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My interest in history and politics began after I arrived in the U.S. from Vietnam in December 1990 as a refugee. In Vietnam, until this day history is deployed as a propaganda tool for the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) to perpetuate the myth that it was the only legitimate and capable inheritor of the national tradition. Children learned at a young age in school that all paths of history necessarily or inevitably took Vietnam to Communist rule, and the country is forever indebted to the Party for rescuing it from foreign domination and taking it to a bright future. History is taught in school as truth to be accepted and is not open to questioning or debates.

While history is monopolized by the official narrative, politics is similarly in the tight grips of the ruling VCP. With the regime's goal to perpetuate Communist rule, politics is restricted in terms of who is permitted to participate; what information is permitted to circulate; and what events are permitted to be discussed in public and how they are to be discussed. Politics as a subject of study is limited only to the study of the VCP's history, Marxist and Leninist philosophy, political economy, and, recently, "Ho Chi Minh's Thought." These subjects are required in college for all majors and aimed to indoctrinate rather than enlighten students.

The good thing about coming to the US as a "stateless refugee" was that I had nothing left to lose. At 25, I already lost my birth country, and my net worth was in the negative given that the airfare I borrowed from World Relief to pay for my trip would have to be repaid. I applied to the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities and received some fellowships for students with no income. One of the classes I took in my first term was American Politics 1001 because I was curious to learn just what politics was, as that concept was a taboo where I came from. The course fascinated me, and I read the textbook over and over.

In the last lecture at the end of the term, the professor, Steven Smith, said something that struck me deeply. I don't remember the exact words, but his general message was that all of the political institutions we had learned about were there by choice in the sense that Americans were not predestined to have them, nor did they have put up with them against their wishes. Growing up in Vietnam, I didn't even have the choice of my food as we were often hungry, let alone the choice of government. I chose to major in political science in order to learn more even though I had no idea what to do with the knowledge or the degree.

In my junior year, after my application for a work-study job in the mailroom of Minneapolis Mayor's Office was rejected (I was told because of my accent), I began to worry about the future. One day I happened to see a flyer at the Career Office about the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship in Public and International Affairs for students of color. I successfully applied and the fellowship helped me get into Princeton's prestigious Woodrow Wilson School for a Master's degree, spend a year in Japan in order to study Japanese, and then move on to Berkeley for a Ph.D. in political science.

At Berkeley my initial plan was to study market reforms in China and Vietnam, so I began to study Chinese. I enrolled in a seminar taught by Ken Jowitt, a scholar of Eastern European Communism, and found his lectures mesmerizing even though I did not understand most of them. Berkeley was a pioneer in developing the comparative historical method in political

science, which I would soon adopt. Then I registered for Vietnam historian Peter Zinoman's graduate seminar on Southeast Asian Communism, and discovered my interest in (Vietnamese) history. Southeast Asian Studies was (still is) strong at Berkeley at the time, and I decided to switch from learning Chinese to Indonesian so that I could compare state formation in Vietnam and Indonesia. The different pieces of the puzzle (topic, method, cases, language) gradually came together as I slowly found my interest and my way forward.

In the eventual dissertation I added China and South Korea to the comparison of state formation, yet in hindsight the choice of Indonesia was one of the best decisions of my academic career. The systematic comparison within the region offered me a rare perspective (few Southeast Asianists, including historians, know more than one Southeast Asian language; certainly none before me had known both Vietnamese and Indonesian). In addition, the breadth of regional knowledge profoundly shaped the conceptual approach I have taken in all my subsequent research on macro-historical topics from state formation to nationalism. I would intuitively understand why the national framework is problematic while appreciating the values of connected or "connecting histories" within a regional framework.[1]

Dissertation fieldwork took place over nearly two years, with the time spent mostly on archival research and divided between Indonesia and Vietnam. It was in a used bookstore in Hanoi that I stumbled into a thick memoir by Mr. Vu Dinh Hoe, published a few years earlier, that discussed the important role his group of French-trained intellectuals played in the Viet Minh government led by the Communists from late 1945 to late 1947.[2] His group was marginalized when that government joined the Soviet bloc and received Chinese assistance in 1950, and was purged in 1957 when they criticized the disastrous land reform policy and wanted to form an opposition political party. They were not killed as Chairman Mao Zedong's enemies were in China, but were "excommunicated" and treated as if they were ghosts, i.e., their names were erased from all public records and not allowed to be mentioned in public.[3]

For this reason, few outsiders and Vietnamese of later generations knew about their presence. One would not even find Mr. Hoe's or his collaborators' names in books on Vietnamese history at that time, let alone discussions of what they did. Official history as well as that written by Western scholars presented only the Communist version of events in which the Communists were alone to deserve credits for forming the new Vietnamese state. Mr. Hoe, who was born in 1912, was able to publish his memoir simply because he had outlived all those contemporary Communist leaders who would have blocked him. It took much effort for me to find out that he was still alive and willing to see me. The knowledge about this group enabled me to read and interpret sources (newspapers or archival documents) in a new light, helping me to understand the pattern of political compromise and polarization in Vietnamese politics that I did not know about when I began my fieldwork.[4]

By the time I graduated from Berkeley in 2005, the field of Cold War Studies/History had really taken off. Newly available archival sources from Russia, China, Hungary, former East Germany, and Vietnam as well as newly declassified sources from Western countries began to shed new light on old questions. Vietnamese history as a field has also grown significantly with increased access to the country. For my interest in Vietnamese Communism, I benefited from a series of more than 40

[1] See, for example, Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann, eds. *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009).

[2] Vu Dinh Hoe, *Hoi ky Thanh Nghi* [Memoir about Thanh Nghi]. Hanoi: Van Hoc, 1995.

[3] The term "excommunicated" was used by Nguyen Manh Tuong, an intellectual who suffered the same fate. See his memoir "Ke bi mat phep thong cong: Ha Noi 1954-1991 – Ban an cho mot tri thuc," translated from French, available at http://www.viet-studies.net/NMTuong/NMTuong_HoiKy.htm.

[4] See Tuong Vu, "It's Time for the Indochinese Revolution to Show Its True Colors: The Radical Turn in Vietnamese Politics in 1948," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40:3 (October 2009): 519-542.

volumes of Communist Party documents from 1924 to 1990 that came out in the early 2000s.[5] While the VCP did not (and still does not) open its archives to foreign researchers, a young generation of its leadership sought to cope with the loss of legitimacy following the collapse of the Soviet bloc by ordering the publication of those volumes. Those sources have many limitations but are useful in various ways that I have discussed elsewhere.[6] With this series, together with newspapers and other contemporary publications, I was able to understand the Communist revolution at a much deeper level.

The new sources out of Vietnam fundamentally changed the study of Vietnamese history, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War as it related to Vietnam. It is now possible and necessary to treat Vietnamese, both Northerners and Southerners, as historical actors and not bystanders in their own history or powerless victims of foreign forces. As historian Christopher Goscha recently wrote, for far too long Vietnamese history has been told from foreign perspectives, whether Chinese, French, or American.[7] Such perspectives are not wrong but incomplete, especially when Vietnamese perspectives are not known or included. As recently as 15 years or so ago, however, Goscha's view was not popular in American academia.

Even today, many observers still deny Vietnamese agency and reduce them to certain pre-assigned roles. For example, Communists are typically assigned to be peace lovers-turned-fighters against external domination, whereas non-Communists are to appear on stage as collaborators or puppets of foreign forces. This is in fact the orthodox view adhered to by much Vietnam War scholarship. On the one hand, that view reflects many scholars' Orientalist mode of thinking that assumes a Vietnam that remained unchanged throughout the millennia; on the other hand, it merely rehashes the Communist propaganda that I grew up with. I found it particularly condescending and even insulting for orthodox historians to assume that Ho Chi Minh and his comrades could not have embraced a worldview more radical than old-fashioned traditional patriotism. In this sense, Vietnam War studies still lags behind Cold War studies that has now fully recognized the agency of "Third World" actors.[8]

There is no question that my scholarship has closely tracked developments in the field and has been critically shaped by scholars of my post-Cold War generation. My book on the Communist revolution in Vietnam was written over nearly a decade during which I continued to tap into newly available sources from Vietnam while being influenced by the works of other Vietnam or Vietnam War historians, especially Keith Taylor, Peter Zinoman, Christopher Goscha, Lien-Hang Nguyen, Edward Miller, Pierre Asselin, Alec Holcombe, and Alex-Thai Vo.[9] We were all raising questions for the orthodox view in various ways and from various vantage points.

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[5] Dang Cong San Viet Nam, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* [Complete Party documents], multiple volumes (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2000-2005).

[6] See Vu, "Van Kien Dang Toan Tap: The Regime's Gamble and Researchers' Gains," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5:2 (2010): 183-194.

[7] Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 203.

[8] Examples include John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[9] Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Keith Taylor, "How I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 18:4 (Fall 2004); Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2012); Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Alec Holcombe, *Mass*

My research on the Vietnam War and Vietnamese history has also been influenced by my research on ancient empires, modern state formation, and nationalism in Vietnam and Asia as a whole. Dominant views in the English-language scholarship by prominent scholars such as Benedict Anderson and David Marr either exaggerates the power of Vietnamese nationalism or conflates it with communism.[10] My research on the debates over Vietnamese nationalism shows that pioneer scholars such as Bernard Fall in fact understood Vietnamese nationalism more accurately than later scholars whose antiwar activism often led them to biases.[11] The evidence I found supports the argument that it was the Southern-based Republic of Vietnam that more consistently employed the rhetoric and symbols of Vietnamese nationalism than its Communist rival in the North.

Beyond Vietnam, the study of nationalism has advanced far beyond the debate between the so-called "perennialists" and "modernists" of the 1980s. The new scholarship does not take current national communities for granted, crosses the divide between the premodern and modern origins of nations, and questions many Eurocentric assumptions of modernists. My research has benefited much from this more nuanced understanding of nationalism. In my forthcoming chapter on the origins of nations in Indochina in the multi-volume *Cambridge History of Nationhood and Nationalism*, I make the case for the imperial origins of ancient communities and modern nations in Indochina.[12] Whereas ancient communities in various river deltas in Indochina emerged through their contacts and interactions with external empires such as the Chinese and the Khmer empires, I argue that modern Vietnamese nationalism arose as the offshoot of the Vietnamese elites' wounded pride in their imperial past when their country fell to the more powerful French empire.

Reflecting a new trend in Vietnamese studies, in the last five years my interest has shifted to the study of Vietnamese republicanism and the diaspora. Until recently these topics were largely neglected by historians of modern Vietnam. Republican ideas of representative government and the rule of law spread to French Indochina in the early twentieth century and fueled many political movements in Vietnam that both pre-existed and intensely competed with the Communist movement for mass support. The anti-Communist Republic of Vietnam (RVN) that existed in the southern half of the country for two decades (1955-75) embodied many of those ideas that were passionately fought for by its supporters and that followed the diaspora to foreign lands. The Communists won the conflict but scholars should not study them exclusively as if other political tendencies did not matter. In fact, modern Vietnamese history looks very different and is much more interesting once the Communist-centered narrative is abandoned. In this line of research, my work has been influenced by many historians, including Keith Taylor, Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox, Olga Dror, Shawn McHale, Van Nguyen-Marshall, Andrew Wiest, Heather Stur, Nu-Anh Tran, Tuan Hoang, Sean Fear, and others.[13]

Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945-1960 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020); Alex-Thai Vo, "Nguyen Thi Nam and the Land Reform in North Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10:1 (February 2015): 1-62.

[10] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991); David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[11] Vu, "Vietnamese Political Studies and Debates on Vietnamese Nationalism," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2:2 (August 2007), 175-230.

[12] Vu, "Bringing Empire Back in: The Imperial Origins of Nations in Indochina," in Aviel Roshwald, Cathie Carmichael, and Matthew D'Auria, eds. *Cambridge History of Nationhood and Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[13] Taylor, ed. *Voices from the Second Republic of South Vietnam (1967-1975)* (Ithaca: Cornell SEAP, 2014); Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox, "Existentialism and Intellectual Culture in South Vietnam," *Journal of Asian Studies* 73:2 (2014): 377-395; Olga Dror, *Making Two Vietnams: War and Youth Identities, 1965-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Shawn McHale, "Understanding the Fanatic Mind? The Việt Minh and Race Hatred in the First Indochina War (1945–1954)," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4:3 (2009): 98-138; Van Nguyen-Marshall, "Appeasing the Spirits Along the 'Highway of Horror': Civic Life in Wartime Republic of Vietnam," *War & Society* 37:3 (2018): 206-222; Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Heather Stur, *Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties* (New York: Cambridge University Press,

In retrospect, I was fortunate to have received support from numerous institutions and individuals for my studies, and to have begun my career at a favorable moment for historians of modern Vietnam, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War. While the field of modern Vietnamese history in the U.S. suffered for decades after the end of the Second Indochina War, it has rebounded and benefited from fresh sources and its engagement with latest scholarship on related topics such as Cold War history, Asian studies, state formation, and nationalism. It has also benefited from the distance from the Vietnam War that once deeply politicized scholarship. The rapidly expanding frontier of modern Vietnamese studies in a transnational perspective from communism to nationalism and republicanism has been an exciting development for me, something I never expected to take part in when I enrolled in American Politics 1001.

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2020); Nu-Anh Tran, "Contested Identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam (1954-1963)," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California-Berkeley, 2013; Tuan Hoang, "Ideology in Urban South Vietnam, 1950-1975," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2013; Sean Fear, "The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic: Domestic Politics and Civil Society in US-South Vietnam Relations, 1967-1971," Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2016.