mean that they stop seeking out same-sex encounters. Nam, for example, spoke about one of his gay friends who had recently got married because of familial pressure but continued to frequent a gay-friendly bar:

> Recently, one of my friends, he had been coming to the gay bar for a long time, and he had a boyfriend, but then, because of family pressure, he got married to a girl. But he still goes to the bar. He said that he just got married because his parents wanted him to get married.

While some LGBTQ people may enter into seemingly heterosexual marriages, and hide their sexuality from their married partner, others may instead seek to enter marriages of convenience, or contract marriages, as a means of satisfying familial expectations while being open with their gay or lesbian partner. As Cho (2009) has argued in the South Korean context, such marriage arrangements tend to favor the male in the relationship, and attempts by gay men to find a lesbian partner may be met with hostility (Horton and Rydstrom, 2019).

For those who do not consider marriage a viable option, the continual barrage of questions may instead lead them to move away from their families, and to seek out urban areas where their chances of meeting other LGBTQ people are improved. This may serve to relieve the pressure on not only those who move but also on their parents who are concerned with upholding the face of the family. This may be particularly the case for those from small rural communities where it is harder to avoid the attention of family and friends (Annes and Redlin, 2012; Fisher, Irwin, and Coleman, 2014; Kuhar and Svab, 2014; Horton and Rydstrom, 2019; Newton, 2012). As 42-year-old Thai explained:

> In the countryside, where the society lives close together and sees them, gay get a lot of pressure from the other people, so . . . they will try to get out of the province or

small town to get to the centre of Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Gay people usually gather in the big cities where they have more chance to find a partner and have fun.

Some parents may make such moves more problematic by sending another family member to the same city in an attempt to maintain a degree of control over the activities of their children. While Sang had earlier moved from the countryside to Hanoi, he explained that his parents had sent his brother to Hanoi to work with him and keep an eye on him. Sang explained that if he had a boyfriend, he would have to move away from Hanoi and further from the reach of his family:

> I have a plan already. If I get a boyfriend, I cannot live in Hanoi. I have to move away from Hanoi, maybe to Saigon or maybe to Thailand. We have to build another life. So, I have a plan when I have a boyfriend, we will start a new life. We will move to Saigon, far from the family, and I can start a business there. Or we will move to Thailand. Or maybe we will start a business in his country.

Sang suggests that his current life is incompatible with having an open same-sex relationship and that rather than coming out to his family he would sooner move further away, possibly even to another country.

Conclusions

Dominant heteronormative sociocultural norms have provided the facilitative backdrop for the political, legal, and social exclusion of same-sex sexualities in contemporary Vietnam through the categorization of homosexuality as a "social evil" or disease in need of remedial action. Challenges to the legislative framework in the form of wedding celebrations and marriage registrations have been countered through the passing of legislation aimed at legislatively excluding same-sex couples from the rights afforded heterosexual partners. While recent legislative and political shifts have opened up for greater space within which to challenge heteronormative social and familial values, religious and cultural beliefs related to the organization of family and understandings of the innate characteristics of males and females continue to underpin the familial pressure that LGBTQ people experience in their daily lives.

In this chapter we have illustrated the myriad ways through which LGBTQ people navigate the heteronormative familial context and associated filial expectations and concerns about maintaining the collective face of the family. Rather than sacrificing their own happiness in order to be accepted into the dominant heteronormative framework, our findings suggest that some LGBTQ people instead seek to create new spaces of opportunity outside that restrictive framework. For some, this has involved engaging in tacit subjectivities through avoidance and the co-option of the heteronormative framework through which their interactions are understood. For some, it has involved entering wedlock, while continuing to frequent gay-friendly social sites. For yet others, it has involved moving away from the reach of the family and seeking out new social spaces where they are easier able to engage in same-sex relations and to do so more openly.

Note

1 Pede is a diminutive of the French term pederasty, referring to sexual relations between a man and a pubescent or adolescent male.

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PART IV

Cultures in Motion

32

CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE CUISINE[1]

Christopher M. Annear and Jack Dash Harris

The notion that there is a specific and identifiably Vietnamese *national cuisine* is both widespread and problematic. Books, online materials, and other modes of representation highlight recognizable dishes and ingredients that are common to Vietnamese cuisine. But the frequency and methods with which dishes are prepared and consumed, and the availability of and manner in which ingredients are used, have varied considerably, reflecting regional variation in social conditions, climate, external influences, and tastes. An array of Vietnamese political institutions propagates the notion of a national cultural consensus around cuisine. But even these efforts admit the country's considerable subnational diversity. Viewed broadly, Vietnamese cuisine can be said to reflect a distinctive and recognizable multiplex of social and cultural expressions, combining Kinh, Chinese, Cambodian, Cham (*Chăm*), and other local and regional influences, as well as French and American influences, and elements from other cultures, and has often adopted from these language, social norms, and culinary products. Yet the manner in which these influences have combined has itself varied within Vietnam across time and place. In what sense, then, can we speak of a recognizably national Vietnamese cuisine?

In this chapter, we work through some of the tensions regarding the notion of a Vietnamese "national" cuisine. We consider whether and to what extent cuisine culturally unites Vietnam, despite the historical, regional, and political tensions that make unification challenging. We suggest that Vietnam provides a critical example of the need to interrogate the idea of a national cuisine and to differentiate it from regional and local cuisines. We observe that, in practice, contemporary Vietnamese cuisine reflects varied regional histories, diversity in socioeconomic conditions, differences in patterns of rural and urban life, continuity and change in processes of education and socialization, and diverse cultural and ethnic identities and institutions. We argue that contemporary Vietnamese cuisine is not the food of the nation, however much it might be represented as such. It is the culinary work of the people who constitute the country of Vietnam – their lands, migrations, histories, and politics. To entertain the notion of a recognizably Vietnamese national cuisine is to embrace Vietnam's diversity and varied foreign influences as essential attributes.

A Political Culinary History

Despite the emerging acceptance of food as a legitimate interdisciplinary lens for academic study over the past two decades, its capacity to reveal ways of knowing, sensing, and tasting the

world continues to surprise (Belasco, 2008; Counihan and Van Esterik, 2013; Mintz and Du Bois, 2002; Pilcher, 2016a, 2016b; Pottier, 1999; Sutton, 2010; Swift and Wilk, 2015). Insights from interdisciplinary studies of food and food systems assists an appreciation of how historical conditions, ideas, events, and contestations have shaped Vietnamese cuisine over time, while also shedding light on efforts to promote the notion of a national Vietnamese cuisine.

Food in Vietnam is deeply rooted in its regions. Until the 1400s, Vietnam (*Nam Việt*) was bounded by a geography, ecology, and political organization that constitutes what we know as northern Vietnam today, dominated by Hanoi. Its climate and geography, especially its proximity to China, affected its cuisine. In the 1400s the Việt/Kinh ethnic group expanded southward into what is known as Central Vietnam. In this region, we find rather different ingredients and recipes represented by the foods of Hoian and Danang, and also the "Imperial Cuisine" of Hue (*Huế*) developed in the 1800s. Completing the march south in the 1600s, this region developed the southern cuisines of Saigon and the Mekong Delta, the latter's food influenced by the Cambodian ethnic groups who lived there and by French colonialism.

Vietnam's history of ethnic diversity, regional and foreign influences, and the relative recent timing of its independence and unification are often suppressed in historical and political narratives that promote the notion of a national cuisine. The majority ethnic group, the Kinh, embrace the historic "March to the South" that celebrates the Vietnamese as conquerors of the Cham and (later) Khmer societies. Dominant representations of this history present several unifying aspects of Vietnamese identity and culture, including Confucian values, beliefs, and customs, even while assiduously denying or limiting emphasis on Chinese cultural appropriations (Jamieson, 1995).

While modern popular narratives declare a longstanding independence and nationhood, the fact is that Vietnam has a very short history of independence and unification. The first time Vietnam was unified in its current territorial form was in 1802 under emperor Gia Long. From 1851 to 1954 Vietnam, partitioned into three entities, the colony of Cochin China, and the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin, further strained the idea of a socially and culturally unified state. The division of the territory in 1954 into the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the southern Republic of Vietnam exacerbated new political, social, and cultural divisions. The territory was finally reunified in 1976 as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The development of Vietnamese cuisine has thus been set against a backdrop of regional diversity and political fragmentation.

Despite the great variety that constitutes a nation of rich cultural identities and variations (especially as a country home to 54 different ethnic groups), political institutions have worked to create a fictive social and cultural consensus, actively promoting Vietnamization," adopting the majority Kinh[2] cultural patterns, and asserting a northern hegemony in language, the arts, music, national costumes, and behavioral norms and customs, thereby creating a supposedly national "Vietnameseness." And yet, as Erica J. Peters (2010, 2012) observes, failed attempts to unify disparate cooking knowledge, ingredients, and practices into a Vietnamese national cuisine – such as those of Emperor Minh Mạng's in the 1830s – have provided proof for Vietnam's recalcitrant localism. Historically and up until the present, Vietnamese national cuisine reflects regional and urban variations in food preparation, cultural expression, and consumption (Avieli, 2012; Vu, 2016). To understand these variations is to comprehend the actual cooking and consumption of Vietnamese foods.

Representation of Food: What Cookbooks Say About "Vietnamese" Cuisine

How, then, to examine the cuisine found in Vietnam – its dishes, its preparation, its ingredients, its sources, and its taste? There are few texts that explore these aspects of cuisine in Vietnam better than cookbooks. Cookbooks are promotional, positioning themselves as representational,

advocating for the flavors and tastes of the cuisine that they promulgate. They indulge us in ingredients, careful measurements, strict preparations, and suggest that consumption will result in delight. Moreover, cookbooks, Appadurai aptly notes, "tell unusual cultural tales" (2008, p. 289). They are the compositions and products of reflections at certain moments in social time. As among Appadurai's Indian texts, the proliferation of Vietnam modern cookbooks in the 1990s and 2000s coincided with widespread literacy, especially in the diaspora, and a desire in and outside the country to highlight cuisine, while also standardizing culinary practice (Appadurai; Goody, 1996). Additionally, the rise in such cookbooks coincided with the prodigious population of Viet kieu (*Việt kiều*) expatriates living in the diaspora, while the country was undergoing dramatic economic transformations following the imposition of *Doi moi* reforms in 1986.

Vietnamese food historian, Hong Lien Vu, argues that "there are hardly any Vietnamese documents or any other type of record" of Vietnamese dishes that we know today. Says Vu,

> General illiteracy among the population until the early twentieth century made it difficult for cooks to write down their recipes, while the literati believed that writing about food was beneath them. . . . Another reason for this vagueness is that food preparation was traditionally a family secret, taught by a mother to her daughter or by a mother-in-law to her sons' new bride. Each family had a different way of preparing certain dishes, and that was a secret to be guarded. Restaurant or street food secrets were guarded even more closely.
>
> *(2016, p. 162)*

Most cookbooks on the food of Vietnam were written and published in Vietnam after 1989, although there are a few from the early post–American War period. Andrea Nguyen (2013) writes one authoritative website, in which she lists 28 Vietnamese cookbooks.[3] The earliest, and quite rare, is *Vietnamese Cookery* (1968) by Jill Nhu Huong Miller. Nguyen (2013) says of this book that it has "a certain Hawaiian touch." The next book is *Vietnamese Dishes* (1973) by Duong Thi Thanh Lien. Her writing, says Nguyen, "offers insights into how people cooked and ate in the pre-1975 era of Vietnam." The cookbooks produced from 1975 to 1989 reflect the waves of Vietnamese refugees coming to the United States and Australia. In what follows, we briefly review this history, then sample more popular cookbooks that were written since 1989.

Vietnamese people more generally have had a lack of food throughout much of their modern history. Hunger was a fact of life through the French colonial period, as well as the period of Japanese (Vichy French) occupation, during which over 2 million Vietnamese died of starvation. The communist period, in the north from 1945–1975, and in the south 1975 to around the year 2000, was very bleak, and culinary practice was no different. State restaurant menus reflected this.[4] Moreover, if there was a coordinated "cuisine" in Vietnam before 1945 it was likely practiced by the French, along with Vietnamese Imperial cuisine. It may have taken time for Vietnamese chefs, especially in the north, to relearn culinary skills and launch restaurants. However, echoing Vu (2016), it is more likely that the preponderance of Vietnamese food preparation was a family-centered activity and that there really was not a national Vietnamese cuisine to remember.[5]

Early cookbooks on Vietnamese cuisine from the 1990s on are mainly in English, and while some acknowledge the great historical influences on foods in Vietnam, they typically neither identify nor distinguish recipes and dishes by region or locale. One of the earliest cookbooks available in English, published in 1989, is Nicole Routhier's *Foods of Vietnam*. Routhier situates Vietnamese cuisine amongst its neighbors, placing Vietnam "at one of the crossroads of the Asian world," strongly influenced by China (chopsticks, noodles, woks, stir frying), vegetarian

Buddhist traditions, Mongolian beef in northern specialties, and food traditions from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and India. Moreover, there have also been strong European influences, especially the French. While it is clear that tastes and textures have their sources elsewhere, "it is apparent from the first bite that the Vietnamese have developed a novel cuisine with a unique delicacy and subtlety of taste" (Routhier, 1989, p. 9). In addition, Routhier says, "The one most characteristic element in virtually every Vietnamese dish is *nước mắm*" and its transformation into the table sauce, *nước chấm* (ibid).[6] Finally, Routhier asserts that "the Vietnamese are quick to point out that their cuisine, like their country, is divided into three regions, each with a distinct culinary tradition. However, regional differences are less pronounced than in Chinese cooking" (p. 11). As a result, Routhier rarely identifies the region in the recipes themselves so it is difficult to actually recognize specific regional variations.

The cookbook *Vietnamese Cuisine* (1999) points out that many varieties of Vietnamese cuisine are reflected in the ways in which meals are served. The common Chinese meal comprises three or four dishes, accompanied by soup, whereas the Vietnamese one-dish meal of fried rice or stir-fried noodles can incorporate various types of noodles and of noodle soups. The author observes that Vietnamese Western-style meals include one-dish meals served with bread, and the Vietnamese sandwich *bánh mì* is derived from the French version. Traditional dipping sauces and meats to mix and match flavors are wrapped with rice paper or lettuce or mixed with rice noodles.

Mai Pham, author of *Pleasures of the Vietnamese Table* (2001) agrees that Vietnam is at a major Asian crossroads, and has borrowed generously from many other cultures. However, she insists that Vietnam:

> Has always managed to retain its unique character. . . . What really sets it apart boils down to three main factors: the extensive use of *nước mắm* to season almost every dish, the high consumption of *rau thơm* (aromatic herbs) and the distinctive style of eating small pieces of meat or seafood wrapped in lettuce or rice paper and dipped in sauce. These characteristics apply to all three culinary regions of Vietnam, although each has a slightly different approach to cooking.
>
> *(p. 9)*

In *Secrets of the Red Lantern* (2008), Pauline Nguyễn further reflects upon on the question of what defines Vietnamese food:

> [A] distinction is that ovens don't exist in Vietnam: we prefer to watch our food being cooked – deep fried, steamed, slow braised, grilled, barbecued, or tossed in a flaming wok. . . . What most distinguishes Vietnamese food, however, is its emphasis on freshness. We do not use fresh herbs sparingly to flavor or garnish a dish – instead, they play a major role in the food. . . . Wrapping savory dishes at the table in lettuce or rice paper with an abundance of the freshest uncooked herbs is very much the signature of Vietnamese cuisine. . . . This combines the raw with the cooked, the cold with the hot, and the soft with the crisp. The Vietnamese have a distinct preoccupation with crunch and contrast. Flavors and textures are juxtaposed for dramatic effect. In Vietnamese cuisine balance is always at play.
>
> *(p. 14)*

Trinh Diem Vy, a noted restaurateur in Hoian, unabashedly identifies her cookbook as local and regional in its focus and it is wonderfully autobiographical. *Taste Vietnam: The Morning Glory Cookbook* (2011) was the first commercial cookbook from this region, and it celebrates

the uniqueness of Quang Tri (*Quảng Trị*) generally, and Hoian specifically. Despite these nods to local and regional specificity, Trinh Diem Vy also makes a claim about the national character of Vietnamese cuisine:

> Vietnamese cuisine can be described as three countries in one bowl: the North, Centre and South, each of which has its own distinctive style. What binds our food culture together is the country's stable carbohydrate – rice – and the fresh ingredients, particularly herbs, which are an essential part of every Vietnamese dish. . . . The other vital component of a Vietnamese meal is the mắm – a by-product of fermented river fish and seafood. . . . Vietnamese people know which dishes are special according to the area where they come from and as such we will seek out the specialties when visiting a place outside our home. Alternatively, when friends or relatives visit, they will always bring special hometown foods as gifts. Just as each meal must have certain harmonizing elements to make it complete, each region in Vietnam complements the other, like a member of the family.
>
> *(p. 7)*

An illustration of Trinh Diem Vy's point about regionalization is the following evidence about one of Vietnam's most ubiquitous noodle dishes that turns out to have all sorts of distinctive regional variations. On this point, the prominent chef Bui Thi Suong wrote a small book devoted to *phở* (2013b). Bui Thi Suong is one of the founders of the Saigon Professional Chefs' Association. She divided the book's recipes and dishes into the three recognizably distinct regions: Northern, Central, and Southern. Moreover, she identifies local variations, and seeks to identify cultural sources. In her introduction Bui Thi Suong notes that:

> Nevertheless, not everyone is aware of the diversity and uniqueness featured in the Vietnamese cuisine. Take for instance the salad; regions vary greatly in their preparation styles. Or with regards to *bún* (fresh noodles) [and] *phở*, each region shows distinctive creativity in just cooking the broth.
>
> *(p. 3)*

Bui Thi Suong claims that "*phở* originated in Nam Dinh (*Nam Định*)" province in Vietnam, "but Hanoi was where the recipe for phở was cultivated and refined" (p. 14). She identifies *phở* as "a typical dish that proudly represents Vietnamese cuisine in the world" (ibid).

Under this rubric Bui Thi Suong includes a wide variety of noodle soups. From the central region she includes *bún bò Huế*, the fish-based *bún cá Đà Nẵng*, Hoian-based *cao lầu*, and Quang Nam's *mì Quảng* noodles. Quoting Nguyễn Tuan, Bui Thi Suong says "Cao Lau is an original dish which is unique to Hoi An" (p. 48), a claim that may belie the significant relationship of this region with the Fukien Chinese and the Japanese of long ago. Presenting noodle dishes from the south, Bui Thi Suong indicates that the southern style includes additional herbs, vegetables, and spices, especially star anise that gives a more intense flavor (p. 61). Additional soups, mainly from the Mekong Delta region, include another version of *bún cá* from the province of Kien Giang, *bún nước lèo*, originating from the Kinh, Chinese, and Khmer ethnic groups living in Tra Vinh (*Trà Vinh*); *bún Campuchia*, credited to the Cambodians living on the border; and *hủ tiếu* (from Mỹ Tho, and Nam Vang), credited to the Chinese living in Cambodia (pp. 69–77).

In all of these examples, we can see the absorptive power of Vietnamese cuisine to adapt recipes from elsewhere as their own. With a wonderful complexity, cookbook authors claim a distinctive Vietnamese cuisine while acknowledging the multiple cultural sources and great regional

and local variations and unique products. The most recent books emphasize regionalization and the local. The 26 cooking schools that have sprouted throughout Vietnam reflect this tension – several schools identify the dishes they teach as regional and local, especially in Hoian, but most are more generic. This is not surprising, as they catered initially and still mostly to non-Vietnamese tourists and, more often than not, make the claim of providing an "authentic" Vietnamese cooking experience with authoritative recipes and cuisine. However, Vietnamese cooking classes are increasingly attended by middle-class Vietnamese housewives, and television shows, such as *Master Chef* and *Iron Chef*, reinforce the notion of an expert Vietnamese cuisine that requires specific ingredients, measurements, and procedures, over and above the eyeball cooking and tasting of conventional family practice. Such shows have also created Vietnamese chef celebrities. In this way, Vietnamese "cuisine" is being publicized, marketed, learned, and professionalized.

Since the forced unification of Vietnam in 1975, national identity has remained contentious, both within the boundaries of the country itself and for its overseas (now called "heritage") Vietnamese, the *Việt kiều*. However, the rising tourist industry and the internationalization of "Vietnamese cuisine" have resulted in framing several Vietnamese dishes, most notably *phở*, as originally and distinctly (if perhaps falsely) Vietnamese. Such identification is, no doubt, useful to government rhetoric about a unified and distinctive Vietnamese culture, at least where the Kinh ethnic group is concerned. This is reminiscent of Emperor Ming Mạng's efforts to define a singular Vietnamese cuisine.

Several of the cookbooks conceal this tension of national and regional identities and subcultures. The few that recognize it use strategies not unlike those employed by Hồ Chí Minh to emphasize a fictive intertwining of the different ethnic groups, regions, and localities into a harmony of differences. In many ways, the idea of a Vietnamese national cuisine fails a culinary authenticity test (Johnston and Baumann, 2015): while lots of dishes are made in Vietnam, the geographic specificity is *really* regional. Many of the dishes and their variations are not simple, not even a good *phở*. What personal connections and relationships to food there are, tend to be familial, local, and regional. The history and traditions of Vietnamese cuisine are located in these localities and regions, and are not ubiquitous. Finally, there is great ethnic variation among the cuisines of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups. If one is seeking food with the claim, "authentic," (cf. Bui Thi Suong, 2013a) it needs to be local and regional, and it may be at its best when eaten in a Vietnamese family's home. It may be that there is enough security in the Vietnamese national identity, through useful identification of common ingredients and methods that are bound to a larger geography, to begin to emphasize regional differences without threatening this unifying aspect of the culture. The national political rhetoric notwithstanding, Vietnam, like many other countries (such as Italy), has fierce local and regional cultural expressions that find their way, quite forcefully, in their ingredients, preparations, dishes, and tastes.

Gustemology of Vietnamese Food

David Sutton's (2010) concept of "gustemology" emphasizes sensory data, especially taste and smell, and place-making. Sutton notes:

> In pursuing our interest in the sensual aspects of food, we should keep our multisensory apparatuses trained on what anthropology has in one way or another always been concerned with: everyday life and the multiple contexts in which the culturally shaped sensory properties and sensory experiences of food are invested with meaning, emotion, memory, and value.
>
> *(p. 220)*

Flavor and flavor borders thus can be recognized as carrying sociocultural and political meaning commensurate to other social institutions. Tastes and foods should be recognized as primary meaning-makers in human cultural worlds, no longer just analogs or conduits for learning about something seemingly more important, such as class or masculinity (Holtzman, 2009).

In the case of Vietnamese cuisine, this invites the study of *nước mắm*, which is cited (above) by many cookbook authors to be a gastro-border and national unifier. Yet by taking its flavor profile seriously, *nước mắm* may be contrasted against technique, ingredient, and taste variations among Vietnam's regions, thus engaging tensions between locality and nationhood. As with *bánh chưng or bánh Tết* – a New Year specialty comprised of rice and pork wrapped *lá dong* (and, more rarely, banana) leaves[7] – a single dish can even symbolize the nation itself. Yet as anthropologist, Nir Avieli, well notes, the production of the dish – including the anxiety over the rice harvest, gendered labor investment, and regional modifications – ground it in lived daily life. *Bánh Tết* thus is both the imagined taste of the nation and its gustative constituent parts (Avieli, 2005).

Distinguishing rural and urban cuisines adds further texture and tastes to questions of regional and national culinary systems. As *bánh Tết* symbolically represents the nation, it is also an economic product of peri-urban villages such as Tranh Khuc (*Tranh Khúc*) outside of Hanoi. In Tranh Khuc, *bánh Tết* is both the purported taste of Vietnam – a bundle of sticky rice that melts together with fatty pork in this savory concoction – and a rectangular commodity that produces identity and income for its residents. In similar ways, home-cooked meals, such as Hoianese *cánh chua* (sour soup), are both symbolically the universe in a bowl (Avieli, 2012) and a light lunch sold to visiting tourists.

Class and Labor in the Production of Street Foods

Street foods are products of urban industrialized economies. Sometimes heralded as "authentic" or "real" Vietnamese cuisine (cf. Vandenberghe and Thys, 2010), street foods are accessible. They provide a window into an emergent urban cuisine that contrasts in notable ways from foods of nostalgia, which are typically associated with rural spaces (Pham, M., 2001; Pham, A., 2009). Urban street food as a category consists of atomized dish construction (i.e., each quán [bistro] sells just one dish) and the economic structures that keep it cheap. Roving street vendors are known as "basket women" for the food-laden woven platters they balance on both ends of a flat bamboo pole over a shoulder. Usually women, these illegal food purveyors are still common, although decreasingly so as Vietnam's cities expand at breakneck pace (Jensen et. al., 2013). For now, basket women along with the industrial, mass production of noodles and other constituent products, keep street food cheap – thus making it available and popular as "domestic" Vietnamese food (cf. Yasmeen, 2007; Jensen et. al., 2013).

Vietnamese cuisine is characterized by geographic region and class distinctions. Cuisines classify food and foods act as symbolic indicators, linking producers and consumers to social categories – thereby classifying people. Street food production is largely women's work. Together, such food and labor combine to create low-class cookery. In terms of social perception, the public nature of street food, and the gendered work that creates it, are mutually demeaning. Women's food labor is marginalized. This contrasts with the privileged status of male work.

Following Sutton's (2010) concept of gustemology, the social positioning of food is intimately engaged with its taste on the tongue and the space where it is consumed. Moreover, the production of street food bears a loneliness that comes with leaving children and spouses in villages in order to earn urban money that allowed them to maintain these rural lives (Jensen et al., 2013). Vending petty food items in a city contrasts with disappointed hopes for some that

Vietnam's rapid economic development since *Doi moi* reforms in the late 1980s would improve formal employment opportunities for all Vietnamese.

Street vendors are awake in the predawn hours of the morning in order to purchase fruit at a wholesale market for resale or to cook pastries to hawk on the street:

> To make my *bánh rán* [pastry], I am a part of a group of female pastry sellers in Hà Nội who make them daily on our rented balcony. We rotate who buys the ingredients, who makes the pastry, who cooks the pastry, and who sells the pastry on a daily basis, so we are able to fairly split the labor between us. We get to keep the money we make for selling, but some of us are better at selling than others. I am a shy person, so selling is sometimes hard for me. I do what I can do (Interview, Sen, 10/14/16; Jensen et al 2013). Beginning sharply at 4 AM, we make the pastry by preparing the filling by soaking the mung beans in water for two hours. While those soak, we peel the potatoes and boil them till they are soft so we can puree them. Next, we mix glutinous rice flour, rice flour, and baking powder in a mixing bowl. Separately, we put water and sugar in a pan and boil it till it turns into a "thick syrup". . .. We know the pastries are done when they float to the top of the pan.
>
> *(Vandenberghe and Thys, 2010, pp. 92–93; interview*
> *and compilation by Danielle C. Moyer)*

Social life of food production involves rising from tight communal living quarters, collaborating to make the donuts, and then pooling together their meager resources to bail out a vendor unlucky enough to be snared in a police raid:

> Women all around are ducking into alleyways. Police are coming. "Illegal occupants of the sidewalks, leave immediately." The crowd fails to move and the street is jammed. "You!" echoes behind me as a hand juts full force behind my back. I stumble on the broken tiles beneath my feet that mock me as my basket full of pomegranates is loaded into the back of the truck, followed by my bike. "Please have mercy, lower the fine." This is what the other women told me to say. The harsh scowl from the larger man tells me they are in a bad mood.
>
> *(Jensen et al., 2013, p. 113; compiled by Sarah Kloos)*

These stories show that basket women are integral to the food system, but nevertheless devalued by those around them. Theirs is difficult, marginal, and anxious work that is an integral, yet rarely recognized component of street food production.

Vu (2016) contends that Vietnamese cooks and consumers adapted to and adopted the wheat-based foods of the French (primarily the baguette and the *bánh mì*). This is an overestimation. French citizens impacted Vietnam's foodscape mainly through avoidance (Peters, 2012). They typically chose canned French imports over fresh Vietnamese dishes, while creating an invented tradition (cf. Ranger, 1983) of simplified rurally-founded Vietnamese cuisine that belied its dynamism and urban creativity. However, the French colonial government unintentionally altered the recipe for the fundamental *nước mắm* by restricting access to salt when it endeavored to monopolize the commodity (Peters, 2012). By contrast, Chinese food knowledge simmered through the more intimate channels of migration, intermarriage, and shared ingredients. If France commandeered salt, it was Chinese businessmen who traded it. Regional differences are born of historical contingency and fed by Vietnam's remarkable diversity of ingredients. Each region thus constructs ways of producing and consuming food that unite through common knowledge, but remain distinguished by class.

One emerging mode of culinary nationalization is Vietnamese concern for food safety, which is routinely expressed as unease over Chinese imports. Vietnamese shoppers seek safe food, but the retail space where it is found exhibits generational divisions. Urban shoppers with means have articulated suspicion over cheap, aesthetically flawless fruits and vegetables, especially those sold in outdoor markets and street stalls. They say that only heavy insecticides can produce such uniformity at a low cost. By using such language, these shoppers imply that such foods are Chinese-grown products – and therefore should not be trusted. Meanwhile, members of older generations, especially women, seek out markets, inversely because they trust the interpersonal relationships they forge with vendors (Leshkowich, 2011).

Despite blame cast northward, Vietnam struggles to regulate its own meat, vegetable, and fruit growers. Early governmental efforts to regulate clean food occurred in 1994 and 1998, but they were hampered by inconsistencies between policy and practice. In 2001, governmental campaigns switched terminology, from promoting "clean" to "safe" foods, in order to dispel the conflation of simple dirt removal with healthfulness. More recently, Denmark and Australia have fostered programs that certify produce as organic and Good Agricultural Practice (Viet GAP), respectively.[8] In 2013, Holland partnered with the Vietnam Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to raise safety standards in pork production (Dwinger et al., 2018). While contributing to improved food safety, these efforts also accelerate trends toward supermarket consumption and away from outdoor markets, especially for younger shoppers with economic means. Food safety certification raises commodity prices, while it likely disenfranchises market buyers and sellers, most of whom are older and female (Leshkowich, 2011; Gerber et al., 2014).

"Three Countries in A Bowl": Culinary Diversity at Risk

In this chapter we have explored the notion of Vietnamese cuisine and what it encompasses, while problematizing the notion of a national Vietnamese cuisine. To imagine a unified Vietnamese cuisine, one may settle on a few ingredients or dishes, such as rice, *nước mắm* and *phở bò*. However, in practice Vietnamese cuisine has a more varied and interesting character, reflecting not only regional variation but also the social pressures, conflicts, and tensions that animate contemporary Vietnam, as the accounts of street food and food safety concerns developed in this chapter reflect. Overall, the account suggests that the notion of a national Vietnamese cuisine sheds little light on what makes it distinctive.

Vietnamese local and regional cuisines present a model for the power of food to negotiate political boundaries and culinary construction. This chapter applies Sutton's concept of gustemology to recognize the culinary work of Vietnamese women, to show, for example, how the invisible labor of basket women produces street food for the nation. Other forms of gendered labor include women buying and selling in outdoor markets. These important social and economic spaces are under threat by national food safety imperatives, as well as a generational shift toward supermarkets. Meanwhile, we highlight the culinary knowledge of a number of skilled female chefs through their cookbooks.

Looking forward, Vietnamese cuisine will further develop within the context of an increasingly internationalized Vietnam, where tourism makes the caricatured claims of a national Vietnamese cuisine good business and de-emphasizes diversity. Indeed, the economy of Vietnamese food is increasingly driven by the forces of globalization, capitalism, and the country's increasing economic prosperity. Whether the development of domestic Vietnamese "foodie" tourism that seeks out regional and local artisanal foods or longer-standing local food cultures can withstand these pressures remain to be seen. If not, the future of Vietnamese cuisines is in doubt. To the practiced eater of foods in Vietnam, it is actually diversity and variation that make's Vietnam's

cuisine "Vietnamese." As Trinh Diem Vy suggested, Vietnamese cuisine is at least "three countries in one bowl" (Trinh, 2011, p. 7), and it is also so much more than that.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this chapter appeared in Annear, C. and Harris, J., 2018. "Cooking Up the Culinary Nation or Savoring Its Regions? Teaching Food Studies in Vietnam." *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts*, 25(1), pp. 115–148. DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/ane.266
2 The Kinh are 86% of the population and consider themselves the core Vietnamese ethnic group.
3 Andrea Nguyen, http://vietworldkitchen.com/blog/. Accessed in 2018.
4 In 2012 Food Shop No. 37 opened in Hà Nội, replicating state run restaurants of the post–1975 period of rationing. They serve meals that consist, for example, of fatty pork, greens stir-fried in lard, and cassava.
5 This last point is the keen observation of Professor Linh Khanh Nguyen, coordinator of the Vietnamese Studies Program at California State University – Fullerton.
6 Fish sauce is explicitly noted as a central and delineating ingredient in Vietnamese cuisines by Trieu and Issak 2005, Mai Pham 2001, Nguyen 2008, Hoyer 2009 and Vy 2011.
7 There is no English translation for the *lá dong* species of plant, *Stachyphrynium placentarium*.
8 Personal correspondence with Nguyễn Thị Tân Lộc, October 19, 2018.

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33

DRIVING *DOI MOI*

Motorbikes, Cars, and Capitalism in Vietnam's Socialist Market Economy

Arve Hansen

Over the past decades bicycles have been substituted for motorbikes[1] at a remarkable pace in Vietnam. The whole country is now seemingly driving motorbikes, and statistics show that on average every Vietnamese household owns a motorized two-wheeler (GSO, 2012). They are ever-present in both urban and rural areas, but the frenzy of millions of motorbikes in Vietnamese cities and the soundscape of almost constant buzzing and honking they create are particularly striking. The motorbike society has indeed become an icon of the new Vietnam that has been developing so rapidly since the communist leadership in the 1980s decided to abandon the planned economy and embrace the market. In the recent decade, however, the motorbike has started to face a significant challenger in terms of markets, mobility, comfort, status, and scarce road space as car ownership has seen rapid increase, particularly in urban areas, alongside growing affluence. Affluence is however still restricted to a minority, and while the car for some symbolizes progress and modernization, the many expensive cars on the road also act as reminders of the inequalities embedded in Vietnam's so-called "market economy with socialist characteristics".

The radical transformation of Vietnamese streetscapes over the past three decades have unfolded as part of the larger processes of socio-economic transformations in the country since the *Doi Moi* (Đổi Mới) reforms. This chapter considers how the rapid motorization of Vietnam's streets has taken place as part of multi-scalar development processes, as well as what the cases of cars and motorbikes can tell us about Vietnam's development trajectory, both in terms of industrial aspirations and socio-economic changes. In other words, the chapter studies motorized mobility through the lens of *Doi Moi* and *Doi Moi* through the lens of motorized mobility. In order to do this, the chapter shifts between zooming out to analyze macro-scale political-economic changes in Vietnam and zooming in on everyday mobility practices in Hanoi.

The chapter begins with bicycles in Hanoi and by analyzing what I call Vietnam's "motorbike revolution", before moving on to the subsequent rapid emergence of automobility from the perspective of domestic production and consumption. I then consider the status hierarchy of vehicles in Hanoi, and what the role of cars as "positional goods" tell us about the meanings of consumer goods and individual consumption in the socialist market economy. The chapter then discusses the motorization of Vietnamese streets as a physical manifestation of capitalist transformation. The findings are based mainly on fieldwork in Hanoi in 2012 and 2013, combining mobile participant observation with interviews in what I have termed a "motorbike

ethnography" (see Hansen, 2018, 2017b), but also draw on data collection and observations during numerous short and long annual visits to Vietnam between 2010 and 2019.

A city on two wheels[2]

Hanoi used to be famous for tranquil streets filled with bicycles. Bicycles were first imported during French colonial times (see Arnold and Dewald, 2011), but remained vital to mobility in the independent Vietnam. Hanoi was indeed home to an estimated 600,000 bicycles in 1981 (Koh, 2006). Bicycles dominated transport after the initiation of *Doi Moi* as well, and as late as 2005 one-third of non-walking trips in the capital were carried out on a bicycle (World Bank, 2014). As I elaborate on later, the position of the bicycle is important in order to understand Hanoi's transport trajectory since then. But things started to change in the new millennium. According to numbers from Vietnam's General Statistics Office, bicycle production in the country peaked in 2004, when Vietnam produced 3.6 million bicycles. This was more than five times the number four years earlier, but also more than five times the number 12 years later (GSO, 2018). Although the bicycle now seems to be on its way back as a means of exercise among the well-off (Hansen, 2016b; Carruthers, 2016), it has almost been rendered obsolete as a means of transportation. In recent years, this has been partly due to the explosive growth in the electric bicycles and electric scooters that are so popular among young people in the country. Mainly, however, it is the motorbike that has taken the place of its non-motorized sibling.

Motorbikes were certainly present in Vietnam before *Doi Moi*, especially in Saigon, where they often originally entered from France. Some of these also made it up north, and together with imports from the Soviet Union contributed to an estimated population of more than 50.000 motorbikes of different sizes in Hanoi by 1981 (Koh, 2006). This number also reflects, however, that owning a motorbike was far from common. Together with the dominance of bicycles, the early motorbikes nevertheless contributed towards firmly embedding scripts for two-wheeled mobility in the social and material fabric of Hanoi (Hansen, 2017a). In the 1990s, the already visible popularity of motorbikes also made them part of development strategies for a government with high ambitions for industrialization.

The motorbike revolution

The goal of industrialization has been central to Vietnam's development strategies since independence (Beresford, 1988, 2008). Little available capital, however, combined with a desire to forge closer connection with the outside world both politically and economically, made opening up for foreign investments a central part of *Doi Moi*. Influenced by the successful East Asian developmental states, the Vietnamese government attempted to combine state control and foreign capital to develop domestic industries (Masina, 2006). For the motorcycle industry the policies consisted of a form of import substitution, with high tariffs on imports combined with licenses for foreign manufacturers to produce motorcycles in Vietnam. The intention behind these policies was to develop domestic manufacturing capacity through cooperation with foreign manufacturers, but the protective policies interestingly also saw the socialist government give big capital from East Asia almost monopoly on motorbikes in Vietnam. East Asian motorcycle manufacturers saw the potential for a huge market, and particularly Japanese, but also Taiwanese, firms started producing vehicles in the country from the mid-1990s (Fujita, 2013a). The presence of these firms clearly increased the availability of motorbikes. Particularly Honda became a dominant player in "democratizing" motorbike ownership in the country. By the late 1990s Honda enjoyed a 67 percent market share (Fujita, 2013a), but this was also

when the real 'motorbike revolution' started, something that would challenge the position of the Japanese manufacturer.

As Jonathan Rigg (2012) has discussed extensively, development processes are often less the outcome of clear plans and strategies than what they appear to be in the development literature and in the rhetoric of states. What has come to be known as the "China shock" (Fujita, 2013a, 2013b) is a good example of such "unplanned development". While the Honda Dream became a symbol of Vietnamese aspirations, and motorbikes in many ways the symbol of development and reforms in the country (Truitt, 2008), the prices for Japanese motorbikes in the 1990s were still too high for most Vietnamese consumers. The rising demand for motorbikes in turn meant a market opportunity for low-cost models, and around the start of the millennium copies of Japanese motorbikes started pouring across the Northern border from China. To circumvent import laws these motorbikes were often transported in pieces, as so-called "knockdown kits" to be assembled by a rapidly increasing number of Vietnamese entrepreneurs (Fujita, 2013a, 2013b). These comparatively inexpensive – and usually relatively low-quality – motorbikes suddenly opened for motorbike ownership for much larger segments of the population, and nationwide the annual sales of motorbikes more than tripled from 500.000 in 1999 to 1.7 million in 2000 (see Figure 33.1). At the same time, Honda's share of the market dropped from 67 percent in 1998 to 12 percent in 2001 (Fujita, 2013a). But as Fujita (2013a) documents, the China shock made Japanese manufacturers start placing larger parts of the manufacturing process in Vietnam, something that together with the development of models designed for the Vietnamese market allowed them to reduce prices significantly. This in turn led to the availability affordable motorbikes that were of good quality. In combination with a tightening of import regulations by the government, these factors allowed Honda Vietnam to reclaim the Vietnamese motorbike market and regain its position as the dominant player. Chinese motorbikes are on the other hand now rarely seen Vietnamese cities, although they still represent a large share of the motorbike population in rural areas (Fujita, 2013b).

Vietnam is now home to a substantial, yet mostly foreign-owned motorbike industry, producing more than 3 million vehicles annually, the majority of which are sold domestically (Figure 33.1). After some years of slowdown and talks of 'saturation' of the market (see, for example, Thanh Nien News, 2014a or 2014b), sales have picked up again, as Figure 33.1 shows. Honda remains the dominant actor by far, in 2017 representing as much as 60 percent of sales in what is now the world's fourth largest motorbike market[3] (Vietnam News, 2018a). Competition is however fierce. In addition to the large East Asian manufacturers Yamaha, Suzuki, and SYM, the Italian manufacturer Piaggio made Vietnam its regional production base in 2010 and has become a powerful actor in the market. Rivalry aside, the five manufacturers mentioned also represent the members of the Vietnam Association of Motorcycle Manufacturers (VAMM), a forum established by the Minister of Home Affairs in August 2013 and intended to promote the domestic motorcycle industry as well as act as a bridge between the industry and the government (see VAMM, 2018).[4]

The extraordinary consumption of motorbikes in Vietnam cannot be understood without the large-scale changes in systems of provision and the political economy of development that *Doi Moi* brought along. Nevertheless, a narrow focus on industrialization, trade, and economic development cannot really tell us *why* so many Vietnamese started driving motorbikes. The relationship between consumption and production is much debated, but it is clear that supply does not necessarily create its own demand. Rather, as Warde (2005) argues, the effect of production on consumption is mediated through the nexus of social practices. Thus, in order to better understand the motorbike revolution, I shift the analytical focus from top–down to bottom–up, zoom in on the streets of Hanoi, and consider the many pillars of everyday mobility practices in the capital city.
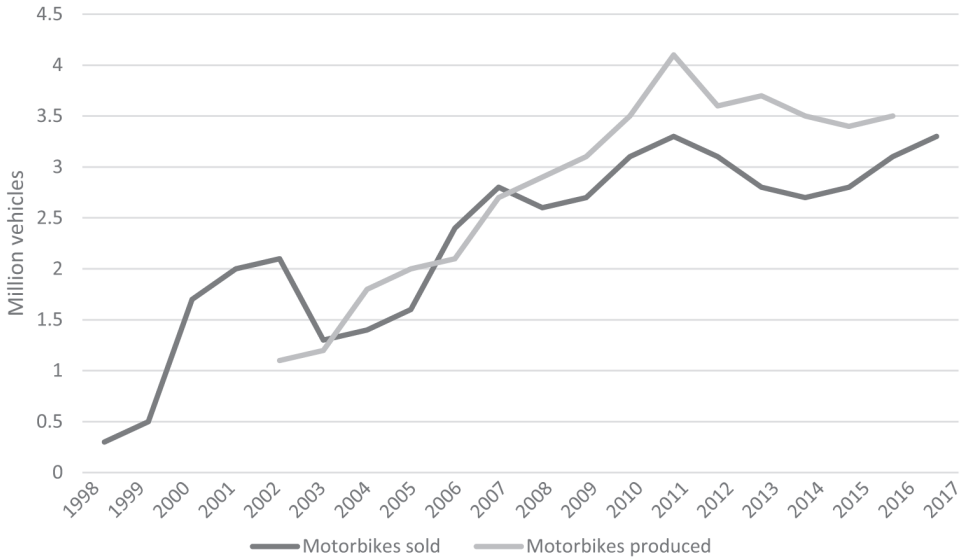
Figure 33.1   Vietnam domestic motorbike sales and production, 1998–2017

Notes: Compiled by author. Numbers have been rounded off.

Source: Sales: 1998–2005: Motorbike Joint Working Group (2007); 2006–2008: estimated from *Fujita (2013a)*; 2009–2010: Yamaha Motor (2011); 2011–2017: Numbers from Vietnam Association of Motorcycle Manufacturers. Production: GSO statistics (various years).

Hanoi and the "system of moto-mobility"

Vehicles are primarily tools for carrying out and participating in other social practices. In other words, driving or moving around are rarely goals in themselves but ways to connect the many parts that make up everyday life. *Doi Moi* in many ways radically altered everyday life, with new forms of housing and employment, rapid urbanization, and new leisure activities. In Hanoi in the heydays of socialism, urban planning was strongly influenced by the Soviet Union, with the state constructing so-called "microrayons" designed to let inhabitants fulfill all their daily needs within short distance from their homes (see Logan, 2000). With *Doi Moi* the state monopoly on production of urban housing was abandoned (Logan, 2000; Tran, H.A., 2015), and through mostly private initiatives a rapid expansion of suburbs started in the early 1990s (see Drummond, 2012). These are examples of new developments that were enabled by, but also required, new and improved forms of mobility. In Hanoi in the early reform years, bus services were in a sorry state and the old tramway from the times of French Indochina was removed, while the popular *xe lam* (tuktuk) was banned from the streets (see Thanh Nien News, 2012). As development in Vietnam boomed, everyday life started demanding longer distances travelled, and bicycling became a much riskier undertaking in the increasingly motorized streetscapes; also, the importance of bicycles started to diminish. Furthermore, the common practice of parking (and even driving) motorbikes on sidewalks, as well as the range of businesses operating from sidewalks, often crowded out pedestrians. Leather et al. (2011) find that even though trip lengths often could make walking and cycling convenient ways of getting around town, the poor infrastructure of Hanoi has made these little tempting options.

Both infrastructure and regional economic integration thus created favorable conditions for moto-mobility, and the motorbike became the 'must-have' consumer object of post–*Doi Moi* Vietnam. The motorbike was in many ways a highly convenient upgrade from the bicycle. It is quite similar to the bicycle and almost as easy to operate. It does, however, come with the advantage of being a whole lot faster and allows its driver to cover much greater distances than on a bicycle with far less effort. As Truitt (2008, p. 5) has put it,

> Unlike bicycles, motorbikes promise effortless mobility or, rather, mobility that relies on fossil fuel rather than human exertion. A motorbike user enjoys mobility without physical exertion, accelerating with a twist of the handle and braking with a slight tap on the foot pedal.

Motorbikes followed in the tire-prints of the bicycle, something that in Hanoi was reinforced by the specific physical and economic infrastructures of the city. Significant parts of the city's built infrastructure are dominated by narrow roads and complex networks of small alleys (*ngõ* and *ngách*) that have developed in a dialectical relationship with the dominance of non-motorized and motorized two-wheelers. Hanoi's geography of consumption has also followed and reinforced these developments, with cafes, shops, and other businesses placed along streets with parking space only for two-wheelers. Many shopping practices, such as purchasing fruit and vegetables from street vendors, are indeed often carried out without ever leaving the vehicle.

In this context, the motorbike provides a rather unique sense of mobility. Motorbikes can go almost anywhere relatively quickly even in densely populated cities. They can usually be driven right to the front door of any store or service, even though Vietnamese urban authorities in recent years have tightened restrictions on sidewalk parking. Back home these restrictions do not matter much anyways, as the motorbike often follows its owner inside the house, and at night time is frequently parked in the living room.

The motorbike is now absolutely vital to the everyday lives of most people in Vietnam, and in 2017 there were more than 45 million motorbikes in the country (VnExpress, 2017). In Hanoi motorbikes in 2012 represented around 85 percent of total traffic, while bicycles had diminished to around 2 percent.[5] In 2013 I interviewed a relatively well-off young girl who reflected upon the role of the motorbike in her life. She told me that throughout her 21 years in Hanoi she had only once ridden a bus inside the city. She used the motorbike whenever she moved around and argued that this was indeed the only option available: "It's convenient for me, I think. [. . .] It's my only choice, right. I cannot walk around Hanoi, I cannot drive a car, I don't have one and I can't, so yeah, motorbike is like the only choice." (Interview, November 2013). The statement by this middle-class interviewee is not unique and arguably reflects quite common experiences and sentiments in Vietnam's capital. It also reflects a sense of transport lock-in that is elsewhere usually associated with cars (e.g. Urry, 2004), but that can be equally strong for two-wheelers.

Mobility practices, consumption, and retail geographies and urban policies on the local scale, together with national and regional-scale changes in trade networks and flows of investment, have co-created what I have termed a 'system of moto-mobility' (see Hansen, 2017b). In this "system", moto-mobility is manifested and reinforced through socio-material aspects ranging from regional and global capital and connections to corner repair shops and traditional wet markets in narrow alleyways. The future of this 'system', however, is uncertain. While it is partly strengthened through new additions such as the immensely popular GrabBike,[6] and possibly also the growing popularity of electric scooters, it is fundamentally challenged by four-wheelers.

Cars are indeed competing with motorbikes at all levels, from national industrial aspirations to everyday mobility practices.

Driving development?[7]

Due partly to the complete dominance of motorbikes, partly to government policies, there has been little room for private cars on Vietnamese roads. In 2015, the so-called motorization rate of Vietnam was at 23, meaning there were 23 cars per 1000 people in the country. This is among the lowest rates in the region. Compare it for example to Japan's 609 or neighboring Thailand's 228 (OICA, 2019). But although the technical term "motorization rate" is used to measure car ownership, it should be quite clear from this discussion that Vietnam is highly motorized although relatively few own a car. Car ownership has been restricted by government tax policies, and cars are very expensive to acquire and use compared to two-wheelers. The high taxes on cars in the context of poor public transportation networks have indeed rather unintentionally further favored motorbikes. This could be changing. To the dismay of motorcycle manufacturers, there has been much talk of the Vietnamese government imposing restrictions on motorbike ownership. Local authorities in Hanoi in 2017 indeed decided to ban motorbikes by 2030 (BBC News, 2017). At the national level, a 2013 adjustment to the "Vietnam Road Transport Development Scheme to 2020 and orientation towards 2030" states that the government aims to

> reduce the growth in quantity of motorbikes using administrative, economic and technical measures in order to limit the quantity of motorbikes nationwide; motorbikes are [to be] *primarily used in rural areas and the areas without public passenger transport; there will be 36 million motorbikes by 2020.*
>
> *(Prime Minister of Vietnam 2013, n.p., italics added)*

The same report states that public transport is expected to meet 25 percent of the demand for transport in Hanoi. Interestingly, the plan says nothing about restricting cars, even though cars require up to 7 times more road space than motorbikes (World Bank, 2011). The plans to restrict motorbikes fit into a government narrative of motorbikes as highly problematic due to congestion, pollution, and accidents. Motorbikes surely do contribute to all of these, but there are reasons to believe that the transport situation in Vietnam would be much worse without them (World Bank, 2011; Hansen, 2016a).

In other countries with widespread use of motorbikes, such as Thailand, car ownership has increased rapidly alongside incomes (Jakapong and Chumnong, 2010). Vietnam's Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT, 2013) makes it clear that this trend is expected also in Vietnam. Crucially, the Vietnamese government aims to meet the expected transport transition with the supply of domestically manufactured cars, as indeed to some extent has been accomplished in Thailand (see Thoburn and Natsuda, 2017).

The regional and global economic integration following *Doi Moi* made cars available for import. But the Vietnamese government has also targeted the automobile industry as a "spearhead industry". In other words, the automobile industry is supposed to be one of the key industries that drive industrialization in the country, as it indeed has done in several other late-industrialisers. As put by Vietnam's Ministry of Industry and Trade: "That the automobile industry contributes not only to the amelioration of the quality of the labor force, but also to the development of industry, to the economy and to the society is an obvious fact recognized by most countries that have developed automobile industries" (MOIT 2013, p. 5, translated

from Vietnamese). In a context where policy makers fear the so-called "middle-income trap", the auto industry is presented as a possible savior on the golden road towards becoming a high-income country.

Until the mid-1990s, the only auto manufacturing taking place in Vietnam was represented by Hoa Binh, a producer of military vehicles. After *Doi Moi*, and similar to the experience of the motorcycle industry, the Vietnamese government attempted to attract foreign capital to the industry. While the dream of developing a national car brand was largely abandoned in the 1990s, the doors were opened for foreign investors, first as joint ventures with Vietnamese state-owned companies (Sturgeon, 1998). The expected positive spill-over effects to the rest of the economy firmly placed the auto industry at the center stage of Vietnam's manufacturing aspirations. With some exceptions, primarily Truong Hai, the industry has largely been dominated by foreign automobile giants. The powerful Vingroup may however put an end to this dominance with their latest project. Although using imported technology, with Vinfast they have become Vietnam's first truly domestic car-maker. Interestingly, Vinfast increasingly focuses on developing electric vehicles (both cars and scooters). Opening its first manufacturing complex in Haiphong in September 2017, the company has high ambitions both in the domestic and foreign car markets (see Valdes-Dapena 2021; Ariffin, 2018).

It is too early to tell how big Vinfast will become, although, for example, Malaysia's attempts to develop a national car tells us this is very difficult in the contemporary political economy of development (Fleming and Søborg, 2017). What is for sure is that Vietnamese auto industry could need new developments, because so far it has largely been a failure. It has seen little technological spill-over, low local contents ratios, and decades of disappointing sales figures. Furthermore, due to inter-ministerial disagreements, Vietnam has been pushing for automobile industrialization at the same time as it has actively restricted the industry's only market through high taxes (Hansen, 2016a).

There has been much uncertainty in the Vietnamese automobile industry from the beginning, particularly due to opaque and frequently changing government policies (Hansen, 2016a). And much uncertainty has surrounded 2018, the year when Vietnam, due to the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), was obliged to remove all tariffs on imports from the rest of Southeast Asia, including more successful automobile producing countries such as Thailand and Indonesia. It is still unclear exactly what the outcomes of these changes will be. So far, it seems the government is finding other ways to protect domestic production. Decree 116/2017 has attracted much attention in Vietnam. Instead of tariffs, it introduces a range of strict conditions and technical barriers for the production and import of cars in Vietnam (see, for example, Vietnam Investment Review, 2018; Dezan Shira and Associates, 2018). The decree led to an almost complete halt in auto imports at the beginning of 2018 (Vietnam News, 2018b). The uncertainties surrounding the policies, as well as the expectation of AFTA leading to cheaper cars, is also believed to have caused a slow down in sales growth in 2017 and 2018 after some years of explosive growth (Hansen, 2016c; see Figure 33.2).

Although still far behind two-wheelers in sales numbers, the rapidly increasing presence of cars on Vietnamese roads has been striking. Nationally, the number of four-wheelers on Vietnamese roads has been estimated to have grown tenfold between 1996 and 2014, reaching approximately 2 million (National Traffic Safety Committee, in Thanh Nien News, 2014b), and since then growth has been much faster (Figure 2). While Vietnam still has a low car ownership ratio, this is expected to change. Vietnam's Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT 2013) indeed projects 11 to 17 million cars on Vietnamese roads by 2030. While numbers are hard to predict, there are good reasons to believe car ownership will increase rapidly in Vietnam.
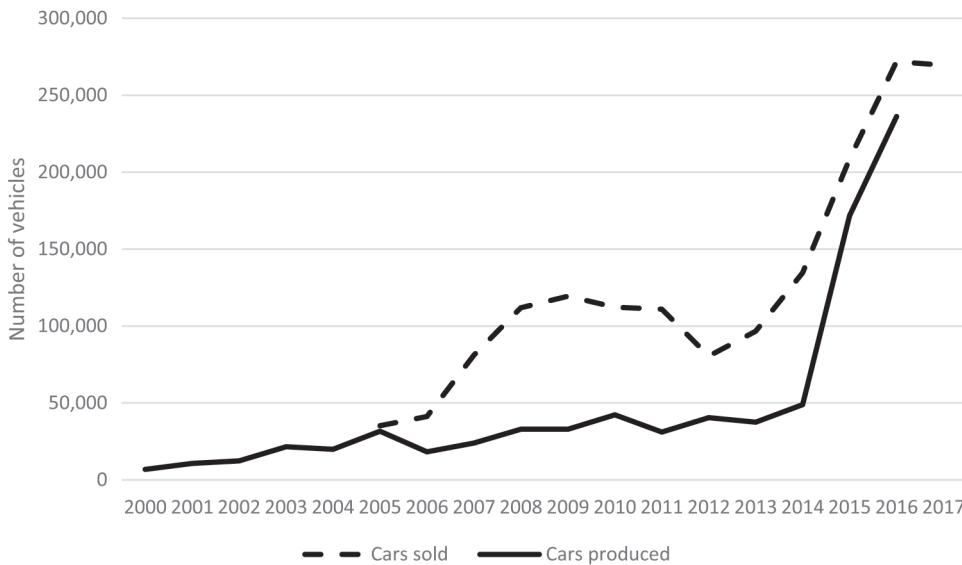
Figure 33.2   Vietnam domestic automobile production and sales, 2000–2017

Notes: Compiled by author. Numbers include all four-wheeled vehicles. Production numbers exclude assembly of imported completely knocked down or semi-knocked-down kits. Production numbers for 2002–2004 have been reported by OICA as estimates.

Source: OICA statistics (various years).

As with motorbikes, increased regional economic integration has played and will play a crucial role in the emergence of cars on Vietnamese roads. But again changes in production and systems of provision cannot provide the full picture of this transition, and I thus return to the streets of Hanoi.

Emerging automobility in Hanoi

In Hanoi, cars are certainly making an impact, and have since the mid-2000s become a much more common sight. According to the World Bank (2014), the number of cars in the streets of Hanoi grew by an annual rate of over 20 percent from the mid-2000s, reaching around 200,000 vehicles in 2012. According to Hanoi's Traffic Police Department, there were more than half a million registered cars in the capital in 2015, versus almost 5 million motorbikes (in Ho, 2015). In central Hanoi cars are still moving around very slowly, usually surrounded by swarms of motorbikes. They clog up traffic and further worsen the alarming levels of air pollution in the city (Hansen, 2016a, 2016b).

Hanoi's built infrastructure furthermore makes the car in many ways highly inconvenient and inflexible compared to the motorbike. The cars cannot access the networks of alleyways in the capital, cannot easily be stopped alongside the road to allow its driver to shop or sit down for a coffee or tea, and obviously cannot be parked inside the living room. Parking is indeed a chronic nightmare for car owners in Hanoi.[8] The car thus disrupts and changes the mobility of its drivers and passengers away from many of the practices associated with Hanoian everyday life (Hansen, 2017a).

At the same time, however, a car brings along a new set of benefits. The allure of the car is often related to mundane categories such as cleanliness, comfort, health, and safety. Although highly convenient for getting around town quickly, compared to cars driving a motorbike is hot in the very high summer temperatures of Hanoi and wet in the frequent and often sudden Hanoi rain. A car furthermore makes it possible to get through the many floods in Hanoi unscathed and to relatively safely bring along family and friends in the rather dangerous traffic. The sociality of driving and "passengering" in a car is also different from a motorbike. While a motorbike has allowed for new forms of intimacy for young couples (Truitt, 2008), the car provides a private capsule for social interaction. All of these aspects of private automobility were very well captured by a young businessman in Hanoi:

> When I drive a car, the wind doesn't hit my face. I can listen to music and audio books. I can listen to my mobile, avoid noises. I can avoid the rain. I can feel the cool air through the air conditioner. I can avoid the flood in Hanoi. My shoes are always dry. If I feel sleepy, I can stop and park the car along the roadside and sleep for a while. Inside the car, I can put many things, and if I want to have a coffee inside the car I can drink it. Moreover, I can talk with my girlfriend in the car. I can talk with her in a low voice. On the motorbike, both of us have to talk really loud. I can drive faster than on the motorbike. It is very pleasant driving a car.
>
> *(Interview, May 2013, translated from Vietnamese)*

Simultaneously, a car allows its driver and passengers to stay pale[9] and clean. As a young Hanoian businesswoman owning both a car and a motorbike told me: "It's more convenient to be inside the car. Because it's clean and, you know, [on a motorbike] after coming back home my face will be black because of the dust" (Interview, March, 2013, translated from Vietnamese).

Interestingly, a car is also seen as the most healthy transport option in Hanoi's streets. Indeed, concern for health was one of the most important reasons for acquiring a four-wheeler according to my car-owning interviewees. In a rather paradoxical relationship to the pollution from cars, many middle class Hanoians see the car as a way of protecting themselves and their family from the often poisonous air of the city. (see Hansen, 2016a). In other words the car disallows some of the old practices of two-wheelers, but allows the overall practice of mobility to be performed in a safer, cleaner and "healthier" fashion, in line with the comforts and expectations of a middle-class lifestyle.

The popularity of cars does not, however, mean that motorbikes are disappearing. First of all, and interestingly, very few get rid of their motorbikes when they purchase a car. Many of my interviewees would choose between car, motorbike, or sometimes taxi or bicycle, to get around, depending on the goal of the trip. If going to the local wet market, bicycles or motorbikes were used if going to the new supermarkets for bulk shopping (a rather new practice in Hanoi), a car could be used, as these new spaces of consumption are designed to accommodate four-wheelers. If moving around downtown Hanoi, the motorbike was usually used, at least if only one or two persons were going together. If taking the family around or going for longer trips, perhaps outside of the city, the car was the preferred option. Still, the agency of the car is highly visible in urban planning, with gated or semi-gated "New Urban Areas" being developed on the outskirts of the city (Hansen, 2017a). The New Urban Areas of Hanoi diverge significantly from the older parts of the city. Instead of the low and narrow houses characteristic of old Hanoi, these new areas have high-rise buildings. And instead of (or in addition to) local wet markets, these areas have modern supermarkets and often large and luxurious shopping malls. And, crucially, instead of narrow streets, these areas have highways with several lanes and

parking facilities to accommodate cars (Tran, 2015). In other words, the expectation of car ownership is being built into the infrastructure and consumption geography of the new Hanoi.

Alongside the car's entry to the streets the symbolic value attached to motorbikes has been diminishing. Not long ago the perhaps most powerful sign of modernity and development in Vietnam (Truitt, 2008), the motorbike has for the middle class largely been relegated to an everyday commodity (Earl, 2014). Meanwhile, the private car has overtaken the top position in the status hierarchy of goods, and emerged as not only a development goal for national industry but also a mobile personal development goal in the streets. While Vietnam's millions of motorbikes were emblematic of the rapid changes following market reforms, the new position of the car arguably reflects an even deeper capitalist transformation.

Capitalism on wheels[10]

With rapid economic growth and a – relatively speaking – inclusive development model, living standards have improved dramatically in Vietnam during the last decades. As in any capitalist transformation, however, this has also involved increasing social inequalities (see, for example, the contributions in Taylor, 2004, 2016). In particular, those with political connections have been able to accumulate significant wealth since *Doi Moi*, and class stratification has been rapidly increasing. The new economic reality has made possible the emergence of a middle class, not seen in (North) Vietnam since the days of French colonialism (see Belanger, Drummond and Nguyen-Marshall, 2012). At the same time, the social and indeed political meanings of consumer goods have changed radically. As Vann (2012) argues, in a country still ruled by a Communist Party that is involved in most parts of the economy, and with little freedom of speech or media, the strongest sense of liberty *Doi Moi* has brought along comes in the shape of consumption. Thus, the well-off parts of the population are able to purchase and display goods that would be judged as bourgeoisie excess not long ago. This of course makes perfect sense. While a planned economy usually focuses on producing and delivering *enough* goods to people, a capitalist economy fundamentally depends on growth, and thus on increasing levels of consumption (see discussion in Wilhite and Hansen, 2015).

The capitalist transformation has not only opened up high levels of private consumption, it has altered social hierarchies. At least there is more room for alternatives to the strict hierarchies of the Communist Party. Along with this alteration, a change in modes of social distinction has emerged. We know much about the ways in which goods are used both to display and acquire social positions, most notably through the work of Veblen (2005 [1899]) and Bourdieu (1984). Veblen famously used the concept of conspicuous consumption to explain the purchase of luxury goods for the display of wealth. While Veblen's theories may be partly outdated, the overall idea of consumer goods as important social markers in a new socio-economic context where inherited social positions were losing their monopoly on hierarchically structuring society, speaks quite well to a new Vietnam where political connections are often necessary but insufficient components in processes of social distinction.

Whether you are successful or not in the market economy is one of the main social classifiers of the new Vietnam, and consumption is used to display and entrench "success". And there is currently no better way to display success than to drive a car, or at least to own one. Hanoi is full of stories of wealthy people who acquire a car even if they have no intention to use it. They purchase it, park it in front of their houses, and then use their motorbikes to get around in the city. These stories reflect a sense of pragmatic mobility that so far prevails in Hanoi. They also show that the car as a material object designed for mobility can be physically immobile while still provide significant social benefits to its owner.

Usually, however, the cars are also physically in use. They are now visible all over Hanoi and in the parts of the city where the streets are so narrow that a car causes instant chaos. The fact that it can move around in turn makes it more important for social performance than a house. As put by a young businessman in Hanoi: "the car is the best symbol of success. You can rent an apartment, but you have to own your car" (Interview, March, 2013). In the business environment, this takes on a more practical side. Businessmen in Hanoi today use their car to show actual or potential business partners that they are successful businessmen. I interviewed one young Hanoian businessman who had recently sold his practical family car and bought a more expensive and less practical model. He told me: "If I have a meeting or appointment with [a] customer I have to go by car". When I asked why he said "Because . . . you know . . . if I go by car maybe my image is better with the customer". He said if he already had known the contact for a long time, he could still use his motorbike (which he still used frequently), but if he needed to make an impression, he had to drive his car. But any car would not do. "It should be nice, usually it should be [an] expensive car. Like you know the cost is maybe more than 50,000 US dollar" (Interview, April 2013). The statements by these young businessmen were supported by similar statements in several interviews. What they are discussing is a form of conspicuous consumption, but perhaps more accurately they are explaining how they use their cars in strategies of distinction. The car is used as an object to define their position as successful businessmen. At least the car *presents* them socially as successful. There are many stories in Hanoi today of ambitious young men who acquire large loans, often in the informal economy with its extreme interest rates, to purchase a car, hoping the vehicle will aid them in their business endeavors.

But distinction is tricky, and the practice of flaunting expensive cars is frowned upon by the educated part of the elite in Hanoi, according to whom this type of behavior belongs to the "new rich".[11] As an older and apparently highly successful businessman with strong connections to the old communist hierarchy told me, this is "something rich peasants do". Of course you would have a car (he did not, he usually rode taxis), but you would not try to "show off" with it. He referred to the many expensive cars in Hanoi as a form of vulgar public display of wealth (Interview, October 2013). After years of socialist rule in Vietnam, there is, however, no clear group of "old rich" in a classic sense. But there are those who have grown up in the corridors of socialist power. They may not themselves even be members of the Communist Party, but they have in various ways been privileged due to either their own or their parents' political connections. This often involves higher education and certain know-how when it comes to behaving among the rich and powerful.

The market economy now produces a range of formal and informal ways of acquiring significant amounts of money. As put in an interview by a young Vietnamese academic: "The transition of Vietnam makes many people suddenly become rich with money falling from the sky, but not from their effort and capability" (Interview, May 2013). Or in the words of a marketer for a large, foreign auto company in Hanoi: "Demand is very high on cars now. We usually make [a] joke: Vietnam is a very poor country but we have the best and the most beautiful cars in the world. People are very poor but they have a lot of money" (Interview, October 2013).

Buy a car, build a house, get a wife

When explaining the position of the car in Vietnam today, many of my interviewees referred to an altered version of a traditional Vietnamese proverb. According to the new version, where the old buffalo has been replaced, there are three things a man should strive to achieve in life: buy a car, build a house, and get a wife. Although usually told as a joke, the proverb reflects how the car has become both a status object and an expectation. As Bourdieu (1984) has explained in

detail, in processes of distinction consumption is simultaneously used to define social classes and *defined by* social classes. In other words, certain goods and certain behavior become embedded in the expectations of belonging to particular strata of society. In Hanoi, while still an elusive dream for most people, owning a car has become normalized as part of being relatively wealthy. Thus, many wealthy car owners I have talked to have explained that the car does not really work as a status symbol anymore, since everyone has one now. With 23 cars per 1000 people, this is, mildly put, an overstatement, but this just serves to make the point clearer. While the car has already become unremarkable for the rich in Vietnam, it seems to have achieved a position of a particularly desirable object, a dream towards which many Vietnamese now aspire.

Conclusions

I started this chapter by asking how the boom in consumption of private vehicles can be understood in relation to the multi-scalar development processes of *Doi Moi*, as well as what cars and motorbikes can tell us about Vietnam's development trajectory. From a macro-economic perspective, global and regional economic integration has been crucial for both the motorbike revolution and the emergence of automobility in Hanoi and Vietnam. The manufacturing of vehicles serves as examples of the successes and failures of Vietnam's economic development strategies: successes in terms of attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) and developing low and medium-tech industries, and so far failures in escaping the "middle-income trap" and develop high-tech industrial capacities (see Masina, 2015).

Nevertheless, *Doi Moi* has radically increased the availability consumer goods, such as private vehicles, and this chapter has shown how the "motorbike revolution" in Vietnam can to a certain extent be understood as an outcome of a combination of intentional industrial policies and unintentional outcomes of these. Chinese manufacturers in particular played a crucial role in driving down prices on motorbikes and thus "democratizing" ownership, although formally Japanese manufacturers have been the key players in the development of Vietnam's motorcycle industry. For cars the picture is less clear, although *Doi Moi* has also made cars more widely available. Detrimental to the attempts to develop a domestic automobile industry, however, the Vietnamese government has limited car ownership through very high taxes and fees, in turn unintentionally favoring motorbike ownership. This has made cars very expensive and accessible only to the relatively wealthy. These policies may be changing as requirements from the AFTA forced Vietnam to remove restrictions on imported cars by 2018. So far, however, it seems the government is finding other ways to protect domestic production.

The extraordinary consumption of motorbikes and now the emergence of cars cannot be understood without the transformations in the systems of provision for vehicles. From a closed, planned economy dependent on imports from the Soviet bloc, with *Doi Moi* Vietnam opened the gates to global and regional capitalism. Nevertheless, although economic theories predict increased consumption of cars alongside economic growth (Medlock and Soligo, 2002), production determinism cannot explain why people to such an extent started using motorbikes, and now cars, to get around. As Sheller and Urry (2006: 210) remind us: "Mobility is always located and materialized, and occurs through mobilizations of locality and rearrangements of the materiality of places". *Doi Moi* involved much more than macro-economic processes. Reforms have created a more affluent, and more mobile, Vietnam. This is a Vietnam where more and more people can both access and afford goods providing new comforts and luxuries, and also one where consumer goods can be used to display success in the market economy. It is, however, also a more unequal society, where the differences between the haves and have-nots represent a stark contrast to the socialist ideals of the country. While the millions of motorbikes

in Vietnam are physical manifestations of the very rapid improvements in material living standards in the country over the last decades, the cars represent a new round of changes and, I argue, deeper capitalist transformations.

Although the extent to which Vietnam has become capitalist is debatable (Hansen, 2015; London, 2009), it is hard to argue against the presence of global capitalism in the streets of Vietnam's cities. As is typical for contemporary capitalism, and indeed for Vietnam's development experience in general, the cars on the roads in Vietnam are mainly manufactured by big actors from more mature capitalist economies. They originate in countries such as Japan, South Korea, France, Germany, and the United States and can in many ways be seen as "global capitalism on wheels". Even if manufactured within Vietnamese borders, usually the majority of the parts used for assembling the vehicles are imported (Hansen, 2016a).[12] Simultaneously, these icons of global capitalism have symptomatically become the ultimate symbol of personal success in the nominally socialist country.

Writing around the time when car consumption started taking off in Vietnam, Truitt (2008, p. 16) concluded that "as the lighter, more flexible, but more exposed motorbike is pushed to the side of the road, the privately owned car may come to define the aspirations of the middle class in Ho Chi Minh City". Her predictions seem to have been right on target. Just as Volti (2008, p. 1001) observes that "the spirits of Henry Ford and Alfred Sloan have prevailed over those of Mao Zedong and Mahatma Gandhi", the same can be said about Hồ Chí Minh's preaching of modesty and frugality. The car is a powerful representation of success in today's Vietnam, and the motorbike will certainly have a strong competitor in the years to come. In turn, as car ownership become increasingly normalized, Vietnam's cities may possibly see a projection of their own futures in the gridlocked streets of other large Southeast Asian cities, such as Jakarta, Manila, and Bangkok. Unless, of course, Vietnam's development manages to surprise us once again.

Notes

1 As is common practice in Vietnam, I use the term motorbike to refer to most motorized two-wheelers, although I use "motorcycle" when discussing industrial development. Most motorbikes in Vietnam range from 50 to 150 CC and are relatively small.

2 The following section draws on Hansen (2017a).

3 Only China, India, and Indonesia sell more motorbikes annually than Vietnam, according to VAMM (VTV News, 2017)

4 http://vamm.org.vn/gioi-thieu-c9.html

5 Sample surveys in Hanoi traffic conducted by the World Bank (2014) in 2012 found that two-wheeled transport together represented 85.8 percent of total traffic. Of this, motorbikes represented 96.8 percent, bicycles 2.6 percent, and electric scooters 0.6 percent.

6 GrabBike is a Singapore registered company that in the name of the "sharing economy" has commercialised motorbike taxis (*xe om*) in Vietnam. Known to be both cheap and fast for anyone with a smartphone, Vietnamese cities are now full of drivers in the green jackets of the company. Grab also has car services. UberMoto offered the same services, but has been bought by Grab (see also Turner and Ngo, 2018; Hansen, Nguyen Tuan Anh and Luu Khanh Linh, 2020).

7 The following section draws on Hansen (2016a).

8 Available parking space in the capital was estimated to accommodate 10 percent of the total number of cars in 2011 (Hanoi People Committee 2011), and the situation is likely worse in 2018.

9 Aiming to stay pale, particularly among women, is a strong cultural trait in Vietnam, as in many other Southeast and East Asian cultures (see Hansen, Nielsen and Wilhite, 2016). The motorbike exposes you to the sun, and Vietnamese girls and women go a long way to cover their bodies with additional jackets, skirts, and facemasks to escape the sun. This hassle is avoided in a car.

10 Parts of this section draw on Hansen (2017b).

11 In Vietnamese the Sino-Vietnamese term *trọc phú* is used, *trọc* meaning stupid, uneducated, or impolite, and *phú* meaning rich.

12 Nevertheless, as part of a wider trend in Vietnam of seeing anything produced in the country as of dubious quality, many prospective car owners are looking for fully imported models, despite much higher costs.

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34

RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Hoàng Văn Chung

In late 2018, the Ba Vàng pagoda in the Quảng Ninh province of northern Vietnam went under mass media's spotlight. This large, brand-new pagoda, located on the slope of a mountain, was built in 1993 to replace an ancient but small pagoda. When completed, it became a large Buddhist center in Quảng Ninh province, greatly contributing to attracting tourists in this rapidly developing province. In late 2018, a video went viral on online social networks, revealing a surprising large amount of money a person was told to pay for the "removal of bad karma" from a previous life. "Bad karma", in the form of family breakup, bankruptcy, incurable illnesses, etc., was justified by the monks at the pagoda as having reasons from debts with others since previous lives. Through a soul-calling ritual, "customers" were informed how much in real money they would have to pay to resolve the debt. It was said that because the pagoda had provided this "service" for years, it accumulated a lot of money. The public strongly criticized this service as representing superstition and exploitation of believers' money. It then seriously questioned why such non-Buddhist rituals were allowed to happen at a Buddhist space and that the local authorities and the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha – the official organization of Buddhists in Vietnam – must take decisive actions to stop this practice. The incident at Ba Vàng pagoda raises further and larger heated debates among the public about the alarming moral degradation among certain religious professionals, the commercialization of religion, unjustifiable religious expenditure, the need to purify Buddhist ritual practices, and authorities' effective management of religious activities.

This incident reveals the dynamics and emerging issues of religious life in contemporary Vietnam. Indeed, it is somewhat misleading when one refers to Vietnam as an atheist nation by reading its label as a communist nation. In contrast, nowadays in this rapidly modernizing nation, in association with dramatic social changes as result of Renovation (since 1986), religious life has changed dramatically. It is not only people who stress the importance of religious belief and ritual practices in their daily life; the state has also intensified its efforts in shaping the religious sphere for the sake of national building.

The current state's authoritative approach towards religion, here including institutionalized religions and folk religion, is not unprecedented. Historically, imperial states in Vietnam always attempted to control religious and ritual practices. Typically, the emperor reviewed and classified locally worshipped gods and spirits via using "the seal of the Emperor" (sắc phong). Thus the state decided what kinds of worship would be legitimate and what would be prohibited as being superstitious. The socialist state, established in 1945, in a certain way continued this

tradition of providing instruction for religious practices. During the high socialist period, also known as the subsidy period (thời bao cấp), religious life experienced a downturn. Mainstream religious traditions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, as well as inner-born new religious movements (such as Caodaism and Hòa Hảo Buddhism) were all under very tight control of the state. Meanwhile, various form of folk religious practices such as fortune telling, mediumship, soul calling, exorcism, etc., were condemned as representing superstition and backwardness. Largely, religion was seen as hindrance to the progress of the socialist nation. Things only changed when Renovation took place in 1986, when renovated views and policies towards religion resulted in major changes in the religious sphere.

This chapter seeks to provide an overview of religion in contemporary Vietnam. A very short historical background of religions in this nation will be presented. It is followed by a description of changes in the religious landscape using data from the government's recent statistics and other sources of secondary data such as research projects and published work in religious studies. The later part of the chapter illustrates the revitalization and development of religion and discusses the role of the state in shaping the current religious sphere.

It should be noted here that the understanding and use of the concept *religion* vary among state and non-state actors in Vietnam. In this chapter, the term religion is used at its broad meaning, referring to both highly institutionalized religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Caodaism, etc., and the folk religion.[1] When referring to folk religion, I mean the variety of indigenous beliefs and ritual practices through which people worship ancestors, deities, gods, and spirits.

An overview of religion in contemporary Vietnam

The religious landscape until 1986

Like elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia, the religious landscape in Vietnam is composed of both indigenous and non-indigenous elements. Through the progress of the nation, these elements have found ways to coexist. Back in ancient times, prior to contact with world religious traditions, residents on lands now north of Vietnam had their own religious beliefs, manifested in the worship of ancestors, animals, agricultural gods, and human and natural deities (Léopold Cadière 1989 [orig.1944]: 61–77; Trần Quốc Vượng 1999: 92–93). During the first millennium, major religious traditions entered the land. Mahayana Buddhism was introduced quite early to the Vietnamese from India and then China (Nguyễn Duy Hinh 2009). Confucianism and Taoism also arrived as the Chinese regime reinforced its domination over the land. Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism were practiced, yet not distinctively perceived by the indigenous. Instead, a syncretic mode of "Three teachings" (Tam giáo) was established and maintained long afterwards, which resulted in mixed ritual practices and objects of worship until today. At one and the same time these traditions allowed the Vietnamese to espouse a Buddhist worldview and a national culture; to follow Confucius moral guidelines in their daily conduct such as family and social behaviors, the expression of loyalty to kings seen as "the son of Heavenly Emperor", and filial piety to ancestors; and to turn to Taoism for questions relating to fate or fortune or to deal with devils through magic (Steinberg 1971: 69; Condominas 1987; Hue-Tam Ho Tai).

In the second millennium, the religious landscape witnessed further diversification. Schools of Buddhism such as Pure Land, Dhyana, Vajrayana, Rinzai, and Caodong arrived and established various Buddhist communities among the majority Kinh in Vietnam (Nguyễn Duy Hinh 2009). In the meantime, a Vietnamese Buddhist school called Trúc lâm (Bamboo forest) was established by King Trần Nhân Tông of the Trần dynasty in the 13th century (see Alexander

Soucy 2007). From the middle of the 16th century, Portuguese missionaries introduced Roman Catholicism into Vietnam and began to seek indigenous converts. Later, Catholicism witnessed growth first in the middle of the country, then the south, and the north (see Charles Keith 2012: 18–20; Nguyễn Hồng Dương 2019: 178–179). The French colonists began the process of Western modernization of Vietnamese culture and society in 1858. Seen as a form of cultural reaction, a variety of indigenous new religions led by nationalists and Buddhist reformists appeared. In the west of the Cửu Long River delta (the Mekong delta), numerous new religious pathways emerged, such as Bửu sơn Kỳ hương (Mystic Scent of Precious Mountain, established 1849), Phật đường Nam tông Minh sư đạo (Southern Buddhist Way of Brilliant Masters, established 1863), and Tứ ân Hiếu nghĩa (Four Debts of Gratitude, established 1867) and later Tịnh Độ Cư sĩ Phật hội (Buddhist Association of Pure Land practitioners, established 1934). Two of these would later become Vietnam's most internationally well-known new religious movements (NRMs): Caodaism (1925) and Hòa Hảo Buddhism (1939) (see, for example, Sergei Blagov 2002, Pascal Bourdeaux 2018, Jérémy James 2018). In the late 19th century until the middle of the 20th century, new international religions arrived in Vietnam. Prominently, missionaries from France and from North America began to introduce Protestantism to the Vietnamese in early 20th century, and the first church, also the center for evangelical missionary works, was built in Đà Nẵng in 1911. Later, the evangelical churches and communities were established in most major cities. Other two smaller religions were brought into Saigon, including the Bahai'i faith in 1954 and he Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1962 (Nguyễn Thanh Xuân 2015: 119–151). Today, most of these inner-born and imported religions are still active in Vietnam.

Some religious traditions in the world also arrived among the minor ethnicities, mainly the Chăm and the Khmer. Segments of the Chăm, who lived on land of the Champa realm that was eventually integrated into Vietnam in the 19th century, received and indigenized several foreign religions. Brahmanism was practiced starting in the 7th century which was later indigenized as a Brahmanist-based religious pathway now called *đạo Bà la môn* (Rie Nakamura 2009; Lê Đình Phụng 2015:162–171). While Islam has a presence in Vietnam, its features reflect the specific experiences of Vietnam's Chăm population. Islam was received by the Chăm at around the 10th century (Nakamura 2000: 57–58), then indigenized as an Islam-based religious pathway now called *đạo Bà ni* (Yasuko Yoshimoto 2012; Lê Đình Phụng 2015: 172–180). Practitioners of this religion have no relation with international Islamic community. When the Champa kingdom ceased to exist in 1832, a large part of the Chăm population took refuge in Malaysia, Thailand, and Cambodia, where they adopted Islam. But they then found ways to come back to the nation, mainly in provinces in the southwest region such as An Giang, Kiên Giang, Tây Ninh, and Bình Phước, and some migrated to Saigon. Since the mid-20th century until today, the majority of Chăm Muslims who practiced orthodox Islam reside in An Giang province. Some Chăm intellectuals following the *Bà ni* religion who worked in Saigon converted to orthodox Islam and introduced this faith back to Ninh Thuận province in the central area, which resulted in the formation of an Islamic community there. In other settings, evidence shows that the reformed Theravada Buddhism was introduced to Khmer communities living in the Mekong delta in the south starting in the 13th century, and the earliest Theravada pagoda was built in the 14th century (Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa 2003: 25). Yet the classic form of Theravada Buddhism entered Vietnam long before this milestone, around the 3rd century. This religious tradition has been maintained and practiced by the Khmer to today.

Over almost two millennia, major religions in the world had set foot in and established communities in Vietnam. They found ways to peacefully co-exist with each other, with inner-born religions, and with indigenous folk religion.

The new religious landscape in a post-renovation context

Changes in the religious sphere began with the state's renovated views and policy towards religion. There was a major shift in the general approach to religion about 10 years after renovation. In 1998, Resolution No. 5 of the Central Communist Party Executive Committee was passed and introduced to the public. The resolution sought to build and develop an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with a national identity. Accordingly, various forms of religious ritual practices and festivals were seen as representing cultural identities and thus subjected to restoration. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the party and government issued a series of documents on religion. Resolution No.25/NQ-TW by the Communist Central Committee issued in 2003 began the official recognition of the long existence of religion. The Article 1 read:

> Belief and religion are spiritual needs of a part of the population. These needs exist today and will co-exist with the nation during the building of Socialism. Compatriots who follow a religion are a part of the great national unity. Consensus is needed in exercising policies that respect and guarantee people's freedom to follow or not follow a religion and their right to have regular religious activities in accordance with law.

Importantly, religion has been seen by the state as a positive factor, i.e. a form of inner strength, a source of moral values, or a tool for mobilization and unification of the mass, that is beneficial for national building (see Philip Taylor 2007: 32; Mathieu Bouquet 2010; Pascal Bourdeaux and Jean Paul Willaime 2010; Edyta Rozsko 2010:7; 2012: 27; John Gillespie 2014). Thus, in the field of legislation on religion, the scope of religious freedom has been reviewed and expanded. In the 1992 constitution, article 70 stipulated that "citizens have the right to religious freedom". The 2013 constitution alters "citizens" with "everyone" which officially enables even one who temporarily loses his or her citizenship to fully enjoy the right to religious practice as others. This regulation has been detailed in the law on belief and religion introduced in 2016 as an upgrade from the previous Ordinance on Belief and Religion (2004).

Consequently, in the public space, the state has actively shown its ever-friendly stance toward religion. National leaders are increasing their presence in selected spiritual ceremonies on a national level on behalf of the state. Annually, selected ritual and religious ceremonies are financially sponsored. Notably, the death anniversary of the Hùng kings was recognized as a national ceremony and has been a public holiday since 2007. Spirit possession ceremonies associated with the cult of mother goddesses in the central and northern regions have been upgraded to a state-recognized cultural-religious activity. In 2015, the government submitted a dossier on the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for recognition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and it was approved in April 2017. Through support for the restoration of rituals and sacred sites and the provision of legitimacy for certain religious beliefs and practices, the state has sought to promote traditional moral values while advancing its cultural programs (see John Kleinen 1999; Horim Choi 2007:104). In short, through new policies and laws introduced since renovation, the government has lessened its regulation of religious activities and provided new conditions for religious dynamism and changes.

In that context, religion has made a surprising return to the public and private life of the Vietnamese after a period of suppression. The religious sphere has witnessed an expansion which includes legalization of a variety of religious organizations. When renovation began in 1986, only three religious organizations representing three religions were recognized by the state, including the General Assembly of the Vietnamese Evangelical Church (the north), the

Vietnamese Archbishop's Council, and the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. With the introduction of the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religion in 2004 – the first comprehensive regulations of religion since renovation – the government provided a clear path for a religious group to obtain registration for religious activities and then recognition as legal religious organization. As a result, the number of official state-recognized religious organizations increased annually. By 2020, the number of state-recognized religious organizations reached 41, representing 16 official religions (The Government Committee for Religious Affairs – GCRA 2020). Having obtained legal status, these organizations are operating according to publicized laws and regulations which means they all can enjoy more freedom from state interference in internal affairs than before.

In addition, there has been a positive change in the number of religious adherents, according to official reports provided by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) since 1986. The number of religious adherents was 14 million by 1985 and reached 23 million by 2010 (cited in Nguyễn Thanh Xuân 2015: 342–343). By 2018, the number of religious followers was around 25 million, accounting for nearly 27 percent of the total population. Included in this number were around 14 million Buddhists, 6.7 million Catholics, 2.5 million Caodaists, 1.4 million followers of Hòa Hảo Buddhism, 1.5 million Protestants, 1.5 million followers of Vietnam Pure Land Buddhist Association (Tịnh Độ cư sĩ Phật hội Việt Nam), and a minority of followers of smaller religions such as Islam, Minh sư đạo (Enlighten masters), Minh lý đạo (Englighten philosophy), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Vietnam Community of Baha'i Faith (cited in Hanoi Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front 2018, p. 39).

The number of places for ritual practices has positively changed as well. Table 34.1 presents comparative data from two national censuses on religious bases in Vietnam between 2012 and 2017.

As one can see from the table, after five years, the number of religious bases, most of them are sacred places of worship, increases. This reflects the attention paid to the spaces reserved for religious activities.

As these mainline and major religions have been revitalized and thrived, numerous new religious groups with shared characteristics of NRMs have emerged in Vietnam since renovation and established their own communities. The most well-known group is the Way of Hồ Chí Minh as the Jade Buddha. There are also groups with foreign origins such as Soka Gakai, Jehovah Witnesses, Falun Gong, I-kuan Tao, and the Way of the Supreme Master Ching Hai. These groups contribute to the diversification of religious worldviews and practices in the nation. However, the government refuses to legally accept them, pointing out that none has met its criteria of a valid religion, such as having complete scripture, a stable system of rituals, clergy and hierarchy, and representative organization (Chung Van Hoang 2017).

In short, the timeless vitality of the folk religion, the open reception, and the active reinvention of foreign religious doctrines have resulted in continual diversification of religion in Vietnam. Religious diversity offers the Vietnamese greater choices in religious beliefs and in

Table 34.1 Growth in number of places of worship and religious training and congregation

Religious types	2012	2017	Rate (%)
Institutionalized religions (churches, monasteries, pagodas, mosques, educational and training institutions)	24,870	27,098	1.08
Folk religion (communal houses, shrines, temples, palaces, etc.)	10,873	15,623	1.43

Source: The national consensuses on economic institutions 2012 and 2017

the reinterpretation and reinvention of religious doctrines and ritual practices. The phenomenal change in the religious landscape needs deeper investigation into what kinds of processes have actually taken place in post-renovation Vietnam. The following section will discuss this question.

Religious revival

Since renovation, research by both local and international scholars has well documented a nationwide and multifaceted resurgence of religion. This includes the revival of institutionalized religions (Taylor 2004, 2007; Thiều Thị Hương 2019), the revitalization of folk religion in association with the effervescent re-emergence of community festivals and rituals (Shaun Malarney 1989; Hy Van Luong 1993; Choi 2007; Kirsten Endres and Andrea Lauser 2011; Roszko 2012; Salemink 2010, 2014), pilgrimages around sacred sites throughout the nation (Taylor 2004; Lauser 2016), and the reinvention of old religious ideas and practices (Chung Van Hoang 2017). Next, I provide more accounts of such religious revival by examining changes taking place within several major religions.

Revitalization of major religions

Now in Vietnam, Mahayana Buddhism is mostly practiced by the Kinh, while Theravada Buddhism is only found among the Khmer in the Mekong delta. These two major blocs of Buddhism in Vietnam have seen the restoration of ritual performance and organization of large-scale festivals, the development of educational and training institutions for clergy, more visitors showing up at pagodas, the emergence of diverse lay-Buddhist groups, the expansion of international relations, and how Buddhists are more active in helping the marginalized people in the society via charity works (for more, see Shawn McHale 2004; Soucy 2012).

The growth of Buddhism has to recognize the role of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, established in Hanoi in 1981 by the unification of nine Buddhist associations and schools, which is now the official organization representing Buddhism in Vietnam. The Sangha is managing an increasing number of Buddhist properties, mostly in the form of pagodas, monasteries, and educational and training institutions. For example, by 2011, throughout the nation, the Sangha managed over 14,000 Buddhist temples and monasteries, a seven-fold increase from 1981 (Hội đồng trị sự Trung ương Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam 2011: 27). Famous Buddhist sites have witnessed an increasing amount of visitors in recent years. The most well-known sites such as Yên Tử, Tây Thiên, and Hương Tích attract millions of pilgrims and tourists at festival season (see Lauser 2016). The Sangha also invest in building Buddhist temples in remote areas where the ethnic minorities or the islanders reside. Interestingly, in the last decade private sectors built new Buddhist pagodas, including the Xuân Trường group and Sun group. Xuân Trường Corp. is famous nationwide for building two massive Buddhist sites called Bái Đính (Ninh Bình province) and Tam Chúc (Hà Nam province). For the 5,100-ha-wide Tam Chúc site, the corporation invested more than 471 million USD for building large Buddhist pagodas and surrounding facilities. Notably, these brand-new Buddhist sites are private properties, and visitors have to pay a fee to worship Buddha and enjoy sightseeing. The construction of new Buddhist sites raises questions regarding the unexpected commercialization of Buddhism. There are other facets of Buddhism in Vietnam which deserve noting. Non-canonical elements become more visible in daily practices by both the professional and the lay Buddhists. At many Buddhist temples, monks appear to provide customers rituals of healing, fortune telling, protective amulets, bad luck removal, and exorcism. There are contradictory tendencies happening to Buddhism: the integration of various subjects of worships into a Buddhist temple, especially in the north,

such as mother goddesses, local spirits, deities, and recently the former President Hồ Chí Minh, thus turns pagodas into a place where people can make prayers to a wide range of supernatural entities and to eliminate non-Buddhist elements from Buddhist spaces, costumes, and rituals. Further, there have been efforts to revitalize and renovate the Vietnamese Buddhist school known as Bamboo school (see Soucy 2007) or to bring home the internationally well-known Buddhist order invented by Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh called Inter-being Buddhism (see John Chapman 2007). In many ways, the dynamics of Buddhist activities since renovation have reflected the population's increasing appreciation of Buddhist moral values and their social role.

Catholicism continues to be the second largest religion in Vietnam, with Catholics now accounting for over 7 percent of the population. The Catholic community is organized under the leadership of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, which was established in 1980 under the direct administration of the Roman Catholic Church (for more, see Charles Keith 2012). By 2019, followers of this religion are living in three regional archdioceses, which include 27 local dioceses and 3,057 parishes. There are 9,000 Catholic churches and chapels, seven grand seminaries, 189 clinics, and 797 educational institutions throughout these localities (Nguyễn Hồng Dương 2019: 181). Over the course of time, the deeper acculturation of Catholicism has furthered integrated Catholicism with Vietnamese culture. In particular, the Vietnamese Catholics, since the introduction of the Common Letter by the Bishops' Conference in 1980, have been allowed to venerate their ancestors as a national tradition. This is a turning point for Catholicism to resolve conflicts with the indigenous culture and become more tolerant of different religious worldviews. Throughout the nation, Catholic churches are now seeing people return to attend services on Sunday. Key Catholic events such as Christmas Day celebrations and the ritual to offer flowers to Mother Mary are open to the public, attracting both Catholic and non-Catholic observers. The Catholics are actively helping people to cope with poverty, illness, and homelessness. By 2010, Catholics have offered the public 13 bases to care for patients with leprosy, drug addicts, and people living with HIV; 159 homes for the invalid, for orphans, and for elders; and 748 child care centers and kindergartens (Hội đồng Giám mục Việt Nam 2010: 417; 429). Yet the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state is sometimes in tension in regard to conflicts over church property or when some Catholic leaders raise their voice and call for Catholic demonstration over heated social issues.[2]

Dynamics in Protestantism can be seen in the presence of numerous Protestant independent churches and/or denominations in Vietnam. These churches have seen a remarkable growth since the reception among the ethnic minorities during 1986–1987 (Oscar Salemink 2002; Nguyễn Thanh Xuân 2015: 129; Tam T.T. Ngo 2015). An estimated one-third of the Hmong population converted to Protestantism, with the numbers in the northwest region jumping from 1,000 in 1986 to 170,000 in 2014. Pastors and evangelists in the south resumed their missions to the ethnic minorities in the Southern region and the Central Highlands and soon made great success. By 2014, the total number of Protestant ethnic minorities reached 770,000, of which 55,0000 resided in the Central Highlands, the coastal area of central and southern Trường Sơn range (GCRA 2015: 129). Missions are dynamic in the lowlands, especially in urban areas, as well. New converts to Protestantism are from all walks of life, but it is especially popular among the young and better educated. Churches in Hồ Chí Minh and Hanoi are busy during the weekdays and always full during Sunday services (Trọng Thành 2009). These churches are dynamic in terms of religious and secular activities and seeing an increase in membership. One million copies of the Bible were printed and distributed in Vietnam by the Religion Publishing House in 2014 alone (GCRA 2015A: 353), reflecting the great demand. Protestant communities in the cities are also known for helping marginalized and vulnerable urban residents. Evangelical churches in Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh work closely with people who are afflicted

by social dislocation, family break-ups, illness, and deprivation. Some Protestant services have successfully rehabilitated thousands of criminals, drug addicts, prostitutes, and persons with HIV, with many of these becoming converts. By 2010, nine Protestant churches representing different groups were granted legal status. According to a calculation by an official working at GCRA, from 2005 to 2015, the number of Protestants increased to 30,533 annually (Thiều Thị Hương 2019: p. 130). The rapid growth of Protestantism relies much on successes in missionary works among the needy in Vietnam in the context of market economy. Because Protestantism has found its niche in the intersection between religious revivalism, communism, and capitalism it will continue to grow in scope and influence.

Islamic communities in Vietnam, mainly found in Ninh Thuận, An Giang, and Hồ Chí Minh city, are currently very active. They live around the Islamic church called Masjid. Most Muslims there solemnly perform prayer (*salat*) five times a day and fast during the month of Ramadan. Annually, there are Vietnamese Muslims going on pilgrimage in Mecca. In particular, these communities have maintained a quite close relation with international Islamic communities in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Many Chăm families send their children to Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, or Saudi Arabia to study the Qur'an and Arabic. These students are required to come back home after graduation and teach the local people of the meanings of Islamic doctrine and how to read the Qur'an in the original language. Meanwhile, various international Islamic organizations are coming to assist Islamic communities in Vietnam in studying doctrine, building or renovating churches, and improving material life.

The dynamics in these religions suggest a rise in religiosity, meaning an increase in religious awareness, experiences, expressions, orientations, and aspirations, as well as the practitioners' engagement into different fields of the secular life such as education, healthcare, and social charity. Followers have become much more open in the expression of their chosen religious worldviews and enthusiastic in participating in religious events. Though seeing development, monotheistic religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam are struggling to retain and attract new followers. Meanwhile Buddhism enjoys its dominant position, both in terms of cultural and religious influences and in the number of adherents.

The vitality of folk religion

In the realm of folk religion, most forms of ritual practices, either in private or in public spaces, have been restored and are performed. The Cult of Three (Four) Palaces (đạo Tam phủ, tứ phủ) is a typical example of the dynamics of ritual practices. Practitioners of this folk religion worship mother goddesses who govern the universe, with the most powerful one named Liễu Hạnh. Before 1986, spirit possession in the north was condemned by the state as being superstitious; thus, these rituals were seldom performed. Since the 1990s, spirit possession has returned and become one of the most dynamic fields in religious life. The upsurge of spirit possession practices, as Salemink argues, can be seen as "a part of a wider process of re-enchantment and re-ritualization in Vietnam" (2014: 231). Consequently, shrines and temples have been reopened and renovated. New and young medium masters arise to compete with older ones for followers and fame. Key temples are loud places, as music is played and rituals take place one after another, colorful electric lights flash, and incense sticks are burned day and night. It was estimated that around 1.5 million pilgrims visit Phủ Giầy where Liễu Hạnh is worshiped around the year (Kinh tế đô thị 2011).

The rise in enthusiasm for folk religious practices can also be seen via how people have invested their valuable resources in religious activities. In 2016, the Institute for Religious Studies carried out a survey on 1,247 families across the nation. It found that the majority of families

had increased the frequency of rituals, money, and time for religious purposes: a reported 84.5 percent of these families increased all three criteria for expression of faith in the super-natural forces; 67.1 percent for the need to connect to the supernatural forces; 76.7 percent for seeking protection from the supernatural forces; and 57.3 percent for a peaceful rest after death. These findings help to explain why religious activities have become one of the most important things for families to care about.

Such religious enthusiasm is not only found in families. Throughout the nation, communi-ties are restoring rituals, religious festivals, and communal places of worship with zeal. Seen as traditional sacred spaces, ancestor altars, communal houses, temples, shrines, palaces, etc., have been invested in with huge resources to be restored, rebuilt, and renovated. The number of sacred spaces belonging to folk religion (in the popular forms of communal houses, temples, and shrines) has increased significantly after five years, from 10,873 in 2012 to 27,098 in 2017 (Vietnam GSO reports in 2012 and 2017). This is a result of the restoration of old bases and the building of new ones. Once the religious bases have been renovated, people will make them look more splendid, larger in size, and cost more in terms of construction materials (Hoàng Văn Chung 2021: 44–46).

At present, a majority of the nearly 8,000 cultural festivals in Vietnam are religious in nature. The key festivals often see huge numbers of participants. Annually, millions of pilgrims travel to famous religious sites such as the temple for Hùng kings (those were believed to be primary ancestors of the Vietnamese) in Phú Thọ province, Hương pagoda in Hà Nội, Yên Tử complex in Quảng Ninh province, and Temple for Lady of Realm in An Giang province. For example, it was estimated that 8 million local and trans-local pilgrims and tourists visited the Hùng kings[3] temple during the seven-day festival in 2016. On the first day when the main ceremony took place, the number of visitors reached two and a half million (Vietnam.net 2016). Further, as people travel far from home and are ready to spend their resources for religious purposes, the industry of providing services for religious practitioners has arisen and made rapid growth. This includes the making and trading of religious objects and provision of transportation, accom-modation, food, and drinks.

Persons who claim to possess extrasensory perception (nhà ngoại cảm) are sought out by people who seek to communicate with their deceased relatives (for more, see Paul Sorrentino 2016). Sensational stories are spread widely of how the living experience communication with the dead through these mediums. In 2011, around 80 people were invited to a national meeting in Hanoi when the Ministry of Labours, War Invalids and Social Affairs recognized them for their contribution during 25 years in the search for remaining skeletons of dead soldiers during the wars. For the Vietnamese, a person's good death means a funeral is organized and the body is buried according to customs. Those without these will never have a peaceful rest and will cause troubles for the living. During the wars, a lot of soldiers died in battlefields without funerals and proper graves. Yet the "nhà ngoại cảm" in Vietnam do more than just search for graves of dead soldiers. They have been invited to help to solve criminal cases, cure illnesses, or predict future events. The rise of "nhà ngoại cảm" and their works keeps alive the old beliefs in the world of the dead, and further, how the two worlds of the living and the dead are intertwined and dependent on each other.

Expenditures for religious purposes is an emerging issue. During my fieldwork in April and May 2017 in Bắc Ninh province, I was told by festival organizers that they would receive US$25,000 a day during the height of the festival for the Lady of Treasure. It is not uncommon for a person or family to spend US$5,000 or even US$15,000 on private rituals performed at home or at a temple. More broadly, according to a newspaper report, it was unofficially estimated that in the late 2000s, Vietnamese burnt 40,000 tons of votive paper and objects for offerings. Notably, in Hanoi alone, residents spent around US$20,000,000

annually for burnt offerings (Thanhnien News. 2014). In the aforementioned survey by the Institute for Religious studies, families with higher incomes spend more money for religious activities than families with average and low incomes. The folk belief in "dương sao âm vậy" (the realm of the living mirrors the realm of the dead) and the old saying "phú quý sinh lễ nghĩa" (when people get rich they will pay more attention to rituals) continue to be true today.

Conclusion

Religions are thriving as Vietnam seeks to realize its vision of socialist modernity. The legacy of religious pluralism and syncretism has been well inherited and continues. Religions are now enjoying favorable political and social conditions to develop and contribute to social well-being and nation-building.

Improving the state's regulation of religion and the growing importance that people have placed on reconnecting to the supernatural forces are two major driving forces causing a religious revival. Yet this phenomenon can also be seen as people's justifiable reaction to the new living context characterized by international integration, greater awareness of religious freedom, and socioeconomic progresses. Further, examination of the dynamics of institution-alized religions and folk religion suggests that religiosity is on the rise as Vietnam develops. This is because religion, on the one hand, offers possible solutions to the feelings of existential insecurity, anxiety, and uncertainty associated with rapidly changing life (see Salemink 2010). On the other hand, through paying more attention to religious rituals and offerings, practitioners seek to please worshipped entities in exchange for good crops, peace, fertility, and prosperity.

Notes

1 For a definition of "folk religion" that is relevant to the Southeast Asian context, see, for example, Turner and Salemink (2014) "Introduction." In: Turner and Salemink (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 5.
2 For example, there were large-scale public protests by the Catholics in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces when they insisted the government close Taiwanese Formosa Plastic Corp.'s steel plant which had accidentally dumped toxic chemicals into the sea, resulting in environmental damage over approximately 200 kilometers of coastline and the end of the livelihood of around 200,000. The protesters struggled for government transparency and to save the maritime environment.
3 The Hùng kings are seen as the first historical and legendary kings and also primary ancestors of the Vietnamese. Their main temple is now located in Phú Thọ province of North Vietnam.

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35

MOVEMENTS OF INDEPENDENT ART IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Bùi Kim Đĩnh

In contemporary Vietnam the production of art takes place in a society undergoing rapid and large-scale processes of change and within a specific set of political and social conditions that bear directly and indirectly on the way art is produced, consumed, and experienced. This chapter examines the recent history of visual art in Vietnam, focusing on independent art whose consumption goes beyond the commercial market and which is created by non-state artists working autonomously from the state and its broader organizational complexes. It devotes particular attention to the historical and contemporary interplay of independent art practitioners with state agencies intent on promoting conformity to state interests.

Globally, interest in contemporary Vietnamese art has skyrocketed, even as its consumption has ranged from crass commercialism to studied appreciation. By contrast, the circumstances of art's production and consumption in Vietnam are more complex and interesting than widely understood. Up until the 1990s, the Communist Party of Vietnam maintained a tight grip on the production of art, limiting the scope of independent art. With Vietnam's market transition and the associated expansion of personal freedoms, space for art production and independent art increased. But its regulation has remained a source of tension and contestation. Tracking this progression, this chapter highlights the experiences and work of selected independent artists, provides insights into the development of independent art and its complex relation with state power, and offers a window onto features of art and society in contemporary Vietnam.

Art in the path to 'market socialism'

Historically, the development of independent art in Vietnam needs to be understood in relation to the constraints and legacies of colonialism, the imposition of a centrally planned culture and the constraints this placed on artistic expression, and the gradual – if incomplete – erosion of these constraints in the 1990s and beyond. In the colonial period, Vietnamese art was seen as an interaction between traditional and colonial aesthetics and interests (Trân 2005; Herbelin, André-Pallois 2013; Taylor 2004; Noppe, Hubert 2003). That was reflected in the features of artworks from French vocational schools in Cocochina (the South), Annam (Huế), and Tonkin (the North) which mostly subjected Vietnamese to French notions of art (Taylor 2004: 26). Over the course of the 20th century, the topics and aesthetics of art across regions diverged from anti-colonialism to a new socialist culture.

Art in the revolutionary zone

With the development of revolutionary socialist anti-colonialism from the early 20th century, the production of art in the north of Vietnam increasingly reflected an interest in socialist realism, with its focus on peasants and workers and anti-imperialism. Within the orbit of international communism, Vietnam's revolutionary leaders were intent on promoting a "new socialist culture" from the 1940s through the 1990s operated within and at the service of the guidelines of the Communist Party.

As the party's chief ideologue Trường Chinh (1943) saw it, socialist revolution would require art subject to the principles of "dân tộc hoá," "đại chúng hoá," and "khoa học hoá" (nationalization, popularization, and scientification.) And he meant it. Immediately following the Vietnam's declaration of independence in 1945, Hồ Chí Minh (1946a, 1946b) ordered all Vietnamese publishing houses to issue all copyrights to the state and subjected all to censorship controls under the Ministry of Home Affairs. In the early 1950s, the Departments of Information and of Literature and Arts were merged into the Department of Propaganda and Literature-Arts (ibid. 1952), placing art and culture at the service of revolutionary politics in a top-down system of production and regulation. This was precisely the aim in October 1950, when authorities founded the College of Fine Arts in Phú Thọ province (Cẩn 1982).

After Điện Biên Phủ victory and the subsequent division of the country at the 17th parallel, art and culture in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) were put at the service of preparing for the next war, reflected in the establishment of the Vietnam Fine Arts Association (VFAA) (Bạch, 1957) and the new museums' mission at the service of 'building and defending the country' (Giám, 1959). Under the VFAA, musicians, artists, and art makers were considered as the labor force in the art field, charged with the artistic transmission of the party and state's messages into the factories, farms, collectives, and rural masses, including special efforts to address women, minority, and Christian communities (Hùng, 1961, 1962). To promote such activities, the party awarded art prizes, of which the most honorable was Hồ Chí Minh prize (Minh, 1947; Đồng, 1981). Henceforth, a complete art mechanism was established within a closed system, in which the state was the sole art producer, distributor, and patron. These arrangements prevailed during the 1950s, when the DRV government launched large-scale and violent land reforms that entailed mass emergency migration to the South (Liên-Hằng, 2012; Alex-Thái, 2015).

Vietnamese artists' responses to repression varied, accordingly two historical instances were illustrative. The most well-known of these was *Nhân văn − Giai phẩm* movement, which unfolded between 1955 and 1958, when writers and artists published numerous issues of two journals [*Nhân Văn* (humanities) and *Giai Phẩm* (masterpieces)] featuring works that stated criticisms on variety of social issues, including human rights. By 1958 both journals were suppressed and shut down. Almost 1,000 writers, poets, and other cultural cadres were either 'reeducated,' forced to make a 'self-criticism,' or imprisoned (Zachary 2001: 55; Ninh 2002: 121–162; Khuê 2009; Zinoman 2011: 60–100). In the late 1960s, the so-called *Vụ án Xét lại chống Đảng* (the Anti-Party Revisionist Affair) that challenged the party's war campaign also resulted as a suppression on artists, writers, and intellectuals. (Grossheim 2013: 108; Hiên 2008: 15).

While the end of the war brought many changes, the suppression of artists and critical intellectuals continued. With the country unified, war-torn, poor, and isolated, repressive cultural policies were maintained well into the late 1990s. In 1982, a misinterpreted poem caused Hoàng Cầm to be jailed in the political event so-called *Hậu Nhân văn* (post-Nhân văn) (Hưng 2010). Eventually, the aftermath of *Vụ án Xét lại chống Đảng* resulted in a number of prisoners including high ranking politicians like Hoàng Minh Chính, Trần Độ, Lê Hồng Hà, Hà Sĩ Phu,

and Nguyễn Trung Thành, who demanded the Politburo exonerate victims of the case. (Hiên 2008: 15, 773–794).

Saigonese art before and after 1975

Developments in "*Saigonese art*" during the same period, according to Huỳnh Bội Trân (2005: 196–224), stood in contrast with the North, continuing its focus on customary themes while also reflecting exposure to French and international influences, particularly from the West. Like the North, the concept of Vietnamese culture attracted attention, but reflected themes of nationalism and humanism. In Saigon's more liberal socio-political atmosphere, tensions between tradition and modernism, figurative and abstract, and communist and anti-communist were evident in art and literature, forming the basis of a more diverse art scene.

Through the mid-1960s, *Saigonese art* continued to bear French influence via French language tertiary education in art in the same tradition of *École Supérieure des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine* (Fine Art College of Indochina) prior to 1945. Major art exhibits held in Saigon were, however, more diverse, including exhibitions of European modernist painters. Additionally, new art schools were founded in Huế, Gia Định, and Bình Dương. The annual Spring Painting Award was founded in 1959, and the First International Exhibition was held in 1962. The capitalist ideology of the Republic of Vietnam permitted artistic, cultural, civil society, and public sphere activities to develop in a liberal way unseen in the North. Private ownership was the principal mode. By 1975 the South had upwards of 1,000 printing houses, 150 publishing houses, and 40 daily newspapers (Ngữ 1979: 50) in stark contrast to the North, in which all of those were under the only state ownership.

In this environment, space for independent art endured as did space for debates on art, culture, literature, and philosophy. While in the North, most literature and art initiated during the anti-colonial period were banned, the southern writings of the left-wing, anti-French but not avowedly socialist *Tự lực Văn đoàn* (The Self-Sustaining Literary Union) that figured prominently between 1934 and 1940 was taught in the southern high school curriculum well into the 1960s. After 1954, similar groups remained active in the South, attracting writers and intellectuals and engaging in wide-ranging cultural debates. This included the journal *Sáng Tạo* (Creativity), which assailed *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn*, declaring its death and the birth of contemporary art in Vietnam. Sáng tạo's aggressive posture, in turn, was countered by the establishment of the journal *Văn hoá Ngày nay* (Culture Today). The ongoing spat between the two journals drew a large readership.

These journals were hardly alone. Subsequently, journals such as *Quan Điểm* (Opinion), *Đại Học* (University), *Bách Khoa* (Encyclopedia), and *Mỹ thuật* (Fine Arts) were published, along with scores of others. In contrast to North's exclusive focus on socialism, debates on artistic and social themes in the South addressed existentialism, surrealism, and both pro- and anti-communist perspectives. Despite sporadic and at times severe wartime censorship, independent and oppositional artistic expression in the South retained a strong presence right up until 30 April 1975.

After liberation (i.e. 1975), the party placed all artistic production under the authority of the VFAA and set about the systematic erasure of the South's modern art history. Repression of Southern art continued by way of bans on all pre-1975 Saigonese cultural products, the renaming of art schools, and re-educational programs framed around the promotion of the aesthetic of *New Socialist Man*. Re-education targeted not only former Saigon officials and soldiers, but artists including Trịnh Cung, Tạ Tỵ, Dương Văn Hùng, Nguyễn Thanh Thu, and Mai Chửng. Upon release, these and others either remained in Vietnam without art or risked their lives to flee the country among multitudes of "boat people" (Trân 2005: 273–276). In this way, Saigon's formerly diverse art scene was assimilated into the hegemonic singularity of socialist realist art and culture.

Art, instrumentality, and the market

Vietnam's transition to a market economy entailed a modest expansion of space for free expression and a recalibration of the state's approach to the repression and management of arts. In the early stages of market transition, changes in the art and literary scenes reflected only little (Taylor 2004: 93). In literature, state officials tentatively called for a policy of 'untying thoughts' (*cởi trói tư duy*). Certain formerly banned books were allowed to be published. Imprisoned writers and artists were released, with some gaining readmission to state associations and even awarded national prizes. There were hard unspoken limits, however, and writers going beyond these were subjected to harassment and faced public criticisms from conservative leaning apparatchiks who accused them of going 'overboard' (*quá đà*). Books were withdrawn and more outspoken persons were heavily criticized or expelled from party-linked associations (Tuấn 2004: 226). Yet as the pace of Vietnam's economic transformation gathered, patterns of art production and state views on art evidenced significant changes.

Instrumentality: from central planning to international tourism

In marketizing Vietnam, independent art has developed fluidly but in an uneasy dialogic relationship with an assemblage of state agencies intent on managing, using, and censoring art and artists. In the new economic situation, the management of art for the sake of revolutionary socialism, military victory, and liberation where recalibrated to the needs of protecting the country from announced dangers of the free market and anti-party forces (the Party 1991).

By the end of the 1990s, the economic situation had changed dramatically and spaces for independent art and its marketing expanded further. During this time, Vietnam saw a significant expansion of personal and economic freedoms and, with it, increased space and outlets for the creation and circulation of art beyond the political structures of the state. For both artists and state managers, market transition married art production to market logics and instrumentalities, within strikingly paradoxical and contradictory effects. In this context, one of the most catalyzing developments for independent art and its regulation was the increasing presence of a decidedly commercializing and globalizing sort: international tourism.

With economic growth and the arrival of growing numbers of international tourists, demand for luxury handicraft goods rapidly increased. Village-based handicrafts production such as ceramics, basketry, papermaking, and lacquer ware partly revived and found a larger market (Fanchette, Stedman 2009: 23–26). Responding to this uptick, more commercially driven artists increasingly produced works depicting village temple scenes, folk tales, and other familiar themes, finding outlets in the hundreds, if not thousands, of galleries serving tourists that mushroomed across the country. With varying degrees of irony, young artists recognized the marketability of *con trâu, nón lá, áo dài* (water buffaloes, conical hats, tunic dresses) or *chim, hoa, cá, gái* (birds, flowers, fishes, girls) versus other subjects. In this way, artists actively or passively contributed to state policies, promoting commercial tourism and producing wares and exotic Vietnamese imagery for purchase by international tourists, building a striking, if strikingly commodified, 'imbued national identity.'

Importantly, state policies in the 1990s are appropriately understood not as "artistic reform" but a more limited recognition of certain artistic styles deemed to be compatible with prevailing state understandings of appropriateness (Taylor, Corey 2019: 9). Indeed, much of the art produced during this period bore of the stamp of Nguyễn Quân and Phan Cẩm Thượng's *Mỹ Thuật của Người Việt* (Art of the Viet, 1989) and *Mỹ Thuật ở Làng* (Art in the Vietnamese Village, 1991), two books published by state presses that aimed to trace Vietnamese fine art to a

4,000-year-old history of folk and aristocratic culture distinctive from India and China. Contrary to Taylor and Corey, these books had less to do with the promotion of "a return to village artistic production" but more with the promotion of the party-state's nationalist outlook and its tourism policies.

What started as a trickle of tourists and tourist dollars in the mid-1990s took on whole new proportions. From the turn of the century, Vietnam had emerged as a leading tourist destination in Southeast Asia – attracting 10 million foreign visitors and contributing upwards of 14% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016 (Trọng 2017). From the sale of reproductions in sidewalk shops to higher-price outlets, commercial galleries began attracting tourists in the Old Quarter of Hanoi and Đồng Khởi and Lê Công Kiều streets in Saigon.[1] After half a century, artists had found consumers beside the state. In 2007 an article in *The New York Times* titled "The Awakening of Hanoi," unofficially confirming Vietnam's addition to the international art market (Conlin 2007).

Whatever one makes of tourism and its commercializing impacts, tourism became a crucial foundation for the development of independent art. For the party and state managers, the mix of tourism and art presented commercial opportunities and political challenges, reflected in calls from within the ranks of the state for the development of "an advanced Vietnamese culture with an imbued national identity" in which artistic orientation should reflect the "reality of a socialist society with national history of revolution and brave defense against invaders" (Phiêu 1998). To preserve this guidance, the state tasked political security units (such as PA83 or PA25) and cultural management institutions to regulate national *an ninh văn hoá* (cultural security) and, where deemed necessary, to intervene directly by prohibiting artworks, censoring exhibitions and even tracking artists (Đĩnh 2017:124).

In so doing, the state nonetheless sought to avoid killing the proverbial goose. In order to strengthen national household economies, the party-state aimed to develop tourism and considered it sufficiently important to incorporate into the socio-economic development strategy of the country. To this end, the development of art and culture were placed under the responsibility of the multi-functional Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism. Indeed, for the state, art and culture were profoundly multifunctional; reflecting political, social, economic, and cultural designs of the party.

The delicate dance with state power

Although independent art has more autonomy than before *Đổi Mới*, the Vietnamese police state still casts a shadow over art and culture broadly (Taylor 2004: 108–120). The result is a continuously unfolding dialogic relationship between independent art and state censors. In these circumstances, independent artists have found room for maneuverer, but within limits. Sometimes, independent art has taken the form of dissident and political art, which is actually remarkable in a country where public discussions of politics remain taboo. One example of the later is *Chuyện của Thịnh* (Thịnh's Stories), a Facebook page presenting videos depicting accounts of *dân oan* (petitioners) across the country. In other instances, independent artists have joined like-minded pop musicians, such as Ngọc Đại and Mai Khôi, pairing visual and performance art in single venues. Authorities' reactions to these expressions have varied depending on developments in national politics, with suppression showing an uptick since 2016. In 2019 alone, voluntary and social movement organizations like Green Trees, artists such as Thịnh Nguyễn, and artist collectives like *Hanoi Doclab* were subjected to arrest, intimidation and confiscation of property. Still, while security forces seek to trace and limit artists' activities at times, Vietnam's independent art scene remains lively and finds space across a variety of local and global spaces, including both physical and virtual platforms.

Independent art meets corporate capitalism

Beyond addressing social and political themes, independent art faces other challenges, ranging from the increasing role of corporate capitalism in driving commercialization to dilemmas of a neo-liberal market. In recent years emerging Vietnamese business groups have become increasingly interested in doing business with contemporary art. In the summer of 2017, the Vietnam's largest private conglomerate, VinGroup, opened a 4,000-square-meter Vincom Center for Contemporary Art (VCCA) within its multi-building mega-development in Hanoi. There, independent artworks found hanging in Vincom's ever-expanding empire of shopping malls and resorts, often against the backdrop of the company's imitation Baroque and Rococo facades. Viewing and purchasing contemporary art has in this way becoming part of mass consumption society. This, even as VinGroup itself has been a key player in the degradation of the country's heritage, whether in its redevelopment of Ba Son Harbour in Saigon or the destruction of Cinematheque in the French quarter of Hanoi. Collective memories, humanity, and heritage in these cases are neither state nor private concerns.

Culture industry

In 2013, an assortment of artists, entrepreneurs, and local citizens established a lively creative hub named Zone 9, featuring a hip and eclectic mix of cafés, vintage shops, and artists' studios in the hulking setting of a 1960s-brutalist Soviet-inspired pharmaceuticals factory in Hanoi. Though not without its faults, Zone 9 developed rapidly into a teaming cultural venue. Its run ended after only six months, when it was forced to shut down after an accident caused the death of six workers. A heavily attended fundraising concert held in support of the accident victims sponsored partly by Goethe Institut seemed only to exacerbate authorities' ire, and Zone 9 was permanently banned.

While Zone 9's blend of commercial dynamism and independence did not appeal to authorities, its brief success did not escape the party's gaze. Indeed, the timing of developments suggests the Zone 9 experience informed efforts to promote a state-driven variety of artistic commercialism that continues to shape and limit independent art in Vietnam. It was in 2013, for example, that the state introduced Decree 113 which allowed auctioning (Dũng 2013: 59). The first three auction houses – Lý Thị, Lạc Việt, and Chọn from Saigon and Hanoi – were set up for purchasing mostly kitschy expressionist paintings.

By June 2014, the party developed further, as its old warning about the commercialization of art and culture was put aside with the announcement of a need to promote a 'cultural industry'. Sensing an opportunity, the Goethe Institut in Hanoi quickly hosted a seminar titled 'Creativity and the City' with key speakers from Nhà sàn Collective and Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism. In the same year, the first Hanoi's Art Market was opened just before *Tết* (Vietnamese New Year) featuring mass produced kitsch and handicrafts. Subsequently, the state invested itself in developing this model, reflected in the approval of the Master Plan for Fine Arts Development until 2020, Vision until 2030 (Đam 2014). This included the announcement to send 930 cultural officers abroad for short-term training by 2030 (2016) and a plan to build the first museum for contemporary art in Hanoi (Tuấn-Anh 2015). Nowhere in these initiatives is there space for independent art.

Opportunities and dilemmas in international collaboration

In 2017, however, Vietnam's government renewed its commitment to the development of a cultural industry with the establishment of the Vietnam National Institute of Art Studio

under the Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Art Studies (VICAS). The studio's mission is to research and support the development of experimental art under state guidelines.[2] International organizations like British Council engaged immediately with VICAS, with the project Cultural and Creative Hubs in Vietnam between 2018 and 2021 with the EU budget of €450.000. For the British Council and the EU, participation in project offers an opportunity to assist the government in the development of cultural industry while also promoting their own interests.[3] Response to this action, there were a number of independent art spaces, collectives, and practitioners joined in the project's training programs and networking events in Hanoi.[4] Posing both opportunities for independent artists, as well as challenges of cooperating with the state actor, the project promises to fund the independent art spaces only if their networks and working strategies are shared.[5] This condition is actually the risk for independent art practitioners because of losing their know-hows into the controlling hand. More oppressive policies might wait for them in the end of the road. Furthermore, under international political agendas, independent art has to deal with the dominance of politico-cultural Euro-American playgrounds.

Experiences of independent art: reports from Hanoi and Saigon

While understanding independent art in contemporary Vietnam benefits from a broad view, an account of the experiences of specific practitioners and art spaces provides a deeper analysis and is the aim of the remainder of the chapter. Of particular interest in the manner in which independent practitioners interact with national and international politics and publics through art activities. This is done by way of series of vignettes about art and art spaces in Vietnam's largest cities, Hanoi and Saigon. In Hanoi, we consider the experiences of artists and spaces associated with *Nhà Sàn* (House on Stilts) artists collective, an informal grouping that has played important roles in the production and circulation of independent art. In Saigon, we address the experiences or independent artists, art galleries as well as an art prize. While drawn from the experiences of diverse artists, the accounts illustrate the interplay of independent art in its broader contemporary context.

Hanoi: Nhà Sàn *and its flexible strategy*

With a rich history tracing back to the 11th century and its prominent role in Vietnam's politics, Hanoi has figured centrally in development of contemporary Vietnam. As the site of Vietnam's declaration of independence in 1945 and the capital of the socialist Vietnam, the city carries thick layers of political culture. Operating in this environment, Hanoi's independent artists have devised ways of navigating the city's complex political geography, forging and expanding spaces to function within a sometimes hostile but always furtive environment. In the context of Vietnam's expanding market economy, independent artists have developed strategies for developing independent art. As a loose collective, *Nhà Sàn* and its artists exemplify this point.

By the 1990s, the development of a market economy and associate expansion in personal freedoms create new subaltern spaces for the development of independent art and such vital functions as artistic experimentation, philosophical debate, materiality, criticism, and art education (Taylor 2004: 124). In the context of market transition, artists found themselves at the intersection of the private and public spheres and with a new and unfamiliar sense artistic independence and freedom. The story of Nguyễn Mạnh Đức, the founder of the *Nhà Sàn*, exemplified this phenomenon and would go on to play a key role in the development of independent art spaces.

Nguyễn Mạnh Đức and Nhà Sàn

From the own private house, the couple Đức and Lương developed *Nhà Sàn* as a collective space where Hanoi-based artists could come to experiment freely. Born into a renowned revolutionary family, Nguyễn Mạnh Đức receiving fine arts training and enjoyed the rare official status of artist within Vietnam's planned economy. He was an inactive artist, however, and spent most of his time working as a quality control officer for the Ministry of Industry and Trade in the field of handcrafts. In the lean year of 1992, Đức quit his job and with his wife – Lê Thị Lương – undertook a massive renovation of his residential house, reassembling it as a *nhà sàn* – traditional house on stilts characteristic of the Mường ethnic group. His contacts with networks of craftsmen from his days working for the state served him well. For almost three decades thereafter,[6] he developed the house into a center for business and experimentation with art and with approaches to art education or varieties formerly absent in Vietnam. *Nhà Sàn* was many things. A space for private business, for running artistic workshops, and for displaying arts and crafts. Within his experience in the socialist system and his appreciation of its rules, Đức conceived of his activities as falling in the realm of "uyển chuyển" (flexibility) and "nghệ thuật thể nghiệm" (experimental art), perhaps reassuring authorities that art at his place was art in process, unfinished and unpublished.

In many respects Đức's background as a state insider that permitted him to navigate and create spaces for independent art and have a sense of what was possible and what was dangerous. He acknowledged this himself as occupying a space of "trung gian" (medium) between artists and authorities, between notions of publicity and privacy, official and informal culture, all for the sake of art. With an enormous support of his wife, he continuously emphasized the importance of maintaining "giữ quan hệ tốt" (smooth and good-working relationships) with diverse groups, from neighbors and hoodlums to culture sector inspectors.[7] Over the time, *Nhà Sàn* has constantly developed, serving as a base for such artists as Trần Lương, Nguyễn Minh Phước, Nguyễn Phương Linh, Nguyễn Quốc Thành, Tuấn Mami, Nguyễn Trinh Thi and others as well as the development of important art spaces, including *Nhà Sàn Studio*, *Nhà Sàn Collective*, *Ryllega*, *Queer Forever!* and *Hanoi DocLab*.

Trần Lương and Nhà Sàn Studio

In 1998 the well-linked and market-savvy artist-curator Trần Lương came together with Nguyễn Mạnh Đức to found *Nhà Sàn Studio*, quickly raising international funds for its development. Although the amount was modest, it was an historic achievement representing, as it did, the first private support for independent art in Vietnam since the beginning of the reform period. Thereafter, Trần Lương brought the Ford Foundation and the VFAA together to establish the Institute of Contemporary Art. Corruption ensued and the project failed, leaving a well-equipped but abandoned space.[8]

Trần Lương left the VFAA and its failed art institute project with a bad taste in his mouth. His work became increasingly political and critical of the regime and addressed a variety of social issues. Performance and video became his new favorite forms. His first public art in 2001 – *The Coal Mine Project* was undertaken in the coal mines in Quảng Ninh province, included *Steamed Rice Man* (Figure 35.1), a performance piece in which the artist's body was covered with black dust beneath a layer of white sticky rice. An artist's statement was written, "How much rice will be eaten in order to make a coal piece?" In his practices, Trần Lương crossed political and geographical borders in ways that drew the ire of authorities.

Figure 35.1 Photo: *Steamed Rice Man*

Trần Lương, 2001. Performance view at Mạo Khê coal mine, Quảng Ninh province, Việt Nam. Images courtesy of the artist.

Nguyễn Minh Phước, Vũ Hữu Thuy, and Ryllega

By the late 1990s, public political criticism had gained an increased salience, as did repression and a constriction of space for independent art. Political criticisms then were reflected in calls for the exculpation of political prisoners dating back to the 1960s, direct criticisms of communist dictatorship, and calls for a transition to democracy by intellectuals. In the ensuing wave of repression, independent art came under direct assault. *Nhà Sàn* itself was subject to strict surveillance. Gatherings around *Nhà Sàn* slowed and came to a halt. And yet, reflecting the resilience of the artist community, a new space was soon formed.

Founded in 2004 by artists Nguyễn Minh Phước and Vũ Hữu Thuy, the *Ryllega* studio at 1A Tràng Tiền street provided a new, if modest, space for independent art in Hanoi. The studio's name, *Ryllega*, was devised through a bit of word play reversing 'gallery' by Trần Lương. According to Lương, the name was meant to connote resistance to commercial art in various so-called galleries in the neighborhood. Despite its tininess, *Ryllega*'s white cube space attracted lots of young artists who used the space to experiment with new art forms. Financial support came from the artists themselves and some international foundations. Being in the red, the studio closed in 2009. Subsequently, its artists retuned to *Nhà Sàn*.

Nguyễn Trinh Thi, Her Arts, and Hanoi DocLab

By 2010 Hanoi's independent art continued its growth with *Nhà Sàn* maintaining its prominent role in the contemporary art scene. But again, *Nhà Sàn* was forced to close in the aftermath of a crackdown following the nude performance *Fly off* by Lại Thị Diệu Hà. Charged with "vi phạm

Figure 35.2   Photo: *Unsubtitled*

Nguyễn Trinh Thi, 2010. Video installation, 10 projectors, 10 media file players, 19 wooden cut-out screens, various loops, color, sound. Installation view at Nhà Sàn Studio. Images courtesy of the artist.

thuần phong mỹ tục" (violating pure customs and beautiful traditions), the performance was subject to heavy criticism in the official media. Drawing inspiration from the events, Nguyễn Trinh Thi responded with her early 2011 video installation *Unsubtitled* (Figure 35.2). Consisting of people standing and explaining who they are and what they eat, the artwork reflected a confessing obligation in a controlled society as a joke under the artist's statement: "Eating needs no explanation." However, the artwork was perceived as an artist's odd behavior, and cultural officers agreed to let the show go on.[9] In this case, the authority had too little humor to capture the artwork's provocativeness.

As a Hanoian who had studied in the United States, Trinh Thi founded *Hanoi DocLab* in 2009 as an independent artist collective supporting experimental documentary films and video art. Being active in education, *Hanoi DocLab* organized screenings and workshops, produced moving images, shared its small library, and engaged with the public via a number of film festivals. As an unregistered Vietnamese non-governmental organization, *Hanoi DocLab*'s space had stood for eight years under the Hanoi Goethe Institut, a German organization for cultural exchange.

Nguyễn Phương Linh, friends, NSC, and Queer Forever!

Growing up in *Nhà Sàn* and learning from the artist friends of her father – *Nhà Sàn*'s founder Nguyễn Mạnh Đức, Nguyễn Phương Linh exemplifies the no-nonsense post-reform generation, explaining her presence in the art collective in straightforwardly humorous terms: "My father put my ass in the space."[10] With English language skills that enable her to reach out to

the world, Phương Linh and her friends responded to the closure of *Nhà Sàn* with an interdisciplinary art project titled *Skylines With Flying People*, whose title references a poem by Trần Dần (1926–1997) about a place without space for imagination and freedom. With the support from a variety of worldwide foundations and patrons, the project brought artists and curators from around the world to Hanoi for a series of opened studios, exhibitions, discussions, and workshops. Between 2010 and 2021, *Skylines With Flying People* was organized four times, increasing in scale each time and expanding its events across the entire country. In 2013 Phương Linh, together with Tuấn Mami and other artist friends, sought to establish *Nhà Sàn Collective* in soon-to-close Zone 9. From that, Nguyễn Quốc Thành initiated *Queer Forever!* as the first public queer art festival in Vietnam.

Saigon: art, institutions, and globalized professionalism

Saigon's reputation as a vibrant and cosmopolitan city reflects its distinctive social history defined by processes of settlement, colonialism, anti-colonialism, wars, socialist revolution and crisis, and, most recently, the emergence of rapidly expanding and globalizing economic powerhouse with a metropolitan population now approaching 10 million. From past to present, Saigon has attracted diverse populations with multi-cultural sensibilities. In addition to its majority Vietnamese (Kinh) and minority Chinese and Khmer populations, Saigon has been shaped by the presence of foreigners whose numbers and purposes have varied across time.

While the economy around Hanoi has grown significantly, Saigon is Vietnam's largest and most dynamic socioeconomic center. But Saigon's significance goes beyond this. As the former political capital of the vanquished Republic of Vietnam, the city is officially represented as a site of revolutionary triumph and defeat. In the latter connection, Saigon retains a special meaning among the more than 4 million members of Vietnam's *Việt Kiều* (overseas diaspora). Large numbers of them trace ties to the city and are part of families who became political refugees and fled the country as 'boat people,' with many eventually settling in Western European countries and the United States after 1975.

Since the early 1990s and with varying success the party has sought to attract "Việt Kiều yêu nước" (patriotic overseas Vietnamese) to Vietnam to enrich the country (Khải 1993). And many *Việt Kiều* – including former refugees – have returned, particularly to the south and Saigon. Among these have been artists, gallerists, and collectors who began to resettle in the 1990s and have initiated a variety of art activities that have greatly enhanced Saigon's independent art scene. These included the *Sài Gòn Open City* project, which was at the time of its launching was the most ambitious contemporary art event in the city (Corey 2015: 139). To capture these contributions, the account that follows examines this process, showing how art spaces run by *Việt Kiều* in Saigon developed rapidly into highly professional and globally linked organizations engaged both in purchasing artwork and nursing artistic experimentation that vary in their commercial and artistic orientation.

Dinh Q. Lê and Sàn Art

Sàn Art was officially founded in 2007 as an independent space for art and culture exchanges by four *Việt Kiều* artists, Tuấn Andrew, Tiffany Chung, Phù Nam, and Dinh Q.Lê. Prior to it, *Sàn Art* was meant to function as a Vietnamese non-governmental organization (NGO), but Vietnam's legal system made this impossible at the time, hampering its development and legal status. Today, *Sàn Art* functions as an international NGO with its physical space in Vietnam and is able to receive funds from around the world via its legal body as Los Angeles–based

Vietnam Foundation for the Arts. Hosting a number of educational programs on art and culture, *Sàn Art* effected strong impacts on local art scene while also attracting the authorities' attention. Allegations at the time that *Sàn Art*'s principal error was its failure to pay bribes could not be confirmed but did circulate. More importantly and promisingly for the art sector, the art space overcame these difficulties, shifting its activities toward the collaborations with partners Mot+++ and The Nguyen Foundation that supported the establishment of the Saigon-based residency program *A. Farm*.

The key factor of *Sàn Art*'s development has been artist Dinh Q. Lê (Lê Quang Đĩnh in Vietnamese). Born in Hà Tiên on Vietnam's border with Cambodia, the artist fled along with his mother during a 1977 Khmer Rouge attack and landed in California in 1980. With fine art photography training in the background, Đĩnh decided to return to Vietnam in the 1990s. In order "to be Vietnamese again," he committed himself to forming friendships with locals. In so doing, he realized the paucity of books and opportunities for education especially in art, inspiring to establish *Sàn Art* as a means for both art development and expanding and deepening his social ties.[11]

Quỳnh Phạm, Galerie Quynh, and Sao La

On the contrary, *Galerie Quynh* is a commercial gallery. Established in 2003, the gallery focused initially on developing and strengthening the Saigon's art market, while also supporting education and experimentation for contemporary art. As part of these efforts, the gallery launched an educational initiative titled *Sao La* on the grounds of the Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts Museum in 2014 in the face high rents and censorship.[12]

Subsequently, the paradigm of *Sao La* had changed into an artist collective. After a period of membership turnover, *Sao La* came to include a mix of Vietnamese and *Việt Kiều* friends, including Sỹ Tùng, Nguyễn Tố Kim Lan, Đỗ Thanh Lãng, and Nguyễn Đức Đạt. After landing in an old quaint Vietnamese building in a historical quarter of Saigon, the collective founded *Cù Rú* bar on the top floor. As a unique combination of a living space, junk gallery, and wine bar, Cù Rú organized a variety of film screenings, exhibitions, concerts, art walks, and parties. The bar's final show took place in April 2017, when 11 Saigon based artists at *Cù Rú* bar and *Galerie Quynh* presented *Ngu Cho Nó Bay* (Figure 35.3), a playful and joyful exhibition that can be roughly translated as 'it's silly let it go'. About this exhibition, *Galerie Quynh* announced precisely of *Sao La*'s characteristic transformation from the polished space of the gallery into an alternative space of the infra-ordinary animated humorously with everyday objects.

Once again, a returning Vietnamese American played a decisive role – Quỳnh Phạm. Becoming a refugee in 1975, Quỳnh grew up and studied art history in California before returning to Vietnam in 1997. Seeking to harness not only the local art community but also global art communities in the development of Vietnamese art, Quỳnh has worked to forge connections between the local art scene and such international artists as Jamie Maxtone-Graham and Thierry Bernard-Gotteland, whose important roles in Vietnamese independent art is discussed next.

International artists and artworks

Maxtone-Graham came to Vietnam in the early 1990s as a camera man shooting a documentary film. Years after, he returned and settled in Hanoi and engaged with the local art scene via *Hanoi DocLab*'s activities while developing his own fine art photography. In his photographs, the photo series *That Little Distance* (Figure 35.4) that was realized in an industrial building at Zone

Figure 35.3   Photo: *Ngu Cho Nó Bay*. Sao La.

Group exhibition by Đỗ Thanh Lãng, Hoàng Ngọc Tú, Hoàng Nam Việt, Ngô Đình Bảo Châu, Nguyễn Đức Đạt, Nguyễn Kim Tố Lan, Nguyễn Việt Long, Nguyễn Uyên Minh, Sunny, Trương Công Tùng, Bảo Vương. Installation view in Galerie Quynh. Images courtesy of the artists and Galerie Quynh.

9, Maxtone-Grame explored the theme of personality in a foreign context, including long-exposure portraits of others and himself. In the style of the early 20th century's European studio photos introduced in the country during the colonial period, the photo compositions included the protagonists in the center and himself at the periphery. Employing such an aesthetic, the photos situate Vietnam as a global point in space time while also conjuring questions about colonialism in the gaze of both the viewer and the viewed.

Thierry Bernard-Gotteland, a Parisian, came to Vietnam in 2006 to teach art and design at an international university in Saigon. His experience is another story worth telling, as it speaks to the confluence of local and international themes that has been central to the development of independent art in town. Attuned to the tension of being a foreign artist, he never expected any curator or researcher to take an interest in his work in the context of Vietnamese art scene.[13] According him, his interest in the intersection of visual art, philosophy and heavy metal music led to *Echoing Scars*, an exhibition at *Galerie Quynh*. Employing objects and paintings related to his personal artistic circles, the installation highlighted the physical body of the art space, explored the self-reflection relating to the history of heavy metal music. In its visual effect, the installation reflected Saigon as a cosmopolitan site of cultural and material exchanges through a multi-dimensional combination of global music, consumption, and fashion. In one part of the exhibit, an antique Singer sewing machine was metaphorically cast as anthropomorphized singer in the exhibition – with a microphone to its needle and an amplifier below, recalling the historical connection between a mechanical relic of Saigon's past and the frequent appearance of such antiques sitting silently as decorative items in fashion shops, hipster warehouses, and cafes across contemporary Saigon.

Figure 35.4   Photo: *That Little Distance #18*

Jamie Maxtone-Graham, 2013. Image produced in a previously state-owned pharmaceutical factory in Hanoi; 15 second exposure, daylight only illumination, the photographer appears with the subjects in all the portraits. Image courtesy of the artist.

Dominic Scriven and the Dogma Prize

Beside the foregoing accounts of the earlier actors, Vietnam has seen the development of new arenas for independent art, including the establishment of the first independent art prize initiated by a Saigon-based British collector, Dominic Scriven. Focusing on self-portraiture, the *Dogma Prize* aims to encourage emerging artists. After several attempts to establish the prize, Scriven invited active artists and curators, including Arlette Quỳnh Anh Trần, Dinh Q. Lê, and the present author to serve as jury. In 2017, the prize was restructured in a way that removed its links to the VFAA. In so doing, it became the first art prize in Vietnam completely independent from the state.

Receiving 254 applications, the 2017 *Dogma Prize* attracted artists from across the country. Succeeded in presenting artworks of 23 finalists, the prize held the exhibition *The Multiverse* in July 2017 in Hanoi. Ironically, five artworks were censored at the show's opening included the winning piece *Confronting Oneself in the State of Presence*, a single-channel video by Nguyễn Phan Anh. Ultimately, the censored works were displayed afterwards and details were announced on different cyber platforms. Scriven himself remains in Vietnam as an investor, collector of propaganda art, and benefactor of the contemporary art scene.

Challenges for the continuity of independent art

Independent art provides a particularly interesting vantage point on Vietnam's ongoing social transformation, reflecting the tensions and contradictions arising from the expansion of certain

personal freedoms within a market society still subordinated to a political framework. As Vietnam globalizes, Vietnamese independent artists have increasingly engaged with each other and with constellations of the global art system. Within and beyond Vietnam, Vietnamese independent artists have negotiated spaces for their work, seeking both greater freedom of expression and opportunities for learning. Under this circumstance, there is still no clear vision for the independent art's development, which is so far still random by individualistic initiatives.

Meanwhile, the party-state seems to stand in between a polarity of, on the one hand, promoting art conmercialism and tourism and, on the other hand, fitting it in 'an imbued national identity'. In such gap, a foundation for experimentation, education and freedom of expression of art is still a blank sheet in the outdated art school system, where the handicraft technique under the guidance of Marxist-Leninism and Hồ Chí Minh's ideology is still a priority. Furthermore, the government has not yet issued any taxing policy to encourage non-profitable activities, but only doubted of sponsors' *động cơ* (motivation) as *thế lực thù địch* (the enemy's cabal) to destroy the country. As a routine, every decade, shortly before a National Congress started, art and culture and civil society are undergone more harassment than usual till the next sitting.

In contrast to that socialist state's posture, Vietnam's varied and often secretive class of emerging capitalists have taken their own interest in the contemporary art market, offering luxury infrastructure for exhibiting, promoting artworks and artists via professional international curators, and promising big purchases to mysterious hidden collectors as powerful *quan chức* (state mandarins). In this binary situation between the state and the market, censorship becomes actually an outdated game even while hastening the commercialization of independent art. Whether independent art in Vietnam can maintain and strengthen its autonomy and adaptability to contribute to the emancipation of human beings is a question that only the future history of art in contemporary Vietnam can reveal.

Notes

1 I use the preferred name Saigon instead of Hồ Chí Minh City.
2 www.facebook.com/pg/vicasartstudio/about/?ref=page_internal
3 www.britishcouncil.vn/en/programmes/arts/cultural-creative-hubs-vietnam
4 www.facebook.com/events/2001401423486535/ & www.facebook.com/BritishCouncilVietnam/videos/1714702315282237/
5 The artists' names remain anonymous.
6 In June 2020, Nhà Sàn was torn down. Nguyễn Mạnh Đức moved to his new house in Long Biên district.
7 Interview with Nguyễn Mạnh Đức on 14.12.2016
8 Interview with Trần Lương on 29.05.2017
9 Nguyễn Trinh Thi's talk at Humboldt University in May 2016.
10 Translated by the author from "Bố em đặt cái đít em vào đấy" in the conversation with the artist in 2017.
11 Interview with Đinh Q. Lê on 27.04.2017
12 Interview with Sao La's members on 10.05.2017
13 Interview with Thierry Bernard-Gotteland on 24.04.2017. [Internet links were last accessed on 18.05.2021]

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36

REVOLUTIONARY JOURNALISM IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Nguyen-Pochan Thi Thanh Phuong

The production, circulation, and regulation of journalism in contemporary Vietnam reflects tensions and contradictions stemming from the contested representation of social life on a daily basis and, in particular, the fluctuating boundaries of press freedoms in a country whose once-revolutionary ruling party has sought to retain and enforce its press monopoly while also relaxing restrictions on the circulation of social commentary at the margins. While Vietnam is routinely ranked as among the world worst countries in terms of press freedoms, the nuances of journalism in the country are more complex and interesting than is commonly known. In this chapter, I am particularly concerned with exploring continuity and change in the relation of journalism to the production of state ideology as well as the challenges the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has faced in this relation in the internet age.

Ideology and media in historical perspective

By design, contemporary Vietnam's press is meant to serve the interests of the CPV. In the party's view, Vietnam's media refers exclusively to officially recognized outlets; alternative outlets are largely, if not always, successfully surprised. A fundamental starting point for the analysis of journalistic media in Vietnam is the concept of the "revolutionary press" (*báo chí cách mạng*) according to which the press is viewed as an instrument of class struggle and social regulation formed, developed, and steered by the party in support of the party's indispensable and historically destined leadership role.

For party stalwarts, the revolutionary press is a vital organ of the party and is seen without irony as an agent for the promotion of correct viewpoints. It is intended to be a major transmission belt of ideas which reach all sectors of society. According to the official view, the revolutionary press is imbued with a revolutionary spirit trained over nearly a century of class struggle in the interests of the party and nation. Nor is the revolutionary press a marginal bit player in Vietnam's political and intellectual life.

Historical development

In its own telling, Vietnam's revolutionary press traces its history to the establishment of the country's first revolutionary socialist newspaper – *Thanh Niên*, founded on 21 June 1925 by

Hồ Chí Minh; predating by almost four years the formal establishment of the CPV itself. The subsequent development of revolutionary press was marked by three distinctive phases, each characterized by the distinctive challenges the party confronted.

The first of these was an anti-colonial phase, in which revolutionary press activities took place in the context of colonial repression and amid intense political rivalries between the party and other pro-independence movements. In the 1930, revolutionary journalism faced extreme pressures and operated under constant threat. By the 1940s its mission lay in undertaking propaganda activities for the Việt Minh Front and the Association of Culture for Saving the Nation under the aegis of the "Outline of the Vietnamese culture" introduced by Trường Chinh in 1943 (Nguyễn, 1984, pp. 263–264).

Between 1945 and 1975 and especially between 1954 and 1975 the Vietnamese press came under two different political regimes. In the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) the non-communist press was swiftly eliminated. In the Republic of Vietnam the press remained on a pluralist footing.

In the north, the party's tactics aimed to suggest press freedom. Accordingly, on 14 December 1956, Hồ Chí Minh enacted Decree No. 282 whereby privately owned publications were authorized and no censorship applied. Approved by the party-controlled National Assembly on 20 May 1957, it would become the first press law passed under the communist regime (Đào, Đỗ & Vũ, 2010, p. 250). Despite these appearances, the functioning of the press in the DRV reflected the consolidation of party control. In March 1955, the 7th Central Committee of the Second Party Congress noted the appearance of some symptoms of "rightist and leftist thoughts" within the party (*Tạp chí cộng sản,* 2018). The most telling example of the party's rectification of the press activities was *Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm*'s case (Nhà xuất bản Sự thật, 1959; Hoàng, 1983; Boudarel, 1991).

In the south, the CPV used revolutionary press to advance its insurgent goals, deliver propaganda, and counteract non-communist and anti-communist media outlets. It did so through party channels and news services, some of which functioned through the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF). These included *Thông tấn xã giải phóng, Đài phát thanh giải phóng* and *Giải phóng*. These news services took aim at the southern regime and the American-led war, providing alternative accounts to outlets affiliated with or supported by the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) or Pentagon (Nguyễn, 2015a, 2012, part 3). But they also targeted newspapers that opposed both the Saigon administration and communism. The pre-1975 Saigon press[1] was pretty free and the majority of newspapers were privately owned. Since the creation of first newspapers *Gia Định báo* in 1865, Saigon had a developed and diverse press market with about 50 daily newspapers and many magazines (Mặc, 2015; Lê, 2016). Saigon's political journalism was also pluralist and tumultuous, especially since the emigration of more than 1 million of northerners to Saigon after 1954. Many famous daily newspapers created and led by the northern emigrants such as *Sáng tạo, Tự do, Chính Luận* or *Ngôn luận* were anticommunist (Mặc, 2015; Hoàng, 2011). The procommunist newspapers or those affiliated to the NLF were also plentiful such as *Thần Chung, Đuốc Nhà Nam, Tiếng dội Miền Nam, Buổi sáng, Điện Tín* (Nguyễn, 2012, part 1; Nguyễn, 2015b; Trần, 2015). The "combating press" – a term now used by the official discourse to name the pro-communist press – experienced and hence inherited the pre-1975 Saigon's pluralist and competitive press which has ceased to exist since 1975.

The end of the war saw the formation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and consolidation of party control. In the south, it marked the end of a pluralist press as non-communist media outlets and journalists were shut down. On 7 July 1976, the southern Association of Patriotic and Democratic Journalists was merged with the Association of Vietnamese Journalists (Đào, Đỗ & Vũ, 2010, p. 316). By 1977, all media outlets and journalists who had been active within the NLF were integrated with the northern press. The revolutionary press established its monopoly.

Ideological renewal and its limits

The CPV's commitment to a process of reform or renewal (*đổi mới*) occurred at the Party's Sixth Congress in 1986 at a time when the country was facing extreme poverty, hyper-inflation, and international isolation. Coming shortly after the death of hardline Secretary General Lê Duẩn, the significance of *đổi mới* was most readily apparent in party ideology and discourse, where it was misleadingly represented as genuine political reform. Nowhere was the representation of *đổi mới* as political reform more dramatically in evidence than in a series of 31 articles in the section entitled "Tasks to be undertaken immediately" signed by General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh and published in the daily *Nhân Dân* from 25 May 1987 to 28 September 1990 (Hoàng, 2017) This section generated great attention at the time of its publication and is widely recalled as a significant moment in the reform process. Taken together, developments such as the Sixth Party Congress and the publication of Nguyễn Văn Linh's added up to something of a green light for a minor, but still significant, easing of restrictions on thought and expression generally and in the revolutionary press.

In subsequent years and well into the 1990s, articles published in *Nhân Dân* and other outlets were announcing the dawn of an era characterized by a "renewal of thought", often presented via unfavorable comparisons to the dogmatic and mechanical thought processes that had characterized the recent past. Often, the rhetoric of reform was more in evidence than new ideas. At other times the enthusiasm for new thinking appeared to embolden newspapers and journalists alike, encouraging substantive changes in the activities of the press and its social roles. As *Nhân Dân* editor HữuThọ[2] would later recall, Vietnam was experiencing the emergence of a new "critical" brand of revolutionary journalism; one that reflected the image of a party determined in its efforts to address the challenges of the time: to root out corruption, roll back subsidization, reign in bureaucratization, call out degenerate and alienated elements within the party-state, and tackle the evils born from the emerging market economy (Hữu, 1998, pp. 459–461). Summing up these changes in his still-used textbook *The Journalist's Work* Hữu Thọ identified two major features of a critical revolutionary press: perspicacity and honesty, and encapsulated its spirit with a motto: "Piercing eyes, selfless heart, sapient pen" (*ibid.*, p. 279).

The significance of these changes was not restricted to the printed page: the newly emboldened press highlighted, encouraged, and anticipated incipient societal trends. The two most notable examples of this were seen in agricultural reform ("household contract") and enterprise reform ("fence breaking" in the non-state sector) (Hữu, 1994; Thái, 2001; Trường, 2002; Papin and Passicousset, 2010). In both cases, the press provided key inputs – with journalists priding themselves on documenting, encouraging, and validating new trends and practices in a way that supported broader processes of change (Hữu, 1994, p. 292).

Perhaps most significantly, the Sixth Party Congress infused the revolutionary press with a sense of idealism. As Hữu Thọ (1998, p. 37) emphasized, "telling the truth" must be deliberate: the revolutionary journalist must guarantee the revolutionary ideals of the party, combativeness, and mass character. The values of perspicacity and honesty aligned with time-honored Confucian notions of morality (e.g. the pairing of "talent" and "heart"). More important, still, was its resonance with revolutionary morality, which mandates absolute loyalty of the press to the party. Indeed, there is no use in exaggerating the scope of the changes. In principle, the 1989 Law of the Press and subsequent laws (in 1999 and 2016) guaranteed freedom of the press and the absence of censorship. In practice, compliance with party strictures was rigorously enforced through countless mechanisms and institutions of the party, state, and police, as is detailed further later.

The revolutionary press meets the market

By the mid-to-late 1990s the pace and scope of Vietnam's movement toward a market-based economy increased, with the CPV influencing patterns of social life in all spheres. As Jonathan Pincus has suggested in this volume, the development of the market economy in Vietnam has taken place primarily within and on the borders of the state sector, generating tendencies toward the commercialization of state-owned and -controlled ventures. To this trend Vietnam's revolutionary press was no exception. And yet the political nature of the press generated pressures and tensions specific sorts of challenges. From the perspective of the party, the commercialization of the press needed to be balanced through a rigorous redefinition of the revolutionary press's social mission and continuous strengthening of the mechanisms of social control.

Commercialization

As early as 1990, the party signaled its intent to scale back the state-socialist subsidy model in favor of a mode of state governance and "socialization" that would develop market mechanisms within the Leninist political framework while gradually expanding the scope for "non state" media providers. The implications of these changes in the press, while slow developing in their early stages, have been striking. Until the 1980s, Vietnam's revolutionary press exhibited a simplified structure. As Nguyễn Thành (1984, p. 11) observed, the main distinction was the *party press* – print and other media aimed at party members – and the *party-oriented press* belonging to mass organizations, all state supported. Over the course of the 1990s the party-state continued to support these forms. Increasingly, however, growth in subsidies to the media were limited, while a raft of new laws, decrees, and directives encouraged and in key respects required print and other media outlets to generate own sources of incomes. The result was a revolutionary media sustained through a mix of state finance and advertising, lending the Vietnamese media a quirky mix of communist ideology and commercialism that would quickly become the new norm in a rapidly expanding media sector.

The CPV's first document on the press economy was Central Committee's Directive No. 8 in 1992, which called for the media outlets' self-accounting and financial autonomy. This leadership line was reaffirmed in the CPV's 8th, 9th, and 10th National Congress in 1996, 2002, and 2007 (Bùi, 2017, pp. 107–109). In the 1999's press bill amendment, media outlets (including print media, radio, television, and electronic media) were regulated as autonomous economic unities but which were still partly supported by the state and the body in charge. According to the 2016 press bill, the state no longer finances but "commissions"[3] the press to carry out "political, social, security and defence missions" (Art. 5). The relationship between the state and media outlets is no longer hierarchical and bureaucratic, but economic.

In practice, the press field shifted much more slowly than other economic sectors into market economy.[4] Until 2019, only 39% of media outlets were financially autonomous, 36% partly autonomous and 25% entirely dependent on the State finance (Phạm, 2019). In 2018, the total revenue of the press activities was 15.840 billion VND, including 4,900 billion from print and electronic media and 10.940 billion from radio and television (Trần, 2018). Advertising is still the main source of income, especially for radio and television: out of a total of 10.940 billion VND, advertising brings in more than 9.600 billion (*ibid.*). But this constantly declines in all of press sectors. While some expected a brighter perspective for electronic media, Lê Quốc Minh, deputy general director of the Vietnam's News Agency, had a different view. The total revenue of online advertising in 2018 was 550 million USD, out of which Google

and Facebook already pocketed 387 million; and the number of press media getting online ads revenue constantly decreases over the year: from 81% of press media profiting from online ads in 2010, this rate fell to 31% in 2018 and 29% in 2019 (Minh, 2019). Some advocate the circulation model, following the *New York Times*' success, to replace the advertising model that is now in crisis.[5] Supporting this trend, Lê Quốc Minh stressed that the VNA's *Vietnam Plus* is the first and still the only paid electronic media in Vietnam (*ibid*.). There are media successful in both circulation and advertising, such as *Tuổi trẻ* and *Thanh niên*; but they are exceptional. Insofar as the private press is not authorized, the quest for a solution to the economic and political imperative is at a standstill.

Social criticism: redefining the revolutionary press's social role

In the context of economic growth, the scale of Vietnam's media grew rapidly. And yet the regulatory roles of the state changed. Rather than through bureaucratic hierarchical controls, loyalty to the party line was encouraged through a new emphasis on social criticism and enforced through an expanding legal regime trained on the regulation of the ways in which journalism is produced and consumed.

Against this backdrop, the party sought to maintain the political role of the press by emphasizing its role in providing 'social criticism'. As presented in the proceedings of the Tenth Party Congress (in 2006), social criticism is seen as an activity whereby party and state organs can monitor and guide developments in society and ideology across an array of fields, including the press. From the beginning, social criticism was intended to be undertaken with party controlled spaces with an eye toward combating the development of political and ideological pluralism (Trần, 2006, p. 161). Achieving this goal presented major challenges, owing both to the affinities of social criticism with pluralistic politics and the emergence of new media beyond the party's direct control. A principal source of difficulty is the affinity of social criticism with modes of expression that threaten party control.

Many within the press embraced this emerging social criticism role, a development that no doubt broadened the scope of public debate and increased the media influence on elite politics (Phan, 2015). The pioneer media in social criticism are print media such as *Thanh Niên, Tuổitrẻ, Tiền Phong* and electronic media such as *Vnexpress* or *Dân trí*. In 2015, several newspapers criticized the city of Hanoi's decision to cut down trees. The heated discussions in the press, such as *Vnexpress* and *Tuổi trẻ Online*, received a lot of attention and reaction from the public and pressured the city to stop this plan. In the case of Đoàn Văn Vươn's protest in 2012, a series of newspapers blamed the Tiên Lãng administration and the city of Hải Phòng. The media coverage generated a wave of opinion in favor of Đoàn Văn Vươn and pushed the prime minister to conclude about the "illegal requisition of the People's Committee of Tiên Lãng district" on 10 February 2012.[6] This event, typical of "press social criticism", also touched on the sensitive subject of land ownership. In a report on press activities presented at the national press conference by Đỗ Quý Doãn, Vice Minister of Information and Communication,[7] the press was criticized for over-reporting this case and in an one-sided way, not objectively and not seriously. This example shows that freedom of social criticism depends largely on the subject, whether it is sensitive or not from the authorities' point of view.

Social media: losing and struggling to regain control over the narrative

With the rise of social media, Vietnam's press has lost its ability to monopolize social criticism. State media outlets evidenced an inability to keep pace with social criticism. Instances of the

latter occurred with increasing frequency, as seen controversies regarding the PMU corruption scandal in 2008, the state requisitioning of land in Hải Phòng in 2012, constitutional reforms in 2013, protests surrounding the mass felling of trees in Hanoi in 2015, massive unregulated social criticism of the 2016 Formosa steel factory environmental disaster, and the protest led by villagers from Đồng Tâm against the state requisitioning of land from 2017 to 2020. For media outlets and journalists alike, the rapid emergence of new media posed a mix opportunities and dangers. Media outlets quickly developed presences on line, expanding their reach. In so doing, press outlets and journalists faced the difficult challenge of responding to issues being discussed online without violating party ideological strictures.

The party-state has responded to these pressures through an increasingly extensive web of regulatory measures, evidenced both in revisions of the Law on Press and the Penal Code. Subsequent adjustments to the penal code stipulated new penalties on "Revealing state secrets" (Art. 263 and 264), "Abusing democratic freedoms to encroach upon the interests of the state, social organizations and citizens" (Art. 258), "Conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam" (Art. 88), and "Producing, storing and spreading or propagating information, documents, and objects against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam" (Art. 117).

Increasingly, revelations about corruption and abuse of power or dissemination of information judged to harm the party-state's were prosecuted as criminal offenses. In 2008, several journalists from the southern newspapers *Tuổi trẻ* and *Thanh niên* were convicted, fired, and jailed for their coverage of the PMU corruption scandal under Articles 263 and 258 of the Penal Code. Particular pressure has been brought to bear on online press outlets. In 2015, Kim Quốc Hoa, editor-in-chief of *Người cao tuổi*, was prosecuted under Article 258 for bringing out investigative articles related to corruption within the Army. In 2016, two editors-in-chief (of *Petrotimes and Infonet)* were dismissed for publishing articles that "puzzled public opinion". In 2018 the state suspended the online operations of *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, Vietnam's most widely read and lucrative online news outlet, for its "misinformation" in the article "The president of the socialist republic of Vietnam agrees on the neef to approve of the law on demonstration", published on 19 June 2018 (Anh, 2018). In fact, *Tuổi trẻ Online* reported honestly and so quickly the words of Trần Đại Quang, were censored.

On 3 April 2019, the government enacted the "Plan for the development and management of the national press by 2025" with a view to reduce the amount of media outlets as well as that of the bodies in charge. By 2025, 94 bodies in charge and 180 media outlets will be removed and this will affect 1,500 employees. It is forecast that there will be 688 media outlets in the whole country (Nguyễn, 2019). As the *Nhân dân* newspaper said, this plan is designed to lighten the press system in order to enhance its effectiveness and to ease the burden on the state budget.[8] In fact it aims to consolidate the party's control by reducing the freedom of the press. The concentration of the press in the hands of a few major media clearly aims to maintain the orthodox press as "the main stream of the media system".[9] But as noted by Ngọc Vinh − editorial secretary of *Tuổi trẻ*, this plan would paradoxically provide an "excellent opportunity for social media" because "the official media don't have the same freedom of speech as them and thus cannot compete with them" (Ngô, 2019).

Lead, regulate, and punish

As of 2019, Vietnam counted 844 printed periodicals, including 184 newspapers and 660 magazines; 24 online newspapers; and 67 broadcasting stations, including 64 provincial broadcasting, a national television system, a national radio station, a digital television network, and more than 23,400 licensed journalists.[10] The chapter examines the challenges the party has faced in

maintaining the functions of the *revolutionary press* in the context of rapid social change. For a closer look at these challenges, it is instructive to peer into the mechanisms by which the party regulates the press, as it is carried out by a troika of actors, including the Central Department for Propaganda and Instruction, State, and the Police.

Political leadership: the Central Department for Propaganda and Instruction

The *Ban tuyên giáo trung ương* is an agency known to all Vietnamese people. It was designed to be an advisory body for the Political Bureau and the secretariat of the CPV in the field of "the Party's political, thought, moral construction, propaganda and political theories, the Party's history"; at the same time, it is a professional body in charge of the party's propaganda.[11] The department is also the right arm of the CPV for the directorate of press, publishing, culture and arts, and education and science. It is, in effect, the executive editor of the entire Vietnamese press. Its role is to ensure that the press closely follows the party's directives and remains loyal to its guidelines.

The department "coordinates" with the Ministry of Information and Communication and the Association of Vietnamese Journalists in drafting, monitoring, and enforcing laws on the press so as "firmly maintain its revolutionary character"; "rectify fully and effectively press activities"; and "reinforce the responsibility of supervisory organs and that of the media" (Lưu, 2016, p. 49). As an agency of the party, the department's function inter-penetrates the state regulatory machinery and newspapers themselves. The principle of democratic centralism in its leadership of press is not implicit, but explicit (Papin & Passicousset, 2010, p. 321), and carried via the mechanism of "weekly meetings" (Đinh, 2004, p. 35). The latter are still maintained today, even reinforced. In recent years, the CPV has emphasized the importance of strengthening and diversifying its regulatory roles. This is not a secret operation, but one presented as normal and correct, as "the direct and total management of the Party over the press is an unchanging principle in the Party's mission" (Lưu, 2016, p. 96).

Regulation: state management of the press

In 2007, former Minister of Information and Communication Lê Doãn Hợp stated that "like commuters, if the press stays correctly to the right side of the road, it would be safe and free."[12] The concept of "right side" (*lề phải*) has since been used as a euphemism to refer to Vietnam's official media system and outlets, as opposed to non-official and "outlawed media", especially "varieties of self-styled journalism" broadcast on internet-based social media. In response, independent journalists and netizens have frequently come to refer to themselves as the "left side" (*lề trái*), indicative not of a location on the political spectrum, but rather a disposition or readiness to present accounts that run counter to official rules, when necessary.

Since 2007, the Ministry of Information and Communication has been in charge of the press management, focusing on two areas: administrative management and information control. Government Directive No. 37 (29 November 2006) stressed the principle of state management: "Purposefully prohibiting the privatization of the press in all its aspects, and letting no organization or individual divert press activities to his own benefit and damage the national interests" (Đỗ, 2015, p. 83). The administrative part includes permitting or prohibiting press activities (publication and broadcasting licenses, press cards). It also intervenes in personnel management: training, appointments, transfers or dismissal. Finally, it involves the development planning of various press areas and drafting press laws or sub-laws.

Blurring of the bounds

In early 2012, two events blurred the boundaries of *left side* press and *right side* press: The arrest of Tuổi Trẻ's journalist Hoàng Khương and Đoàn Văn Vươn's protest in Tiên Lãng (Nguyễn, H, 2012).[13] Many licensed journalists showed the courage to fight injustice and corruption. The social media *Dân làm báo* published the article "A concept is dead: left and right sides"[14] which therefore proposed an alternative conception of the press: "sides of people and of party" (*lề đảng* and *lề dân*). As Phạm Chí Dũng (2013) observed, there seemed to be a differentiation between the party's loyal media and other media within the right side, and the change of side can be observed in the intense interaction between the party-state's media and social media. This phenomenon was identified as "the potential risk of self-evolution and self-transformation in the field of the press".[15] The favorite term used by the authorities is now "the orthodox press" which closely follows the CPV's lines and differs from the "deflecting media".

Hostile forces

In the "struggle against foreign hostile forces", the press has also taken responsibility for "fighting off attempts that play the cards of "democracy" and "human rights" to interfere and destabilize our country" (Lê 2012, pp. 254–5). The "driving force" media is in the front line in this fight. Just before the Party Eleventh Congress, the 4 April 2010 *QĐND*'s outlet "fired the first shot in the air" (Phạm, 2010) with the article "To prevent and combat self-evolution from inside and from above",[16] which warned of an insidious plot from the imperialism to cause self-evolution and destruction to the national security from "inside and above". This vague warning from the party rapidly found specific targets in the context of the 2010s social movements: bloggers, internet-based social media, civil society movements, anti-Chinese demonstrators, or intellectual opponents. There were two most often used arguments. Firstly, these actors "took advantage of" freedom of religions, patriotic sentiment of the people, democratic and human rights in order to conduct propaganda and action against the political regime and the State. Secondly, it was the "hostile and reactionary forces", from inside and outside, who instigated and excited the people.

Let's cite two articles published by *Quân đội nhân dân* (*QĐND*) outlets of 17 and 31 July 2011, signed by Nguyễn Văn Minh, which took aim at bloggers and social media in treating them as "garbage", "toxic wind", "and poisonous mushrooms".[17] The official attack regularly mixed bloggers and social media with civil society movement – "a manoeuvre aiming at a peaceful evolution" (*Nhân dân's* 30 August 2012[18] and 6 March 2017,[19] *QĐND's* 17 July 2017).[20] Facing the rise of anti-Chinese protest demonstrations in the course of 2011 and 2012, several media outlets stigmatized demonstrators as "reactionary elements", "saboteurs", "excited crowd" and demonstrations as a spontaneous and illegal "gathering" and "march" (*Hà Nội mới's* 28 August 2011,[21] *Hanoi's TV newscast* on 22 August 2011[22] and 5 August 2012,[23] *An ninh thủ đô's* 25 August 2011).[24] In response to massive demonstrations in 2016 and 2017 against the Formosa steel factory, the mainstream media countered pro-environmental activists and Catholic priests' arguments by using the scenario of opposing forces taking advantage of an outraged population to destabilize the country (*QĐND's* 3 April 2017,[25] *VTV's 7p.m newscast* on 4 April 2017).

The hazards of being intellectual

Last but not least, the most sensitive target under attack was intellectuals with ties to the party and retired state officers. In response to "Thinking on the patient bed" by Lê Hiếu Đằng,[26] former

deputy and president of Ho Chi Minh City's Fatherland Front, *QĐND*'s 23 August 2013 outlet published the article "The fumble juggling show" which judged Lê's prodemocratic activism as "fighting on the computer keyboard" or "begging for democracy".[27] In October 2018, the party's Central Committee of Inspection decided to punish Chu Hảo, former vice-minister of Sciences and Technologies and director of *Trí Thức* Publishing House for his "self-evolution" and "self-transformation".[28] While the *left side* press ardently supported him, the orthodox media launched many counter-attacks which considered the case of Chu Hảo as a symptom of illnesses such as "arrogance", "discontent", "degeneration of thought, morality and way of life" (4 VTV's 7pm newscasts on 29 October, 15, 16 and 24 November 2018, *QĐND*'s 26 October 2018[29]; *Nhân dân*'s 29 October 2018,[30] and so on). The *QĐND's* 10 October 2019[31] and *VTV's 7 p.m newscast* on 20 October 2019 identified this case as "the illness of meritorious officers".

The control of information was carried out through quarterly meetings with all organs in charge and editors-in-chief in the presence of the Department for Propaganda and Instruction. During these meetings, the ministry warns the media responsible for spreading information that they are violating the Press Bill and considers sanctions. Here are but a few examples: in February 2014, the newspaper *Sài gòn tiếp thị* had its permit removed and thus had to cease publication, over 100 staff lost their jobs (Mặc, 2014; Mai, 2014); in 2017, *Doanh nghiệp – Doanh nhân* and *Thương hiệu* magazines had their licenses withdrawn, the publication of *Nhà quản lý* was interrupted for three months, *Người đưa tin* was fined VND 140 million (Trần, 2017), etc.

Over the last two decades, the state's management has focused on the internet, the use of which has grown exponentially: from only 204,000 in 2000 (0.3% of the total population) and the number of Internet users has risen to 68 million (or 70%) in January 2020 (Kemp, 2020). Facebook is the most popular social network: with 61 million users in 2020, Vietnam ranks seventh in the world. As early as 1997, as the internet had just appeared in the country, the government promulgated Decree No. 21 (5 March 1997) to regulate collective and individual uses, as well as conditions for internet hosting and service providing. The Government Decrees No. 55 and 97 (23 August 2001, 28 August 2008) strictly regulated the contents being circulated by transposing into it criminal offenses (Art. 11, Decree No. 55 or Art. 6, Decree 97). In 2012, the government launched a campaign aimed at contending with several information websites (*Quan làm báo, Dân làm báo, Biển đông*). The government issued Decrees No. 72 and 174 (on 15 July 2013 and 13 November 2013) to tighten control measures. Decree No. 72, which replaced Decree No. 97, gave rise to two new concepts: "Aggregated information" coming from various information websites which now cannot be relayed on personal pages (Art. 20); and "Information security" meaning ensuring that "information on the Internet does not jeopardise national security, social order, state secrets, rights and interests of organizations and individuals" (Art. 3). Decree 174 applied administrative sanctions to offenses which "are not held penal[ly] accountable" (Art. 64). More recently the Minister of Information and Communication's Circular No. 38 (26 December 2016) regulated "public information provision through the national border" whereby online information from abroad that threatens national security and social order will be deleted or blocked by firewalls (Art. 5).

Since the approval of the Cyber-Security Bill by the National Assembly on 12 June 2019, all virtual spaces of the internet have been put under police surveillance in the name of "national security." On 25 December 2019, the Association of Vietnamese Journalists publicly released its "Rules for the Use of Social Networks of Vietnamese Journalists" (*BBC*, 2018), thus expressing their consent to the Cyber-Security Bill (*Người làm báo,* 2020).

Surveillance and punishment

The state legislation of the media has paved the way for the expansion of the role of the police in the press, whether in regard to the monitoring and disciplining of journalists or targeted interventions against bloggers and independent journalists. Those found in violation of state laws are subject to police intimidation, harassment, arrest, or detention (Crispin 2012; FIDH, 2013, 2018).

The Ministry of Public Security is in charge of monitoring journalists, bloggers, and activists on social networks and carries out its monitoring and enforcement activities through a mix of official and unofficial modes, ranging from the issuance of official warnings to the use of "thugs" (sometimes disguised police) to meet out punishment and threats (Abuza 2015, p. 5). In August 2014 the Ministry of Public Security opened its Department for Cyber-Security, which possesses the ability to access data held by internet hosting and content providers, conduct cyber-attacks against news websites, surreptitiously obtain personal data, track and monitor influential bloggers and their writings, close down blogs and personal pages, and so on.

The police and army have also become activity involved in shaping public opinion on line. The police, in coordination with the army and propaganda organs, deploy "opinion shapers" (*dư luận viên*) or "pro-PCV bloggers" (Mai, 2017, Pham, 2013) with a view to supporting the regime's policies, fighting hostile forces, making up false evidence against bloggers then accusing them, and participating in online discussions under false profiles in order to manipulate opinions and monitor active internet users. Drawing from the Chinese model of "Internet moderators" (FIDH, 2013, p. 10), this activity involves more than 10,000 agents within Force 47 of the Vietnamese People's Army alone (Mai, 2017, Vaulerin, 2018), and "900 polemicists" in the city of Hanoi alone (Đào, 2013).

Police surveillance and punishment are informed by the CPV's ideological doctrine on Western conspiracies, including well-worn warnings of "peaceful evolution" and new national security discourses that emphasize threats in the field of cyber-security (Bộ Thông tin truyền thông, 2009, Tạ & *al.*, 2013, Võ, 2019). The police keep a close check on journalists so as to guard against unwanted "transformations of thought". Domestic journalists' contacts with the international organizations, foreign press agencies, and overseas schools of journalism are also monitored (Nguyễn, 2011, pp. 65–9). International journalists operating in Vietnam are themselves monitored through the Ministry of Public Security's A87 Department for Information Security and Communication, which coordinates with the six Departments for Political Security: units A63, A64, A65, A66, and A67, which monitor the activities of Anglo-Saxon journalists; European, African and Latin American journalists; Chinese and Asian journalists; and Northeast Asian journalists, respectively (Nguyễn, 2011, pp. 104–5).

Arrest, conviction, and sentencing of independent journalists

On the eve of the 13th Party Congress in January 2021, three well-known independent journalists, Phạm Chí Dũng, Phạm Chí Thành, and Phạm Đoan Trang, were put into detention under Articles 117 and 88 of the Penal Code. All three were very acute and prolific journalists and had been committed actors in the civil society movements. As the founder and president of the *Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam* and its website *vietnamthoibao.org* (*Vietnam Times*) since 2014, Phạm Chí Dũng was arrested on 21 November 2019 and sentenced on 5 January 2021 to 15 years imprisonment. Phạm Chí Thành, a retired reporter and editor of the state-controlled Voice of Vietnam (VOV) and host of the political blog *Bà Đầm Xòe*, was arrested on 21 May 2020 and sentenced on 9 July 2021 to five years and six months in prison.

His latest book entitled *The Holder of the Mandate of Heaven or the Great Immoral Traitor*, which criticizes the general secretary of the VCP himself for his pro-Chinese attitude and was published by the underground *Liberal Publishing House* in 2019, constituted the most important evidence for his accusation. Finally, well-known Vietnamese dissident journalist and blogger Phạm Đoan Trang[32] was arrested on 7 October 2020. Trang authored numerous books and reports on human rights violations and environmental disasters in Vietnam. She also co-founded the *Legal Journal* in 2014 and founded *Liberal Publishing House* in 2019. The arrest of independent journalists once again showed the regime's violent coercion of social media, and to some extent, its powerlessness to control the *left side* press.

An uncertain future

Absent its revolutionary press ideology and massive regulatory apparatuses, contemporary Vietnam would be a fundamentally different place. This chapter has traced the development of the state ideology regarding the press. It has highlighted the gaps between idealized representations of the press's revolutionary role with actual conditions and the challenge of regulating journalism in the internet age. Vietnam's rapid growth, urbanization, and modernization have occasioned a rapid expansion in media, opening up new avenues for communication. These have been countered by the application of technologies for the purposes of regulation, surveillance, and control. In this context, media reforms have been sought to enhance control over the press rather than to expand or protect the freedom of press and expression. But they must deal with intrinsic contradictions which arose from their own ideological programs and control apparatuses that would make the future of the Vietnamese press uncertain.

Notes

1 To see two points of view on the pre-1975 Saigon press: see Nguyễn Ngọc Chính 2012 and Nguyễn Hoàng 2015, "Báo chí Sài gòn trước năm 1975", 7 issues, *Lao động*, numbers 21 to 27.
2 Hữu Thọ was *Nhân Dân*'s editor-in-chief from 5/1992 to 8/1996, see: http://daidoanket.vn/van-hoa/tam-su-voi-nguoi-hay-cai-tintuc447673.
3 https://vov.vn/chinh-tri/thu-tuong-chinh-phu-se-co-them-ngan-sach-de-dat-hang-bao-chi-922879.vov
4 http://tailieu.ttbd.gov.vn:8080/index.php/tin-tuc/tin-tuc-ho-tro-boi-duong/item/1286-khai-ni-m-va-d-c-di-m-c-a-kinh-t-bao-chi
5 http://nguoilambao.vn/mo-hinh-kinh-doanh-dua-vao-phat-hanh-bao-chi-kinh-nghiem-tu-the-new-york-times-n15943.html
6 https://vnexpress.net/thoi-su/chinh-quyen-sai-toan-dien-trong-vu-tien-lang-2222318-p2.html
7 https://dantri.com.vn/chinh-tri/toan-van-bao-cao-danh-gia-cong-tac-bao-chi-2011-1333475744.htm
8 https://nhandan.com.vn/chinhtri/item/40495902-phat-trien-nen-bao-chi-chuyen-nghiep-hien-dai-nhan-van-ky-1.html
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37

POPULAR TELEVISION
Socialist Politics and Market Competition

Giang Nguyen-Thu

Television came extremely late in Vietnam. Only until the early 1990s – a decade after the fall of Saigon and a few years after the Reform – did Vietnamese television started expanding its effect to the sphere of everyday living. By the end of the 1990s, television had become an essential part of ordinary rituals. During these transitional years, television served as a means not only to disseminate news, entertainment, and ideology but more importantly to establish and promote a novel sense of daily normalcy, regularity, and pleasure – a privilege that only non-war societies could enjoy. In 2020, Vietnamese television provides its viewers with almost all forms of televisual entertainment, ranging from free-to-air franchised reality shows to Hollywood movies on pay-per-view cable networks. Such an impressive development, however, is driven by a combination of political docility and heavy dependency on advertisements. At a time of economic recession and digital competition, the entrapment between the state and the market leaves television producers with a few possibilities to tell local stories and promote public values. In reviewing the historical development of entertainment programming in Vietnamese national television, this chapter explores how Vietnam is far from debarring itself from the influence and profit of popular media, while at the same time holding tight to conservative politics. Empirical input of this chapter is derived from my archival research of various Vietnamese newspapers from 1990 to 2000 and my semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese television producers from 2014 to 2018.

Pre-reform television: a history of division and scarcity

During the Vietnam War, Vietnamese television had two 'histories' in the North and the South, which directly reflected the condition of the national division. The earliest television project was launched in Saigon in 1966, funded by the United States. Besides the headquarters in Saigon, television stations were built in Huế, Nha Trang, Quy Nhơn, and Cần Thơ, which transmitted two channels for American forces in English and local audience in Vietnamese (Hoffer, 1972). The number of TV sets was roughly 450,000 in 1970 compared to 2,500 in 1966 (Hoffer, 1972, p. 391). After the fall of Saigon, the systematic albeit short-lived establishment of the southern network was barely mentioned in the official biography of Vietnam television (as seen in, for example, Trần, 1995; Đài Truyền Hình Việt Nam, 2005; Đài Truyền Hình Việt Nam,

2010). The current state-owned television network is promoted solely as a socialist project, although the current southern broadcasting system was significantly built on the facilities and human resource from the previous regime.

The birth of television in the north was marked by the combination of political determination and technical poverty. A majority of early television practitioners in the north had a background on radio, who were sent to Cuba for brief retraining in television in the late 1960s. Upon their return, the initial television trial was conducted on 7 September 1970, now considered the founding day of Vietnamese television. This trial was but a small technical experiment done by a group of inexperienced workers. Facilities for the first broadcasting session were minimal, either recycled from old radio items or donated by international socialist friends (Đài Truyền Hình Việt Nam, 2005, pp. 26–28). In 1987, the national network was renamed from Central Television to Vietnam Television or VTV. The parallel establishments of television networks in the south (aided by the United States) and in the north (with help from the socialist bloc) exemplify Vietnam's position as a Cold War battlefield.

From 1970 to 1975, television barely existed in the north due to warfare interruptions, limited signal coverage, and an almost absolute lack of TV set. When peace was restored, local and national television stations were gradually built or rebuilt across the nation, and by law all belonged to the state. But the scarcity of television in Vietnam continued until the late 1980s, mainly due to a postwar economic crisis and cultural isolation. In 1977, the total airing time of the national network was two hours daily (Lý, 2010, p. 127). Such extremely limited frequency was further reduced by the constant lack of electricity and the absence of a TV market. Several local transmitters were installed during the 1980s, but it was only in 1991 that the television signal could technically cover all of Vietnam thanks to the introduction of the national satellite system. In the first decade after the Vietnam War, the so-called 'national' or 'central' television network in Vietnam never managed to achieve an actual national reach.

Today, very few Vietnamese could remember the content of national television in the late 1970s. Back then, watching television was almost impossible at a household level, at least in the north and central parts of Vietnam. In Ho Chi Minh City, there were a significant number of television sets from the previous southern television industry, which allowed viewers to watch provincial television (HTV) in a more regular pattern. Enjoying local programs instead of following the national network is still a dominant practice in the south today. In the early 1980s, people returning from Eastern Europe started to bring more electronic appliances, including TV, to Hanoian homes. Another source of TV sets was Japan, where second-hand items were imported and turned into luxurious goods in Vietnam. A TV set, together with a fan, an iron, a fridge, gradually became a common household item.

In these early postwar years, dramas and movies given by Eastern European friends were best entertainment on national television, besides heavily politicized current affairs. The famous Soviet cartoon *Nu, Pogodi!* [*Hãy Đợi Đấy!*] was virtually the only animation for children, long before the arrival of Tom and Jerry in the 1990s. Vietnamese socialist films, produced both before and after 1975, were recycled at a high frequency due to an extremely weak production capacity. Familiar titles such as *The Abandoned Field: Free Fire Zone* [*Cánh Đồng Hoang*], *When the Tenth Month Comes* [*Bao Giờ Cho Tới Tháng Mười*], *Legend of Motherhood* [*Huyền Thoại Mẹ*], *Saigon Ranger* [*Biệt Động Sài Gòn*] were all set in a warfare context, telling glorious stories of how people sacrifice their personal happiness in pursuit of patriotic duty. In the very little amount of airing time dedicated to entertainment, socialist heroism was still the dominant message on Vietnamese small screens in the first decade after the war.

Television dramas and the return of 'normalcy'

The shape of Vietnamese television today is mainly a post-reform product. The initial change began with the arrival of television dramas in the 1990s, whose widespread popularity marked a decisive break with the previous monotonous televisual experience. In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union happened simultaneously with the installation of the first national satellite system. Political turbulence across the socialist world, however, did not seem to affect Vietnamese people as much as the arrival of an unexpected televisual product: *The Rich Also Cry* – a Mexican telenovela. For the first time, it was technically possible for viewers across the whole national territory to watch the same episode of a drama at the same time and on a daily basis. *The Rich Also Cry* was soon followed by *Simply Maria*, another telenovela from Latin America. Both were a great hit, now serving as a fond memory of those who lived through the 1990s. With around 100 episodes each, these telenovelas told stories of poor beautiful country girls who made their way to the city and turned themselves into wealthy women while struggling with a complicated love life. The theme of upward social mobility mapped on perfectly with the rapid economic growth in the early 1990s, while intimate topics – sexual relationship, private wealth, family conflicts – once excluded in war-centered propaganda, now achieved a new public status, creating enthusiastic engagement from viewers across the nation.

Everyday fandom for soap operas was common throughout post- and late-socialist contexts, as seen in China and many Eastern European countries (Zha, 1995; ZhuKeane and Bai, 2008; Stan, 2003; Boym, 1995; Baldwin, 1995). Clearly, Vietnam was not an exception (Nguyen-Thu, 2014). Almost overnight, foreign dramas became the most awaited programs on the Vietnamese small screens, with numerous series imported from all corners of the world: China, Japan, Latin America, Korea, India, Australia, and the United States. Many terms from early foreign soap operas had officially entered Vietnamese vocabulary. 'The rich also cry' [người giàu cũng khóc] became a common idiom to signify the limit of wealth, a new problem that only occurred in a time of rapid marketization. When *Oshin*, a Japanese series, made a hit in 1994, the term 'oshin' itself was normalized into a common noun to call domestic maid, an occupation of the lead female character. This kind of job suddenly became necessary in emerging middle-class families when a busier and more affluent lifestyle led to a need to outsource child-caring and housework burden to less privileged workers. Vietnamese viewers also borrowed terms from *My Fair Princess*, a widely popular Chinese series set in the Qing dynastic time. 'A ka' [prince] and 'cách cách' [princess], two Manchurian words in *My Fair Princess* are imported and turned colloquial nouns to label pampered son and daughter.

The entwinement of televisual fiction and ordinary language demonstrated how soap operas did not only created ardent fandom but also enabled Vietnamese viewers to make sense of and reflect on their new daily life, which had become much thickened with new complexities after the Reform. In watching soap operas, viewers could develop more sensitivity to their personal experience in the new era of marketization, and in so doing, performing a cultural departure from socialist collectivism without any explicit connection to political dissatisfaction. Almost unnoticeably, the regularity and banality of television dramas helped establish a pattern to the novel flow of quotidian activities in the transitional years after the Reform. The popularity of imported dramas in Vietnam marked a decisive break of televisual banality from previous top-down propaganda, heralding an era of popular entertainment that quickly pervaded Vietnamese small screens in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s.

The success of imported series naturally urged Vietnamese television to make its own dramas. Producers were also prompted to focus on ordinary themes instead of repeating the old mantra of socialist heroism. Foreign soap operas thus enacted a new practice that barely existed

in the previous history of Vietnamese television: competition. In 1994, three years after the success of *The Rich Also Cry*, the first Vietnamese television dramas were broadcast every weekend on a new program entitled *Culture and Art on Sunday* [*Văn Nghệ Chủ Nhật*]. One episode per week was an extremely low frequency for the genre of television drama but was already seen as a significant success of national television. A report in *Lao Động* newspaper in 1994 commented that the birth of *Culture and Art on Sunday* 'demonstrated an audacious effort by VTV3 to produce quick and cheap dramas, given an extreme lack of money, technologies, and human resources' (Tô, 1995). Major topics of Vietnamese television dramas in the late 1990s were the incompatibility between love and poverty, the desire of youngsters to escape obsolete social and cultural norms, or the bitter nostalgia of socialist veterans in market time. Just like soap operas anywhere else in the world, money emerged as the cause and solution of almost all problems. 'Serving the audience' also became a common concept in many reviews of television dramas that appeared abundantly in the culture section of many newspapers in the 1990s. Viewers were now treated as valued customers and ultimate judges, instead of merely passive receivers of state-controlled messages. With the arrival of television dramas, the integration of market regulation and political duty became the defining dilemma of television in Vietnam.

Lifestyle programs and the expansion of the market

By the end of the 1990s, when television dramas could no longer feed the increasing need for household entertainment, it appeared inevitable for local producers that Vietnamese television should quicken its pace of 'development'. With a population of more than 70 million, there was a vast and barely explored market for light entertainment other than homegrown musical shows and television series. In 1996, Vietnamese national television launched VTV3, a channel entirely dedicated to 'sports, entertainment, and economic information' after two years of trial broadcasting. Here the term 'economic information' did not mean financial news but was a euphemism for 'advertisement' – a word still considered too 'capitalist' for the state-owned national channel at that time (Marr, 1998, p. 20). Unsurprisingly, VTV3 was received with substantial public engagement, to the extent that Tiền Phong newspaper ranked the birth of VTV3 as one among top ten most important cultural events in 1996 (Tiền Phong, 1997, p. 7).

A brief analysis of *SV'96*, the debut show of VTV3, allows us to understand an instance of how light entertainment was introduced to the national network. *SV'96* was the first game show in Vietnam: 'SV' is an abbreviation of 'sinh viên' [student], signifying key participants of the show, and '96' is the year of production. Dozens of university teams competed in a nationwide tournament consisted of comedies, quizzes, public speeches, and talent contests. Being an instant success, *SV'96* was the main topic in the 'culture' sections of many newspapers in 1996. Almost every show received some coverage, and a full-page story was typical. A review on *Thanh Niên* newspaper described *SV'96* as 'a fever that heats up all regions across the nation' (Tâm, 1996, p. 7), while another report on *Lao Động* newspaper noted that *SV'96* created 'waves of excitement that stirred up student life in Hanoi and soon reached Ho Chi Minh City' (Lương and Minh, 1996, p. 6).

At first glance, the content of *SV'96* fitted neatly to the ideological purpose of socialist youth movement. This program was co-organized by VTV and the state-run Vietnamese Student Association. Each show was assigned a particular theme, such as 'students and environment', 'students and social evils', 'students and national culture', or 'student, labor, and thrift', all explicitly manifesting the educational ideals of state-controlled propaganda. But what made *SV'96* a great hit was not its pedagogic content. The key impression was the amusing performance of youthful personalities by ordinary students, something Vietnamese people rarely, if

ever, saw on television. Most newspapers skipped discussion of the assigned themes to emphasize the joy and excitement that *SV'96* generated. As such, the show had found a way to bring ordinary life, or an amusing illusion of such, onto television, turning a state-endorsed program into a local experiment of popular culture.

If we focus on the 'how' instead of the 'what' of *SV'96*, we can see that this show deviated from past televisual conventions in Vietnam, indicating major transformations of the national network that were possibly unaware by the producers themselves. First, game show was a completely new popular genre imported from 'the West'. The idea that the media could serve as 'a game' instead of 'an ideological battlefield' [mặt trận tư tưởng] marked a moment when Vietnamese national television redefined itself to reach for a more global orientation beyond its previous political duty. Second, the inclusion of students as 'ordinary' people means that there was more access to the small screen for commoners, who came to perform 'themselves' on TV. But this also means that free labor of amateur participants enabled VTV to produce low-cost and regular content with much greater genre choices, ranging from game shows, talent shows, talk shows, to reality shows. More possibilities of television programming at a cheaper cost was extremely important in the late 1990s when VTV3 needed to fill up an increasing airing time for a new entertainment channel. A diverse range of televisual products also permits VTV to feed the demand of an expanding middle class, who was interested in watching a better diversity of entertainment content after nearly a decade of just dramas. *SV'96* and the birth of VTV3 thus signalled the rapid diversification of entertainment genres and the professionalization of the television industry in Vietnam.

SV'96 started a tradition of recruiting students in the making of popular content on Vietnamese television, which in itself reflects the gradual shift from top-down media production to market-regulated one. Examples of highly successful student shows include *Seven Shades of Rainbow* [*Bảy Sắc Cầu Vồng*, 1997], *Road to the Olympia* [*Đường Lên Đỉnh Olympia*, 1999] and *Ring the Golden Bell* [*Rung Chuông Vàng*, 2008]. In early popular shows, the recruitment of students was much easier and safer than selecting random participants because producers could request institutional support from schools and universities under the banner of 'communist youth union' activities. The energetic competitions among students also provided an effortless coupling of education and entertainment, enabling a smooth transition from the heavy pedagogic purpose of socialist propaganda to a more entertainment-oriented mechanism influenced by post-reform marketization and globalization. The weight of entertainment got heavier in the 2000s when television shows had become much more saturated, and student programs started appearing obsolete and monotonous. Later shows, particularly the franchised formats such as *Wheel of Fortune* (2001), *The Price Is Right* (2004), *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* (2005), *Vietnam Idol* (2007), *Vietnam's Next Top Model* (2010) invite a much more diverse range of ordinary individuals and aim explicitly at earning advertisement and commercial sponsorship through rating competition. Educational programs still exist but are overshadowed by blatant quests for fame or money on talent contests and reality shows.

The success of lifestyle programs in the late 1990s and early 2000s demonstrated the rapidly improved production capacity of Vietnamese television. Such an improvement, in its inception, was mainly motivated by an increased dependence on advertising revenue. Before the arrival of lifestyle shows in the late 1990s, Vietnamese television relied primarily on state funding, which many producers described as 'limited' and 'slow'. The popular success of lifestyle programs prompted television producers to turn to commercial sponsorship as an alternative source of income, and this income was soon greater than, and replaced, state subsidy. Quick and generous money from advertisement and commercial sponsorship was often considered the major 'liberating' force in the television industry, allowing producers to experiment with new and better

programs. By the mid-2000s, VTV largely went financially independent, although television was still strictly controlled in political and institutional terms. Resistance against state-based control motivated an aspiration to gain more autonomy by leaning toward the market, which explained the celebration of marketization in the broadcasting sector in the 1990s and 2000s.

The introduction of a diverse range of lifestyle shows turned Vietnamese television into a fully-grown television system. Lifestyle shows soon covered extremely diverse topics of health, cuisine, tourism, fashion, shopping, business, gardening, architecture, teenagers, dating, entrepreneurship, and so on. From a few airing hours a day with just one channel in the late 1990s, the free-to-air national network has expanded to more than ten channels in 2020, producing a combination of hundreds of airing hours each day. Provincial television, particularly in the south, follows the same trajectory as the national network, with dramas and lifestyle programs being the major genres and key sources of income.

The paid television system, whose sole focus is entertainment and profit, has also developed into a lucrative business, with around 16.5 million subscribers nationwide (Tuấn, 2020). In 2020, a premium subscription to VTV cable network – the most prominent paid content provider – costs about 8 US dollars a month. This service provides about 200 channels: local, national, and international. HBO, Star Movie, CNN, BBC, NHK, and many other global news, sports, and entertainment channels are available to watch at home. Whether appearing on free-to-air or paid networks, homegrown shows are fully sponsored by advertisements or business brands. All aspects of daily life and any lifestyle topic can appear on TV, as long as a show can maintain stable commercial funding or perform reasonable ratings to attract advertisers. Measuring audience size through ratings serves as the standard method, if not the only one, in determining the 'quality' of a program on VTV. Within just more than one decade after reform, the television industry in Vietnam had developed into a highly profitable and competitive market with a diverse range of services and changing programming strategies. Paradoxically enough, the market has fundamentally transformed broadcasting services in a country famed for rigid communist media control.

Question of censorship: political docility and market dependency

Vietnamese producers are generally proud of the rapidly growing television industry after eeform, even when surviving the market has become their main source of anxiety and exhaustion. Framed as the only alternative from the entire dependence on the state, the income and competition driven by marketization are often described in the spirit of liberation and renovation. Such a positive attitude, however, exists alongside the near-total acceptance of political surveillance that works through both self-censorship and layered top-down restriction. As a television network requires centralized management and major infrastructure investment, there is virtually no room for television producers to directly challenge the regulation from above. In 'off-the-record' talks, producers are highly critical of the party-state, but in professional performance, their oppositional agencies are weak and tactical. For instance, their sidestep of political discussion in many socially-oriented programs is itself an implicit act of resistance against the demand of shameless prop ganda. Sometimes, the banner of 'serving the publics' allows producers to lay bare latent social tension, often in a nationalist tone, without appearing as too threatening to the censoring eyes (Nguyen-Thu, 2019). On the one hand, the existence of political censorship does not prevent popular television from representing and constituting cultural complexity and social transformation in the post-reform times, which reach beyond the politicizing logic of communist propaganda. On the other hand, the television industry's impressive growth is largely based on the combination of political docility and uncritical reliance on the market.

The post-reform combination of the state-owned model with the commercial model in television governance means that there is no explicit dedication to 'public values' in the Vietnamese broadcasting system. The model of public broadcasting services, as seen in Australia, Canada, and the UK, has never earned the status of 'an alternative' in Vietnam. Due to the lack of institutional vocabulary in defending the public values of television, Vietnamese producers often define their commitment to 'serve the publics' along the educational or philanthropist line. Other vital values of public broadcasting, such as the promotion of ethnocultural inclusiveness and informed social debates, remain largely absent in most discussions about strategic prospects of Vietnamese television.

The rather odd combination of political restriction and entertainment abundance is clearly shown on the small screen, where one sees the pairing of heavily censored current affairs and a great deal of blatantly commercialized content. Consider, for example, the 7 p.m. news program on VTV1 – the key political channel of the national network. By law, all provincial stations must simultaneously broadcast this program. Such a requirement means that viewers across the whole nation are synchronized in watching the same newscast at the same time on a daily basis. This evening program, which lasts one hour, mainly reports top politicians' activities, promotes new policies, and explicitly takes side of the party-state in all controversial issues. But news and current affairs form only a modest part of what is offered by Vietnamese television today. A glamorous celebrity show or a sentimental soap opera often comes right after the 7 p.m. newscast. In surfing through numerous national, local, and cable channels, most likely one will see a few news programs packed with plenty of Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, and Indian dramas, besides a great number of comedies or game shows. These fully commercialized programs usually claim far better ratings than any newscast, generating the most advertisement revenue for both national and local channels. In the financial context where the state has completely withdrawn from funding any VTV production (except for VTV5 – the subsidized channel dedicated to ethnic minorities) (Đài Truyền Hình Việt Nam, 2019), the advertisement revenue generated by commercial shows is reallocated to cover the cost of running propagandist programs.

Private ownership of television (and all other forms of mass media) remains strictly forbidden in Vietnam. Still, semi-private production of television content is permitted by law (Bộ Thông Tin Và Truyền Thông, 2009). Under what is normally referred to as 'the socialization of television production' [xã hội hoá sản xuất truyền hình] or 'collaborative activity' [hoạt động liên kết], a private company can sign a contract with a state-owned television institution to make a program or to run a whole channel. The state-owned institutions mainly contribute their broadcasting license (or 'selling the airwave' [bán sóng], as many producers term it) and take responsibility in ensuring that the content is politically clean. This kind of transaction often runs smoothly, as long as private companies manage to avoid political taboos – a task that is, after all, quite easy for purely entertainment shows. 'Accidents' sometimes happen, for example, when viewers found out that a 'socialized' reality show had shown a map where the capital city of Hanoi is relocated to Guanxi, China (Quang, 2015). Against the backdrop of heated territorial disputes in the South China Sea (or the 'East Sea' from the Vietnamese point of view), this geographical mistake provoked widespread public anger, leading to the show being immediately suspended. Occasional 'accidents', however, do not prevent all major national and provincial networks from outsourcing their entertainment programs to private partners. Nowadays, almost all reality shows, such as *Vietnam Idol, X-Factor, The Face, The Voice, Vietnam's Next Top Model*, or *Dancing with the Stars*, are 'socialized'. External partners are also significantly involved in the production of television dramas and comedies that pervade the Vietnamese small screens.

Predictably, private companies are banned from producing news and current affairs – programs perceived to have an important political duty and thus requiring entire in-house

production (Bộ Thông Tin Và Truyền Thông, 2009). Global news channels, such as BBC and CNN, are available on paid cable at a highly affordable price. Still, their availability is subject to top-down permission that can be withdrawn at any time. The content of BBC and CNN is fully scanned before broadcasting with a relay of 10 to 30 minutes. Actual censorship of international news, however, is quite rare because content related to Vietnam is seldom found on the global newscasts today. One example of censorship on a paid service was related to the death of Fidel Castro in November 2016. All BBC and CNN reports and obituary documentaries about this event were removed by the VTV's cable network with the screen declaring 'the program is temporarily interrupted due to inappropriate content'. Interestingly enough, the massive amount of news and features on the presidential race to the White House that happened in the same month remained completely intact. When it comes to cultural matters, however, the State is eager to work with global channels. In 2016, Hanoi authorities invested 2 million dollars in promoting the city's image on CNN in an attempt to attract more foreign tourists (Võ, 2016). The censorship system is thus designed to intensively focus on detecting any potential threat that might defame socialist leadership but remains friendly, if not encouraging, toward cultural or economic issues that appear political benign.

The restriction of news and current affairs demonstrates that despite the dynamics of economic growth and cultural transformation, Vietnam is far from allowing more freedom of expression. In banning non-state production of news and current affairs, the authorities ensure their hegemonic voice in public political discourses. But political limits also reduce the diversity and attraction of news programs in competing with entertainment shows. The paradoxical result is that political content is getting increasingly squeezed by an expanding sphere of popular culture, while commercial entertainment becomes abundant in a country famous for media oppression. The marketizing and globalizing processes that underwrite the participatory 'votes' by Vietnamese viewers in choosing their popular idols on reality shows are thus largely removed from any democratizing effect in public discussions of social and political issues.

The limited space of tactical resistance once possible in the 1990s and 2000s is shrunken significantly in the late 2010s due to the punishing force from the market amidst economic recession and the overwhelming competition from online platforms (Đình, 2018). When the initial optimism about rapid television growth faded out, producers' discussions of televisual 'quality' were increasingly shaped by the entrapment between the two 'bad choices' of either going commercially shallow or becoming politically tedious. For many producers, the immediate and intense source of anxiety comes more from the burden of securing long-term funding for their programs, although ideological surveillance remains a frustrating issue. In the last ten years, socially oriented programs that promoted an inclusive representation of various marginalized groups – farmers, missing people, and the elderly – gradually disappeared due to their failure in generating adequate advertisement income (Trâm, 2020). In 2020, for example, the famous homegrown reality show *As If We Never Parted* [*Như Chưa Hề Có Cuộc Chia Ly*] on the national network had to stop broadcasting due to the lack of commercial sponsorship. In its 13 years of existence, this reality show had reunited thousands of missing people, most of whom were victims of warfare and social neglect. The optimism toward market-based financial independence, once expressed by the earlier generation of producers, is now replaced with a new tone of exhaustion, vulnerability, and defeat.

The so-called 'post-broadcasting era' (Turner and Tay, 2009) indeed casts a gloomy shadow over the future of the heavily centralized television networks in Vietnam. No longer enjoying the central spotlight as in the 1990s and 2000s, the current television landscape is shaped by the (de)regulation of a politically oppressive state, a saturated market, and a increasingly disinterested public that pays more attention to digital platforms (Phuong, 2017; Hoang, 2020;

Nguyen-Thu, 2018; Vu, 2017). For two decades after the reform, the rapid marketization of television production enabled an aspirational force of creativity and innovation, and sometimes generated a feeling of autonomy. But the uncritical celebration of marketization has also generated its own impasse that increasingly corners Vietnamese television producers between the punishing forces of the state and the market.

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REMEMBRANCE, COMMEMORATION, AND REVOLUTIONARY APPARITIONS

Ritualizing Connections with the Past and the Future in Vietnam

Oscar Salemink

Revolutionary apparitions on Côn Đảo prison island

In December 2012 I spent some time on Côn Sơn island in the Côn Đảo archipelago in the South China Sea, some 180 km south of Vũng Tàu. Now a marine national park and tourist destination – complete with an upscale Six Senses resort – the island gained notoriety as the penitentiary island of Poulo Condor during the French colonial era (1861–1955) and during the Republic of Vietnam period (1955–1975). Far from the mainland, it was partly used to detain political prisoners away from the prying eyes of relatives, journalists and a potentially critical public. In 1970 two U.S. congressmen visited the prison complex which was used by the southern regime to intern political opponents, including those they called Việt Cộng [Vietnamese communists], and found the so-called "tiger cage" prison cells, with roofs consisting of iron bars only. Stories and photos of that visit were published in *Life* magazine on magazine of July 17, 1970, and contributed to the growing disaffection with the American war in Vietnam, in support of an ally that did not appear to be very democratic.

Any present-day tourist visit to the island must include visits to the extensive prison complexes, which after 1975 have been preserved as a heritage site to commemorate the many national heroes fallen for the father land, including communist heroes. In 'Reading revolutionary prison memoirs', historian Peter Zinoman describes how stylized revolutionary memoirs published in northern Vietnam represented the prison complexes set up by the French in remote areas like Sơn Là, Lao Bảo and Poulo Condor as "revolutionary universities" for those who survived the tortures and the ordeals (Zinoman 2001b; see also Zinoman 2001a). Many leaders of the communist-led Việt Minh movement and the postcolonial Democratic Republic of Việt Nam and Socialist Republic of Việt Nam, like Tôn Đức Thắng, Lê Duẩn, Phạm Văn Đồng, Lê Đức Thọ, Phạm Hùng and Nguyễn Văn Linh, went through such revolutionary training in French prisons (Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan 1996; Nguyễn Đình Thống 2012).

Communist leaders like Lê Hồng Phong and Nguyễn An Ninh who died on the island are commemorated in the Nghĩa trang Hàng Dương [Hàng Dương cemetery] as revolutionary martyrs [*liệt sỹ*] (cf. Malarney 2001, 2002, 2007). Of the over 22,000 prisoners who died on Côn Đảo over the decades, only 695 have individual graves in the Hàng Dương Cemetery; but all *liệt sỹ* are honored in the temple-like monument in the middle of the cemetery (Bảo tàng Bà Rịa – Vũng Tàu 2007; Management Committee for the Historic Monuments in Côn Đảo 2005).[1]

On December 4, 2012, I visited that memorial during the day, when several busloads of youngish – Thanh Niên [Youth Union] members – police officials from eight southern provinces arrived, who came to honor the revolutionary dead by standing in silence in the mid-day heat, laying a wreath and burning incense. After that the group dispersed to look for graves of famous revolutionaries. In the late evening I returned to the cemetery, in order to visit the grave of Võ Thị Sáu, a young girl who in 1947 killed a number of French soldiers with a grenade, but who was arrested in 1949 after failing to kill a colonial canton chief; she was eventually sent to Poulo Condore and executed there in 1952 at age 18, reportedly as the youngest female political prisoner to undergo that sentence (Nguyễn Đình Thống 2009). Each night *cô* [auntie], *bà* [grandmother] or *chị* [elder sister] Sáu[2] rises from the grave and responds to the prayers of her supplicants who come to worship her and offer her comfort in the form of incense, sacrificial fruit and effigies. Outside the cemetery, the small seafront shrine dedicated to *cô* Sáu contains clothes, perfume and make-up – items supposed to make her happy in the afterlife-and mainly attracts groups women who come to propitiate her spirit. As a virtuous girl without offspring – putatively a virgin – who died a violent death far from home, the revolutionary apparition of *cô* Sáu is considered to be particularly responsive and efficacious, and not just in political matters, but especially in matters of health, wealth and well-being.[3]

Close to midnight, the same group of young police officials came, this time making more noise; some were drunk, others were visibly moved at the site of the grave, which was monitored by cameras hanging in trees. One young woman approached me and addressed me in fluent English; my answer in fluent Vietnamese raised eyebrows, but suspicions were put to rest by two local cadres – the head of the Youth Union and a police inspector – whom I had met the previous night. Mr. Đinh, the Youth Union cadre and official host of the delegation, explained to the group who I was, what my connection was to Vietnam and what I was doing there in much more detail than I had given the night before; apparently, he had carefully checked my dossier in Hanoi. Đinh's message that I was a friend of Vietnam cheered up the group, which invited me for a night of drinks, snacks and songs by the seafront in town.

This brief encounter shows the two dimensions of commemoration and remembrance that I will highlight in this chapter, namely official state commemoration that honors the dead in their capacity as national heroes on one hand, and unofficial forms of remembrance that afford communing with the dead – as ancestors, spirits or ghosts – in more personal ways. Côn Đảo attracts both types of pilgrims as part of its tourist strategy which targets not just state cadres and party officials in need of ideological fortification, but also traders, retirees, and others.[4] In fact, for many visitors the political virtuousness of Võ Thị Sáu enhances her ritual virtuosity in response to more mundane, non-political wishes, or as one informant from Ho Chi Minh City formulated it: "Côn Đảo là bàn thờ của quốc gia Việt Nam" [Côn Đảo is the altar of the country of Vietnam] – and an altar has many different dimensions beyond the political. The divergent dimensions – subjects, objects and manners – of remembrance and commemoration of war dead in contemporary Vietnam are the focus of this chapter.

Introduction: commemoration, remembrance and forgetting

Commemoration, remembrance and forgetting are important phenomena in all postwar situations. In August 2016, the Vietnamese authorities cancelled the memorial ceremony at the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Long Tân (August 18, 1966) that marked an early victory (after deployment) of Australian and New Zealand forces against forces of the National Liberation Front.[5] Since the 1990s, reconciliation and joint commemoration of war dead became common, so the sudden cancellation sparked anger and a diplomatic spat between Vietnam and Australia. One day later, Vietnamese authorities agreed to allow small-scale ceremonies of not more than 40 people; according to Lindsay Murdoch (2016), a series of celebratory events involving 3,000 visitors from Australia and New Zealand was regarded as provocative and disrespectful to the Vietnamese war dead. This event – or better: non-event – seems to reaffirm Christina Schwenkel's insights regarding the transnational and to some extent performative character of commemoration in Vietnam, which to some extent overlaps with tourist practices (Schwenkel 2006, 2008, 2009).

Although the Vietnam/America War lies more than 40 years behind us, we cannot expect that it will soon be forgotten and that commemoration and remembrance will themselves become something of the past. In his essay on China's war commemoration in the post-Mao era, Rana Mitter observed "the new significance of the war [which ended in 1949 – OS] to generations born after the events themselves (which echoes the increasing interest in war commemoration among the younger generation in western societies)" (Mitter 2003, 123–124). This observation seems to attribute the act of war commemoration to "generations" rather than "the state" (although these two categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive). In this chapter, I will reserve the term commemoration for practices initiated, enacted, organized and/or endorsed by the state and its agencies; in other words, such commemoration has an official character, with the prime object of commemoration being the political struggle for which people sacrificed themselves. But in his critique of Maurice Halbwachs's (1959) concept of collective memory, "floating somewhere in the cultural atmosphere of a period" (Ib., 40), Jay Winter coined the concept of agents of remembrance, as the human subjects of the act of remembering. I take remembrance, on the other hand, to denote "small-scale" practices undertaken by "agents of remembrance," who largely consist of "fictive kin" (Winter 1999, 41) – with the prime object of remembering being the dead people themselves as ostensive kin rather than the reasons for and circumstances of their deaths.

This implies that the act of remembering must be done by specific (human) *subjects*. In her recent essay "Why study the past?" the postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2012) begins her epistemological reflections on the multiple connections between present and past by problematizing the present. The present – the "now" – is just a moment, and continuously vanishes into the past. This means that the past can only be seized (rather than comprehended) in this fleeting moment; she calls this moment of comprehension "present-ing the past" (2012, 2). Logically, this means that the history of the past is necessarily the object of a construction in our minds. After all, whereas the *object* of remembering is something that happened in the past, the *act* of remembering takes place in a present that itself vanishes into the past. Remembering, then, is an active, agentive and selective practice that takes place in an ever-fleeting present (cf. Salemink 2014a), against the backdrop of – alternatively painful or blissful – forgetting (cf. Augé 2001; Mitter and Moore 2011, 240). Ceasing the act of remembering ushers in the forgetting of the events and the people of the past that were the objects of remembering, or of deliberate, often ritualized acts of remembrance. Spivak does not describe or define the subjects of this act of remembering – of "seizing the past" – but since she speaks about history in the

plural, one may infer that she thinks of the subjects of remembering as diverse as well; to what extent they are collective subjects – such as the nation, an ethnic group, a socioeconomic class – she does not spell out.

This chapter takes these blurred distinctions, but also the multiple connections, between commemoration, remembrance and forgetting as point of departure. In the next section I discuss the phenomenon of war martyrs, sacrifice and commemoration in Vietnam. A subsequent section will pay attention to the distinctions and connections between personal memories and official commemoration. After that I discuss the meritorious and efficacious dead in the guise of ancestors, spirits, ghosts and gods, paying particular attention to the spirit of Hồ Chí Minh. A last section suggests that ritualization of remembrance and commemoration in Vietnam integrates overlapping worlds and times.

Wars martyrs, sacrifice and commemoration

The mass warfare waged by conscription armies of modern industrial societies often resulted in massive casualties, giving rise to specific forms of commemoration, like the ubiquitous monuments dotting French and British landscapes in honor of the soldiers who died during World War One (Nora 1996; Winter 1999). As Winter suggested, such sites of commemoration are often the result of a joint initiative by state agencies and by private agents of remembrance. One celebrated example of such a memorial site is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, which chronologically lists the names of all American servicemen and – women who died during the war on a black granite wall. The memorial site attracts many visitors – veterans, relatives, friends – who often call their visit a pilgrimage (Dubisch 2008, 2009; Sturken 1991), which helps overcome the grief. The healing power of the memorial has been the subject of serious psychological research (Watkins, Cole, and Weidemann 2010; Watson et al. 1995). In the words of Jill Dubisch:

> For many Vietnam veterans, the Wall is where the spirits of the dead reside. Touching the names of the dead calls back their souls, one veteran explained.
>
> *(Dubisch 2009, 10)*

In other words, the memorial mediates between the living and the dead in ways that encourage healing during an annual "healing pilgrimage" (Ib.) that brings a group of motorcycle-borne agents of remembrance to the official commemoration site in DC, which has acquired personal and spiritual significance beyond state politics.

In Vietnam the various wars tend to be commemorated in much more decentralized fashion. There is, of course, a central site in downtown Hanoi for commemorating the war veterans, namely the Đài tưởng niệm liệt sỹ vô danh [memorial shrine for the unknown war martyrs] in Ba Đình square, Hà Nội, which is used for official commemoration ceremonies on behalf of the Communist Party-State. But as Benoît de Tréglodé shows in *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam*, during the 1950s and early 1960s the Democratic Republic of Vietnam developed an extensive hierarchy of memorial sites: "Houses of remembrance (*Nhà lưu niệm*), commemorative statuary sites (*Đài tưởng niệm*), funerary monuments (*Khu mộ*), and ritual sites (*Khu vực thờ*)" (2012, 171). The most ubiquitous sites of both commemoration and remembrance that dot the Vietnamese landscapes are the *nghĩa trang liệt sỹ* [war martyr cemeteries], with uniform graves of fallen soldiers and partisans symmetrically arranged around an obelisk-like structure with the slogans *tổ quốc ghi công* [the fatherland records the merit] and *đời đời nhớ ơn* [eternally remember the debt].[6]

These memorial shrines and war cemeteries are the sites of regular official commemorations, in particular War Invalids and Martyrs Day [*Ngày thương binh liệt sĩ*] which takes place on July 27 in the presence of local authorities and families of war dead and invalid veterans. The chairperson of the local people's committee will make laudatory speeches to honor the war martyrs, after which the attending families of war dead receive small gifts, as a more symbolic gesture of gratitude in addition to the pensions and other monetary, economic and political benefits that they receive. After the brief ceremony the families head home for a rather modest meal with a number of immediate relatives and perhaps close friends and neighbors (Malarney 2001, 67–71). With this form of commemoration, these specific war dead are inscribed into the national list of all war martyrs who died for the revolutionary and/or national cause, albeit on the side of the movement that produced the current communist regime (Goscha and de **Tréglodé** 2004).

Far from definitive, this list is hierarchical with a patriotic pantheon of 32 names, divided over three ranks (de Tréglodé 2012, 204–205). Some of the revolutionary heroes become the object of ritual worship in ways that resemble the worship of national heroes who played historical roles in the defense or liberation of the country in the past – usually in the struggle against China; some examples are the mythical Hùng Kings, the Trưng sisters, Lady Triệu, Trần Hưng Đạo, Nguyễn Trãi or Lê Văn Duyệt. In the course of time some of these historical figures became protective deities who were worshipped in temples and shrines; Trần Hưng Đạo – or Đức Thánh Trần [Virtuous Spirit Trần] – has become one of the most important deities in the widespread spirit possession practice (Pham Quynh Phuong 2009). More contemporary figures who have seen museums but also shrines erected in their honor are the former presidents Tôn Đức Thắng (cf. Giebel 2001, 2004) and, of course, Hồ Chí Minh.

The latter, regarded the father of the fatherland and affectionately called *Bác* [Uncle] Hồ,[7] has his mausoleum, his stilt house and his museum in the center of Hanoi, but in fact many provinces and cities have their own Hồ Chí Minh museums or exhibitions. These are *lieux de mémoire* [memorial sites] in the sense that Pierre Nora meant, namely sites that explicitly, specifically and selectively evoke the memory of a specific event, person or historical category. Nora theorized the proliferation of *lieux de mémoire*, which correspond with the official commemoration alluded to earlier, as correlated with the disappearance of *milieux de mémoire* [environments of remembering] (Nora 1989; see also Connerton 1989, 2009). In order to ensure collective remembering on a societal scale, the arrangement of places, practices and rituals of remembrance become literally commonplace. The most prominent of these theories of collective remembrance is *La mémoire collective* by Maurice Halbwachs (1959), which seeks to develop a theory of memory and (the experience of) time predicated on Henri Bergson's distinction between the individually experienced *durée* (duration) and the collective time (*temps commun*) (1959, 54–59).[8]

In *Imagined Ancestries of Vietnamese Communism*, Christoph Giebel (2004) argued that the official commemoration of president Tôn Đức Thắng [*Bác* Tôn] is disputed by different categories of people in different locations. Likewise, in the case of *Bác* Hồ official commemoration cannot contain the personal remembrances by non-official agents of remembrance, as brought out in a recent flourishing of his worship as a rising deity in the Vietnamese pantheon (see Chung Văn Hoàng 2016; de Tréglodé 2004; Dror 2016; Duiker 2004; Hémery 2004; Malarney 1996, 2002, 189–207; Marouda 2013; Quinn-Judge 2004). In this case, official commemoration has sparked communities and forms of remembrance inspired by his status as fictive kin – namely as uncle of every Vietnamese. In other words, the collective subject of commemoration – the party-state – is not identical with the diverse agents of remembrance, as Edyta Roszko (2010) brought out in her study of patrilineages on Lý Sơn island that seek to inscribe their ancestors into official state commemoration projects. In his essay "Abortive Rituals: Historical

Apologies in the Global Era" Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2000) speaks out against the assumption of a "transfer of attributes from individual to collective subjects [which] testifies to the changes in historical perception that make it possible" (Trouillot 2000, 173). After all,

> Collective subjects are by definition historical products. They cannot precede their own experience. They are not naturally given.
>
> *(Ibid.: 176)*

To some extent this goes against a number of common theories about collective remembrance which hold that collective memories of the past become objectified in texts that are authored, authorized, circulated and transmitted from generation to generation. The next section, then, will deal with such divergences between official commemoration and personal remembrance.

Personal remembrance and official commemoration

The previous section began with a brief discussion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC. In 1997 I visited the famous Tunnels of Củ Chi, a rural district of Ho Chi Minh City on the way to Tây Ninh and further to Cambodia. The tunnels were dug by the Việt Minh and later extended by the National Liberation Front, who held out in these hidden underground tunnels close to the southern metropole of Saigon in spite of overwhelming military superiority of their adversaries (Mangold and Penycate 1985). In the postwar, *Đổi Mới* era, the tunnels became a tourist destination for primarily foreign tourists (including American veterans) and an employer of Vietnamese veterans (Schwenkel 2006, 2009, 88–97). In 2005 I revisited Củ Chi, but now primarily for the memorial temple [*đền tưởng niệm*] at Bến Dược, located idyllically by the Saigon river, and next to the cemetery for war martyrs [*nghĩa trang liệt sỹ*] of Củ Chi. Architecturally, the temple resembles the 1960s modernist style of major Buddhist pagodas in southern Vietnam, with concrete main halls and a high bell tower – not dissimilar to the Xá Lợi and Vĩnh Nghiêm pagodas in Ho Chi Minh City. The exterior walls of the main hall are decorated with revolutionary murals in socialist realist style, depicting Vietnam's resistance against foreign aggression through the ages. The inside is adorned by a towering image of Hồ Chí Minh under three panels with the texts *Tổ quốc ghi công* [The fatherland remembers your sacrifice] – *Vì nước quên mình* [Forgetting oneself for the country] – *Đời đời nhớ ơn* [Eternally remembering the debt], in a wide space adorned with images derived from Đồng Sơn drums as well as with ritual objects like incense vessels and statues of cranes, the bird sent down to guide those destined to live eternally to Heaven.

The main sight in the temple are the interior walls – large slabs of black granite stone engraved in gold letters with the names of almost 45,000 war martyrs, most from Củ Chi and Sài Gòn. During my visit I could not help but remark the similarity with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in DC, which equally honors those who died for their country by engraving their names in black granite. When asking local people about the temple they told me that construction had started in the early 1990s, some 10 years after the inauguration of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in DC (1982).[9] They explained to me that the highly unusual, religious-inspired style of honoring the war dead [*liệt sỹ*] was connected with the motivation for its erection, namely dissatisfaction with the cold, politicized atmosphere of the cemetery, devoid of ritual objects and symbols that help guide the dead to a fulfilling afterlife in heaven. Local people, who had supported the revolution for decades during difficult times, reportedly threatened to take the bodies of their loved ones from the cemetery for a reburial elsewhere, while at the same time

mobilizing political and financial support for a different, more religiously inspired form of commemoration that was more in line with their own ritualized forms of remembrance. The temple was the result of a compromise enabling a combination of political commemoration with ritual remembrance by "fictive kin" (cf. Winter 1999). This section discusses some of these practices of ritual remembrance as distinct from, but often intertwined with, official commemoration practices.

In his study of war dead in the village of Thinh Liet, northern Vietnam, Shaun Malarney (2001, 2002) juxtaposes "two distinct communities of remembrance", namely the nation (in conjunction with socialist state, Communist Party, and revolution) on one hand, and the kin groups rooted in specific localities on the other. In the dominant cosmology in Vietnam, death is a journey rather than a radical departure, which means that the souls of the dead continue to be with us for some time. Across the main religious traditions (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, ancestor worship and spirit worship), death is a transition of the soul from this Yang world [*thế giới Dương*] to the other, Yin world [*thế giới khác* or *thế giới Âm*] where the soul lives on as a spirit until s/he is born again. Most ancestor worship rituals seek to venerate and comfort the ancestors out of thankfulness and indebtedness (*nhớ ơn*), and the ritual care for dead ancestors or fellow kinsfolk is an evident religious duty in cosmologically bifurcated but interconnected worlds. Vietnam's admittedly diverse funerary rites tend to prefer "good deaths": a peaceful departing at home after a good (long, healthy) life with offspring rather than a violent death at young age far away from home, and with the remains dispersed or the dead body not buried with the proper ritual. In this regard Heonik Kwon spoke of the bipolarity of death in his study of commemoration of war dead in central Vietnam (Kwon 2006, 11–27). Funerary ritual prepares the dead for the journey to the afterlife by comforting, feeding and caring for the souls of the dead in their long and lonely journey to the other world. Since the dead are not really dead but still with us in between the two realms, their potential unhappiness could cause harm to the living – first and foremost to their kin, but as wandering, hungry ghosts without proper graves and propitiating community also to non-kin (Endres 2008; Gustafsson 2009; **Salemink and Phan** 2007).

Funerary rites consist of a proper burial after death, with a feast for kin, neighbors, friends and possible others; the lavish celebration of death anniversaries [*ngày giỗ*]; the ritual reburial of the cleaned bones in the family grave after three years; the cleaning of the graves on "grave sweeping day" in the week before the lunar new year to ensure that the new year is inaugurated with a literally clean slate and hence the blessing of the spirits; and the daily routines usually glossed as "ancestor worship", which involves the daily praying and offering of food and drink to the ancestors at the home altar with photos of dead ancestors, diplomas, commendations and other relevant documents as well as paraphernalia (Jellema 2007). Sometimes, especially in case there is no male offspring to continue the patriline, kin make offerings to a nearby Buddhist pagoda on behalf of the dead person, with the intention that the monks or nuns will take ritual care of the soul (Malarney 2001, 70). This ritual care of dead ancestors or kinsfolk is an existential duty for the living regardless of the dead person's merit in terms of the national commemorative project (cf. Tai 2001, 12; Malarney 2001, 67; Kwon 2006, 2008).

Both communities of remembrance – of official commemoration and of remembrance by fictive kin – invoke the Confucian adage of *uống nước nhớ nguồn* [when drinking water, remember the source] which exhorts the living to honor the moral debt that they owe to those who made their lives possible in the first place, but some dead are not seen as meritorious and hence excluded from the official commemoration in an act of – what Hue-Tam Ho Tai calls – "willed amnesia" (Tai, 2001, 8). Those dead were not necessarily political enemies such as those Vietnamese fighting for the French [*thực dân Pháp* – French colonialists], the Americans [*đế quốc Mỹ* – American imperialists] or their allies [*ngụy* – lackeys]. In a recent

article about the relative silencing of the hundreds of thousands of victims of the Great Famine (1944–1945) in northern Vietnam, Ken MacLean (2016) shows how the unease about those victims of colonial policy – suffering horrible deaths, buried without ritual and devoid of a ritual community of remembrance – has turned into a relative amnesia in the national commemorative project, as these victims did not contribute to the liberation of the nation and constitute a moral embarrassment for the living who in this case could not honor the adage of *uống nước nhớ nguồn*.

A number of studies have indicated the growing importance of agents of remembrance beyond the state or state-related agencies and shown the intricate interconnections between the two communities of remembrance – of fictive kin and of state commemoration (cf. Tai 1995, 2001, 12; see also DiGregorio and Salemink 2007; Großheim 2016; Heathcote 2015; Kwon 2006, 2008; Malarney 2001, 2002, 2007; Roszko 2010; Schwenkel 2006, 2008, 2009). Families are happy to receive state recognition of the sacrifice of their dead family member, which in a sense adds to his or her meritorious contribution [*công đức*] in relation to the afterlife as the cosmological worlds are connected. This was not much different for southern soldiers who in their fight against the Communists died for the Saigon-based Republic of Vietnam, which erected its own memorial cemeteries that after 1975 were desecrated by the new regime (cf. Großheim 2016; Malarney 2001; Schwenkel 2006, 2009; Tai 2001). Tensions became more visible during the recent Đổi Mới period as families enjoyed increased wealth, more freedom and engaged more in religious activity. In his article on ritual commemoration of the "exceptional dead" in Vietnam, Shaun Malarney (2007) argued that since the 1990s the Vietnamese state has become more tolerant of large-scale festivals and other explicitly religious rituals celebrating the exceptional dead – including those of revolutionary or military merit. While families have attempted to erect shrines to exceptional war dead, the state itself has embraced the mythical Hùng Kings and the practice of mother goddess worship as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)–endorsed 'intangible cultural heritage' (Salemink 2008, 2016).

In a recent study of war memorials and societal initiatives, Martin Großheim equally observes that during the reform period forms of commemoration and remembrance of war dead have differentiated as the party-state gradually gave up its interpretative monopoly (Großheim 2016, 34). While the party-state does seek to contain inadmissible commemorations of the past – as evidenced by the non-commemoration of the Battle of Long Tân and of the Great Famine (cf. Murdoch 2016; Robertson 2016; MacLean 2016) – other agents of remembrance consisting of kin groups, localities and other 'fictive kin' (cf. Winter 1999) mounted myriad initiatives to remember or even commemorate in different, non-orthodox ways. One particularly heterodox form of remembrance has been described by Anthony Heathcote in his doctoral dissertation on the online memorial site *nghĩa trang online* [online cemetery, http://mo.quakhu.net]. In this cemetery individuals and families remember all sorts of different dead, including dead children, unborn fetuses, but also victims of "bad deaths" like war dead, linking the Yang [*Dương*] and Yin [*Âm*] worlds with the virtual [*ảo*] online world. In his chapter 7 on the memorialization of war dead, Heathcote argues that the online cemetery works especially for those war dead whose remains are missing or who fought for the "wrong" side that lost the war, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Beyond official state commemoration, the personalized virtual remembrance in *nghĩa trang online* offers consolation to the living and the dead alike through mutual care for each other (Heathcote 2015).

But the need for consolation indicates the presence of pain, which in Vietnam is often predicated on an absence of ritual care and the impossibility of ritually effective remembrance. The next section deals with situations where the dead are missing or wandering and constitute an irruptive presence for the living – fictive kin and non-kin alike.

Ancestors, spirits, ghosts and gods[10]

As death is a journey rather than a radical departure, the souls of the dead continue to be with us for some time. Simultaneously, people seek to placate the spirits of ancestors because the spirits can be beneficial and potentially harmful, as spirits exert an influence in the affairs of this world as well. Funerary rituals aim to guide the deceased person safely on the voyage to the other world – safely out of reach of humans – while pleasing her or him by showing appropriate grief. But failing to comply with the ritual prescriptions turns the soul of the dead person into a hungry, revengeful wandering soul (Kwon 2008; Malarney 2002; Luu Hung et al. 2003). The soul of a dead person who is not buried with the proper rituals will wander between the two worlds and can harm the living. For their relatives or descendants who are getting older, having a family member who has not been buried properly is "unfinished business".[11] There are around 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers and militia still missing after the three Indochina Wars (with France, 1945–1954; with the United States, 1960–1975; with Cambodia and China, 1979–1989), whose remains have not been located and who have not been buried properly. For living relatives or descendants who cannot meet the ritual requirements of a proper burial, the continued presence of a family member wandering as a restless, hungry soul between two worlds is not just a source of existential anxiety in terms of not being able to pay the filial debt. It is a source of profound insecurity and uncertainty regarding the present situation. Health, wealth and good fortune are transient, ephemeral and at constant risk of loss by the presence of a wandering soul turned hungry, unhappy and potentially malevolent towards the living. The successful search and ritually correct burial of lost remains enhances family well-being.

One widespread but contested practice in contemporary Vietnam is the search for remains of people "missing in action" (MIAs) since the war years. In the United States, MIAs are usually associated with American soldiers missing in action, with the politicized myth of American soldiers still held prisoner in "North Vietnamese" camps, with Rambo films, and with the political lobbying of right-wing pressure groups opposing normalization of U.S. relations with present-day, Communist-led Vietnam. Like in the United States, Vietnamese MIAs have sparked a search for their remains in Vietnam. In order to put the wandering souls of lost loved ones to rest, many Vietnamese are presently looking for their remains in a variety of ways, first of all by consulting the army records. If these offer no clue, many people nowadays resort to the services of a medium, shaman or clairvoyant because they believe that these people have special, supernatural faculties that may help them locate the remains of the MIAs. This belief received a boost since a scientist and former leader in the Communist regime, Mr. Trần Phương, circulated a paper narrating his own experiences which forced him to abandon his skepticism. Many Vietnamese believe in such supernatural phenomena, or at least try this avenue when all other avenues have been exhausted, but many others remain skeptical. Yet over the past 15 years there has been a remarkable upsurge in the numbers of people seeking the support of mediums, clairvoyants or people with special faculties, as well as in public interest in the phenomenon. Professor Phan Đăng Nhật, who has been studying this phenomenon for years and who has interviewed hundreds of clients, distinguishes between five different "special faculties" employed by famous mediums.[12] While some mediums specialize in finding dead bodies – for example, with the use of "spirit maps" (Hüwelmeier 2020) – other mediums have a more varied repertoire, often involving practices of "soul calling" [*gọi hồn*] or possession [*nhập hồn*]. What is clear in all these cases, though, is that the special faculty is highly individual, located within such an individual or in a special relationship of the medium with a spirit, saint or deity. Because of this individual character, rituals around such forms of spirit possession or shamanism are individual, too, and are usually not as scripted as the more elaborate *lên đồng* rituals which go through a prescribed number of stages, each with fixed attributes (**Endres 2008; Salemink and Phan 2007**).[13]

The ethnic Dao medium Ms. Bình[14] is such a person who is reputed to be able to help find the remains of people who have been lost, as a medium whose body is completely possessed by the souls of dead people during the sessions, and whose mind is "empty" – without conscious-ness – and who therefore has no recollection afterwards of what goes on during the possession. In order to give a sense of such possession by the spirits of dead people, I briefly describe Ms. Bình's methods and impact on one ordinary day in 2003, when she entered the old wooden house which functioned as her ritual space. The space was already packed with people – some coming from far away – seeking her services. Dressed in normal, everyday clothes, she prayed before the altar to ask for permission from the (unnamed) spirits to begin the ceremony. These prayers lasted for about an hour, while clients continued to prepare the altars and the sacrifices, and burn effigies and votive paper money in the yard outside. All the while, people walked in and out of the room through one of the three doors. After Ms. Bình had eaten a bit and rested on the mat, she sat down on an upright chair with eyes closed. From there she ordered that paper waste be removed from under the altar and asked whether everybody was ready with their requests. When there was positive response, somebody started a tape player with music and Buddhist chants. Prayer books from the little table in front of the altar were distributed, and people seated on the mats chanted along with the better-known chants. Prayers were chanted in unison, after which Ms. Bình asked permission to continue the ceremony from the saints of a multi-ethnic Taoist pantheon.

After sitting upright on the chair for 15 minutes, Ms. Bình's head and body started to sway in circular motion, and the audience became excited and murmured chants that asked for 'their' spirit to appear. Around noon – and after a possession was botched by clumsily disruptive behavior on the part of the client, the mother of a dead child – Bình started to shake her head quickly now. She spread her hands with palms up, indicating that the spirit was male. Incarnated in the body of Ms. Bình, the low voice of Ms Nga's husband called his wife, and he mentioned the names of family members, criticizing one family member who has two wives. The spirit lamented his fate – why was he alone when he died during the war? Why did she come only now for the first time, after 45 years? Why was fate so hard that he had to wander on the ground of his forefathers? Ms. Nga and her daughter Liễu came forward and respectfully offered rice wine, which the spirit (through the body of the medium) accepted and drank. Why did the other family members not come? Nga whispered that the other children and grandchildren could not come for they were in the south. After some time the spirit left Ms. Bình's body, and Bình opened her eyes, looking around her as if awaking from a deep sleep.

After a number of other clients had met their dead relatives, the medium did not "wake up" from her trance as usual and again began to sway her head and body as the crowd chanted the Vietnamese name of the Amitabha Buddha – A di đà Phật. With the palms of her hand stretched out she called Mô from far away Nghệ An province, but the crowd answered that Mô went home already. Mô's family had been around for the past couple of days but they went home after waiting for some days without success in meeting with a spirit. Many people do wait, even for days or weeks if necessary, especially those who come from far away. During the next trance the medium put both hands akimbo, indicating that the body was possessed by an old male spirit, Ông Tạo, who calls his wife Thu, an elderly woman of about 70. From the conversation it became clear that she had three brothers killed during the war as *liệt sỹ* [revolutionary martyrs], and that she was looking for their graves in Quảng Ngãi province in central Vietnam, below the old demarcation line along the 17th Parallel. The spirit was offered a glass of beer and cigarettes (three at a time), his conversation was very lively as he was alternately joking and crying with Ms. Thu. He encouraged her to go look for the graves but his information did not seem very precise. According to some northern Vietnamese, locating graves in this manner would only

work with those who had fought on the "politically correct" revolutionary side of the war, thus becoming war martyrs [*liệt sỹ*] and hence considered to have sacrificed themselves [*hy sinh*] for the nation. However, I have witnessed on other occasions that locating graves via spirit mediums is not the exclusive prerogative of politically correct war martyrs.

The mushrooming of *gọi hồn* and *nhập hồn* was frowned upon as superstitious and heterodox [*mê tín dị đoan*] within certain political and scientific policy circles, yet the stories of successful searches – as brought out in the auto-document by the former deputy prime minister, Professor Trần Phương, and the survey by Phan Đăng Nhật – tickled the curiosity about the possibility of extrasensorial capacities [*năng lực ngoại cảm*] in Vietnam among leading scholars and politicians as well as the general public.[15] In 1997 a new, semi-official Center for the Study of Human Potentialities [*Trung tâm Nghiên cứu Tiềm năng Con người*] was inaugurated in Hanoi under the auspices of the Vietnamese Union of Science and Technology Associations [*Liên hiệp Hội Khoa học và Kỹ thuật Việt Nam*], which itself has been studied in-depth by Paul Sorrentino (2013, 2018). In his dissertation and subsequent book Sorrentino describes and analyzes possession rituals involving the possession of fictive kin by the dead rather than professional mediums, overseen and guided by scientists – some of them parapsychologists. The dissertation offers a fascinating read about the search for the remains of loved ones through extrasensorial [*ngoại cảm*] means, if only because the possession of lay persons – fictive kin – rather than professional mediums understandably leads to confusing situations and emotions which seem to counter the scientific ethos aspired to by the center.

The Center for the Study of Human Potentialities constitutes a site where heterodox remembrance rituals of fictive kin overlap with officially-mandated scientific practice. Another present-day phenomenon where personal, heterodox remembrance overlaps with official commemoration is offered by the cult of Hồ Chí Minh (Chung Văn Hoàng 2016, 2017; Dror 2016; Hüwelmeier 2019; Malarney 1996, 2002; Marouda 2013; Ngo 2019). Most Vietnamese have grown up with the omnipresent figure of Hồ Chí Minh as the benevolent father of the fatherland, the embodiment of patriotism and virtue, and whose image is visible in textbooks, in meeting halls, in temples, in homes. Portrayed as unmarried and childless, the absence of familial interests made it possible to portray him "as 'uncle' [*bác*] of every Vietnamese, so that he thus symbolically assumed a relaxed but serious family authority-*cum*-responsibility" (Salemink 2008, 265) in the sense of filial piety [*hiếu*], making it the duty of every Vietnamese to take ritual care of Uncle Hồ's soul. In addition, as national hero Hồ Chí Minh entered the pantheon of deified national heroes which includes such ritually efficacious deified national heroes as Trần Hưng Đạo (cf. Pham Quynh Phuong 2009).

In "Establishing Hồ Chí Minh's cult", Olga Dror (2016) traces his tortuous party-state–sponsored route towards senior unclehood within the Vietnamese nation. In "The unending death of an immortal", Marina Marouda (2013) suggests that the specific mummified form that official commemoration of Hồ Chí Minh takes in his mausoleum forecloses his metamorphosis towards an efficacious spirit. This suggestion, however, is convincingly refuted by Chung Văn Hòang (2016) in his article analyzing the veneration of Hồ Chí Minh as the Jade Buddha as a new religious movement with millenarian aspects. Believers hold that Hồ Chí Minh's journey to Heaven and up in the heavenly hierarchy was extremely fast and heralds a heaven-inspired revolution in this world; this is known through the spirit writings of a medium under possession by uncle Hồ. I have come across one believer during a recent trip to Vietnam in the guise of a retired professor in Hanoi who spoke with gusto about Bác Hồ's meteoric rise in the pantheon of the Jade Emperor, about his regular possession of an uneducated woman who wrote his spirit words in what was irrefutably his poetic style, and about Bác Hồ's promise to help Vietnam defeat China in the upcoming war over the South China Sea. Official commemoration

predicated on a fictive kin relation between the father of the fatherland as the senior uncle of all living Vietnamese engenders communities of remembrance that go way beyond the official commemoration project. Thus, the connection between official state commemoration and remembrance practices by fictive kin and other agents of remembrance may lend potentially dangerous political legitimacy to the latter's projects.

Revolutionary apparitions and their eruptions

Much like other national heroes in the past, the transformation of Hồ Chí Minh into a benevolent deity protecting the Vietnamese nation against its enemies – especially China – can be fruitfully compared with the transformation of Võ Thị Sáu into a benevolent spirit protecting its supplicants on Côn Đảo island. Similar to the commemoration of Tôn Đức Thắng as described by Giebel (2004), in both these cases official commemoration of political figures by the party-state intended and used for ideological fortification [*bồi dưỡng chính trị*] morphed into ritualized remembrance practices in which the agents of remembrance pursued goals with methods vastly different from those officially endorsed. To specific mediums, mediators and their followers, the spirits of Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Thị Sáu appear as visions not unlike the Marian apparitions in Catholic parts of the world (Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans 2009). As *revolutionary apparitions*, however, they become unpredictable and spread messages that diverge from the officially condoned political versions, but respond to the aspirations and anxieties of different – and diverse – agents of remembrance. In the same vein, the forgetting – or at least silencing – of specific events and people, like the morally and politically embarrassing victims of the Great Famine of 1944–1945, corresponds with the present-day interests of those who make amnesic choices.

While the objects of commemoration, remembrance and forgetting are situated in the past, the acts of remembering, commemorating and forgetting take place in an ever-fleeting present. This is done by a wide variety of agents of remembrance, acting in different assemblages or communities of remembrance representing diverse interests and aspirations, and employing myriad – more or less ritualized – ways of memorial work. This memorial or amnesic work of recalling, and connecting with, past events and persons, takes place in the present but is paradoxically oriented towards a future, which is not a bleak, empty landscape but a world inhabited by more or less familiar beings – fictive kin – in a great chain of being. If L.P. Hartley's (1953; see also Lowenthal 1985) famous adage that "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there" holds any truth, then the kind of proactive memory work that I alluded to as remembrance and commemoration seeks to make that foreign country less unfamiliar. Simultaneously, it seeks to make the future – perhaps an even more exotic country – more familiar as a future past,[16] inhabited by familiar beings who have to be placated and comforted in a process of mutual care of the living and the dead. Control over the ritual forms and substantive contents of remembrance – typically in the guise of official commemorations – would then project some control over the future, both backward and forward from the present; but the dead, in their multiple apparitions, keep interrupting the present.

Notes

1 For general overviews of the history of the Côn Đảo penitentiary and its political prisoners, see Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, Đặc khu Vũng Tàu – Côn Đảo 1991; Demariaux 1999; Hoàng Phong Hà et al. 2011; Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan 1996; Management Committee for the Historic Monuments in Côn Đảo 2005; Nguyễn Đình Thống 2012; Trần Thanh Phương 1995).

2 In northern Vietnam she is conventionally referred to as **cô**, and in southern Vietnam oftentimes as **bà** or **chị** (elder sister), depending on convention and relative age distance – but these distinctions are fuzzy; see also Cỏ Mai (2012); Hoàng Thị Lương (n.d.); Ngô Minh (2016).

3 In an article on the performance of remembrance by former female guerrillas in southern Vietnam, Rivka Eisner made the same trip to Côn Đảo as her interlocutors, and felt herself – as a non-Vietnamese speaker – haunted by the ghosts of the place (Eisner 2012: 77). In their article on tourism development on Côn Đảo, Hayward and Tran speak of "thanatourism": "Rather than the mass graveyard being a locked, prohibited and/or 'spooky' location after dark – in a manner familiar to Western tourists, residents and/or tourism researchers – picnics, informal gatherings and social interactions centered on memorial facilities and/or individual graves are common. The social interactions that occur at Hang Duong represent members of the living community of Vietnamese communing with dead patriots, respecting them by including them and their experiences within the lived present of a Vietnamese society freed from foreign control due to their sacrifice." (Hayward and Tran 2014: 119–120).

4 I spoke with many night-time visitors to Võ Thị Sáu's grave, who came from various parts of Vietnam and all walks of life (albeit the more well-off sections of Vietnamese society). See also Cỏ Mai (2012), Hayward and Tran (2014) and Hoàng Thị Lương (n.d.).

5 See Robertson (2016) and The Guardian (2016).

6 Malarney translates *tổ quốc ghi công* more freely as "the fatherland remembers your sacrifice" (Malarney 2001: 57; 74–5, note 27).

7 The usual translation of *bác* as "uncle" does little justice to the various meanings of the term in Vietnamese, where kin terms are used instead of personal pronouns in order to establish the (hierarchical and gendered) relationship between the speaker/narrator and the person referred to. In Vietnamese, *bác* is often used to refer to an elder sibling of one's parents, but it can also be used to refer to any person of similar age or status outside the kin group.

8 These paragraphs are partly based on Salemink (2014a).

9 Christina Schwenkel reports that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial had been the inspiration (Schwenkel 2009: 95 and 135–6).

10 This section is a partial adaption of Salemink (2014b).

11 Vietnamese people often use the word *việc* [literally "work"] in connection with "family affairs", including care and rituals.

12 These methods are 1) complete spirit possession (whereby the medium is no longer conscious); 2) partial possession (whereby the medium is conscious of the spirit possession); 3) translation (of the meaning expressed by spirits); 4) prophesying (whereby the medium is making announcements); and 5) being prophesied. According to Prof. Nhật's respondents, many people have been able to locate graves or dead bodies in these manners (Phan Đăng Nhật – personal communication, 2003)

13 On *lên đồng* and mother goddess worship there is a host of publications, much of which is discussed in Salemink (2015).

14 This is a pseudonym.

15 The idea of extrasensorial [*ngoại cảm*] seems more acceptable within scientific reasoning than supernatural [*siêu phàm*]; the last idea has the connotation of non-natural and hence unscientific, whereas the first could denote a phenomenon that has *not yet* been scientifically discovered. The stories of Trần Phương and of well-known extrasensorial expert Nguyễn Văn Liên and high-level positive interest have been covered in a series of newspaper articles by Phùng Nguyên in the newspaper *Tiền Phong* (Phùng Nguyên 2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

16 This idea of "future past" is distinctly different from Reinhart Koselleck's notion of "futures past" (cf. Koselleck 1985, xi).

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INDEX