

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXII-13

Christian C. Lentz. *Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780300233957 (hardcover, \$35.00).

23 November 2020 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT22-13>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

Contents

Introduction by Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, Columbia University.....	2
Review by Michitake Aso, University at Albany, SUNY	5
Review by Pierre Asselin, San Diego State University	8
Review by Bradley Camp Davis, Eastern Connecticut State University.....	11
Response by Christian C. Lentz, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.....	14

INTRODUCTION BY LIEN-HANG T. NGUYEN, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Vietnam Studies has never been stronger. The field has undergone a renaissance as of late, evidenced by the recent publication of three capacious surveys by established scholars, the dominance of Vietnam titles among the major book prizes including the Kahin, the Benda and the Fairbank, and the growing number of Ph.D.s in the field gaining tenure-track positions and tenure at institutions worldwide.¹ At the same time, new centers of Vietnam Studies are joining the ranks of established programs as enrollments grow in courses devoted to Vietnamese history, politics, culture, and society. As long as Vietnamese language courses remain available and research in Vietnam stays viable, it seems that the field will continue to thrive even as area studies in general loses its luster. While the Vietnam War continues to anchor some of this interest, at least in the United States, the field has attracted a new generation of scholars who have either found different ways to study conflict, revolution, and violence in Vietnam's modern history or have ventured beyond the war to examine other topics and periods in Vietnam Studies.

Christian Lentz's *Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwestern Vietnam* is perhaps one of the best examples of this resurgence and new dynamism of the field. Combining diverse methodological rigor with deep linguistic expertise, it uncovers the "hidden history" about the competing claims over a particular space near the Black River in Southeast East Asia, most commonly known as Điện Biên Phủ, during the "long 1950s" (1945-1960). In doing so, the book challenges its readers in so many ways that it is worth listing them lest we gloss over the book's many interventions. First, *Contested Territory* challenges conventional narratives: in diplomatic history (Điện Biên Phủ as the precursor to Geneva and the new Cold War in Asia), military studies (Điện Biên Phủ as the defeat of western colonial forces by a revolutionary postcolonial army), globalization (Điện Biên Phủ as one of the early augurs of the decolonial on the world stage), and nationalist depictions (Điện Biên Phủ as the model victory of the Vietnamese communist state). Second, *Contested Territory* also forces us to rethink territory as an "ongoing social process, a ruling strategy, and a contingent outcome" rather than a fixed notion of "sovereign space or a spatial container." (4) Indeed, the process of how the area referred to as "heavenly *muang*" (or Mường Thanh) by the upriver Tai inhabitants became incorporated as Điện Biên Phủ ("border-post prefecture" by its Kinh "downstream" counterparts) into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) body politic was highly-contested and violent. By moving between the perspectives of the DRV state and the local Tai actors, against the backdrop of an increasingly globalized war, Lentz throws into sharp relief just how complex the construction of national territory was in northwest Vietnam. Also, *Contested Territory* temporally reframes the study of this period to better represent events as they unfolded on the ground. The periodization of the "long 1950s" upends staid periodization that tends to either start or end in 1954, eliding movements and counter-movements that transpired over this fifteen-year period.

The reviewers of this roundtable, who are well-known Vietnam Studies scholars from different historical corners of the field, all recognize the significance of *Contested Territory*. Pierre Asselin, who has done the most to dissect internal Vietnam Workers' Party politics and to contextualize these struggles on the global stage, calls *Contested Territory* "essential reading for anyone seeking deeper comprehension of the triumphs and failures of the Communist nation-building effort in

¹ The surveys include: Keith Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). Recent Benda Prize winners include: Ann Marie Leshkovich, *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014); Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Erik Harms, *Saigon's Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); recent Kahin Prize: Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and recent Fairbank Prize: Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*.

Vietnam.”² Bradley Davis, a polyglot historian of the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, applauds *Contested Territory* for “overthrow(ing) the hagiographic edifice of Dien Bien Phu and open(ing) paths for future researchers” even though he wishes that it had done more exploring the historical linguistics of the early DRV.³ Finally, Michitake Aso, a rigorous environmental historian of Vietnam’s modern history spanning from the French colonial period to the end of the revolutionary era, appreciates the methodological and theoretical interventions that *Contested Territory* makes.⁴ Place matters and so too do “affect and calculability” in the DRV’s state-building and developmental schemes.

And what about the author himself and what he brings to the field of Vietnam Studies? Self-described as a “sociologist turned geographer (who) thinks like a historian,” Lentz comes from very good Southeast Asianist scholarly stock. At Cornell and Yale, he studied under the greats, which is evident in Lentz’s versatility in utilizing and adapting various methodological frameworks from sociology, anthropology, agrarian studies, and history. Originally focused on Indonesia, Lentz found his way to the mainland, much to the delight of scholars of Vietnam. In that vein, he brings the diversity and richness of the broader regional field to bear on this important book about northwest Vietnam and the heavenly *muang*. If Lentz is representative of the field’s new scholars, Vietnam Studies is in very good shape.

Participants:

Christian C. Lentz earned a Ph.D. at Cornell University and is Associate Professor of Geography at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He was a member of the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, NJ. His research and teaching have been supported by the Association of Asian Studies, a Fulbright Foreign Scholarship award, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. His articles have appeared in *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Modern Asian Studies*, *Political Geography*, *Geopolitics*, and other leading journals. His current research traces political relations between Vietnam and Indonesia in the 1950s and explores local alternatives to Cold War alignment and nation-state domination.

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen is the Dorothy Borg Chair in the History of the United States and East Asia at Columbia University. She is the author of *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012) and the general editor of the forthcoming three volumes *Cambridge History of the Vietnam War*. She is currently working on a comprehensive history of the 1968 Tet Offensive with Random House. Nguyen is also the co-founder of the Vietnam Studies Program at Columbia.

Pierre Asselin is the author of *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), which won the 2003 Kenneth W. Baldridge Prize, and *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (University of California Press, 2013), winner of the 2013 Arthur Goodzeit Book Award. His third book, *Vietnam’s American War: A History*, was released in 2018 by Cambridge University Press. He is co-editor of *The Cambridge History of the Vietnam War, Volume III: Endings* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

Michitake Aso earned his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin and is an Associate Professor of History at the University at Albany, SUNY. He has held postdoctoral fellowships at the National University of Singapore and the University of Texas,

² Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) among other prize-winning books.

³ Bradley Davis, *Imperial Bandits: Outlaws and Rebels in the China-Vietnam Borderlands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

⁴ Michitake Aso, *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam, 1897-1975: An Ecological History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

Austin. His dissertation on French colonial Vietnam won the 2013 Young Scholar Prize of the International Union of the History and Philosophy of Science. His book, *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam, 1897-1975: An Ecological History* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), explores how the places and people involved in rubber agriculture shaped environments, human health, and knowledge production in modern Vietnam. His book won the 2019 Henry A. Wallace Award from the Agricultural History Society. In addition, he has published articles in *Modern Asian Studies*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, and *Science, Technology, and Society*. He is currently working on a history of environmental health in global Vietnam during the Cold War.

Bradley Camp Davis is an Associate Professor of History at Eastern Connecticut University. A historian of Vietnam and Southeast Asia, Davis's first book, *Imperial Bandits: Outlaws and Rebels in the China-Vietnam Borderlands*, was published by the University of Washington Press in 2017. Currently, he is completing his second book, an environmental history of the Vietnamese empire. His other projects include an international collaboration to research Asian elephant populations in Southeast Asia, an edited volume on the "Wood Age" in Asia, a contribution to the forthcoming *Cambridge History of Confucianism*, and a project on Yao/Mien manuscript traditions. Davis also edits book reviews for H-Asia and is an Editorial Associate for the *American Historical Review*.

REVIEW BY MICHITAKE ASO, UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY, SUNY

Christian Lentz's *Contested Territory* is the history of Điện Biên Phủ that Vietnam studies has been waiting for. For too long this world-historical place, as Lentz puts it, has been frozen as an event dominated by two narratives—a heroic, nation-building Vietnamese victory or a humiliating, empire-shattering French defeat. Few scholars have studied the multiple effects, and actors, of this battle and its aftermath. Lentz breathes life into Điện Biên Phủ by reminding readers that it is “a place, not just a battle” and offering a theoretically-sophisticated discussion of territory and state-building in the Black River region of what is now Northwest Vietnam (1). In this way, Lentz recovers a spatial component to the power/knowledge equation and he invites readers to think more deeply about the role that affect and calculability play in constructing the nation-state on its imagined frontiers.

There is much to praise in *Contested Territory*. Drawing inspiration from the adage that “an army marches on its stomach,” Lentz highlights food as a key problem faced by the Việt Minh and examines the activities that went into its provisioning (141). Challenging official narratives that make success appear as inevitable, Lentz sketches out the monumental task faced by lowland Kinh cadre and their Tai allies. He starts his narrative in 1948 with the Việt Minh's initial attempt “to territorialize the revolution” and challenge the French and their local proxy the Tai Federation (26). Salt, Lentz argues, formed the basis for the material exchanges that constituted the “political work” of building the networks that could support an army and, eventually, a state (53). Before infrastructural projects such as road construction could be completed, the Việt Minh needed to convince locals to make the necessary sacrifices. Ultimately, this attempt failed in 1950 when the Tai Federation regained control of much of the Black River region and the Việt Minh fled to neighboring regions and Laos, leaving local allies to their fate (63).

Lentz next introduces the concepts of mapping and affect to his consideration of territory formation. He recounts the debates among Việt Minh leaders about the proper extent of their territorial claims, whether Vietnam or Indochina, and examines the “mapping projects” of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) (77). In one of the most original contributions of the book, Lentz plays close attention to the ways that emotions motivated, or blocked, territorial processes. In Chapter 3, Lentz recounts the Việt Minh's clever linkage between *công dân*, or citizen, and *dân công*, or laborer (106-115). Through this semantic link, Lentz argues, revolutionaries sought to reinforce the service due to the state as a duty of citizenship. Although in practice such service could be confused with earlier forms of labor demanded by Nguyễn emperors and the colonial state, the Việt Minh worked hard to explain the new economies of affect that governed the relationship between the postcolonial nation and its citizens. Lentz's discussion of a ‘politics of hunger’ further elaborates on both the opportunities and hazards faced by would-be leaders in these economies of affect. When the Việt Minh gained control of the Black River region, they also took over responsibility for ensuring adequate food supplies. Lentz's demonstration of how concerns about calories extended beyond Washington, Moscow, and their emissaries around the world adds to growing literature on the Cold War politics of hunger (123-128).¹

Lentz then provides a one-two punch by exploring first the top down and then the bottom up processes that led to the 1954 battle at Điện Biên Phủ. Like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Lentz's book adopts a broad view of war by looking at how it transforms society. Moreover, Lentz appreciates the difference between plans and the confusion of violence on the ground, and communicates the difficult choices Việt Minh leaders faced as they built on earlier attempts to provision their military. When the Việt Minh regained control of the Black River region in 1952, they drew on previously-formed networks to build the infrastructure necessary to requisition and distribute food, all without alienating local supporters. In the end, these revolutionaries decided to leave in place many of the traditional hierarchies they claimed to oppose. In Chapter 5, Lentz theorizes the links between nation-state territory and individuals, or the geobody and the body, through a close examination

¹ See, for example, Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (New York: Walker & Co., 2010); Geoffrey Gunn, *Rice Wars in Colonial Vietnam: The Great Famine and the Viet Minh Road to Power* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

of the labor performed by locals. “Human bodies,” as Lentz puts it, “were suffering the hard work they did to expand the Vietnamese geobody” (202). Of course bodies were differentiated and Lentz offers a detailed discussion of the gendered aspects of social transformations (186-190). Building on an examination of “state learning” through its miscalculations, Lentz highlights the limits to the DRV’s spatio-teleological categories by revisiting the division of Vietnam at Geneva and South Vietnam’s competing claims to independence and sovereignty (140-145, 181).

Finally, *Contested Territory* continues where most histories of Điện Biên Phủ end through an analysis of the battle’s aftermath into the late 1950s. Illustrating the place of Điện Biên Phủ in Vietnamese popular memory, Lentz states that most Vietnamese in 1954 could not locate the valley on a map but knew that it represented a great Vietnamese victory (247).

While there exists a considerable literature on development in Southeast Asia, *Contested Territory* contributes to it by explaining how the DRV adjusted its development plans to war conditions. In this way, Lentz argues, development for DRV leaders was not an anti-politics machine but in fact was extremely political. This point has been made by several historians for the Ngô Đình Diệm regime in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) but has been less fully explored for the north (150-151).² Yet the idea of the anti-politics machine is not that development discourse actually erases politics but that it masks them. War, it seems, is no different, masking the choices to value certain contributions, and choices, over others. It would also have been interesting to consider how a ‘state of exception’ was used to justify wartime sacrifices and the DRV’s labor and food demands during the First Indochina War. It seems that Hmong and Tai accepted sacrifices (especially relative to Kinh) only because of a compelling argument made for an exceptional state and once that state was over, divisions in the Northwest resurfaced.

Another helpful result of *Contested Territory* is its showing how the state uses, and draws legitimacy from, its power to maintain some narratives and let others fade. Điện Biên Phủ is a place saturated with meaning and contested narratives. Yet, the DRV recorded and standardized one narrative and preserved it in an archive. In this way, the state is a history-making machine and those who control the machinery of the state attempt to enforce its power through the control of meaning (248). Even though the written word is open to challenge and ambiguity, doing so takes great effort, which limits challenges to state meaning making. In terms of source materials, Lentz playfully uses his description of the difficulties of working in National Archives III to reflect on how he reads against the grain and recovers narratives outside of officially sanctioned ones. Lentz’s unpacking of, for example, Lò Văn Mười’s late 1940s reports on conditions in the Black River region is superb and he performs an equally fluent reading of the absences in the documentary record, including the two-year gap from 1950-1952. Lentz’s work is all that much more valuable, as recent changes to Vietnamese law have made documents marked ‘secret’ near impossible for researchers to access.

As with any useful book, *Contested Territory* raises questions for further research. Lentz chooses to approach the history of Điện Biên Phủ through an event, a “conjunctural moment,” that set into place the set of postcolonial relationships that formed the basis of Northwest Vietnam (243). Indeed, the closing years of the First Indochina War and its immediate aftermath were crucial ones for the current Vietnamese state and the efforts of the center to incorporate the Northwest into its geobody. The 1950s saw the introduction of new technologies and techniques that enabled greater state intrusion while subsequent invaders, such as tourists, have brought about their own extensive changes. Exploring 15 years in 250 pages allows Lentz to unpack dense theory in an approachable way and the leisurely, sometimes looping pace of his narrative makes it a joy to read. But Lentz’s work suggests a *longue durée* history of Điện Biên Phủ similar to those written about other Vietnamese places.³ No doubt this *longue durée* history would cast the processes that Lentz examines in a different light,

² David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngô Đình Diệm, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

³ In addition to Biggs, see e.g. Pamela McElwee, *Forests Are Gold: Trees, People, and Environmental Rule in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).

relativizing the state and nation building activities with a comparison to those already taking place during the Nguyễn dynasty and colonial era.

Contested Territory is deeply engaged with literature on rural society, spatial theory, and state formation, providing an informed, fresh analysis of the different taxes on swidden and other forms of agriculture (191). As an environmental historian, however, I wanted to know more about the agricultural processes taking place on the ground. Rice was more than just calories in the mouths of soldiers and *dân công*, while opium was more than just a source of tax revenue. The same goes for the oxen that were slaughtered, eaten, or used to pull a plow. What were the histories of environmental conditions, and of these plants and animals, that are relevant to Lentz's discussion of state formation and nation building? Who was eating what, when, and in what quantities and what did it mean to them?

Contested Territory also provides a new history of the negotiations and compromises that resulted in the Thai-Meo (Tai-Hmong) autonomous zone. Lentz provides relevant information on actors such as Lò Văn Hặc and Lò Văn Mười and their contributions to incorporating the Northwest into Vietnamese nation-state. These figures, however, might usefully have been compared to other sub-imperial agents such as those working in the American and Japanese empires. Lentz chooses to follow recent literature in Tai and Hmong studies that focuses on clan histories. Doing so means that older approaches, such as the political economy of opium growing, fade into the background. A tighter integration of the two approaches may have yielded novel insights.⁴

At the risk of making an unfair demand, *Contested Territory* would have benefitted in certain aspects from a more global approach. Of course Lentz's method is to take a world historical moment and make it local, putting Điện Biên Phủ in its place. Still, I am curious how Lentz would have compared Điện Biên Phủ to other twentieth-century battles across Southeast Asia. At a minimum, the processes highlighted by Lentz do not apply, at least not to the same degree, to other regions during the First and Second Indochina Wars. And what of the Korean War that was taking place in the early 1950s? Finally, while the sections on vampires and "Calling for a King" are very suggestive, they feel a bit unmoored (222-236). Vampires are not a common figure in Kinh culture and it is curious that they showed up where and when they did. Perhaps putting them in the context of other colonial and Cold War vampire stories could have fleshed out their appearance.⁵

In sum, Lentz has done a service to the field by reanimating the conversation around Điện Biên Phủ and showing that there are other possible readings of this event. *Contested Territory* should become a standard reading on the topic and celebrated as the great contribution it is.

⁴ For the more recent approaches, see Oliver Tappe, "A Frontier in the Frontier: Sociopolitical Dynamics and Colonial Administration in the Lao-Vietnamese Borderlands," *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16:4 (2015): 368-387. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2015.1049202>; Mai Na Lee, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for Legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015); Yukti Mukdawijitra, "Contesting Imagined Communities: Politics of Script and Tai Cosmopolitanism in Upland Vietnam," *Cultural Dynamics* 24:2/3 (2012): 207-225. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374013482389>. For a political-economic approach, see Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003).

⁵ Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

REVIEW BY PIERRE ASSELIN, SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

Contested Territory: *Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam* explores the Vietnamese Communist state building process from the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) in 1945 to the ratification of its second constitution in 1959. Specifically, it addresses the production of Vietnamese territory in a region that was historically non-Vietnamese. Territory, its author notes, “is never given;” it is instead “an ongoing social process, a ruling strategy, and a contingent outcome” (3).

State formation in Vietnam was particularly contentious given the various factions competing for domination of that geobody. While several scholars have documented the contest between foreign powers and the forces loyal to Communist leader Ho Chi Minh, far fewer have considered that among and between local/indigenous actors.¹ In this work, Christians Lentz seeks to redress that imbalance by delving deeper into the process culminating in the integration of a remote borderland region into the state established by Ho and his comrades in 1945. To that end, Lentz spent years mining Vietnamese archives, uncovering remarkably insightful documentary evidence in the process. Interestingly, he is not a historian; he is a geographer, one who clearly has a passion for the past and a knack for telling a good story.

The Northwest – or Black River – region consists of the provinces of Lao Cai, Son La, Yen Bai, and Lai Chau. Its inhabitants at the time were overwhelmingly non-Vietnamese (non-*kinh*), namely, members of the Tai, Hmong/Meo, Dao, and Khmu ethnic groups. The area gained strategic importance during World War Two, when the Japanese used a base and airfield previously built by the French at Điện Biên Phủ to fight enemies near and far, including Ho’s Vietminh armies. Communist leaders considered this borderland space an integral part of the Vietnamese geobody from then on.

Following Japan’s surrender and the onset of the Indochina War, France promptly regained control of the Northwest region by coopting local elites and creating an ostensibly semi-autonomous Tai Federation with its own president. This was consistent with a colonial-era policy of divide-and-rule, of exploiting regional fault lines to split upland minorities from lowland Vietnamese. In fact, for much of the Indochina War French counterinsurgency strategy aimed to inhibit upland-lowland movement to isolate Vietminh forces. To counter that strategy, Vietnamese communist leaders dispatched cadres to remote regions with instructions to rally minorities. The leaders supported their cadres’ work by improving road and river infrastructure in those regions, including the Black River. “Wartime struggles,” Lentz explains, “involved enlisting local peoples and militarizing spaces”; it implied realization of “a national territorial project” that “transformed the Black River region into a frontier of Vietnam” (17).

As DRVN authorities thus engaged and rallied distant non-Vietnamese populations, they called on them to submit their resources, including not just food but also labor, as taxes. That tax burden proved onerous, to say the least. The authorities distributed salt, a precious commodity in highland regions, to incentivize taxpayers and assert the legitimacy of the DRVN there. To the latter end, Ho and his government also strove to alleviate everyday afflictions and used indoctrination, as they

¹ Popular works on the French and American wars against communist revolutionaries include Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2014); Arthur Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009); David Anderson, *The Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* [5th ed.] (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013). Works addressing more closely intra-Vietnamese struggles include Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); William Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History* [2nd ed.] (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* [concise ed.] (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007); and Lien-Hang Nguyen’s *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

did everywhere, to provide peasants with an explanation for their suffering and to introduce the Communist alternative to improve their condition.

DRVN state-making in the Black River region got into high gear in 1950, when General Vo Nguyen Giap shifted his military strategy from guerrilla to mobile warfare, and accelerated in 1952, when he endorsed regular combat. As the Vietminh gradually replaced the French as masters of the Northwest zone, Communist authorities undertook intensive nation-building there. The decision by Ho and other Communist leaders to prioritize national independence and unity over international solidarity during the Second Party Congress of 1951 set the stage for the Party's 1952 Ethnic Minority Policy and the DRVN's 1953 Ethnic Policy. Championing ideals of equality, interdependence, and self-determination among all ethnic groups, the two policies in fact sanctioned intensification of the campaign to rally and mobilize peasants in highland regions, on the one hand, and consolidation of the Vietnamese geobody, on the other. Most consequential for amalgamation of the Black River region into the DRVN was an edict entitled "Temporary Regulations on Mobilization and Use of People's Laborers." The edict effectively nationalized labor, mandating that those called upon by DRVN authorities provide no less than twenty days of free labor each month. This "transformative social process," as Lentz dubs it, "linked bodies to geobody, expanded membership in a larger community, and exposed households to new risks and rewards" (114). In sum, it served as justification for subsuming under the DRVN those hesitant to extend their support, including ethnic minority groups, and those of the Black River region in particular.

The Điện Biên Phủ campaign of 1953-54 brought everything to a head. To prepare for it, DRVN authorities mobilized no less than 261,000 people's laborers. That included 30,000 members of local minorities, a significant number considering their relatively low population numbers. The mobilization of civilian labor and related logistical efforts in the Black River region bound this borderland and its people tighter to Vietnamese territory. To retain the support of local elites throughout the Điện Biên Phủ campaign, Communist authorities exempted the Northwest zone from land reform, undertaken in 1953 elsewhere. There, securing territory and populations trumped social revolution. In stark contrast to conventional accounts of the land reform program that underscore communist violence and errors against ethnic Vietnamese landowners, *Contesting Territory* advances the argument that the exemption – in conjunction with wartime exigencies – aggravated the condition of destitute highlanders.² As all this suggest, the legacies of the Điện Biên Phủ campaign were manifold. It not only helped Communist authorities to secure new territory through physical force, but also legitimated resource appropriation, including labor, by the State, acculturated minorities to ethnic Vietnamese social norms, and, most important, institutionalized DRVN rule in a historically autonomous space.

As Vietnamese celebrated the victory at Điện Biên Phủ and the ensuing departure of the French, Black River minorities struggled, experiencing acute food shortages and even starvation. Many now questioned the morality, fairness, and legitimacy of DRVN rule. As some sought to alleviate their suffering by relocating to lowland areas, others took up arms to reclaim their autonomy. "Practiced in guerrilla warfare and emboldened by ideas of self-rule," Black River peoples "turned logics of revolutionary state formation" against the DRVN itself (8). The movement advanced both a sovereign alternative to the DRVN as well as a "spatial imaginary alternative to the Vietnamese geobody" (236). Ho's government attempted to appease the rebels by forming the Tai-Meo Autonomous Zone in 1955, to no avail. As the DRVN prepared to undertake its second war of national liberation in the late 1950s, it became increasingly authoritarian and intolerant of internal dissent. Its second constitution of 1959 enshrined that orientation. Beyond eliminating private property and effectively creating a police state, it subsumed ethnic minorities firmly under the Vietnamese nation. By the end of the following year, the authorities had crushed the Black River rebels.

² The standard and most comprehensive account of the communist land reform movement of 1953-56 is Edwin E. Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the Revolution at the Village Level* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). See also Alex-Thai D. Vo, "Nguyễn Thị Năm and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953" in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10:1 (Winter 2015): 1-62.

Bringing about national reunification and sovereignty involved far more than combatting foreign imperialists for Ho Chi Minh and other Vietnamese Communist leaders. They also had to negotiate delicate and complex domestic circumstances, a reality that is often lost on historians and other students of the Vietnamese wars for independence and of the Cold War more generally. *Contested Territory* is essential reading for anyone seeking deeper comprehension of the triumphs and failures of the Communist nation-building effort in Vietnam.

REVIEW BY BRADLEY CAMP DAVIS, EASTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

For many people, Điện Biên Phủ means anticolonial struggle. Intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire and Franz Fanon extolled the victory of the Việt Minh over France in 1954 as a blow against colonialism. The cover image for Christian C. Lentz's *Contested Territory* refers to this; it shows forearms and fists of various hues acting out the words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx, breaking chains that bear the words “chủ nghĩa thực dân cũ.” It is a compelling image that, like the book that follows it, points the way to questions that defy easy answers. “Chủ nghĩa thực dân” means “colonialism,” which is modified by “cũ,” a word that means “antiquated” or “old,” but without the positive connotations of “cổ.” The arms that liberate themselves from “the antiquated colonialism” owe their freedom to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the government declared in August 1945 by the Việt Minh, the victors of Điện Biên Phủ nine years later.

In addition to its anticolonial legacy, Điện Biên Phủ also holds a place in the popular imagination of Vietnamese intellectuals. Tô Hoài and Nguyễn Tuân each served in the People's Army of Vietnam after World War II. Each fashioned literary careers from their experiences. Tô Hoài wrote a series of stories, including (“Mường Giơn” and “Cứu đất cứu mường” [“Save the Land, Save the Muang”]), that depicted the multi-ethnic struggle against French colonialism in Điện Biên Phủ under Vietnamese leadership.¹ Nguyễn Tuân praised the gains made by Vietnamese cadres in Điện Biên Phủ through his travel writing. Visiting Điện Biên Phủ five years after the victory over France, Nguyễn Tuân found a carving on a rock left by a work team. “For the first time,” he waxed, “children of the delta [*đứa con đồng bằng*] have come up to build a homeland [*quê*] in the Northwest.”² Eight years later, a road linked the Northwestern Vietnamese “homeland” to points south, to the Red River Delta, and thus to lowland areas that had traditionally been governed by Vietnamese states.³

Contested Territory provides a crucial, ground-level account of Vietnamese state-making in the Black River Basin, the “Vietnamese Northwest.” For readers unfamiliar with Southeast Asian uplands, it is a very useful corrective to lowland or, in Lentz's narrative, “downstream” narratives. This book gives crucial ideological and political context not only to the years preceding the 1954 victory, but also to the triumphant tones of Vietnamese intellectuals. It will edify readers from a variety of disciplines, including diplomatic history, military history, postcolonial studies, discourse analysis, historical geography, and political science. Lentz has impressively mined archives in Vietnam and France to subject documents to deep, patient, and thoughtful analysis.

As a contributor to an H-Diplo roundtable, I must admit that I read this book in two ways. The first, which stems from my intellectual relationship to the author, led me to push against a few empirical and conceptual claims. I yearned to see connections made and bristled when some never materialized. In this manner, my reading notes resemble a paginated conversation, one ending with a grand synthesis of mutual understanding for some points, and friendly frustration for others. The second way, emerging from my own work on Southeast Asian uplands, brought me to appreciate the apertures left by Lentz's interventions. Regardless of my qualms, *Contested Territory* is a twinned achievement. It both overthrows the hagiographic edifice of Điện Biên Phủ and opens paths for future researchers.

Lentz locates the conceptual stakes of the book at the outset, reminding readers that Điện Biên Phủ, like Vietnam, is “a place, not just a battle” (1) and that “territory” is “never given” (3). At turns engaging and compelling, the book's analysis of

¹ On Tô Hoài's work on the Northwest, see Hoàng Trung Thông, “Tô Hoài và *Truyện Tây Bắc*” in *Tô Hoài: về Tác Giả và Tác Phẩm*, ed. Văn Thanh (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 2007), 218-224; Huỳnh Lý, “*Truyện Tây Bắc* của Tô Hoài,” in *Tô Hoài: về Tác Giả và Tác Phẩm*, ed. Văn Thanh (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 2007), 225-238.

² Nguyễn Tuân, “Bài ca trên mặt phần đường,” in *Tuyển Tập Nguyễn Tuân, Volume II*, ed. Lữ Huy Nguyên (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 2004), 240-253, 249. This is a reprint of a piece first published in 1959.

³ Nguyễn Tuân, “Tây Bắc và Lào Cai,” in *Tuyển Tập Nguyễn Tuân, Volume II*, 317-323.

Vietnamese political discourse finds meaning in small turns of phrase, elevating the dull, formulaic words that frame documents to revelatory status. Lentz's finds the hidden significance in rote text, an approach that connects his work to Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, as well as scholars who work on bureaucratic cultures.⁴ "Vui lòng," for instance, a phrase that is functionally similar to "gladly" or "with pleasure," indicates the conditional character of obedience, whereby the acceptance of Party authority must be constantly reiterated (30). The *Sturm und Drang* of DRV paperwork, in Lentz's analysis, manifests in the repetitious use of "hăng hái" and "thắc mắc," Vietnamese terms that indicate excitement, worry, and anxiety (96). Within these archival materials, he sees the stressful precariousness of the revolutionary state project in the Northwest that was manifest in the political argot of the DRV.

Although obliquely, Lentz implies that this language connects to other situations. Discussing "wealthy peasants" (*phú nông*), he references "kulak" in a parenthetical gloss (103). Kulak (*Кулак*) refers to a category for agricultural land owners and affluent farmers that populated Bolshevik discourse about rural reform during the early twentieth century. If *phú nông* and Kulak share common conceptual ground, then the possibility of DRV-Soviet ideological influence remains to be examined. On the other hand, if DRV officials in the Northwest maintained ties to advisors from the People's Republic of China (PRC), then Mao Zedong's "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Situation in Hunan" (1927), which elaborated a strategy to build an agrarian-based movement decades before Mao declared the Peoples Republic of China in 1949, might have provided keywords for discussing 'peasant' unrest and land reform, even for the unique circumstances of the Northwest.⁵ However, Lentz does not elaborate.

More generally, Lentz's book effectively submerges the reader into the ideological context of Vietnamese revolutionary state-making. His study opens a discursive space for appreciating the heavy ambiguities that attend ostensibly settled concepts. Building on his previous work on the slippage between *dân tộc* and *quốc gia* in the writing of Trương Chinh, Lentz places the loosely-handled distinction between 'nation' and 'ethnicity' into the fluctuating semantic universe of the DRV (68-69). Scholars should take note that this book offers no pat definitions for these terms, and nor should it. Not only territories, but also contested realities haunt attempts to standardize one, unified understanding of 'nation,' which Ernest Renan once called a "spiritual principle."⁶ The characterization of the DRV as a "not yet nation" (81) may lead some readers to consider the parallels, if not influence, of Soviet ideas, particularly the theoretical work surrounding *narod* (*народ*) by Soviet leaders Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, work that related to policies towards "revolutionary" and "non-revolutionary" peoples.⁷

⁴ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). On the concept of the archive, theoretical and empirical studies include Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993); Annelise Riles, ed., *Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); and Sam Kaplan, "Documenting History, Historicizing Documentation: French Military Officials' Ethnological Reports on Cilicia," *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History* 44:2 (2002): 344-369.

⁵ Reprinted recently in Timothy Cheek, ed., *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 41-75.

⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, (London: Routledge, 1990). Includes a translation of Ernest Renan's "Qu'est-ce que une nation," 8-22.

⁷ For a discussion of these ideas in twentieth century Vietnam, see Bradley Camp Davis, "Between Ethnos and Nation: Genealogies of *Dân Tộc* in Vietnamese Contexts," in Regna Darnell and Frederic W. Gleach, eds., *Historicizing Theories, Identities, and Nations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017). 253-266.

Readers familiar with historical linguistics might find themselves perplexed in a few places. For example, a potentially illuminating comment about how the word for labor (*công*) conveys achievement and publicness seems to depend on the confusion of three different words; *công* 工 meaning labor or work, *công* 功 meaning achievement as in “thành công” or “to succeed,” and *cộng* 公 meaning public. Identifying “công” as “polyvalent Sino-Việt particle” (148) certainly raises an interesting issue, but also confuses three different words to strain an etymological point. Similarly, readers might wonder what Lentz means by the term “Sino-Việt root” when explaining the Vietnamese term for logistics, *hậu cần*. (150) The term itself is “Sino-Vietnamese,” meaning that *hậu cần* can also be written 后勤 (ch. *houqin*). In this instance, the use of “root” recalls European, Arabic, Persianate, or Malay analytical categories, but might not fit the mechanical realities of the Vietnamese language. Furthermore, we should not underestimate the familiarity of DRV officials with Sino-Vietnamese; *công* only becomes ‘polyvalent’ when limited to its Latinate script.

Other oversights are relatively minor. The leader of the Chinese Communist Party during the founding of the PRC appears, twice, as “Mao Tse-tung” rather than Mao Zedong (60, 150). A “Chinese observer,” likely an advisor, named Tang Hongguang is identified as “Duong Hông Quang” (128). The former may be an unfortunate editorial choice beyond the author’s control – some presses do prefer Wade-Giles over Pinyin Romanization, but the latter, presenting the name of an advisor from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in diacritic-free Vietnamese, exposes the limitations of hewing too close to the source material.

Ultimately, this is a book that achieves what it claims, convincingly demonstrating that contestations over territory, sovereign, and social categories attended the microflows and capillary circulations of power as the DRV state project pushed into historically Tai areas of mainland Southeast Asia. Lentz has done serious groundwork that will benefit future researchers; anyone taking up ethnographic fieldwork, archival research into the more distant past, or seeking to understand the present-day politics in this part of Vietnam will need to read this book. They should be inspired to push further.

In doing so, they should also keep in mind the challenge before them. In the chapter before the epilogue, Lentz notes that “Vietnamese-language texts inhibit an emic understanding of activities undoubtedly spoken about in local, mutually unintelligible languages” (225). The novel status of Vietnamese as a common language for the Northwest was an outcome largely contingent on the ground-level processes explained in this book. Scholars examining the past or the present of the Northwest cannot neglect other linguistic traditions. The French colonial authority, for instance, printed Yunnanese phrasebooks to aide railroad workers in Lào Cai, reflecting the importance of this dialect of Chinese for borderlands commerce.⁸ Today in the Northwest, the resurgence of Tai Dam as a written tradition challenges the durability of written Vietnamese as the sole language of power. For Vietnam, as for Southeast Asia, the future of the past is multilingual.

Although anyone with an interest in Điện Biên Phủ, Vietnam, Southeast Asia, or the close reading of administrative paperwork through the lens of discourse analysis will benefit from reading *Contested Territory*. Lentz has staged a very specific intervention. Just as territory is never given, neither, as Lentz makes clear, are the many ways of being Vietnamese – “many of the people now called ‘Vietnamese’ only become so during the period in question...” (244). Lentz has left us with a picture of how an adjective stitched to national territory became naturalized through a tense, anxious, violent, and often disjointed political project.

⁸ Compagnie Française des Chemins de Fer de l’Indochine et du Yunnan, *Vocabulaire Yunnanais-Français: mots et phrases à l’usage des Contrôleurs de train*. (Hanoi: Imp. Tonkinoise, 1927). Available in the Vietnamese National Library as P9.10128.

RESPONSE BY CHRISTIAN C. LENTZ, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

I wish to begin by expressing my deep gratitude to the editors of H-Diplo for bringing worlds of history to our inbox, to Tom Maddux for organizing this roundtable, to the three reviewers for their insightful reviews, and to Lien-Hang T. Nguyen for writing the introduction.

But a small town sixty years ago, Điện Biên Phủ played an outsized role in world history. Situated far from military bases in a mountain valley near Laos and China, it became the battlefield where France and Vietnam decided the First Indochina War (1946-1954). In November 1953, elite French paratroopers landed in the valley, lengthened an airfield, built bristling fortifications, and invited the nascent People's Army to a set-piece battle. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam accepted the challenge, mobilized a massive logistics operation, deployed its army, and surrounded the Expeditionary Forces—all largely on foot. While the colonial and national forces squared off only months after the Korean armistice, Điện Biên Phủ became a flashpoint in Asia's emerging Cold War. U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles even offered his French counterpart two atomic bombs, an offer he wisely declined.¹ After two months of grinding artillery duels, a bitter siege, and trench warfare, People's Army troops captured the French command post on 7 May 1954 in a stunning victory for Vietnam. The outcome not only catalyzed negotiations in Geneva, earning independence for Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, but also inspired colonized peoples the world over, as noted by Bradley Davis in his review. France's overseas empire was on the ropes, and the U.S. was preparing to enter the ring in what would become the Second Indochina War (1960-1975).

I did not set out a decade ago to write a book about an out-of-the-way place where a 1954 battle smashed French Indochina, consolidated a Vietnamese nation-state, and changed the world. That seemed like a topic for a military or diplomatic historian, not a Ph.D. student in Rural and Development Sociology. But when I started writing my dissertation, the battle's effect on the town of Điện Biên Phủ loomed ever larger in the story I sought to tell about the incorporation of a historically autonomous region into modern Vietnam. Then, in a sort of causal regression, I found that a preceding military campaign in 1952 and guerilla organizing in 1948-50 had laid the ground for the epic Điện Biên Phủ Campaign of 1953-54. Thus what I had thought would be the beginning of my story became, instead, its organizing event and central theme: in line with historian Michael Geyer's classic piece on militarization, I argue that militarizing society in and around Điện Biên Phủ intensified processes of mobilization, territorialization, and acculturation that ultimately transformed the Black River region into Northwest Vietnam.²

More accident than design, the idea for a historical and geographic book about Điện Biên Phủ was the product of interdisciplinary training and area studies, a yawning gap in the literature, and scholarly conversations such as this one. As Pierre Asselin notes, I am a geographer, not a historian. Still, I was not trained in Geography but became a geographer through education in Development Sociology, Environmental Science, and Southeast Asian Studies. Neither Cornell nor Yale Universities, where I earned degrees in these fields, even has Geography departments. Instead, I was a product of the American academy at a moment in the 1990s and 2000s when interdisciplinarity was an intellectual priority if not a job-market reality. Nonetheless, my area studies background served as a proxy for spatial thinking: steeped as I was in the significance of context, language, and history, geography turned out to be a welcome—and welcoming—discipline. In this case, thinking spatially meant investigating what had happened in the 1940s-1950s to change the very ground under the feet of ethnically diverse peoples who had rarely if ever thought of themselves as Vietnamese.

¹ Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 498-501.

² Michael Geyer, "The Militarization of Europe, 1914-1945," in *The Militarization of the Western World*, ed. John R. Gillis (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 65-102; Dirk Bonker, *Militarism in a Global Age: Naval Ambitions in Germany and the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

A huge literature focused on the battle itself but did little to explain what had happened before, during, or after it in a region long considered a backwater of Vietnam—and Vietnam Studies. Located far upstream from Vietnam’s heartland in the Red River delta, the Black River region spreads over 50,000 km² of rugged terrain which is home to more than twenty ethnolinguistic groups, including Tai, Hmong, Dao, and Khmu peoples. Yet the scholarly literature on Điện Biên Phủ in English, French, and Vietnamese digs narrowly into close-quartered combat, aligns with positions defined particularly by the Indochina Wars and broadly by the Cold War, and either begins or ends on 7 May 1954 when the French surrendered.³ Aside from a historiographic emphasis on guns, statesmen, and generals according with either of the two “frozen” narratives cited by Michitake Aso in his review, this literature temporally bracketed inquiry to several months and spatially to a valley under siege, as though Điện Biên Phủ were a discrete event and a town severed from its surroundings. I thus aimed to contextualize a place—and, by extension, the battle that happened there—by adopting a longer periodization, what I call “the long 1950s” from 1945 to 1960, and by situating it in a region with distinctive cultural, ecological, and political-economic characteristics.

A series of fortuitous scholarly conversations helped me conceptualize and execute the book project. First, historians Bradley Davis and Philippe Le Failler published excellent books on the nineteenth-century borderlands and its political realignment during the French-colonial era, thereby laying the foundations for my largely postcolonial history.⁴ Rather than pursue a *longue durée* history, an approach suggested in Aso’s review, I chose instead to build on their shoulders and focus on a conjunctural moment. Meanwhile, geographer Nga Dao wrote pioneering articles on contemporary landscape transformation, population displacement, and agrarian differentiation, helping me set an upper limit on my periodization.⁵ Second, a new generation of Vietnam specialists was rewriting the history of a country in relation to warfare, not the other way around.⁶ Third, Southeast Asianists followed a path cleared by political scientist Jim Scott and others back into the socio-linguistically complex mountains of the eastern Himalayas, one now cleared of a conceptual baggage that had long been biased in favor of lowland elites, nation-state frames, and cultural chauvinism.⁷ I thus found inspiration among anthropologists, historians, and others working on similar themes amidst kindred cultural formations and contiguous landscapes next door in Laos, Burma/Myanmar, and China.⁸ Finally, as I started to read, teach, attend conferences, and

³ Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967); Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2004); Howard Simpson, *Dien Bien Phu: The Epic Battle America Forgot* (Washington: Brassey’s Inc., 1994).

⁴ Bradley Davis, *Imperial Bandits: Outlaws and Rebels in the China-Vietnam Borderlands* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2017); Philippe Le Failler, *La rivière Noire: L’intégration d’une marche frontière au Vietnam* (Paris: CNRS, 2014).

⁵ Nga Dao, “Political Responses to Dam-Induced Resettlement in Northern Uplands Vietnam,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 16:2 (April 2016): 291-317; Nga Dao, “Rubber plantations in the Northwest: rethinking the concept of land grabs in Vietnam,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42:2 (2015): 347-369.

⁶ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War* (Berkeley: University of California, 2013); Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Tuong Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁷ Willem Van Schendel, “Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 20 (2002): 647-668; James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Jean Michaud, “Editorial—Zomia and Beyond,” *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010): 187-214.

⁸ Oliver Tappe, “A Frontier in the Frontier: Sociopolitical Dynamics and Colonial Administration in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands,” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16:4 (2015): 368-387; Pierre Petit, *History, Memory, and Territorial Cults in the Highlands of Laos: The Past Inside the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Vattana Pholsena, *Post-War Laos: The Politics of Culture, History, and Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Thomas Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification*

publish in geography, I came to realize that my core interest in statemaking had something to do with how power operates in space. Fortuitously, my realization coincided with recent theorizations of territory, and I took on the idea as the master analytic in *Contested Territory*.⁹

A teacher warned me that a book takes on a life of its own after publication, when readers develop their own ideas about its contents. Nonetheless, I am pleased to see much of what I aimed to accomplish reflected in these reviews. The reviewers appreciate the text's attention to what Asselin calls the "delicate and complex domestic circumstances" present in revolutionary and wartime Vietnam, a reality which is too often overlooked in conventional Cold War, nationalist, and military narratives. Not surprisingly, gaining access to these internal negotiations and contests benefits immeasurably from facility in Vietnamese, a skill that Southeast Asianists, including the reviewers, have long recognized, even required. Yet, to this day, too few scholars go beyond the colonial language of French and the imperial/scholarly language of English to learn the national language of Vietnamese, thereby missing out on emic understandings, actual terms of debate, and newly available archival documents. By contrast, the reviewers are veterans of the National Archives of Vietnam. As such, they understand that policy in Vietnam—even when announced in official reports, bulletins, and newspapers—was and is not always the same as practice. Stated differently, what elite actors say and decree does not necessarily comport with what gets heard or implemented by everyday folk, especially out in the countryside. Local diversity and regional variation have long been facts of life in Vietnam, remaining so since World War II in spite of elite self-representations, their totalitarian aspirations, and foreign interventions.¹⁰ Investigating large-scale processes such as government centralization, wartime mobilization, or agrarian reform can only benefit from inquiry at the ground-level where tensions between state and society are most visible.¹¹

Finally, I share with the reviewers a sense that we, as scholars, can take few concepts for granted when we work in contexts—whether Vietnam particularly or the global south more generally—where our empirical work so often challenges the very ideas we invoke on a routine basis. Concepts such as territory, for example, must be thought anew in ways that converge with local experience given they so clearly diverge from conventional understandings derived from Euro-American experience. Whether called Tonkin, An Nam, and Cochinchina by the French or "Vietnam" by the Vietnamese, the space first claimed by the Democratic Republic in 1945 and only partially secured in 1954 may assume the same shape on a map or in a secondary source. Yet things looked, felt, and worked far differently on the ground. This space, I argue, only assumed the properties of modern territory—delineated boundaries, cartographic orientation, exclusive sovereignty—through the contests involved in its construction, including the battle but not exclusively so. Through processes of taxation and labor service, for example, local people became members of a national community, at times against their will. They also developed their own ideas about the rights and responsibilities that are bestowed by citizenship, sometimes in opposition to the same state that had mobilized them and claimed to represent their interests. Never predetermined, the spatial outcome in 1954 of

in Modern China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); James Anderson and John Whitmore, eds., *China's Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier over Two Millennia* (Boston: Brill, 2015).

⁹ Emily Yeh, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Stuart Elden, "How should we do the history of territory?" *Territory, Politics, Governance* 1:1 (2013): 5-20.

¹⁰ Keith Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region," *Journal of Asian Studies* 57:4 (1998): 949-978; Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, The United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

¹¹ Benedict Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Benedict Kerkvliet and David Marr, *Beyond Hanoi: Local Government in Vietnam* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2004); Alex-Thai Dinh Vo, "Nguyễn Thị Năm and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10:1 (Winter 2015): 1-62.

a multiply divided Vietnam, including its Northwest corner as well as the breakaway south, was shaped as much by accident as design. Indeed, contests over the sovereign space of a singular Vietnamese nation-state did not end formally until 1975 and, I would argue, continue to this day. My theory of territory—as a political technology, ongoing process, and contingent outcome—reflects this historical reality.

In light of these general comments, allow me to turn to the individual reviews.

A diplomatic historian versed in Vietnamese sources, Asselin usefully locates the subject matter of *Contested Territory* in the global currents stirred by World War II and in the independence struggle led by President Hồ Chí Minh and General Võ Nguyên Giáp. His review highlights the policies, events, and characters that guide a complex story. Yet the story I tell is less about these guideposts per se than how they looked and functioned from a radically different perspective. Whereas he treats “the Northwest” and “the Black River region” as synonyms, for example, I demonstrate that the former toponym emerged in Vietnamese policy-making only in summer 1952. That the cartographic referent was Hanoi—a city located 500 km south and east of Điện Biên Phủ—is a hallmark of territorial logic: “the Northwest” frames a region in relation to a distant center to which it was neither always nor primarily oriented. In this vein, toponyms are significant: whereas Điện Biên Phủ means “border post prefecture” in Vietnamese, its local name Muang Thanh means “heavenly place” in Tai, indicating entirely different ideas of space and community orientation. What was and remains on an edge of Vietnamese space is central to a local, Tai-inflected sense of place.

In another instance, Asselin is broadly correct when he writes, “Ho and his government also strove to alleviate everyday afflictions and used indoctrination, as they did everywhere” to explain the suffering of peasants and provide a “Communist alternative to improve their condition.” I raise two seemingly small but important issues with this phrasing. First, “indoctrination” implies a one-way flow of propaganda and potential stupefaction (think brainwashing) when, in fact, the processes of legitimation were always relational, conditional, and, hence, historical. This awareness helps explain why people broke with the Democratic Republic after the battle when reality did not live up to promises made by revolutionary cadres. Second, early efforts by Việt Minh and government officials were neither outwardly nor necessarily “Communist” in their presentation (local archival sources say nothing of Communism) but, rather, adhered to a logic of state-led development and egalitarian social transformation. Underlying this logic was an emerging relationship between state and society predicated on reciprocal exchange in the present and shared belief in a better future. As noted by Aso, the exchange first became concrete through the trading of salt and farm tools for local food and labor, foreshadowing a larger commitment to modern national development. Indeed, as implied by Davis in his appraisal of the book’s cover, notions of citizenship, equality, and progress contained in themselves a revolutionary potential for colonized peoples the world over.

For the same reasons I treat place names with care, Davis and Aso share an underlying interest in decentering conventional narratives of Vietnamese history. I would argue that doing so effectively benefits from methodological pluralism and theoretical engagement. In other words, I could not have written the history I did without venturing beyond the archives and reading broadly across disciplines. I only made sense of archival documents by way of immersion in the social life of Hanoi and Điện Biên Phủ and through travel around the Black River region, including the provinces of Lai Châu, Điện Biên, Sơn La, Lào Cai, and Yên Bái. Whether living in a neighborhood with veterans of the Indochina wars, conversing with Tai and Khmu farmers about their livelihoods, or riding the roads that their forebears had built sixty years ago, I encountered interlocutors whose life experiences helped me interpret what was said in—and left out of—government reports and other textual sources.¹² Here is where my interdisciplinary training and experience with ethnography came in handy: thinking about a past that is very much alive in the present.¹³ History is better when historians employ multiple

¹² Christian C. Lentz, “Encountering Everyday Perspectives on the American War,” *Geopolitics* 20:4 (2015): 753-756.

¹³ Lentz, “The King Yields to the Village? A Micropolitics of Statemaking in Northwest Vietnam.” *Political Geography* 39 (2014): 1-10.

methods to include perspectives obscured or omitted in the archives.¹⁴ Relatedly, reading across disciplines and beyond Vietnam helped me identify social formations and ecological patterns that were unavailable in either history or Vietnam studies alone. Studying classic and contemporary works about Laos, Burma/Myanmar, China, and Thailand, for example, clued me in to the significance of the Tai *muang*, a governing unit that to this day structures social life, organizes agriculture and settlement, and undergirds administrative forms across mainland Southeast Asia.¹⁵

I am grateful to Davis for our long-standing intellectual companionship and for his close reading of this text.¹⁶ True to form, his insightful comments here identify a few errors, suggest points of comparison, and help clarify my larger point about language and power. First, much like an earlier generation of Vietnam specialists, Davis has mastered Vietnamese and Chinese and therefore understands in depth the nature and form of the latter's linguistic influence on the former.¹⁷ As someone who neither reads characters nor speaks Chinese, I appreciate his corrections, including my clumsy rendering of the Great Helmsman's proper name. Nonetheless, I do not want a larger point to get lost in (my) mistakes of linguistic detail: a malleable neologism in the 1950s, *dân công* means something like "people's laborer," neatly reversing the particles of citizen (*công dân*) and doing powerful work in relation to an idea of national duty, as Aso recognizes. Second, the language of revolutionary Vietnam does indeed suggest valuable points of historical comparison, especially the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. The translation of *phú nông* as "rich peasant, kulak" comes straight from my dog-eared Vietnamese-English dictionary, and I should have referenced it.¹⁸ But the reference in question (fn. 14, p. 103) cites anthropologist Ken MacLean's work on the difficulty of importing class categories and translating them into the Vietnamese context.¹⁹

Finally, Davis warns that we should not "underestimate the familiarity of DRV officials with Sino-Vietnamese." True. Nor, I would add, should we overestimate the familiarity of local people with Sino-Vietnamese. According to my interviews with local Tai elders and Kinh/Việt veterans from downstream, virtually no one spoke Vietnamese in and around Điện Biên Phủ before 1954. More than simply a medium of communication, the Vietnamese language itself, as practiced and imparted by

¹⁴ Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003); Anne Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Eric Tagliacozzo and Andrew Willford, *Clio/Anthropos: Exploring the Boundaries between History and Anthropology* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009); Mai Na Lee, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for Legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2015).

¹⁵ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geobody of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Georges Condominas, "Essai sur l'évolution des systèmes politiques thaïes," *Ethnos* 41:1-4 (1976): 7-67; James Anderson and John Whitmore, "The Dong World: A Proposal for Analyzing the Highlands between the Yangzi Valley and the Southeast Asian Lowlands," *Asian Highland Perspectives* 44 (2017): 8-71; E.R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965); Karl Izikowitz, *The Lamet: Hill Peasants in French Indochina* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktr., 1951); Ha Viet Quan, "Brokering Power in Vietnam's Northwest: The Case of Ethnic Tai Cadres." PhD diss., Australian National University, 2016).

¹⁶ Full disclosure: Davis and I have long discussed these issues and co-edited a special issue, "Hidden Histories and Submerged Stories from Northwest Vietnam," in *The Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 6:2 (Summer 2011).

¹⁷ Keith Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Đặng Chấn Liêu, Lê Khả Kế, and Phạm Duy Trọng. *Từ Điển Việt-Anh / Vietnamese-English Dictionary* (Hồ Chí Minh City: TP Hồ Chí Minh, 2001), 589.

¹⁹ Ken Maclean, *The Government of Mistrust: Illegibility and Bureaucratic Power in Socialist Vietnam* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2013).

the national ethnic majority Kinh/Việt population, indicates a larger population movement and cultural shift that began during the period in question. In other words, the Vietnamese language is not just something to be decoded. In addition, and as Davis notes of my larger point, its geographic spread is itself an artifact of “the ground-level processes explained in this book.”

Aso’s review usefully highlights points of emphasis, especially my links between development, hunger, and political legitimacy, and my epistemological argument. Having suffered a terrible famine in 1945, the surviving people and new government officials in northern Vietnam were understandably concerned with hunger. A subsequent political program to prevent hunger and stress its links to state legitimacy is written all over archival documents. But few scholars of the First Indochina War have noted this link, much less appreciated the popular discontent that resulted when food became scarce all over again in the mid-1950s. Moreover, recovering what Aso calls “a spatial component to the power/knowledge equation” was indeed a central goal of this book. Here, I aimed to speak back to social theory that was derived in the metropole—in this case, the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault—by drawing on the experience of the people who struggled against colonial domination. Deploying the calculative logic of territory did enable the state to learn a whole lot about its subject population, as Foucault argues.²⁰ But the epistemic mistakes associated with quantitative reasoning resulted in oversights, misunderstandings, and unintended consequences, often in the form of mass hunger, development failures, and political discontent. Again, we as scholars need to think critically about the theory we deploy.

Aso also suggests areas that would have benefited from more attention, argues in favor of political-economy, and queries the relevance of a postwar social movement. Yes, the Korean War (1950-1953) was happening almost simultaneously with escalation in the First Indochina War. The text nods to Asia’s emerging Cold War and notes the use of American artillery that was captured in Korea, dragged across China, and used by the Vietnamese to deadly effect. Yet for reasons of source access and a complex story line, I prioritized a zoom lens over a wide-angle. As for comparable twentieth-century battles, I might suggest the fall of Singapore to Japanese forces in February 1942: much like the French at Điện Biên Phủ, it was unthinkable to the British that their colonial ‘stronghold’ could collapse at all, never mind so fast and to a non-European foe. By contrast, the defeat of a European power demonstrated the vulnerability of the colonizer and the potential of armed struggle for the colonized. Yes, a political-economy approach to opium and more attention to agricultural practice would have enriched the book. But, for fear of bursting the book at its seams, I calved off this important discussion through a journal article and cited it instead.²¹ Finally, Aso writes that my discussion of vampires and the Calling for a King movement “feel[s] a bit unmoored.” My decision to include these items was two-fold. First, the movement was, literally, written all over the titles of documents stored in Vietnam’s National Archives but was and remains virtually unknown to scholars. The oppositional social movement presented me with a writing challenge, namely how to explain popular support for the battle and popular discontent with its outcome. My explanation returns to the significance of context and contingency: war-time mobilization, education in radical ideas, and training in armed struggle articulated in unexpected ways with disappointment over postwar conditions and a policy of regional autonomy; drawing on a rich repertoire of local millenarian traditions, local peoples embraced self-rule but took it their own way, challenging nation-state power and associated territorial domination. Writing about this movement meant adopting a longer time period than the conventional book-end date of 1954, my

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Macmillan, 2009).

²¹ Christian C. Lentz, “Cultivating Subjects: Opium and rule in post-colonial Vietnam,” *Modern Asian Studies* 51:4 (2017): 879-918. In short, opium functioned as a form of mobile capital in the Black River region, and labor was more scarce there than land. But labor always appeared in the documentary record as abstract: numbers of workers, hours worked, and so on. So, I prioritized an analysis of the limiting factor of production, namely labor, and endeavored to recover the story of the people who actually did the work.

second goal. All too often, scholars of Vietnam and colonial France equate this date with rupture, neglecting more subtle changes and durable continuities.²²

In sum, I am delighted that my book has stimulated this meaningful and thought-provoking debate. Our discussion of history and geography underlines why the two disciplines share so much, especially a core emphasis on understanding context, incorporating multiple perspectives, and analyzing patterns of continuity and change over time and space. Our discussion of theory and methodology argues both for rethinking taken-for-granted concepts, like territory, and for using multiple methods, learning local languages, and reading interdisciplinarily to do so. Once again, I would like to thank the editors at H-Diplo, the reviewers for making our discussion possible, and the readers for taking part.

²² Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954*, trans. Ly Lan Dill-Klein, with Eric Jennings, Nora Taylor, and Noémi Tousignant (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).