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SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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SPECIAL FOCUS

Collective Care in Three Vietnamese Contexts: The Intersection of Health, Community, and the State

Introduction

Liam C. Kelley*, Catherine Earl,** and Jamie Gillen***

Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Vietnam was initially featured in the world news media as a triumphant success story in its fight against the coronavirus. Scholars drew attention to the public health policies and practices of the government (Le 2021; Quang *et al.* 2022) and a society whose collective sense of self-worth was derived from entrenched practices of looking out for one another (Su *et al.* 2021). This special focus uses the pandemic as a launching point to investigate the idea of collective care in contemporary Vietnamese society. It does so by looking at the contexts of three different communities: the Vietnamese nation as a whole, a Vietnamese diasporic community in Germany, and an ethnic minority group in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

With the remarkable economic growth experienced in Vietnam since market reforms were introduced in 1986 (Đổi Mới), many scholars have focused on the incredible transformations that economic growth has engendered, such as the rise of a middle class (Earl 2014) and the emergence of new forms of urban living (Harms 2011; 2016) and gendered consumption (Hoang 2015). More recently, individualized dimensions of affective care have begun to make an impact on critical Vietnamese studies. Anthropologists such as

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Merav Shohet (2021) and Allen Tran (2018) have shown how Vietnam's intensifying middle class have transformed notions of love, care, and emotion in neoliberalizing Vietnam. This special focus builds on the emerging interest in collective approaches to care, an issue that the pandemic also brought to light.

Max Müller *et al.*'s paper, "Vietnamese Carescapes in the Making: Looking at Covid-19 Care Responses in Berlin through the Affective Lens of Face Masks"—about how overseas Vietnamese hand-sewed masks for their compatriots as well as threatened Berliners—demonstrates how Vietnamese collective care has a transnational quality indicative of how responses to the pandemic (like the pandemic itself) do not respect national boundaries. Mirjam Le and Franziska Susana Nicolaisen then write in their paper, "Narrative and Framing of a Pandemic: Public Health Communication in the Vietnamese Public Sphere," about the Vietnamese state's methods and language driving "crisis communication" during the pandemic. Propaganda messaging brought together Vietnamese people along collective care lines but also divided them as the government's approach to the Omicron outbreak unraveled and social inequities came to the fore. Finally, Kang Yanggu takes us beyond the pandemic to look at collective care among the ethnic Raglai, in "Appropriating State Techniques for Effective Rituals: Funerals of the Raglai in Contemporary Vietnam."

While these three papers are diverse in their coverage, they demonstrate at the granular level the complex ways in which the state informs and influences people's ideas and actions on how to care for their collective communities. Whereas Le and Nicolaisen focus on the intent of the state itself, Müller *et al.* and Kang show us that even in communities that exist beyond the direct or firm reach of the state, approaches to collective care still reflect or engage with state concepts—be that the proper way to perform rituals, as in the case of Kang's paper, or the sense of gratitude that one owes one's home country, as in the case of the work of Müller *et al.*

In conclusion, all these papers illustrate the complex ways in which "Vietnamese communities," in the broadest sense of that term—from communities of ethnic Vietnamese in Vietnam or in the diaspora to non-Vietnamese ethnic groups in Vietnam—navigate through a world of state policies and economic inequities to find ways to care for those most in need.

The three papers in this special focus were originally presented at the conference on "Engaging With Vietnam: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue." This is an annual multidisciplinary conference focusing on "Vietnam" as both a place and a concept, for scholars working in the social sciences, arts, and humanities. Now in its 14th year, the conference has traditionally attracted upcoming and early-career scholars. The papers in this special focus are representative of the type of work that gets presented at this conference, and

they are also representative of some of the topics that young scholars are researching these days.

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Vietnamese Carescapes in the Making: Looking at Covid-19 Care Responses in Berlin through the Affective Lens of Face Masks

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Face masks were undoubtedly one of the most visible and (at least in some countries of the Global North) most controversial markers of the Covid-19 pandemic. Contrary to the white-German majority society in Berlin, Vietnamese migrants in the city were aware of the essential role of wearing masks in public right from the beginning of this health crisis. In March 2020, when the German government agency for disease control was still advising the general public against donning masks, former Vietnamese contract workers were already producing thousands of fabric masks for donation to ill-prepared hospitals and care facilities. Vietnamese students in Berlin, as well as children of Vietnamese migrants born and/or raised in Germany, also initiated various mask-related campaigns to tackle the health crisis and support

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local Vietnamese communities.

Based on digital ethnography in the spring of 2020, as well as later offline ethnographic exploration, we tracked the emergence of Vietnamese care networks trying to cope with the then-evolving pandemic. Looking through the analytical lens of face masks, we aim to highlight people's emic understandings of care as materialized in self-sewn masks.

Besides showing the processual character of those care responses, we also aim to work out distinct differences between the migrant generation and post-migration actors regarding their motivations for organizing their respective campaigns. While our interlocutors from the latter group were much more vocal about anti-Asian racism and thus focused on community care projects, the Vietnamese migrants we talked to framed their care response in terms of a narrative of giving back to their second home country at a time of need. In addition, we will show how these care responses were differently shaped by media discourses from Vietnam and/or the global Vietnamese diaspora.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Vietnamese diaspora, face mask controversy, anti-Asian racism, community care, carescape

Introduction

> While my understandings of masks are shaped by . . . specific embodied and social experiences, so too are they shaped by living in and through this pandemic, by the endless numbers signalling rising cases and deaths worldwide. By the statistics telling devastating stories about the inequities of our world. Through this, I've come to wonder what else might we do? Surely much needs to be done. Masks cannot protect us all from all of these complexities, *but perhaps as a symbol of care, they are a good place to start*. (Lupton *et al.* 2021a, XIII, italics added)

In March 2020—with the ever-increasing numbers of infections and deaths due to the previously unknown coronavirus SARS-CoV-2—Germany's first lockdown was implemented. The German federal government called for contact restrictions, shops were closed, employees were asked to work from home, and only jobs deemed "systemically relevant" were to be carried out. All eyes were on the country's health-care system. This societal pressure was particularly noticeable at Charité-Berlin—one of Europe's largest university hospitals—where not only did physical and mental health care for patients need to be upheld under the new pandemic conditions but also much-needed research had to be carried out under high pressure. Under these circumstances, strict hygiene measures were the top priority in daily contact with patients. However, this required a great deal of effort because at that time the federal government had not ordered enough face masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) for the public or, even

worse, for employees of the health-care system. Hence, during the first lockdown caregivers were faced with the challenge of adequately protecting themselves. At that tense time, a large donation of self-sewn masks reached the Charité-based psychiatric-psychotherapeutic outpatient clinic for Vietnamese migrants living in Germany.[1] Tạ Thị Minh Tâm, the head of the outpatient clinic, gratefully accepted this self-initiated donation from an East Berlin tailor shop owned by a Vietnamese migrant. With this gift reaching the clinic, doctors, psychologists, nurses, and other employees of the Charité were provided with potentially life-saving masks—even before the federal government officially decided to mandate mask wearing in all federal states by the end of April 2020.

Working at the intersection of migrant psychosocial care, engaged scholarship, and Vietnamese diaspora experiences in Berlin, our anthropological-psychiatric team aimed at disentangling the above-described encounter and similar mask-related care responses of different Vietnamese communities in Berlin. It is worth noting that the rich and diverse history of global Vietnamese migration is especially recognizable in Germany's capital. There are, for example, Vietnamese communities connected to the Cold War era—former refugees who fled Vietnam after the end of the war in 1975 and the consequent reunification under the socialist government—and, on the other hand, socialist contract workers who migrated from different countries of the former Eastern Bloc to Germany (Bösch and Su 2021; Steinman 2021). In her ethnography *The Border Within*, Phi Hong Su (2022) unpacks the histories of those two distinct Vietnamese communities in Berlin, which devolved independently when Berlin was still divided and came in contact with each other only after the German reunification.

In the socialist era before 1989, around 300,000 Vietnamese nationals went abroad as part of a socialist migration regime (Schwenkel 2014, 239) to other countries in the international socialist ecumene (Bayly 2009). There they would initially get schooled or receive vocational training under the banner of solidarity and proletarian internationalism. In the later phases of this migration regime they were mostly exploited as a cheap source of labor for the crumbling Eastern Bloc economies. Between 1980 and 1990 around 69,000 Vietnamese contract workers came to East Germany to work or receive vocational training (Spennemann 1997, 10). After the German reunification, many years of political struggles for permanent residency rights as well as financial incentives provided by the German government to return to Vietnam led to only 21,000 of the former contract workers remaining in Germany (Sextro 1996, 58).

On the other side of the Berlin Wall were around 40,000 Vietnamese refugees who had come to the Federal Republic of Germany as part of quota regimes to tackle the

1) For more information about this clinic, see Charité Department of Psychiatry and Neurosciences CBF Berlin (2021).

exodus of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fleeing the country after the end of the American War in Vietnam in 1975 and the subsequent reunification of Vietnam under the socialist government. Unlike the political struggles faced by the former contract workers to stay on in Germany, the refugees were welcomed in Germany under favorable circumstances and received governmental support in the form of language training and housing (Bösch and Su 2021).

Today, those historically well-established groups are eclipsed in numbers by a steady influx beginning in the 1990s and picking up speed in the early 2000s of newer Vietnamese migrants who often reach Germany via clandestine routes (Glassey-Trầnguyễn 2016; Mai and Scheidecker 2020). Nowadays Berlin also attracts more and more students from Vietnam and young people starting vocational training. The ethnographic vignettes in this article will provide insights from actors from almost all the above-mentioned migration regimes.

By connecting diverse Vietnamese migration histories in Germany with different care responses of mask making and donating, we will show how the intense affective moment of the emerging coronavirus pandemic led to the formation of distinct yet connected ephemeral communities of care (von Poser and Willamowski 2020). In combining different analytical dimensions (migration history, care, and the affective marker of face masks) we aim to bring the emic perspectives behind different forms of care to the fore.

To analytically capture those ethnographic encounters, we first introduce our theoretical conceptualizations revolving around different notions of affect and care and the challenges of doing fieldwork during a pandemic. Based on this conceptual and methodological foundation, we provide a brief historical context of medical masks in order to shine a light on their highly charged symbolism in times of crisis. In the ethnographic part of our article, we will concentrate on the affective dimensions of care related to several mask initiatives launched by different Vietnamese communities in Berlin. Besides showing the processual character of these care responses, we aim to work out the distinct motivations and approaches of varying migration cohorts and generations regarding their intention to organize face mask campaigns. While our interlocutors from the post-migration generation were much more vocal about anti-Asian racism and structural disadvantages related to the pandemic, the elderly generation of Vietnamese migrants we talked to framed their care response as a narrative of giving back to their second home country. By focusing on face masks as an analytical lens (see also Lupton *et al.* 2021b), we strive to show how different groups of the heterogenous Vietnamese community in Berlin found their own rationale for their mask projects. To analytically grasp the pandemic-related care responses of different Vietnamese dia-

sporic networks in Berlin, which are presented in more detail below, we will first define our understanding of care with a particular focus on affect theory.

Care in Times of Crisis

Social and medical anthropologist Elana Buch hinted at the inherent ambiguity of care, which she understood as "a shifting and unstable concept" (Buch 2015, 279) that was used in the last three decades to describe a myriad of social and cultural phenomena. Care as a social practice located in time and space manifests itself (among other things) as professionalized care in hospitals, nursing homes, or the home; psychiatric treatment; psychosocial care; civic engagement; and caring for others as well as oneself. Faced with the challenge of defining the rather broad and fluid concept of "care" for our work, we feel most comfortable with the anthropological definition of care as a "notion that transcends categorical boundaries: moving between different institutions and actors, times and places, care . . . brings together individuals, relatives, working relations, communal services, societies, policies, and nation-states" (Drotbohm and Alber 2015, 14).

Care characteristics such as the spatial and temporal dimensions were first captured under the term "caringscapes" (McKie *et al.* 2002). As Sophie Bowlby (2012, 2110–2111) has explained, this can mean taking into consideration changing "patterns of caring" over the life course of a person (see also von Poser 2017; 2018) or looking at the actual spaces where care takes place. The influence of institutionalized structures and discourses as well as "resource[s] and service context[s] shaping" those caringscapes became the focus of attention under the framework of "carescapes" (Bowlby 2012, 2112). Coming full circle, Sophie Bowlby and Linda McKie reimagined the highly dynamic and interwoven relationships of individual "caringscapes" and their interactions with their surrounding "carescapes" as an ecological framework in "which . . . political demands or shifts in behaviour, will influence resources and services provided and vice versa" (Bowlby and McKie 2019, 536). They also hinted at an often-overlooked dimension of care, which due to the pandemic and the accompanying restrictions became increasingly important in our research: "Moreover, we note that spaces of interaction relevant to care may be material spaces but can also be 'virtual spaces'" (Bowlby and McKie 2019, 537; see also Baldassar 2014). We will address this point more extensively in the ethnographic description of the emergence of Vietnamese digital carescapes responding to the Covid-19 health crisis.

It is worth noting that we are particularly interested in the affective space which opens up when humans, organizations, and other entities enter care relations. This

interest stems from our ongoing involvement in the well-established Network for Mental Health of Vietnamese Migrants in Berlin (Ta *et al.* 2021), which is closely connected to the specialized outpatient clinic mentioned in the ethnographic vignette at the beginning of this article. Working at the intersection of psychological anthropology, cultural psychiatry, and global mental health, the senior scientists working on this article were actively involved in the founding of this network in 2013 and its further professionalization. For the past ten years social workers, medical doctors, psychologists, migrant self-organizations, and social scientists have come together to develop culture- and language-sensitive care for Vietnamese migrants and their descendants in Berlin. The reasons for Vietnamese migrants to engage with the many organizations and care institutions of this network are manifold; they include, among others, unclear residence status, structural racism, cultural ostracism, trauma related to war and migration experiences, intergenerational conflicts, and pressure to maintain transnational family obligations (von Poser 2023, 146). Despite the efforts of this network, there are still many institutional barriers and affective dissonances that need to be tackled to further improve psychosocial care for Vietnamese communities in Berlin and sensitize the white-majority society to mental health problems related to migration and racism (Stumpfögger *et al.* 2022).

In our ongoing research of those processes, we understand affect as a felt intensity of indefinite size. Instead of being a hidden quality in the inner lifeworlds of the involved actors, it is a result of what is produced in between those entities. Hence, affecting and being affected is a highly relational intensity occurring in "encounters between bodies that involve a change—either enhancement or diminishment—in their respective bodily capacities or micro-powers" (Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019, 27; see also Slaby and von Scheve 2019). This relational character of affect (and care) can work as a social force to create, maintain, and in some cases even dissolve "significant relations" (Thelen 2015; for affect and care in Vietnamese contexts, see Tran 2015; 2023; Shohet 2021). With attention to this relational-affective perspective on care (as seen through the lens of face masks), we aim to illuminate how the disruptions caused by the pandemic motivated the mask-related care responses. We further explore the felt intensities of actors in their care effort, i.e., we ask what motivated people to help in times of crisis and how they felt while doing so.

Conceptually, we would like to take off from those preliminary considerations and extend them by including the affective dimension of care. This combination of care and affect can be achieved by focusing on what Anita von Poser and Edda Willamowski (2020) have described as an "ephemeral community of care." We think that in order to understand the intention of the involved care actors, it is highly relevant to take into account their "affective lives" and explore their "emotional experiences . . . as the dynamic and

open outcome of complex, and sometimes, arduous, processes of dealing with felt differences and of doing and undoing belonging over the entire course of life" (von Poser and Willamowski 2020, 612). Thus, sharing affectively grounded memories and experiences can help to create ephemeral communities of care. The ephemeral nature of those communities is intimately linked to affect: When the affective intensity fades away, communities can also dissolve—or, as in the case of Veronika Zink's description of affective communities, "[They] are *momentary connections of social immediacy* that are driven by the 'impulse of sociability' . . . that is, of a playful form of practicing convivial connectivity" (Zink 2019, 289–290, italics added). In the following section we will show how we methodologically captured the affective entanglements of care and face masks.

Doing Fieldwork during a Pandemic

While we started our research project in late 2019 with the goal of studying the institutionalization of psychosocial care services for Vietnamese migrants in Berlin, after a couple of months we were forced to come up with new ways of doing the research we had originally planned. Due to health considerations and legal constraints on freedom of movement, our research was restricted in the first quarter of 2020. The ethnographic encounters described here offer a lively snapshot of our attempt to come to terms with the challenging research context of this period. As will be shown, various initiatives and projects from diverse Vietnamese lifeworlds in Berlin were started to tackle the health crisis. While those emerging communities of care were connected to a specific period (March to late summer 2020) and eventually disintegrated, they nevertheless helped us to sharpen our original research question concerning the dynamic relationship between affect and emotions in the process of caring for others and the self.

As a result of the uniqueness of the developing pandemic situation, we had to adapt our initial research design, which was based on face-to-face fieldwork and direct contact with patients, and adjust it to the given context. Especially helpful in our attempt to redesign our research agenda and methods was the crowdsourced online document "Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic" (Lupton 2021). Inspired by the creativity of the international research community, we slowly came to terms with the digital nature of our research. Hence, we ended up following two lines of methodological inquiry.

On the one hand, we concentrated mainly on observing the online behavior of Vietnamese communities in Berlin on social networking services like Facebook and

Instagram. Public Facebook groups, such as Cộng đồng Việt tại Berlin Germany (Vietnamese community in Berlin and Germany) (2020)—with around 30,000 members, this is one of the biggest of its kind—and public posts on social media were used to observe the first wave of corona care responses by members of different Vietnamese communities in Germany. There are, of course, ethical considerations when it comes to online data collection, with consent issues and problems relating to anonymity being the most obvious ones (see Boellstorff *et al.* 2012, 129–149; Coughlan and Perryman 2015; Franzke *et al.* 2020).

A second important Internet source for following up on the wide variety of care responses was the Vietnamese-language online newspaper *Việt Báo*. Run by Phạm Quỳnh Nga, *Việt Báo* has been reporting since 2014 on topics related to the Vietnamese diaspora communities in Germany and neighboring countries. Several interviews were put online by Phạm about groups of Vietnamese migrants sewing masks and Vietnamese charity organizations donating self-sewn masks to German care facilities, which helped us map the Vietnamese care responses related to Covid-19 (Phạm 2020a; 2020b).

Beginning in late April 2020, our online encounters were extended to face-to-face interactions. Keeping in mind hygiene and physical distancing rules as well as corona legislations, Max Müller, the first author of this article, ventured out to conduct interviews. As much as the medical community and the general public were learning about the virus and how to live with it every day, we certainly also made mistakes and were taught valuable lessons. In hindsight, doubts remain about whether we should have engaged in this kind of face-to-face research. However, Deborah Lupton, the editor of the crowdsourced document mentioned earlier, reminds us that there was a real urgency to capture anthropological snapshots during the early stage of the health crisis:

> Social research is again urgently needed to document people's experiences of living in this moment, how different countries and governments are addressing the pandemic and what social changes are occurring now or will be happening in the post-Covid world. Social researchers need to be contributing to understandings [*sic*] how people have been affected by living in the pandemic, both physically and mentally, and what measures and policies have been most effective and helpful. (Lupton 2020)

The lion's share of our investigation was, nevertheless, conducted online. By scanning care responses of diverse Vietnamese communities in Berlin and organizing interview partners online, we kept our physical interactions to a minimum. Because of the digital nature of our research, we have included several videos, online articles, and links throughout the article for readers who might wish to delve into digital Vietnamese carescapes relating to the Covid-19 pandemic and its mask-related responses.

Affective Histories of Face Masks

Medical face masks are certainly one of the most visible and—at least at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic—controversial markers of the health crisis. While many Asian societies and their citizens instantly responded to the crisis by wearing masks without complaining, there were endless civil debates in numerous European countries, the United States, and other regions of the world about the effectiveness of this practice.[2] Looking at diverse Vietnamese communities in Berlin, one of our aims was to understand what underlying care concepts and narratives could be conceptualized through the highly charged symbol of the mask. To begin to grasp why the Vietnamese community in Berlin was so quick to act in a time of crisis and convey what masks as symbols of intense affective periods can teach us, it is helpful to briefly look into the history of medical face masks.

In our endeavor to understand the connection between masks and the Covid-19 health crisis, it is crucial to bear in mind that medical face masks have supported humanity for well over a hundred years in our constant fight against germs and diseases. Medical cloth masks were first developed in Europe and North America at the turn of the twentieth century, when germ theory was relatively new and virology was still in its infancy. Hence, the efficacy of those new biomedical devices was highly debated (Matuschek *et al.* 2020, 4). When the use of medical masks was still being contested in most parts of the world, Dr. Wu Lien-teh transformed them into highly effective medical devices. Born in 1879 in Penang—then part of the British Empire in Southeast Asia—as a child of Chinese immigrants, he studied at Cambridge University before working for the Empirical Chinese administration. While stationed in East-Chinese Manchuria during the 1910 outbreak of the pneumonic plague, he added layers of gauze and cotton to the already existing crude face masks of the time to fight the airborne disease. Based on his meticulous field research, he created an efficient anti-plague device. This invention is widely regarded as the birth of our now commonplace medical face masks (Lynteris 2018).

When the Spanish influenza had the world in its grip only a few years later, Dr. Wu's face masks were used worldwide. Their usage is especially well documented in the US, where some local governments—not unlike today—made mask wearing mandatory in pandemic times (Luckingham 1984). After the Spanish influenza disappeared, the practice of donning masks by the general public stopped in most countries around the

2) In this article, we explicitly avoid engaging with the often shifting (medical) discourses about the effectiveness of mask wearing. Instead, we try to show how different groups organized specific forms of care around the affective highly charged symbol of face masks.

world as quickly as it had started; but it has persisted most notably since then in Japan.[3)]

As Lupton and her colleagues remind us in their anthology on the socio-material aspects of medical face masks, in pre-Covid-19 times most people from Europe and North America did not have any contact with this social practice. In fact, "[t]hey have had to learn how to make sense of face masking as a protective practice and how to incorporate face masks into their everyday practices and routines" (Lupton *et al.* 2021b, 10–11). Having researched the history of face masks for many years, the medical anthropologist Christos Lynteris (Friedman 2020) notes that this unfamiliarity—due to the absence of large-scale outbreaks of disease in the recent history of Europe and North America—was responsible for why an automatic "mask-response" did not occur in those regions. On the contrary, as it became shockingly clear from the very beginning of the pandemic, the sole act of wearing a mask as an Asian person (or people read as Asian) was seen as suspicious and triggered racially motivated hate crimes (Ren and Feagin 2020).

Therefore, we consider mask wearing (or sewing for later donation) as a highly relational act of care that created "disturbing and disruptive affective forces" as well as "affective and relational tensions" (Lupton *et al.* 2021c, 73) at the beginning of the global health crisis. In the following ethnographic descriptions, we introduce four distinct yet connected communities of care that revolved around face masks: two care networks initiated by Vietnamese migrants (each group linked to different migration regimes) and two related projects developed by actors from the post-migration generation of German-born and/or -raised children of Vietnamese parents.

ChungTay: Joining Hands against Coronavirus

After we first heard about the mask donation to the specialized outpatient clinic mentioned earlier, we went online to look for possible interlocutors who had participated in this or related mask-sewing projects. Still confined to our homes, we scanned the Internet and found a Facebook livestream by Ms. Hà[4)] on March 21, 2020, one of the first

3) Japan is not the only Asian society where mask wearing is widespread (see Burgess and Horii 2012; Horii 2014), but besides some biomedical studies there are virtually no academic reports about the cultural practice of mask wearing in other countries of the region (for an exception about mask wearing in China, see Rochot 2020). For two fascinating compilations of street interviews about the attitude of everyday people in East Asia toward mask wearing as well as their perception of the aversion to masks in Europe and North America, see Asian Boss (2017) (for pre-Covid-19 interviews in Tokyo) and Asian Boss (2020) (for interviews in Seoul during Covid-19).

4) We use original names that are to be found in openly available resources, such as newspapers and social networking services, while the names of the interlocutors we met in our research are anonymized.

highly visible responses to the Covid crisis in our field. A chemist by profession but then running a wholesale business for nail shop supplies (Mai 2020), Ms. Hà was one of many successful businesswomen from the Đồng Xuân Center in East Berlin who had amassed several thousand followers on her personal Facebook page. Only a couple of days after the first lockdown had been implemented in Berlin, she addressed her followers and fellow nail shop owners in tears, urging them to follow suit and donate their supplies of hygiene products to first responders and caregivers. It is important to note once again that at the time many care facilities in Germany were not prepared for the upcoming pandemic upheaval. Due to a dangerous mix of the public downplaying the pandemic situation and mismanagement by the German government, there was a severe shortage of medical masks and other PPE. Hence, the video caption of Ms. Hà's emotionally charged video reads:

> Join hands with HA NAIL to donate masks, gloves, and disinfectants to hospitals, nursing homes, Super Markets, firefighters, police stations and clinics and pharmacies to support those on the frontlines who are working for our peaceful lives. This is a way for us to thank Germany for caring about Vietnamese people far from home, many of us with stable and rich lives. Please share [this video] and support the Germans of your second home country [*quê hương thứ hai*]!!!!! (Nguyễn Thị Hà 2020)

Following Ms. Hà's emotional plea for support, we were redirected to the Facebook page of Ms. Thành's corona network, ChungTay. Ms. Thành went to Germany to study business administration almost 15 years ago. There she met her future husband, moved to Berlin, and opened a successful beauty salon in the Đồng Xuân Center. Instead of just donating supplies, she got together with four friends working in the beauty and nail industry to launch the corona support network ChungTay (Vietnamese for "joining hands" or "helping together"). Apart from resonating with the general sentiment of support for the "second home country" of Ms. Hà's video, ChungTay's founding statement on Facebook also called for a certain amount of patriotic pride and the keeping of feelings of belonging to Vietnam: "With the message 'Vietnam together with CHUNGTAY is here to help the second homeland' [*giúp đỡ quê hương thứ hai*] we want you always to be proud to tell Germans 'We are Vietnamese'" (Nguyễn Thanh 2020).

In addition to donating their stock of medical masks, disinfectants, and gloves, the group also called online for donations to buy fabrics. Those textiles were intended to be turned into simple cloth face coverings, which in turn could be donated to health-care workers. The group's spontaneous idea suddenly grew so large that well over 4,000 euros was raised in just three days. After one week of calling for support on Facebook

and other social media networks, organizing fabrics, finding people who could sew masks, as well as collecting hygiene products from several small Vietnamese-run businesses, the group were able to donate over 10,000 medical masks, 5,000 self-sewn masks, and dozens of liters of disinfectant to more than ten care facilities in Berlin. Most of the time, Vietnamese care providers working in hospitals and nursing homes initiated connections to those facilities. Vietnamese restaurant owners later joined the cause by donating over 1,000 servings of food for medical staff and caregivers. Through the personal network of one of ChungTay's founders, the group were able to get in touch with VTV4—the Vietnamese state media channel addressing the overseas Vietnamese population—to organize a film crew for their first round of donations. Hence, their patriotic sentiment could be broadcast to the global Vietnamese diaspora.[5)]

After the first author of this article became aware of the group's activities on Facebook, he was able to establish a rapport with Ms. Thành to talk about the development of the ChungTay group. They met in her beauty salon to discuss the group's formation, the intention behind establishing this community of care, and the underlying rationale for helping others during the coronavirus outbreak. When Ms. Thành was asked at the beginning of the conversation why she thought the Vietnamese in Germany were so active in the fight against the coronavirus, she pointed out that "while some Europeans were still downplaying the outbreak, the Vietnamese community was very much aware of what was happening in Asia." She said that by consuming internationally broadcast Vietnamese media channels—for instance, VTV4—they received "the latest news about the virus when German news stations only scarcely reported about it."

Later in the conversation, Ms. Thành picked up that thought again and went on to say that the urge to help was strengthened by the group's feeling of belonging to Germany as well as their overall perception of well-organized crisis management by the German government:

> And you know, in this pandemic, I have a really good feeling that we are all well taken care of here [in Germany]. You can feel safe in Germany. The state takes care of you, no matter where you come from—no matter what nationality you have. You live in Germany, and you can feel just like in your homeland. And that is what many of us feel, that we are really happy we can live here. Well, I was born in Vietnam, but the second half of my life was spent in Germany. So I feel that I'm already half German. Me and other people like me always feel that Germany is our second home. And of course, we can't do much, but what we can do, we will do.[6)]

5) See the VTV4 (2020) clip starting around 0:56. An online article about the corona-related activities of Vietnamese in Germany on VNExpress (Lý 2020) shows a picture of a banner from the ChungTay group reading "*Gemeinsam Helfen* [Helping together] Vietnam for Germany."

6) All interviews were conducted in German and translated by the authors.

Continuing the conversation after the recorded interview, Ms. Thành further opened up about her perception of being well taken care of by the German government. She explained that many Vietnamese migrants felt incredibly grateful for the 5,000 euros they received from the German government as part of a stimulus package for self-employed workers and freelancers. Since Vietnamese migrants in Germany in general, and especially the former socialist contract workers, were overproportionately self-employed (around 29 percent compared to approximately 12 percent of the total German population [Schmiz 2011, 83]), this was a sentiment shared by many people of the Vietnamese diaspora in Berlin.

The highly intense moment at the beginning of the pandemic in Germany, especially in the face of mismanagement by the German authorities and the subsequent lack of masks for people working in the German health-care sector, affectively spurred people like Ms. Hà and Ms. Thành to step forward and organize care responses. At this point, it is worth noting that both of these women working in the transnationally connected Vietnamese ethnic niche of the nail and beauty industry (Eckstein and Nguyen 2011) are part of the often-overlooked migration cohort of newer Vietnamese migrants in Germany. Vietnamese migrants in Germany are still perceived and described as being made up mostly of former refugees and socialist contract workers. While this description might fit the situation in the first decade after the reunification of Germany, Mai Thi Thanh Nga and Gabriel Scheidecker (2020, 121) have estimated that roughly 105,000 of the 176,000 Vietnamese and Germans with Vietnamese family ties living in Germany are connected to newer migration cohorts. Many of those newer migrants work in the beauty and nail design industry and were therefore in a position to donate possibly life-saving supplies like medical masks and disinfectants.

From the description of these first ethnographic examples, it becomes clear how the sentiment of belonging to Germany and the narrative of gratitude heavily influenced the formation of the ChungTay network. People either stated online or told us directly that they felt they were taken good care of by the government, that they could live a stable and fulfilling life in Germany, and hence that they wanted to help out in times of crisis. Thus, the formation of the ChungTay network as an ephemeral community of care was heavily motivated by the shared sentiment of wanting to give back.

Who Sewed the Masks?

Before the first author left Ms. Thành's beauty salon, he asked her whether she could connect him with some of the sewists who were producing masks from donated fabrics.

Ms. Thành told him that her group had been contacted in the early days of its formation by a Mr. Hoàng, who was mainly responsible for finding sewists and organizing the distribution of donated fabrics.

A couple of weeks later, the first author met Mr. Hoàng in his apartment in an East Berlin socialist housing block. Sitting in his living room, Mr. Hoàng talked about his previous life in Vietnam and how his contributions to the army had made him eligible to work in a socialist foreign country. Upon arriving in East Germany in 1982 to work in a glass factory, he got a firm grip on the German language. After his contractually fixed period of five years in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), he was asked to act as a group leader for newly arriving Vietnamese contract workers. His job was to mediate and translate between the Vietnamese workers, the management of the textile-processing factory he was assigned to, and the Vietnamese embassy. Most of his present-day contacts with Vietnamese sewists making masks for the ChungTay group stemmed from his time working at VEB Berliner Damenmoden, a people-owned textile-processing factory in Berlin. He explained to the first author:

> I have many friends in Germany, contacts with Vietnamese friends, so that's why I called them. They immediately wanted me to bring fabrics so they could sew and everything. And that's why we [the network] can do it. If they [the sewists] don't want to do it voluntarily, we can't do it that way. Everything is voluntary. Then I called several people, but I couldn't do too much alone. And that's why I only have three groups. It's like a network. I called them, brought stuff, asked what they needed, how I could help. And then they sewed, and then we look at how much there is. I wrote it all down, wrote it down every day. Look at this.

Mr. Hoàng showed the first author his private records of the last six weeks. He had meticulously noted every detail of the group's activities: how many masks had been sewn, the date of donation, which care facility got how many masks. Later, he pulled out his cell phone to show some pictures of his work and his network of sewists. While swiping through dozens of images, he estimated that around fifty Vietnamese families in Berlin were sewing masks for donation.[7] Zooming in on some of the images, Mr. Hoàng went on to explain that it was usually the women who sat at the sewing machines while their husbands prepared the patterns or cut the fabrics.

Before the first author left, Mr. Hoàng took him to another room and proudly showed him the sewing machine he and his wife had bought in the GDR and used the last couple of weeks. Smilingly he said, "but that's only a small machine which can only do so much. I'll give you the address of a group of people who are sewing more professionally in a tailor's shop. You should visit them."

7) See also ChungTay (2020).

When he arrived the next day at the address Mr. Hoàng had given him, the first author, unfortunately, interrupted the sewing group who were on their well-earned lunch break. They were, nevertheless, able to sit down and talk with him about their arduous work and why they were doing it in the first place. The main group consisted of the married couple who owned the tailor's shop and three of their friends. All of them—well into their fifties or early sixties—had arrived in the 1980s in the former GDR to work as sewists. Besides their migration history and their profession in East Germany, they also shared their Buddhist faith. They were active members of the Phổ Đà pagoda in Berlin-Lichtenberg and decided to help by sewing masks because they "wanted to do something which comes from the heart."[8] Since March 19—just a few days after the general lockdown started in Berlin—they had been sewing behind the closed curtains of the small tailor's shop nine hours a day, often late into the night, even on weekends. When the first author visited them, already six weeks into their work, they told him that they estimated they had sewn around 6,000 masks. The fabrics had been donated by several individuals as well as Vietnamese community networks—ChungTay being one of them. When the first author asked them about their motivation for this work, Mr. Hảo—the owner of the tailor's shop—explained:

> Yes, that's just to say thank you. We just want to give back. After the reunification of Germany, we [contract workers] were allowed to stay on in Germany. We got a lot of support from the Bundestag [i.e., the German government] and much support from Germany. And now we live here, and our children are born here. They are all grown up now, at school. And everything is good for our people. Our children were born here, and we are all fine. That's why we want to give something back to Germany to help with the corona crisis.

After a short initial conversation (in German), the first author was about to pack up his things and leave when it suddenly started to rain heavily. With a heartfelt smile on his face, Mr. Hảo invited him to sit down with the group and stay a bit longer. His wife offered the author coffee and cookies, and they continued their conversation off the record. Using this affective change of atmosphere, the first author introduced himself once again in Vietnamese. When the author asked the group in their mother tongue why

8) This sentiment of "giving from the heart" resonates with the findings of Le Hoang Anh Thu about charity work done by Buddhist laypeople in Ho Chi Minh City. In a special issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* dealing with the *Affective Turn in the Ethnographies of Buddhism* (Schwenkel and Keith 2020), she writes: "Studies by Vietnamese scholars on charitable work also emphasize this cultural tradition of giving and highlight the Buddhist concept of compassion that pervades Vietnamese people's everyday practice of giving" (Le 2020, 7). Buddhist nuns from the Linh Thứu pagoda in Berlin as well as the migrant organization Danke Deutschland (Thank you Germany)—both connected to the migration history of former Vietnamese refugees—also sewed hundreds of masks for later donation (Danke Deutschland 2020).

their first response to the corona crisis was sewing masks, the sewists reminded him of two crucial things. First, masks are simply a ubiquitous sight in the streets of Vietnam. Many women wear them on their motorbikes to protect their skin from tanning or to battle sexual harassment (Nguyen 2017), while younger people use more sophisticated versions to fight air pollution. Second, by consuming Vietnamese national media and global media programs specially designed for the overseas Vietnamese population (for the media politics of the Vietnamese Communist Party, see Carruthers 2007), they were sensitized to mask wearing very early on in the pandemic.[9] Their heightened sensitivity to the crisis was due to a massive corona-related information campaign carried out by the Vietnamese government. Recalling sentiments of patriotism and heroism from the time of struggle for national independence, the campaign had included propaganda posters showing masked health-care workers, agitation from omnipresent street corner loudspeakers—themselves remnants of the war—and even a stamp series showing a police officer helping a civilian don his mask to remind Vietnamese citizens (at home and abroad) about the importance of masks. Combined with slogans like "chung tay phòng chống dịch COVID-19" (Join hands to fight COVID-19) or "ở nhà là yêu nước" (To stay at home is to love the country/be patriotic) (Humphrey 2020), this campaign achieved considerable success, with no reported corona-related deaths in Vietnam until June 2020.[10]

As shown by the formation of the ChungTay group by newer Vietnamese migrants and the sewing groups of the former socialist contract workers and their subsequent care responses, actors from the migration generation of Vietnamese in Berlin were quick to step in and support first responders and care workers. Looking at the affective lives of the actors of these two migration cohorts, we can see how in both cases the migration history of the cohort indirectly shaped their efforts to tackle the health crisis. While newer migrants working in the ethnic niche of the nail and beauty industry donated their supply of masks and other PPE when there was a need for those items in Germany, post-socialist networks of former contract workers stepped forward to use the skills they had learned in the GDR to sew thousands of simple cloth face coverings. After decades

9) In late February 2020 the Vietnamese Ministry of Health even sponsored a corona-themed reinterpretation of a 2017 hit single, which ironically went viral around the world (Min Official 2020).

10) As shown in an April 2020 survey with around 29,000 adult respondents from 15 countries, the percentage of people wearing face masks in Vietnam due to the Covid-19 pandemic was at that time around 91. Compared to the reported numbers from China (81 percent), Japan (77 percent), and a staggering low of just 20 percent in Germany, Vietnam ranked highest in this poll. While around 34 percent of German respondents did not see any benefit from wearing a mask if they were not sick, this sentiment was lowest in Vietnam (7 percent), where, appropriately, 55 percent of respondents expected others to wear masks so as to not pass on their illness (compared to only around 20 percent in Germany) (IPSOS 2020).

of living in Germany, becoming oftentimes successful business owners, and raising their children in their new home country, they were intimately affected by the possible life-threatening lack of masks and decided to help their "second home country." The formations of these two ephemeral communities of care, which are loosely connected through individuals from different migration cohorts and regimes, show how highly intense affective moments make way for possibilities of connection, change, and care.

By conceptualizing such formations as "carescapes in the making," we want to draw attention to the underlying affective immediacies and emotional forces that led to the establishment of specific care-related networks. We used the two interrelated projects of actors from the migration generation to show that such forces often have long histories relating to the particularities of different migration regimes. In the next section we will look at two independent yet connected mask campaigns from the post-migration generation, to further show how affective lives with reference to past experiences shape present-day care responses.

Hãy ở Nhà: Stay at Home, Stay Safe

After the rain stopped, the first author got ready to leave the sewing group so they could finally enjoy their lunch break on their own. Before leaving, he asked the group about their children and whether they ever helped with sewing masks. Mr. Hảo explained that while their children tried to support their parents as much as they could, he knew that their lives were busy and they usually did not have time to help. He added, "But there is this young German-Vietnamese journalist named Vanessa Vu who visited us for her podcast last week. Maybe you could talk to her."

Vanessa Vu and her colleague Minh Thu Tran are public figures in the post-migration generation of German-born children of Vietnamese parents. Together they host a successful podcast called *Rice and Shine*, simultaneously acting as a community project for Viet-Germans and as a platform to inform the majority of German society about different Vietnamese experiences. On their Instagram account (@riceandshine.podcast) they were reporting about the coronavirus and anti-Asian racism related to it since early January 2020. In their effort to bridge the generational gap Mr. Hảo was talking about, they shared information and vocabulary about Covid-19 for the post-migration generation in Vietnamese. In cooperation with the Hãy ở Nhà (Stay at home) online campaign, they further connected the relentlessly working sewists and their masks with the German-majority society.

The Hãy ở Nhà campaign came to light in mid-March 2020, when Tạ Thị Minh

Tâm—the head of the specialized clinic for Vietnamese migrants in Berlin—sat down in a Facebook livestream organized by the bilingual (Vietnamese-German) children's book publisher Horami (2020). As an engaged psychiatrist working for years to improve the psychosocial care system for Vietnamese migrants in Berlin, Dr. Tạ came together with Dr. Mai Thy Phan-Nguyen (a medical doctor in Berlin) and Nguyen-Schwanke Hanh (founder of the publishing house) to give basic information about Covid-19 to a Vietnamese audience. Ms. Nguyen-Schwanke and the project's co-founder Thai Bao-Tram later launched the Hãy ở Nhà website (Nguyen-Schwanke and Thai 2020).

In line with the campaign's motto, Ms. Nguyen-Schwanke and the first author stayed at home and sat down for an online interview about the project. As Ms. Nguyen-Schwanke told the author, their goal was to pool high-quality information in Vietnamese because

> there were those daily updates in the German media, and even I noticed for myself, as someone who knows this language intimately, how difficult it is to get a clear answer. How are my fellow Vietnamese who can't speak German then handling this situation?[11)]

Asked about the affective dimension of the face masks and the initiative they had started, Nähen gegen die Pandemie (Sewing against the pandemic), she answered:

> We just loved this narrative of going back to the sewing machines. Many former contract workers worked as sewists in the GDR. This year [2020], it was initially planned to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the [Vietnamese] contract workers [in Germany], and now it is somehow like a new part of this story, a sequel. I suddenly realized how we're going to be part of it now. Then we noticed that those sewists, who are either still working in the tailoring business or have other jobs, can do their work for now, but they can't keep it that way for long if they just donate the masks. We then created this online platform for them to reach a bigger group of people and actually sell their products.

Later in the conversation, Ms. Nguyen-Schwanke told the first author that she hoped this mode of transgenerational cooperation could be a model for the times to come. A possible recession and economic hardships related to the crisis were thought to most likely hit the migrant generation of Vietnamese in Germany harder than their German-born children working in white-collar jobs. She hoped that lending the post-migration generation a hand could help to ease this development and make this generation step forward to care for their parents' generation.

This transgenerational cooperation brings us to our last ethnographic example. The above-mentioned Rice and Shine podcast got in contact through the Hãy ở Nhà

11) The first official documents about Covid-19 translated into Vietnamese appeared mere months after the first lockdown, making this kind of community care essential for Vietnamese migrants in Berlin.

campaign with the sewing group visited by the first author. The May edition of the podcast was therefore dedicated to Vietnamese migrants in Germany sewing masks. In this episode, we also hear Mr. Hảo explaining in his mother tongue his core motivation to help out:

> I really enjoy making masks. When the first people came to us and asked for masks, we were really happy. We were so happy that people wanted something from us and that we could do something good for the Germans. For Germany, our second home. We are really happy. (Rice and Shine Podcast 2020)

While the migration generation of Vietnamese in Germany felt the urge to give back to their host country because they had been allowed to stay on after reunification, the two hosts of the podcast voiced diverging post-migration points of view concerning this narrative of thankfulness. In the May episode of their podcast they pointed out that many younger people of Vietnamese descent in Germany, having been born and raised in this country, nowadays speak loudly and proudly about their place in society as equals. Therefore, their focus was more on their needs and their constant fight to have the same rights as people from the white-German majority society. So, the motivation of the two women was to pool resources and take care of their peer community instead. Out of the felt need to support Vietnamese migrants sewing masks as well as to take care of the post-migration generation, Vanessa Vu and Minh Thu Tran began a "community masks" project. In collaboration with the French-Vietnamese designer Babeth Lafon and the sewing group around Mr. Hảo, they produced a small batch of hand-sewn masks. On her personal Instagram page Lafon explained the rationale behind the chosen design and the motivation for this mask project quite beautifully:

> We went with a floral pattern to celebrate the podcasters['] Asian heritage and I picked Daisies for their simplicity and understated elegance. In Feng Shui they symbolize purity and positive energy, and because of the increased Racism that we, the Asian community, had to face since the beginning of the pandemic, it felt like the perfect sentiment to infuse these masks with. I wanted to create something joyful and warm, a bit like a perfect summer day spent laying on the grass full of daisies, feeling held, supported, and safe. I wanted to recreate that feeling of grounding and comfort. (Lafon 2020)

Coming back to the affective lives approach, we can see in the mask project of the post-migration generation how their emotional experiences while growing up in Germany—an upbringing that the hosts of the Rice and Shine podcast often point out was filled with experiences of institutional racism, everyday microaggressions, and sometimes even physical attacks—led them to care for their peers. So, besides just care-related

responses toward German society at large, there clearly was an intra-group aim. The Hãy ở Nhà campaign also concentrated its efforts on the launching of its website for the Vietnamese community in Germany, providing the community with high-quality information related to the health crisis as well as assistance with legal and bureaucratic matters. German-born and/or -raised children of Vietnamese migrants also filled this institutional gap in the German state-run health-care system by translating important information during the first months of the pandemic. Instead of putting their efforts solely into helping the white-German majority society, they aimed for a form of community care by empowering their peers in times of heightened anti-Asian racism and violence against Asian (or Asian-read) people. Furthermore, through their shared work with a designer from the French-Vietnamese diaspora community, this sentiment of community care later materialized in a transgenerational "flower mask" project.

Conclusion: Solidarity in Times of Need

This article aims to show how emerging communities of care situated in different Vietnamese lifeworlds of Berlin reacted to the ever-increasing health risks related to the global threat of Covid-19. Due to limitations on our fieldwork during the pandemic, this article portrays only a snapshot of the felt intensities of "carescapes in the making." We have used this catchphrase to hint at the different affective dimensions that came together in building and maintaining care communities. Revisiting those communities of care almost two years after they started their work, it is important to point out that they either dissolved or returned, as in the case of the sewing group of Buddhist laypeople, to the group's former activities. When the German authorities finally met the demand for masks for health-care professionals as well as the general public—and hence the affective intensity faded away—these ephemeral communities of care also slowly disintegrated or transformed, thus showing that carescapes are constantly made, unmade, and remade in view of changing societal challenges.[12)]

The intersection of the affective dimension of face masks and care is apparent not only on the micro and meso levels of German society but ever more so on the macro

12) While this article was being written in spring 2022, the East Berlin Buddhist congregation (like many other Vietnamese communities of care) reacted to a new affective intensity by refocusing their care efforts at Vietnamese nationals and their children fleeing the war in Ukraine and arriving in Berlin. Engaging in community care for their peers, they cooked several hundred servings of vegetarian Vietnamese meals and collected money, clothes, and household items like rice cookers for donation.

level of international politics in pandemic preparedness and prevention (see also WHO 2021). While millions of Vietnam-produced masks were purchased by Germany in early 2020, tens of thousands more were donated by Vietnamese networks to Germany. For example, members of the Vietnam-Germany Friendship Association (Hội hữu nghị Việt Đức) donated over 80,000 masks for distribution in Germany. As the German ambassador in Vietnam, Guido Hildner, pointed out, hinting at the affective dimension of the masks, "they convey the deep affection of the Vietnamese people, as well as the solidarity of the peoples of the two countries in this fight" (VNF 2020). In a strange turn of events, the Vietnam-Germany Friendship Association's former socialist students and workers, who had arrived in East Germany under the banner of *Internationale Solidarität* (International solidarity), were now reciprocating this sentiment of solidarity with Germany. Through various mask-related projects in Berlin, we can see how particular histories of different migration cohorts and regimes influenced individual as well as collective care efforts.

We conclude our paper by emphasizing that we work and pursue our research with various Vietnamese communities in Berlin as engaged scientists. It is therefore essential for us to point out that from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were other dangerous collateral effects following in its path—namely, hate and racism, effects that impacted us practically and ethically. While all of us bore the responsibility to wear masks to protect ourselves and others, Asian migrants and the post-migration generation seem to have borne the brunt of the crisis. In the last couple of decades, Asian migrants and their descendants—often perceived as model minorities in their countries of settlement—have been at risk of being seen, once again, as the "Yellow Peril." Therefore, it is not surprising that harassment, physical attacks, and acts like the terror attack in Atlanta in early 2021—fueled by anti-Asian racism—have become an almost weekly occurrence in the news. Unfortunately, the combination of a global pandemic and anti-Asian racism is not a new phenomenon. In a curious historical coincidence, the origin story of our modern-day medical masks is also intimately linked to a health crisis and blatant racism.

Over a hundred years ago, when Dr. Wu transformed surgical masks into sophisticated biomedical devices, he tried to convince a French doctor working in Manchuria of the merits of his new invention. As the story goes, the colleague racially ridiculed the Cambridge-educated Dr. Wu for suggesting wearing one of the new masks to protect against the plague: "he faced Dr. Wu, raised both his arms in a threatening manner, and with bulging eyes cried out 'You, you Chinaman, how dare you laugh at me and contradict your superior?'" (Wu 1959, 19, cited in Lynteris 2018, 444). Refusing to acknowledge the effectiveness of Dr. Wu's invention against the airborne disease, the French doctor

contracted the pathogen and died a few days later.

Thus, mask wearing to reduce the spread of Covid-19 is of utmost importance, just like solidarity with people who are read as Asian and are discriminated against because of the racial connection of the virus with Asia is of utmost importance. As Lupton and her colleagues pointed out in the opening quote of this article, masks as a symbolic, highly charged marker remind us that we are living through an intense affective period. We have addressed some of the ephemeral care responses of Vietnamese communities in Berlin and the related affective immediacies at a particular critical time to show that masks can and should be perceived as a visually strong marker of "altruism and solidarity" (Cheng *et al.* 2020), a symbol of care.

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Narrative and Framing of a Pandemic: Public Health Communication in the Vietnamese Public Sphere

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This paper explores the Vietnamese government's approach toward public health risk communication in the context of citizen mobilization during the Covid-19 pandemic. We analyze the government's communication strategy using images and videos published during the pandemic, such as artwork, leaflets, campaigns, music videos, and public announcements in public spaces. The government's visual risk communication strategy is embedded in an idealized vision of cooperative citizenship. The focus is on the moral obligation of citizens toward the Vietnamese nation and the morality of caring, in which the state communicates behavior it deems morally correct.

Keywords: Vietnam, public health, risk communication, Covid-19 pandemic, cooperative citizenship, authoritarianism, morality of caring

Introduction

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Vietnamese government's response became a controversial topic in the global discourse. Consequently, an extensive body of literature was published in newspapers, books, and academic journals addressing the subject (Le Huu Nhat Minh *et al.* 2021; Le Tuyet-Anh T. *et al*. 2021; Nguyen *et al.* 2021). While some Western media outlets pointed toward the underlying authoritarian government structures as the reason for the initial success of Vietnam's response (Hayton and Tro 2020), academic literature looked at the role of public communication strategies and nationalism (Nguyen Quang Dung 2020; Taniguchi 2022). Vietnam was also held up as a model case for the Global South (Dabla-Norris *et al.* 2020; Tran *et al.* 2020).

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The pandemic thus provided a unique tool for looking at policy making in Vietnam in action, including its underlying narratives concerning state-society relations. This is particularly interesting in the context of a global democratic backslide and the emergence or hardening of authoritarian structures. Looking at Covid-19 policies, regulations, implementation, and communication can be useful to better understand the conceptualization of these relations in the authoritarian context of Vietnam. Citizenship, as proposed by Ward Berenschot *et al.* (2016), can be a useful concept for understanding the complexity of state-society relations. As the pandemic progressed, state and social actors in Vietnam were forced to renegotiate their relations. Consequently, the Vietnamese framing of citizenship was also used as a tool by the authorities to mobilize the population, enforce compliance, and create legitimacy for the government and its regulations. The public health crisis provides the background to study the production of narratives on citizenship as they are used to frame the pandemic for increasing social mobilization.

Consequently, this paper looks at Covid-19 communication in Vietnam (particularly from February to August 2020) to reconstruct the narratives used by state actors for citizenship negotiations. It aims to better understand the distinct conceptualization of citizenship for Vietnamese state-society relations in the context of a public health crisis.

Cooperative Citizenship

In recent years, the focus of state-society relations in Vietnamese studies has moved away from a state-centered perspective, where citizens merely negotiate the top-down politics of an accommodating state (Kerkvliet 2010), to a "meditation space" (Koh 2006). Newer perspectives on state-society relations in Southeast Asia aim to take an "approach from below" and understand the relationship as something dynamic and continuously negotiated (Berenschot *et al.* 2016). These perspectives aim to understand citizen rights and agency and provide an alternative understanding of modern authoritarianism in Southeast Asia as put forth by political scientists, such as Lee Morgenbesser's (2020) theory on sophisticated authoritarianism. Similar discussions can be found in academic works on civil society in Vietnam (Thayer 2009; Wischermann 2010; Waibel *et al*. 2013).

Citizenship as a conceptual framework is thus used in recent academia in the Vietnamese context to understand how ordinary citizens demand accountability from the state in return for providing legitimacy and support (Nguyen Quang Dung 2020; Binh 2021). Obligations and rights on both sides, therefore, characterize state-society relations. This form of "cooperative citizenship" (Le and Nicolaisen 2021) is designed

as an idealized form of state-society relations in which citizens and state institutions do not compete and negotiate over interests, resources, and needs but cooperate to modernize and reconstruct Vietnamese society for the creation of a better nation. A good citizen, according to this understanding, puts the common good of the nation before their interests and needs and is thus willing to make sacrifices for the future of society. Inherent in this perspective from the state's point of view is that Vietnamese government institutions best know what constitutes the common good. Hence, the idea of cooperative citizenship is underscored by a normative dimension: the morality of caring. Putting the nation first, feeling an obligation to improve society, and supporting the state are not merely political demands but reframed as moral obligations. Nguyen-Thu Giang (2020) has written on this moral dimension of care work in the context of social expectation, particularly with regard to the role of women.

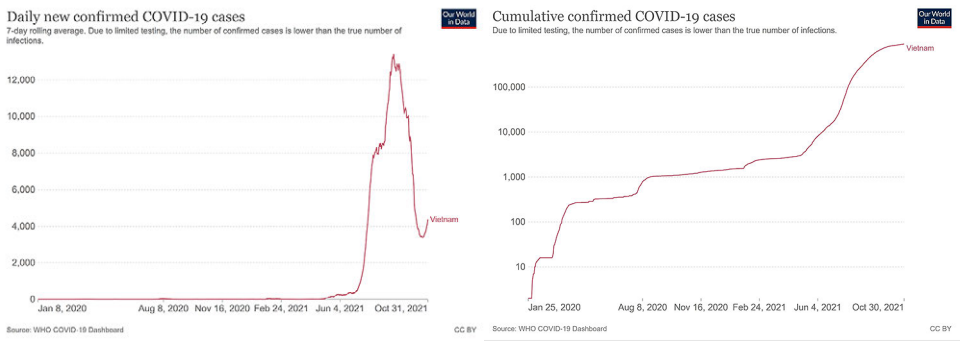
Politics and morality are deeply intertwined, as can be seen in political campaigns like the "Civilized Streets" campaign. Also, political messaging often has a moral aspect (Binh 2021). This morality dimension is discussed in academics, for example, by Susan Bayly (2020) in her work on state imagery in public spaces and moral citizenship in Vietnam. The morality of caring has a nationalist undertone, which references historical struggles and individual sacrifices to frame state demands, implying a moral obligation on the part of citizens to support the nation. Public willingness for individual sacrifice is communicated as inherited by previous generations and tied to what it means to be Vietnamese. This link between morality and care can be found also in community-level discourses on social responsibility, the role of women in society, and the obligation of children toward the elderly. However, when looking at citizenship in the Vietnamese context, it is necessary to distinguish between formal image and informal practices (Ehlert 2012). The expectation of "cooperative citizenship" is often translated into conflicted forms of citizenship that challenge the state's perspective on state-society relations (Le and Nicolaisen 2021). However, within the framework of crisis response, as seen during the pandemic, the state needs to rely on social cooperation to achieve widespread social compliance, including people following rules and regulations (Glik 2007). Public communication can reduce instances of conflicted citizenship. In the context of the pandemic, the cooperation of citizens in preemptive measures was—and is—crucial for an effective response. Thus, a cooperative citizenship approach in public communication is a feasible strategy to mobilize society.

This paper argues that the ideal of "cooperative citizenship" became an important message to mobilize the public, gain legitimacy, maintain control, and thus create a cohesive Covid-19 response in Vietnam. We argue that the pandemic was broadly framed in terms of a "morality of caring" in order to increase the levels of mobilization and

people's engagement in the sense of cooperative citizenship. Thus, pandemic communication can help to provide insights into the construction of this cooperative citizenship narrative and the underlying symbols and arguments.

Background: Covid-19 in Vietnam

Vietnam's declared goal from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was to wipe out the virus entirely. This zero-Covid strategy had its roots in Vietnam's limited health infrastructure, its previous experience with other infectious diseases, and a general weariness on the part of the Vietnamese government with official information coming from the Chinese government (Le and Nicolaisen 2022). Accordingly, as early as January 16, 2020, the Vietnamese government ordered ministries and relevant agencies to take measures against the spread of pneumonia caused by the then still novel coronavirus (VNS 2020). Thus, when the first Covid-19 infection was registered in Vietnam on January 23, an immediate and broad political response was implemented, including the closing of all schools nationwide following the Tet holidays and canceling of all flights from China on February 1 (Murray and Pham 2020). This was followed by the closure of all borders to foreigners on March 22. The authorities dealt with isolated local breakouts by locking down villages, neighborhoods, and factories between February and July 2020 in order to contain the spread of the virus and trace each individual infection back to its source. Due to this decisive strategy, Vietnam was able to initially contain the spread of the virus, as shown in Fig. 1a on the development of daily Covid-19



a **b**

Fig. 1 Development of Confirmed Covid-19 Cases from January 2020: (a) Daily New Confirmed Cases; (b) Cumulative Development of Cases on a Logarithmic Scale

Source: Mathieu *et al.* (various years)

cases. Fig. 1b shows the different waves of Covid-19 outbreaks in Vietnam.

Consequently, between mid-April and the end of July 2020 Vietnam had no community infections; it registered infections only inside quarantine camps, due to people arriving on repatriation flights. In the first half of 2020 the country had fewer than 450 infections and no Covid-related deaths (Mathieu *et al.*, various years; Le Huu Nhat Minh *et al.* 2021).

The streak of low infections ended with an outbreak in Đà Nẵng that began on July 28, 2020, when—for the first time—some of the early infections could not be traced back to their original source. The outbreak occurred during the height of Vietnam's travel season in a domestic tourist destination. A large number of people attempted to leave the region in order to escape a lockdown, which hampered efforts to isolate the outbreak regionally. On July 31, 2020, Vietnam registered its first Covid-19 death. Over the next month the country registered more than 600 new infections, more than in the entire first six months of the pandemic, and 32 deaths (Mathieu *et al.*, various years). However, by the end of August the outbreak in Đà Nẵng was under control, with no new deaths from September 4, 2020 to May 2021 and no locally transmitted infections for almost three months. However, on November 28, 2020, a Vietnam Airlines crew member tested positive while violating government-mandated Covid-19 quarantine protocols and infected three other people. This led to the first new cluster in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) in 120 days (Tuoi Tre News 2020). The authorities responded with temporary measures in HCMC, including the lockdown of three residential neighborhoods, the closure of universities, and the cancellation of outdoor events. Due to these measures, the outbreak did not spread further and infections remained mostly under control until the end of January 2021 (Manh 2020).

The next outbreak, a third wave, occurred from January 28, 2021 to March 25, 2021, in Hai Duong, with the Alpha variant responsible for most infections. Within a time frame of two months Vietnam registered around 1,000 new cases, of which more than 900 were community transmitted. However, as most patients were young and healthy, there were no new deaths (Le Huu Nhat Minh *et al.* 2021; Le Tuyet-Anh T. *et al*. 2021).

Generally, while Vietnam registered three infection waves between February 2020 and April 2021, globally the country's approach was discussed as a successful response to the pandemic by experts and in the media—especially given Vietnam's limited financial resources and close geographic proximity to China (Dabla-Norris *et al.* 2020; Tran *et al*. 2020).

With the emergence of new virus variants and waves of community infections, from April 27, 2021 case numbers started to rise rapidly, particularly in HCMC and

surrounding provinces (Le Thi Phuong 2020). This led to Vietnam's worst wave up to that point, with 19,063 deaths and around 770,000 infections by the end of September (Mathieu *et al.*, various years). The government imposed a lockdown from August to September 2021 in an effort to contain the outbreak, which led to economic difficulties.

Although vaccines became available in 2021, Vietnam faced supply issues due to a lack of government funds, an unequal global distribution with Western governments stockpiling most of the supply, and a societal distrust of Chinese-produced vaccines (Dao 2021).

However, with an increase in the vaccination rate by the end of 2021, when almost 80 percent of the population had received at least one dose, Vietnam ended its zero-Covid policy (Viet 2021).

Overall, by the end of 2021 a total of 1.7 million Vietnamese had been infected with Covid-19 and more than 32,000 people had died (Mathieu *et al.*, various years). However, on a global scale Vietnam's Covid-19 strategy can be perceived as having been comparatively successful due to its rapid and transparent approach in the early months (Le and Nicolaisen 2022).

Vietnam's Pandemic Communication Strategy

One of the major arguments found in the literature on Vietnam's response strategy focuses on the role of transparent and immediate communication by the authorities during the first year of the pandemic. Academics argue that transparent communication was responsible for broad social mobilization and increasing legitimacy for the Vietnamese government in this time frame. This corresponds with the academic literature on crisis communication. Deborah Glik (2007), for example, argues that the way people respond to hazards is determined not by the actual risk but by the perception of risk. Stephen Flusberg *et al.* (2018) explain the need for simple communication: when the amount of information becomes too complex, with daily changing regulations and rules, it can lead to resignation or numbness. Here, visual risk communication as seen in the use of propaganda posters and social posts can be understood as a means to reduce complexity.

Below, we will take a brief look at Vietnam's pandemic communication strategies as summarized in the relevant literature.

As mentioned above, Bayly (2020) pointed out the limited effectiveness of propaganda posters in public spaces in a study in Hanoi as reported by her interviewees. Rather, her study pointed toward a negotiation process where Hanoi residents selec-

tively engaged or disengaged with public messaging as their agency. Christophe Robert (2020) points toward a similar approach in his paper on the representation of Covid-19 in public spaces in Hanoi at the beginning of the pandemic. He also states that while propaganda posters were widely distributed, their effectiveness in influencing behavior might have been limited. He mentions instances of defiant behavior by residents, for example, ignoring mask mandates. He gives examples of how Covid regulations and lockdowns affected public spaces, for example, with lower traffic and the setting up of checkpoints. However, he also points out that in Vietnam often "the language and visualization of mobilization are prominent and prominently displayed, without the corresponding, actual mobilization" (Robert 2020, 7). Citizens in Vietnam often engage in tactical resistance in their media consumption and are critical of official messaging, because they are familiar with state tactics of obstruction and misinformation (Harms 2016, 109–110). This skepticism becomes increasingly relevant as social media has opened new arenas for negotiation that are often more difficult to censor (Pearson 2020).

Thus, looking at Covid-19 communication alone might not help in assessing the success or failure of Vietnam's Covid-19 response. However, it offers valuable insights regarding the underlying narratives used to frame the pandemic and, ultimately, state-society relations in Vietnam from a government perspective.

Nguyen Hong Kong and Ho Tung Manh (2020, 10) and Bui Trang (2020) mention how, from the beginning, the Covid-19 pandemic in Vietnam was framed by war metaphors—a "language of war" and historical events. As the pandemic became the new enemy, slogans like "Every citizen is a soldier" (Nguyen Hong Vinh 2020) and "So long as there is a single invader left in our country, we have to wipe it all out" (Giao 2020) reappeared. The Party-state located the pandemic response in a long tradition of the "war against imperialism" extending beyond the Vietnam-US War (Kirubakaran 2020; Nguyen Maya 2020; Truong 2020; Hartley *et al.* 2021, 159).

In communication research, opinions about the effectiveness of war metaphors differ. War metaphors provide a structural framework to communicate abstract and complex situations and convey emotions. Historical points of reference can create meaning for the population. This could increase the understanding of the pandemic and its far-reaching consequences. Embedding the pandemic in the national memory and the trauma of war gave weight to the necessity of a unified and swift reaction: every citizen was needed, had sacrifices to make, and had a role to play, as in wartime. Such framing establishes emotional continuity (Flusberg *et al.* 2018). However, Flusberg *et al.* (2018) argue that continuous framing in martial language can have adverse effects. The reduction of moral complexities and emotional weight stokes social conflicts. Due to the focus on the need for sacrifice and state control, people unwilling to make sacrifices or

accept state control are quickly singled out by the authorities. When a pandemic is understood as an existential crisis, self-righteous bullying and mobbing become acceptable (Flusberg *et al.* 2018).

As stated by Nguyen-Thu (2020, 2), the communication strategy of the Vietnamese state during the first year of the pandemic moved beyond the aim of social mobilization to increase government legitimacy with messages of hope, order, and control often set against Western failure. In particular, in the early months of the pandemic from March to May 2020, the official communication was characterized by transparency with the aim of signaling the severity of the crisis but also reassuring the public of the government's capacity to deal with it. The authorities shared the newest data, photos, and videos to fight rumors and uncertainties, which led to a high degree of engagement on social media. A study by Nguyen and Ho (2020) analyzing the level of transparency, amount of (daily) information, and wide range of communication channels used by the authorities in the first months of the pandemic from March to May 2020 confirms this effort to address and refute rumors and misinformation.

The increasing use of social and online media to communicate shows a general shift in Vietnamese politics toward embracing digital technology as a political tool. On February 8, 2020, for example, the Ministry of Health launched the Vietnam Health website. Less than one month after the first Covid-19 case was detected in Vietnam, on February 14, 2020, citizens were asked to download the new official mobile phone app Sức Khỏe Việt Nam (Vietnam Health) to access information regarding the pandemic. This app was followed by several other mobile applications: NCOVI, Bluezone, the Vietnam Health Declaration app, and Hanoi Smart City. While the apps served different functions, they were all used to convey information to the public and also to gather information for mitigating the spread of Covid-19. The information collected included individuals' travel history and health status, including Covid-19 symptoms.

Overall, the communication strategy included a highly diverse set of tactics—from loudspeakers and door-to-door warnings to neighborhood watches and social media engagement. Interestingly, as emphasized by Nguyen-Thu (2020), the official communication strategy combined the use of the old public speaker system—a relic of the Vietnam War, nowadays seen mostly as a community annoyance—with the widespread use of social media, particularly apps and Facebook. This made information accessible and available to everyone. As in the case of propaganda posters, new digital technologies were embedded in the conservative legacy of the Communist Party. This created a dichotomy between wanting to alert the public regarding the severity of the situation and the need for control. However, as Nguyen and Ho (2020) state, the use of public loudspeakers also allowed for better reach in more rural communities with less access

to digital technologies. Increasing the reach of state messaging thus also influenced the choice of communication channels. Numerous awareness campaigns (Nguyen and Ho 2020) also aimed to mobilize residents and reduce the level of disengagement described by Robert (2020) above. These campaigns included music challenges and cooperation, poster design competitions, and social media engagement.

Nguyen-Thu (2020) points to studies on digital networking (Phuong 2017), popular music (Hoang 2020), and popular television (Nguyen-Thu 2019) that show public spaces can serve as sites of contestation and negotiation with the authorities and allow for gray areas to address local grievances. This points toward the role of communication in negotiating citizenship in Vietnam.

Methodology

This section contains a visual analysis of the construction of cooperative citizenship in Covid-19 communication from state actors. This paper looks at different instances of public communication in the form of images and videos published and circulated by the Vietnamese government from the beginning of the pandemic until August 2020, with a geographic focus on the three largest cities: Hanoi, HCMC, and Đà Nẵng.

The focus will be on the visual and verbal framing of the pandemic in public communication materials from government sources. The paper follows a qualitative content analysis approach, building on existing research on the role of visual communication material in state-society relations, as proposed by researchers such as Bayly (2020) for Vietnam, Tom Walsh (2022) for the Middle East, and Joanna Sleigh *et al.* (2021) for social media.

To this end, we collected visual data on Covid-19 messages online, particularly from newspapers and government websites. This data was then separated into two categories: propaganda posters, for which we used photographic evidence that these posters were distributed in public spaces; and social media messaging, particularly music videos. For the music videos, we used videos distributed by the official YouTube channel of the Ministry of Health, as we concluded that the messaging in these videos would be closely aligned with the government's messaging strategy. We used number of views and likes as measuring sticks to focus on those videos with the broadest public appeal.

By comparing offline messaging (propaganda posters) with online messaging (videos), we aimed to address one problem with propaganda posters that has been raised in research on Vietnam. Bayly (2020) and Robert (2020) point to the passive

character of propaganda posters, which allows social actors to disengage or ignore the messaging. Consequently, propaganda posters to some degree represent the colonization of public spaces by state ideology. Conversely, social media messaging allows for a voluntary engagement with content as those watching music videos in the framework of the pandemic choose to engage with the topic.

By analyzing the visual content in combination with the text included in the two categories of data, we aimed to identify underlying categories of messaging that were employed to appeal to the public: (1) the female gaze, (2) patriotism, (3) social responsibility, (4) gratitude, and (5) simple messaging.

From this visual analysis of common tropes and narratives, the paper aims to reconstruct the government's perspective on citizenship in Vietnam, starting with this framework of cooperative citizenship. The aim is to better understand the underlying dimensions of the cooperative citizenship ideal.

Case Study: Direct State Messaging as Covid-19 Communication: Propaganda Posters in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and Đà Nẵng

As a starting point for the analysis of the framing of the Covid-19 pandemic in Vietnam, we will look at the most used propaganda posters displayed in public spaces in HCMC and Hanoi during the first stage of the pandemic in spring 2020. These images were displayed along major streets and alleyways, on the sides of trucks, and as smaller posters on school gates. They were sometimes single displays, and in one case they combined a large display of the relevant regulations in the common state design of white script on red ground. These propaganda posters represented the primary state messaging with typical socialist state iconography that pervades public spaces in everyday life in Vietnam. They presented a simplification but also a preserving way of communicating, connecting public spaces with private (Bayly 2020). Besides posters (as seen in Fig. 2a), state messaging was included also in numerous murals in urban public spaces and distributed in neighborhoods and directly to households at the ward level by local officials. However, the following analysis will focus only on the framing and narrative of posters (as seen in Fig. 2b) and not on their distribution.

The Female Gaze

The poster in Fig. 3a is dominated by the profile of a woman's face with a mask next to the text "COVID-19 pandemic prevention is to protect yourself, your family, and society" (Phòng, chống đại dịch Covid-19 là bảo vệ chính bạn gia đình và xã hội) on a red back-

a b

Fig. 2 Covid-19 Messaging Dominates Urban Public Spaces as Wall Murals and Propaganda Posters
Sources: (a) AFP and Asia News Network (2021); (b) VNA (2020a)

a b

Fig. 3 Masked Women and Covid-19 Messaging
Sources: (a) VNA (2020b); (b) VNA (2020a)

ground, with only the text and woman in white and light yellow. Red is commonly used in state propaganda and official public signs. It is linked to the state flag, the revolution, and the Communist Party and thus has a strong link to national identity and the state. The face of the woman is dominated by the mask and the eyes, which seem to look at and address those passing by. The picture of a woman with a mask is not new on propaganda posters. It was used pre-Covid on posters advising the use of face masks and body covers to protect against dust, fumes, and the sun while riding a motorbike. As stated by Robert (2020, 4), the poster employs performative speech, figurative images, and the lack of a subject. Thus, the woman in the poster "becomes a figure representing a segment of the population" (Robert 2020, 4), or even "the People."

The poster in Fig. 3b also displays a woman looking at passersby. However, the iconography differs in color and style. This poster displays the photo of a female medic in scrubs with a face mask and protective headgear above the text "Use a mask regularly and properly wash your hands to prevent the spread of COVID-19" (Sử dụng khẩu trang

thường xuyên rửa tay đúng cách để phòng chống để dịch Covid-19). The main color of the image is blue, with only the last part of the text in red. This blue coloring references the protective uniforms of medical workers and other workers in protective gear fighting Covid-19. The poster has a pedagogic image of handwashing, which was used also in previous public health campaigns by the government and international NGOs (Robert 2020, 4). Overall, the message of the poster relies on the friendly yet firm professional authority of the medical professional to advise the public.

Both posters in Fig. 3 play on the mental connection between caring (for a family and society) and the often-conceived role of women as caregivers. This might play into what Bayly (2020) describes as the "highly gendered nature of its imagery" in socialist iconography. It points toward a social responsibility not only to oneself but also to the family and society to follow preventive measures, thus creating a moral framework overseen by everyone in public. This is underlined by the direct stare of the women on the posters watching passersby, which is intensified because the rest of the women's faces is hidden behind the face masks, putting the focus on the eyes.

Patriotic Fight and Heroism

Many of the propaganda posters rely on patriotic messaging, which aims to create historical continuity with a link to the anti-imperialist and socialist struggles for independence.

Fig. 4a shows a small boy with a face mask washing his hands in front of a glove-wearing female medic in scrubs putting on a face mask, along with a person in protective gear (overall, glasses, and mask) working to disinfect public spaces. The background is dark red, with "Covid-19" repeatedly written on it. The message below (red letters on a white background) reads "Let's join hands to fight against Covid-19" (Chung sức đồng lòng chống dịch Covid-19).

Fig. 4b shows a group representing the Vietnamese people, including a soldier, a schoolchild, a worker, a female farmer, and an ethnic minority woman, all wearing masks. Above, a man in a suit stands over the assembled group, probably symbolizing the Vietnamese government. The text below states "Vietnamese people agree with the government to fight the epidemic" (Nhân dân Việt Nam đồng lòng chính phủ chống dịch). The background is red, with the yellow star from the Vietnamese flag and the socialist symbol of the hammer and sickle in the top left corner. On the right, a light blue shield with a cross protects the group from the attacking coronavirus.

In the poster in Fig. 5a, designed by the artist Luu Yen The (Humphrey 2020), the central figure is a traditionally clad nurse (with headgear and a white dress) advising on proper Covid-19 prevention. This poster could also be seen as a mural in HCMC

a b

Fig. 4 Patriotic Messaging and War Rhetoric in Covid-19 Communication
Sources: (a) Ebbigenhausen (2020); (b) Le (2020)

a b

Fig. 5 The Role of Health-care Workers as National Heroes
Sources: (a) Communist Party of Vietnam Online Newspaper (2020); (b) Trung tâm Thông tin Triển lãm Thành phố HCM (2020)

in 2020. The text reads "Wear a mask regularly and properly to effectively prevent and control the Covid-19 epidemic" (đeo khẩu trang thường xuyên và đúng cách để phòng, chống dịch covid 19 có hiệu quả). In the front, a nurse with long hair holds a blue mask, while in the red background are a man and a woman wearing masks. In smaller letters on top, the poster reads "Fighting the epidemic is like fighting against the enemy" (Chống dịch như chống giặc).

The poster in Fig. 5b was part of a global health-care sector campaign in 2020. The campaign used photos of health-care workers under the slogan "We go to work for you; please stay home for us" to motivate people to shelter in place. The example here shows a tired-looking health-care professional with angel wings in scrubs, mask, and headgear looking over a group of people framed by a medical cross with red and white outlines and the same slogan. The cross seemingly provides a protective shield against

the coronavirus displayed at the bottom of the poster. The poster creates a narrative of heroism, sacrifice, and a national fight against an external threat.

In all four posters (Figs. 4, 5), the community of the Vietnamese nation is asked to fight the pandemic. As the poster in Fig. 4b shows, this community is inclusive with regard to ethnicity, gender, and social class. The posters define the fight as washing hands, wearing masks, and staying home. Nationalist undertones can be found in all four posters, including the common use of nationalist symbols like the flag, the color red, and the messaging in the slogans. In this regard the poster in Fig. 4b is the most obvious, directly referencing unity with the government and the socialist symbol of the hammer and sickle. The poster in Fig. 5a combines the red with a slogan that directly references the coronavirus as the enemy and compares the fight against the pandemic with a war, thus falling back on the use of war rhetoric also used in some public speeches from the government in early 2020. In contrast, the poster in Fig. 5b more directly points toward the sacrifice of the fight and also connects Vietnam to the international community in its fight.

Overall, the messaging underscores the conclusions of Nguyen-Thu (2020), who points toward the use of wartime metaphors in pandemic communication as a means to highlight the severity of the situation but also the need for solidarity, social responsibility, and national unity. With the aim of increasing state legitimacy, besides increased transparency, the narrative framing of the pandemic becomes relevant.

Taking Care, Taking Responsibility

The posters in Fig. 6 center on the provision of advice with iconography embedded in storytelling. Overall, the style is reminiscent of more classic propaganda iconography from the 1950s and 1960s.

In the poster in Fig. 6a, a man wearing a brown shirt and a face mask points to his chest while consulting a traditionally dressed female nurse with a face mask, white dress, and headgear. The top of the poster has a blue background with a red box in the top middle reading "Join hands to prevent and fight the Covid-19 pandemic" (Chung tay phòng, chống đại dịch Covid-19) in white block letters. The bottom half is dominated by white, with the outline of the nurse's dress and the text "Fever, cough, difficulty breathing" (Sốt, ho, khó thở) in red and a little smaller in brown "Go to the nearest medical facility immediately for advice, medical examination and treatment" (Đến ngay cơ sở y tế gần nhất để được tư vấn, thăm khám chữa bệnh). In the second poster of this set (Fig. 6b), a man with a face mask in a green shirt holds a brochure on preventive measures against Covid-19. In the background, two doctors/nurses with more traditional scrubs and face masks walk in front of the photo of a quarantine area. On top,

Fig. 6 Health-care and Preventive Measures against Covid-19

Sources: (a, b) Trung tâm Thông tin Triển lãm Thành phố HCM (2020); (c) Công an Nhân dân Online (2020)

the text states "When suspected of being infected with Covid-19, it is necessary to immediately isolate and notify the local health authority" (Khi nghi nhiễm Covid-19 cần thực hiện cách ly ngay đồng thời thông báo cho cơ quan y tế địa phương).

In the poster in Fig. 6c, an ethnic Thái woman kneels in front of a little girl in a school uniform and helps her to put on a face mask, next to a small stool with a sun hat and an old-school leather schoolbag. Except for the red word "Covid-19," the colorful head covering of the Thái woman, the blue mask, and the red neckcloth of the school uniform, the poster is in black and white. At the top, there is again the picture of handwashing practices in white on a dark background. The poster states, "The whole population actively implements measures to prevent and control the epidemic" (Toàn dân chủ động thực hiện các biện pháp phòng, chống dịch); and at the bottom is the text "Wear a mask, wash your hands with soap to prevent the epidemic" (đeo khẩu trang, rửa tay bằng xà phòng để phòng chống dịch).

The posters in Fig. 6 link the narrative of a united, national fight against the pandemic to a set of concrete instructions, particularly the need for medical help and quarantining when infected. As before, the choice of slogans points toward martial rhetoric that looks for broad mobilization against the pandemic. Again, the pandemic is framed as an external threat to the nation.

In the first two posters (Figs. 6a, 6b), the focus is on medical professionals as providers of support and information. The third poster (Fig. 6c) includes the mother as a familial caregiver in a similar role, responsible for her family following the rules and

implementing preventive measures. Using the image of a woman from an ethnic minority underlines the sense of national unity, urgency, and a "community of fate" (Baehr 2005) fighting together, which includes every family and person regardless of socio-economic background. Overall, taking care of oneself and one's family and following instructions are depicted as a national responsibility and thus gain a moral dimension.

Finally, the iconography of medical personnel is found in several images on Covid-19 messaging. However, in other images the medical professional is mostly seen in modern blue scrubs. In Fig. 6a the nurse and man seem to be placed in a less modern context, providing iconographic continuity to the past and creating a sense of nostalgia and timelessness.

Simple Messaging

A final grouping of propaganda posters (Fig. 7) combines a slogan with primary colors (as did most other posters) and a simple graphic into a very basic corporate design style. The most prominent poster, which was displayed on streets in Hanoi and HCMC, shows a pair of black lungs infected by the coronavirus on a white background. Against the black background on top, the white text reads "Let's prevent it together" (hãy cùng nhau ngăn chặn) above the word "Covid-19" in large red letters with a symbolic coronavirus as "O." Below, the poster states "The dangers of a global epidemic" (Hiểm họa của dịch bệnh toàn cầu) with the last two words also in red. The poster creates a sense of threat, imminence, and uncertainty. From this sense of threat, the poster calls for unity in fighting the pandemic. It also points toward the global nature of the threat. The message of a global threat is conveyed also in the second poster. The center of

Fig. 7 Simple Information Posters on Covid-19
Source: Trung tâm Thông tin Triển lãm Thành phố HCM (2020)

a b c

Fig. 8 Preventive Information against Covid-19
Sources: (a, b) Trung tâm Thông tin Triển lãm Thành phố HCM (2020); (c) Huyện (2021)

the poster shows a globe next to some stylized coronaviruses on a sickly yellow background. The globe is used to spell the word "SOS." The slogan on the poster states "All people join hands to prevent the global threat of Covid-19 pandemic" (Toàn dân chung tay ngăn chặn đại dịch Covid-19 hiểm họa toàn cầu), with the first half of the words in red. In both posters, the health risk is also prominently displayed. Contrary to the menacing tone of the first two posters, the third poster combines green and white and focuses on a message of hope—"For a world without Covid-19 – Repel Covid-19" (Vì một thế giới không có Covid-19 – đẩy lùi Covid-19)—with a pair of scissors cutting the word "Covid-19" from a green ribbon in the center of the poster below the silhouette of a family in front of a stylized globe.

Simplified messaging, simple, abstract graphics, and primary colors, particularly red, were used also in some of the informative posters and communication materials (Fig. 8) distributed in neighborhoods, sometimes directly to households. These included posters on handwashing, social distancing—"Do not gather in large numbers to avoid the risk of infection" (Không tụ tập đông người để tránh nguy cơ lây nhiễm)—and the "5K" rules: (1) face mask (khẩu trang), (2) disinfection (khử khuẩn), (3) not gathering in groups (không tụ tập), (4) medical checkup (khám bảo y tế), and (5) distancing (khoảng cách). The 5K poster in Fig. 8c exemplifies a whole set of similar posters, which often contained additional text to explain the relevant rules depending on location and local needs.

Social Engagement: Poster Design Competition, Đà Nẵng, August 2020

As stated by Robert (2020), most propaganda posters in Vietnam dominate public spaces visually, but due to their omnipresence they often become invisible. Engagement or disengagement becomes a choice, as shown by research by Bayly (2020) for Hanoi. Propaganda posters thus become a tool to visually colonize public spaces by reducing the space for alternative messages and visual materiality.

Some of the posters in Fig. 9 came from artist initiatives (see, for example, Humphrey 2020). However, beyond the visual colonization of public spaces and the visual framing of the pandemic, local authorities also aimed to engage the public more directly in the framing process in order to improve compliance and understanding, often in the form of competitions organized by companies—such as the Biti's Hunter shoe design competition (Biti's Hunter 2020)—local authorities, newspapers, and schools (Nguyen and Ho 2020). Below, we will discuss some of the posters created in a local poster design competition during the outbreak in Đà Nẵng in August 2020 (Khánh 2020; Xuân 2020). The competition, titled "Join Hands to Repel Covid-19," was organized by An Khe ward (Thanh Khe District) and BTEC FPT International College in the *Bao Đà Nẵng* newspaper in mid-August and on the home page of the City of Đà Nẵng authorities: "Every citizen is a soldier, each picture and photo is a powerful spiritual weapon in the 'great war' against the Covid-19 epidemic. Let's create beautiful and meaningful works with the Vietnamese people to fight against Covid"[1] (Khánh 2020).

Visual materials are used as tools for mobilization, to engage the public, and posters were an important part of the fight against Covid-19. Compared with official propaganda posters, the posters from the competition, which also included images created by children, were less direct in their messaging and choice of color and motive. However, as seen in the selection of posters in Fig. 9, the majority depict health-care and emergency workers as well as local landmarks, particularly the Dragon Bridge. One image depicts the skyline of Đà Nẵng instead, with two skyscrapers wearing masks in front of a clear morning sky, providing a picture of hope. Another poster uses a stylized version of six doctors forming a star in front of the Dragon Bridge and a Vietnamese flag. The image of health-care workers as heroes, protectors, and caretakers is seen in numerous posters. In one, a crying female doctor is given a crown. In another, a female doctor painted in soft aquarelle colors carries a golden baby dragon together with the city of Đà Nẵng. In two other posters, doctors employ syringes as weapons against the

1) Mỗi người dân là một chiến sĩ, mỗi bức tranh, ảnh là một vũ khí tinh thần mang đầy sức mạnh trong cuộc "đại chiến" chống dịch Covid-19. Hãy tạo ra những tác phẩm đẹp và ý nghĩa cùng dân tộc Việt Nam chung tay đánh bay Covid.

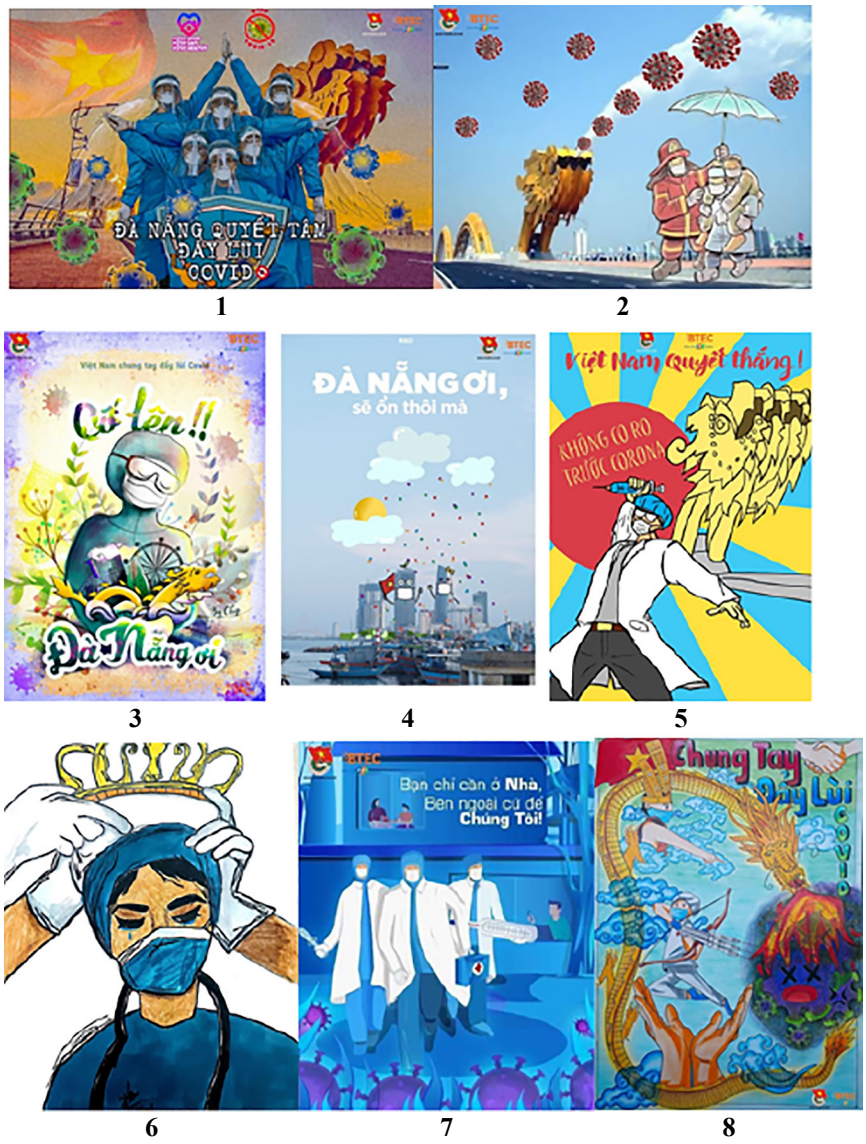


Fig. 9 Images from the Đà Nẵng Poster Design Competition, August 2020
Sources: Pictures 2, 6–8, Khánh (2020); pictures 1, 3–5, Xuân (2020)

attacking virus. One of the posters references the founding mythology of Vietnam. Overall, the local identity is more prominent than the national. Common motives beyond locality are the heroism of emergency and health-care workers along with their sacrifice, fighting, and caring as well as a sense of local solidarity and comfort in local resilience rooted in personal experience. From this, the call to fight together can gain some

meaning. This provides a more personal framing of the pandemic compared with official posters.

Case Study: Indirect Messaging and Mobilization: (Music) Videos and Social Media Campaigns

As part of its official communication strategy, the Vietnamese Ministry of Health (MoH) regularly publishes videos on its official YouTube channel and has cooperated with artists in producing songs related to the pandemic. Under the playlist "Activities to respond to the COVID-19 epidemic" (Các hoạt động hưởng ứng phòng chống dịch Covid-19) there were a total of 48 videos uploaded as of June 12, 2022.

In order to demonstrate the important role played by music videos in Vietnam's Covid-19 response, the case of one of the first corona-related songs going viral will be briefly outlined here. On March 31, 2020, a music video titled "Jealous Coronavirus" (Ghen Cô Vy) was uploaded to the MoH YouTube channel. The song was produced by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health in cooperation with the singer Khắc Hưng (Saigoneer 2020). The video combines a cartoon-like animation style and catchy music with an educational function. The lyrics and animations explain how to wash one's hands properly, stress the importance of wearing a mask, and urge people to avoid crowded places. The original video was uploaded to YouTube on February 23, 2020 on the official channel of the singer Min (Min Official 2020) and was shared by global media outlets such as *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* on HBO, becoming an instant hit globally. It has since inspired a viral TikTok dance trend in Vietnam (La *et al.* 2020, 12–14; *LastWeek Tonight* 2020). As of July 2022, the video had been watched more than 110 million times. Interestingly, however, the views of the song on the official MoH channel were fewer than 10,000 as of July 2022.

While the song's popularity abroad can be credited to the catchy soundtrack and lighthearted approach to explaining pandemic measures, its popularity in Vietnam can be explained by the song's reference to the Vietnamese community and its employment of nationalistic narratives. As seen in the discussions on the posters above, these are common themes and topics in the government's communication strategy. One concrete example from the "Jealous Coronavirus" song is the reference to China. Following the song's global success, new versions of it were uploaded to the official MoH YouTube channel. The first one was an English-language version on April 24, 2020 (Vietnam, Bộ Y tế 2020d). In the early versions of the song, the lyrics refer to the virus as originating from Wuhan: "My hometown is Wuhan" (Quê của em ở Vũ Hán). On March 24, 2020, a

cover of the song in the Chinese language with Vietnamese subtitles was published on a private channel, which also used the line "It comes from Wuhan" (*Ta shi laizi Wuhan* 它是来自武汉) (Chinese Home 2020). While the first outbreak was detected in Wuhan, this focus on China played on existing anti-Chinese sentiments and anti-China nationalism in Vietnamese society (Vu 2014). On May 28, 2020, the MoH uploaded versions of the song with subtitles in several ethnic minority languages of Vietnam (Tày, Thái, Cao Lan, Dao, H'mông, and Sán Chỉ) as well as sign language. In these versions, the lyrics were changed to say "Over the past few days, I have created many waves" (Bao ngày qua, em tạo ra bao sóng gió).

Several music videos uploaded during the early waves of the pandemic in Vietnam, between February and late August 2020, are now analyzed with regard to their style and central message. Based on this analysis, these videos can be categorized into (1) videos showing gratitude, for example, to health sector workers or government institutions, such as the MoH; (2) videos referencing patriotism and using war rhetoric to call on people to fight the virus; and (3) videos urging the public to cooperate and adhere to pandemic measures as well as educating them regarding proper conduct.

Gratitude

On April 16, 2020, the MoH uploaded a music video titled "Thank You" (Vietnam, Bộ Y tế 2020b). The video shows famous Vietnamese singers giving thanks to health-care professionals. The video begins with a compilation of clips from Vietnamese news shows, with images from hospitals, WHO press conferences, and test centers. They are shown in quick succession, accompanied by driving music, creating a dramatic effect and a serious, almost alarming atmosphere (Fig. 10).

The actual song begins with a soft piano tune in the background with clips of singers and musicians sharing sentiments of gratitude toward medical personnel for their

Fig. 10 MV "Thank you: Những chiến binh thầm lặng" do Bộ Y tế phối hợp với Gala nhạc Việt thực hiện ("Thank you: Silent warriors" performed by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the Vietnamese Music Gala)

Source: Vietnam, Bộ Y tế (2020b)

Fig. 11 MV "Thank you: Những chiến binh thầm lặng" do Bộ Y tế phối hợp với Gala nhạc Việt thực hiện ("Thank you: Silent warriors" performed by the MoH in collaboration with the Vietnamese Music Gala)

Source: Vietnam, Bộ Y tế (2020b)

"sacrifices" (Fig. 11). The lyrics describe these sacrifices with lines such as "deep lines under the cheeks" (từng vệt hằn sâu dưới má) and "swollen fingers" (những ngón tay đang sưng phồng). The song also refers to blue hazmat suits as "fragile blue armor" (chiếc áo giáp mong manh màu xanh), which is in line with the war rhetoric found in other pandemic songs and on propaganda posters.

Two days later, the MoH uploaded the video "Thank You to My/Our Ministry of Health" (Cảm ơn Bộ Y tế mình) by the YouTuber Trang Hý (Vietnam, Bộ Y tế 2020c). According to the video description, the song is a funny cover of the song "This Spring Day Is Full of Prosperity" (Ngày xuân long phụng xum vầy), with lyrics adapted to the pandemic. The song is about giving thanks to the MoH, with lines such as "Thank you to my/our Ministry of Health for always doing its best and making sacrifices to save us" (Cám ơn bộ y tế mình đã luôn hết mình và cố gắng hy sinh để cứu tụi em). The singing voice has been digitally altered to be higher pitched and sped up, resulting in a voice effect similar to cartoon characters that seems childlike and underlines the entertaining function of the song. The lyrics also include comedic lines, such as "[I am] so beautiful but [I] have to stay at home because [I am] scared of corona" (đẹp xinh thế này mà phải ở trong nhà vì sợ cố rồ na). Furthermore, the song encourages national solidarity, as demonstrated by the line "The whole country unites to fight the monster together" (Cả nước đồng lòng cùng chống con quái vật). The music video is animated and simplistic, with black-and-white cartoon drawings of the coronavirus, health workers, and ordinary Vietnamese citizens. The drawings are humorous, with the virus depicted wearing sunglasses and carrying a suitcase with the word "Wuhan" on it (time stamp 00:20), again playing on anti-China nationalism (Fig. 12).

The combination of a humorous and childlike messaging style with a political message demonstrates the creativity and adaptability of the Vietnamese authorities in communicating with the public. The efforts in creating music videos that resonate

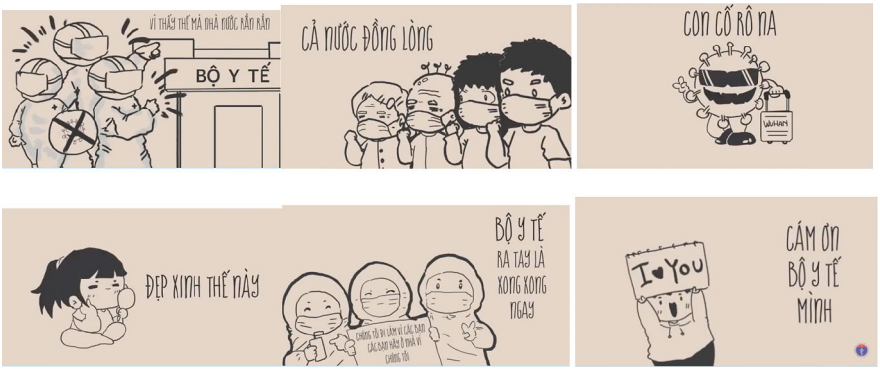


Fig. 12 Cảm ơn Bộ Y tế mình – Trang Hý (Thank you to my/our Ministry of Health – Trang Hý) Source: Vietnam, Bộ Y tế (2020c)

especially with a young population show the government's view of public cooperation as important for a successful pandemic response and its recognition of the importance of communication for mobilizing public support. By involving famous singers and public figures, the MoH increased the likelihood of a favorable public response to the videos and the general Covid-19 response. The important role of public opinion in state legitimacy in the Vietnamese context has been described by Marie Gibert and Juliette Segard (2015) as "negotiated authoritarianism." By creating and sharing videos showing gratitude to health workers and government institutions, the MoH aimed to demonstrate the government's essential role in combating the pandemic and protecting Vietnamese citizens. The central message was that the government was fulfilling its obligations toward its citizens, which links back to the idea of "cooperative citizenship" (Le and Nicolaisen 2021). This message was supported by the images and lyrics referring to the emotional and physical sacrifices made by health sector workers, which may be interpreted as representing both the state's efforts as well as sacrifices on an individual level.

Patriotic Fight and Heroism

Similar to the notion of sacrifice, the state also invoked nationalist and historical narratives of patriotism and heroism. One example was the song "Be Confident, Vietnam" (Vững tin Việt Nam), sung by Phạm Minh Thành and Hà Lê, which was uploaded on August 24, 2020 (Vietnam, Bộ Y tế 2020e). According to the video description, this is the theme song of the communication campaign "Confidence in Victory" (Niềm tin chiến thắng). This campaign was launched in early August 2020 by the MoH in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme and aimed to encourage all

Fig. 13 "Vững tin Việt Nam" (Be confident, Vietnam)
Source: Vietnam, Bộ Y tế (2020e)

members of Vietnamese society to support the government's pandemic response (VNNews 2020a). The video was released on several media channels, such as Facebook, TikTok, and Spotify. The description encourages people to join hands in this "period of 'resistance' against this epidemic" (giai đoạn "kháng chiến" chống dịch này). Minister of Health Nguyễn Thanh Long was quoted in a newspaper article related to the campaign saying, "Every citizen, be a soldier on the pandemic prevention and control front. Unite, together we will conquer this plague" (VNNews 2020a), which again reinforces the image of Vietnamese citizens as soldiers and the pandemic as a war.

The music video shows scenes of daily life during the pandemic in Vietnam, such as a young girl going to school and people going about their daily activities wearing masks (Fig. 13). It uses these everyday scenes to demonstrate regulations, such as keeping a distance of two meters from others when standing in line or greeting one another without shaking hands. Beyond that, it also shows acts of kindness between community members. The video has a story arc related to a nurse and her father. In the beginning, the father is shown attempting to reach his daughter, who is busy working at the hospital. He is seen crossing off on a calendar the days he has not been able to see her. The video ends with the father and daughter reuniting at home. The atmosphere of the video is lighthearted, with a "youthful and modern melody" (VNS 2020) and people smiling and dancing throughout. The video also stars local celebrities, such as the football player Bùi Tiến Dũng. Like the videos discussed above, this song combines a lighthearted atmosphere with references to public solidarity, educational aspects, and public figures to create a motivational message.

References in the video to Vietnamese national identity are made by showing images of the Hanoi Ceramic Mosaic Mural, which, among other things, depicts historical events and legends (Mosaic Marble 2018). For example, there is an image of two soldiers with the Vietnamese flag in the background (time stamp 2:09) and the lettering "Quyet Thang," meaning "to set one's mind on victory" or "to be determined to win" (time stamp

Fig. 14 "Vững tin Việt Nam" (Be confident, Vietnam)
Source: Vietnam, Bộ Y tế (2020e)

2:11) (Fig. 14). These images link back to previous anti-imperial wars against France and the United States and are similar to the war rhetoric and images used on propaganda posters. The lyrics include references to solidarity (đoàn kết) and the inclusion of all citizens in the government's pandemic response with the line "No one will be left behind" (sẽ chẳng để ai, bỏ lại phía sau). The country's history is also referenced, focusing on the nation's resilience in the line "With more than 4,000 years of history, the descendants of Lac Hong are still here" (Hơn 4000 năm lịch sử, con cháu Lạc Hồng vẫn còn đây). War rhetoric in the lyrics includes mention of the "decisive victory of our army" (quyết chiến quyết thắng của quân ta) and the line "singing over the sound of bombs" (tiếng hát át tiếng bom). By invoking Vietnamese history and previous struggles and framing the pandemic as a war, the song's creators aimed to mobilize Vietnamese citizens to participate in the government's Covid-19 response. Comparing current struggles to the sacrifices made by soldiers during war also put lockdown and quarantine measures into perspective.

Taking Care, Taking Responsibility

Beyond demonstrating the sacrifices made by the government and mobilizing the public through war rhetoric, the MoH also references a "morality of caring." Caring in this context means the government taking care of its citizens, especially infected patients, and the state fulfilling its role as an educator, explaining to the public how they can protect themselves from the virus. On April 13, 2020, the MoH uploaded a song titled "Goodbye Covid" (Tiễn Covid), sung by Lê Thiện Hiếu (Vietnam, Bộ Y tế 2020a). The lyrics are predominantly educational, reminding people that "Masks are needed every day" (khẩu trang là thứ cần có mỗi ngày) and asking them to "always wash hands to avoid spreading [the virus]" (luôn rửa tay để tránh cô lây lan). Furthermore, the song calls on citizens to support the government's response: "do not loiter [around with large groups of people]" (đừng la cà) and "please sit still" (xin hãy ngồi yên), meaning

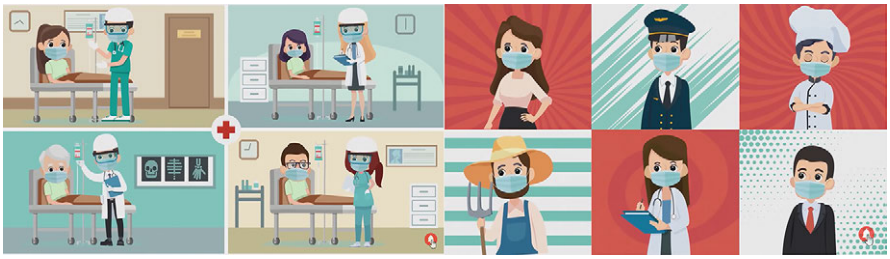


Fig. 15 "Tiễn Covid" (Goodbye Covid)
Source: Vietnam, Bộ Y tế (2020a)

Fig. 16 "Tiễn Covid" (Goodbye Covid)
Source: Vietnam, Bộ Y tế (2020a)

stay at home. The song is an easygoing pop song with some reggae elements and a catchy melody. The video style is animated and colorful. The images closely follow the song lyrics, showing different members of society wearing masks and health workers examining patients. The video portrays regular Vietnamese citizens from all strata of society as well as various workers involved in the pandemic efforts, such as soldiers and doctors. In this way, the video creators appeal to all sections of society, which helps to foster a sense of solidarity, inclusion, and individual responsibility in the community.

The video references popular shared images of corona patients being handed a bouquet of flowers after being released from hospital (SGGP 2020) (time stamp 2:58–3:03) (Fig. 15). This image is part of the story arc of the video, which shows people meeting each other on the streets, getting infected, visiting the doctor, and then recovering from the illness. The video storyline is educational and easy to understand. It portrays the comprehensive and initially successful government response to the virus. Thus, the video aims to create a positive public perception of the government and strengthen its legitimacy as well as public compliance. The images and tone of the video provide viewers with hope and motivation while simultaneously demonstrating that there is a real risk of community infection if regulations are ignored.

The video also references the MoH's comprehensive information strategy. It shows images of cell phone messages being sent out to the public. The lyrics include the following line: "The Ministry of Health reminds everyone via media channels, does not miss anyone" (Bộ Y Tế, báo đài nhắc nhở không bỏ sót ai)—that is, it aims to reach everyone. This narrative again portrays the Vietnamese government as responsible, going above and beyond to keep the public informed and take care of its citizens. The video's final image shows the then president of Vietnam, Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, being cheered on by supporters waving the Vietnamese flag (Fig. 16).

Social Engagement: Local Artists Spreading the Message

In line with the argument on "cooperative citizenship," Vietnamese public figures embraced and adopted the state's message of sacrifice and nationalistic narrative. This is evident from the large number of pandemic songs produced by local artists echoing the state's sentiments and using similar language and imagery. One of the first of these songs was released on February 2, 2020, at a time when there were only 16 Covid-19 infections in the entire country. Although the song had a limited reach, with under 8,000 views on YouTube, its early publication shows the seriousness and urgency with which the Vietnamese government viewed the new Covid-19 virus. The song is called "Eyes of nCoV" (Đôi mắt nCoV) and is performed by the singer Sa Huỳnh (Sa Huỳnh Nhạc Sĩ Official 2020). The song's main message is the sacrifices made by health-care professionals and the toll their work takes on their bodies and lives, as demonstrated by images of wrinkled hands and hair loss in the music video. Health professionals wearing full protective gear are shown working in the hospital, walking beside patients lying in gurneys, or resting on hospital floors. The video mixes black and white with color images. The tempo of the singing increases throughout the video, creating an urgent and passionate feel. The lyrics describe the workers' sacrifice: "day and night curing fellow human beings" (ngày đêm cứu chữa cho đồng loại), "they have put on a shirt of sacrifice" (khoác lên trên mình tấm áo hy sinh), "red eyes and no time to lament" (những đôi mắt đỏ au và không kịp thời gian để thở than). The song also uses war language, such as "front line" (nơi tuyến đầu) to refer to hospitals and "hands still save a world of gunpowder smell" (những bàn tay vẫn cứu lấy một thế giới của mùi thuốc súng). Another early song was "Wuhan Pandemic" (Đại dịch Vũ Hán), released by the musician Nguyễn Duy Hùng on January 31, 2020 (Nguyễn Duy Hùng 12h Official 2020). Although this song reached an even smaller audience, with under 400 views, the title shows the early perception of the Covid-19 virus as a "Chinese virus," similar to later

discourses in the West (Bushman 2022).

A more popular early song was "Fighting Corona" (Đánh Giặc Corona), which was released on February 17, 2020 and viewed more than 16,000 times (Trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội 2020). Similar to later songs, the lyrics combine educational messages, such as "remember we wear the mask for the sake of our safety" (nhớ khẩu trang ta mang vì lợi ích ta an toàn), with references to national solidarity, such as "unite all our people, from young to old" (Đoàn kết toàn dân ta, từ trẻ đến người già). A search on various online music sharing platforms shows other songs from early 2020 on the topic of Covid-19, including "Why Should the Children of the Fairy and the Dragon Be Scared of Corona" (Cháu Con Tiên Rồng Ngại Gì Corona) (Yến Tatoo Official 2020) and "Don't Fall in Love with Cô Vy" (Đừng Yêu Nhầm Cô Vy) (Đỗ 2020). Both songs promote health measures like handwashing and social distancing. They also promote the need for public sacrifice. The first song, from April 2020, uses mythical and historical references and a more martial language with nationalist and war metaphors. The second song depicts some of the experiences of living with the containment measures.

Beyond the production of pandemic songs by local artists, content producers on social media engaged with the government's social media campaigns, such as the TikTok campaign #onhavanvui (#happyathome). During the campaign, started by the MoH in March 2020, users were invited to post videos of different activities being done at home; the intention was to promote social distancing measures (VNNews 2020b). The online space allowed a more fun and relaxed form of communication on social media in comparison with the martial rhetoric described above.

Discussion

As mentioned above, state communication in Vietnam is challenging to assess due to a continuous choice between engagement and ignoring on the part of the public. Due to the omnipresence of propaganda posters, public engagement with these and their messaging is questionable (Bayly 2020; Robert 2020, 4).

As seen with the posters above, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic many posters employ similar styles, colors, symbols, and messages. They become part of the state representation in public spaces without being able to dominate the spaces. However, they are still part of the state narrative on the relationship between state and society. This becomes even more obvious when compared with the messaging in social media content as we look at the example of music videos propagated by the state authorities. Here, citizens voluntarily engage with content, pushing streaming and like/

dislike numbers.

Comparing both mediums of communication, it becomes clear that the focus of the messaging follows similar motives and narratives. Posters in public spaces and online videos frame the pandemic in similar narratives to support a similar aim.

Overall, three major narratives can be identified from our datasets: (1) patriotism and historical references, (2) morality and solidarity, and (3) the use of scientific and factual framing regarding containment and preventive measures for public health.

Generally, all communication material has at least some simplified messaging on public health measures, particularly handwashing, mask wearing, and social distancing. However, these scientific health messages are embedded in a normative and patriotic framing. Thus, while both online and offline communication aim primarily to distribute information on preventive measures and increase awareness of the risk of Covid-19 infections, both forms of communication also aim to reframe state-society relations and the role of citizens during the pandemic.

Citizenship in the Framework of Patriotism

State symbols like the Vietnamese flag, its star, and its red color are predominantly used in communication material offline and online. Often slogans reference previous wars or use wartime rhetoric such as "fight," "soldiers," and "sacrifice." Following Nguyen-Thu's (2020) argument, the data from this paper support a clear focus of the propaganda on social responsibility and community and an underlying sense of patriotism. The referencing of heroism combined with war rhetoric has strong cultural and historical roots in a country only two generations removed from the last war ending in 1979. From this perspective, cooperative citizenship is rooted in the patriotic idealization of Vietnam and the need to fight for the country's future. This patriotic perspective is present also in the heroization of health-care workers seen in some of the visual material. The heroic framing depicts the sacrifice of health-care workers as a social ideal while, on the other hand, highlighting their fighting spirit as the foremost protectors of the nation, demanding gratitude.

Citizenship as a Normative Framework

Besides the patriotic narrative, a normative framework is also used to frame the pandemic. This is closely linked to the heroic role of health-care workers and their perceived sacrifice. In this context, compliance with public health measures is no longer defined as a logical decision but as a moral obligation enforced by public pressure, as represented by the female gaze in some of the posters discussed above. Social responsibility and solidarity are central concepts implied in the messaging. Going to the doctor and wash-

ing hands become moral obligations when juxtaposed with the suffering and sacrifice of those fighting at the front line, that is, health-care workers. Consequently, those not complying become enemies, hindering the fight against the pandemic and being rendered outside of the community of fate consisting of the Vietnamese state and its citizens. The normative framework, which evokes a moral dimension, thus works as a unifying element. However, while represented in posters, only in the social media sphere can it be reproduced by citizens and thus be enforced.

Morality of Caring and Cooperative Citizenship

In the context of the pandemic, the negotiation of citizenship as state-society relations rooted in rights and obligations is framed, on the one hand, in terms of patriotic heroism and a collective fight and, on the other, as a moral obligation rooted in sacrifice, social responsibility, and solidarity. Both narratives can be summarized into the idealization of a cooperative citizenship that puts social pressure on the community to comply or care for the common good—here, public health. This also pits the individual against the community: Whereas the individual might resist or ignore the messaging on the pandemic, the collective, symbolized in the female gaze in the posters above, reproduces and enforces the normative and patriotic construction of citizenship. From this, a morality of caring emerges, which moves citizenship from a political and social framework defining state-society negotiations into a mythical realm that demands individual and collective sacrifice, compliance, and responsibility in the name of the nation.

However, as Nguyen-Thu (2020) argues, the choice to follow Covid-19 regulations, including mask wearing, handwashing, social distancing, and quarantines, is also a personal and collective choice toward the "common good." The protection of the community is thus not only a top-down demand but a bottom-up choice to protect one's community and neighborhood. This can be seen in the broad engagement in poster competitions and online engagement as well as neighborhood support networks. Thus, at least at the beginning of the pandemic, individual responsibility toward the community, a sense of solidarity, and moral obligation were reproduced not only in state communication but also in social interactions and the individual framing of the pandemic. The idea of cooperative citizenship is thus no longer a top-down concept but a bottom-up demand toward the state to address the public health crisis.

Conclusion

The visual narratives in the Vietnamese government's communication strategy are aimed

at mobilizing all citizens to adhere to Covid-19 regulations. They are also a tool to gain political trust and legitimacy. The communication strategy is embedded in an idealized vision of cooperative citizenship based on a moral obligation toward the Vietnamese nation. The focus is on morality of caring, which is represented in all state communication to teach what is understood as morally correct behavior. However, over the course of the pandemic, new conflicts on participation and transparency, as well as questions of political competence, emerged. Nguyen-Thu (2020) rightly points toward a lack of democratic process and states that the emerging transparency in public health communication at the beginning of the pandemic was neither sustainable nor translated into other aspects of the political discourse. While social engagement, particularly in social media communication, is encouraged, the overall communication strategy is still dominated by a top-down approach. The combination of morality and patriotism dominates the framing, creating a sense of collective responsibility but also social pressure and exclusion for those seen as not complying. The ideal of cooperative citizenship is embedded in a morality of caring which defines state-society relations in the context of the pandemic as a community of fate that aims to reduce space for pushback and increase government legitimacy. However, some evidence from 2021, with increasing infection and death cases in 2021 and a decrease in transparency, points toward a certain mistrust concerning the state's capacity to deal with the crisis and a reduced legitimacy. Instead, local and private networks of support address rising difficulties, contesting the notion of cooperative citizenship while transferring the morality of caring from a state-centered narrative toward a social discourse.

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Appropriating State Techniques for Effective Rituals: Funerals of the Raglai in Contemporary Vietnam

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Since the relaxation of religious regulations in Vietnam in the 1990s, an increasing number of studies have examined the resurgence of religious practices with the revival of traditions and economic development. Some studies have shown that people accept the authority of the state in the religious realm, suggesting that such acceptance is intended to restore people's religious legitimacy. However, they tend to limit their understanding of legitimacy to the context of the state order. In contrast, this article demonstrates how the state serves as a source of knowledge to be appropriated in reforming religious practices that reflect and reconstruct local values.

Based on ethnographic research, this article examines the impact of state policies on the Raglai people's funerary rituals in upland South-Central Vietnam, which are integral to their cosmology and customs (known as *adat*). These rituals have undergone modifications because of the socioeconomic changes brought about by sedentarization. To legitimize these modifications and maintain the rituals' efficacy, people have appropriated rhetoric and techniques from the state authorities. This article argues that this is not an attempt to gain recognition from the state but a creative way to reconstruct practices in a manner that aligns with local values that are continuously recreated.

Keywords: Raglai, ethnic minorities in Vietnam, upland Southeast Asia, religious policy, cultural policy, sedentarization, funerals

Introduction

For the Raglai hill peoples in coastal provinces of South-Central Vietnam, funerals are the largest rituals. These are closely connected with the Raglai cosmology and customary practices, known as *adat*. However, the Raglai people in my research site are undergoing rapid socioeconomic change caused mainly by sedentarization, and their religious practices—including funerals—are being modified. The transformation of

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funerals appears to align with the current state cultural policy, which promotes the restoration of ethnic minorities' traditional rituals but requires their retention in a manner that avoids wasting resources. However, this article argues that the Raglai's intentions in transforming their funerals are not only to comply with the state cultural policy or gain state recognition but also to adapt to the rapidly changing environment by creating new ways to organize them. The state authorities provide a framework for transformation and its legitimation based on the Raglai's conventional perspective.

Before delving into the ethnographic description, context is provided to this discussion by exploring the current research on religious practices in socialist Vietnam. To understand people's religious activities in contemporary Vietnam, the influence of the state cannot be ignored. Several scholars have explored how, and to what extent, the socialist state regulates, represses, modifies, and utilizes the people's religious and ritual activities (see, for example, Matthews 1992; Malarney 1996; 1997; 2002; 2007; Salemink 1997; 2003; 2007; 2008; Ó Briain 2014; Århem 2015). Some studies have pointed out the limitations of state control, although they also recognize the state's influence on religious activities (Luong 1993; 2007; Malarney 1996; Kitazawa 2021). Others have argued that the religious activities of ethnic minority groups enable them to negotiate their identities and autonomy under the state control and socioeconomic conditions that marginalize them (Lewis 2002; Salemink 2003; Taylor 2007; Ngô 2016; Nakamura 2020). Against the general view of the socialist state's top-down and authoritarian statecraft, these works successfully portray the dynamics of state-local relations and people's agency in contemporary Vietnam.

As the above studies have illustrated, the Vietnamese state regulated people's religious practices during the revolutionary era. However, after the economic reforms known as Đổi Mới in the late 1980s, the state's regulation of religious activities was reduced. With this shift, the state authorities came to be seen not as an active agent that intervened in people's religious practices but as a backdrop to modestly situate them. The resurgence of religious practices in Vietnam is interpreted as a revival of the traditions that were suppressed by state control or a reaction to the increased economic instability caused by exponential commercialization, which the state was not able to control (see, for example, Taylor 2004; Lê 2007; Kwon 2008).

While the above studies have focused on mitigation of the state's religious control, some other studies have shown the state appearing to be an effective agent that authenticates religious practice. For instance, Shaun Malarney has pointed out that in villages in North Vietnam, people began worshipping Ho Chi Minh as the government legitimized the worship of national heroes and relaxed regulations on religious practices in the 1990s. He argues that such worship is a deliberate attempt by local men to maintain their com-

munal house as a space for male rituals since the restoration of village rituals and ritual spaces, which were male domains before the revolutionary era, allowed female residents to participate in rituals or organize Buddhist rituals in the 1990s (Malarney 2002, 189–204). Meanwhile, Nguyễn Thị Hiền introduced the case of a group of spirit mediums in North Vietnam who worshipped Ho Chi Minh as a god, even though the government restricted spirit mediumship and local officials repressed the group's activities (Nguyễn 2007, 545). While the authors explain that the worship of Ho Chi Minh is rooted in the Vietnamese tradition of venerating national heroes who have contributed to the country and its people, they also mention the expectation among the people that the contemporary socialist state will validate the legitimacy of this religious practice (Nguyễn 2007, 545) or help residents address gender issues in the local religious realm (Malarney 2002, 204).

Oscar Salemink's (1997) analysis shares similarities with the above studies when he examines the attitude of a potential successor to the King of Fire, which is a position held for performing crucial rituals in the Jarai community of the Central Highlands. The future King of Fire's acceptance of the Vietnamese authorities' plan to film the succession ceremony, his preference for official attire in photographs, his saving of distinguished visitors' business cards, and his expectation of receiving medals from the state authorities demonstrate his interest in gaining recognition from the state for his religious legitimacy. Salemink interprets the future King of Fire's attitude as a willingness to become a museum character for the benefit of Vietnamese and foreign consumers. He also sees this attitude as necessary when seeking permission to conduct the ceremony for certifying the King of Fire's ritual status, given the increasing number of Jarai converting to Protestantism. The future King of Fire's subordination to Vietnamese cultural politics is understood as an attempt to gain official recognition to bolster his religious status (Salemink 1997, 529–530).

The above studies have successfully illustrated how people attempt to leverage the state's authority to legitimize their religious practices. However, they have not explored the possibility that people may be seeking more than just recognition from the state. In contrast, a case study by Oscar Salemink and Phan Dang Nhat suggests that the state's recognition is not always necessary when people borrow its authority. The authors argue that people view official status and an administrative formula as helpful for planning successful and effective rituals. They explain how the ethnic majority Kinh followers of an ethnic Dao woman who conducts a possession ritual have contributed to the formalization of this ritual. Those who take part in the formalization are experienced leaders, often from the ranks of political and administrative cadres despite the government's discouragement of spirit possession rituals. They adopt administrative formulas

for the ritual procedures and refer to administrative divisions in the chants.

The authors argue that this formalization, combined with other religious traditions, ensures the success and effectiveness of relatively unscripted and uncharted ritualistic practices. Salemink and Phan's argument sheds light on the phenomenon of people adopting a formula or framework derived from state control not to seek recognition from the state but to maximize the efficacy of a ritual (Salemink and Phan 2007, 92). The study indicates that people's interest in the adoption of state-like formulations into a religious practice cannot be reduced to a pursuit of recognition from the state authorities.

In the last couple of decades, the Vietnamese state has shown more interest in recognizing religious institutions and traditional rituals. Against the backdrop of such circumstances, previous studies have illustrated people's attempts to worship Ho Chi Minh or to establish contact with the state authorities as a means of seeking state recognition. These studies have interpreted such actions as a pursuit of legitimacy within the state's political order. However, Salemink and Phan's research sheds light on the possibility that the authority of the state is appropriated to enhance the efficacy of religious practices. Drawing inspiration from Salemink and Phan's perspective, this article investigates how the Raglai appropriate the techniques and rhetoric of the state authorities to explain and legitimize the transformation of their funerals. Consequently, this article argues that the Raglai seek legitimation from their own conventional point of view rather than conforming to the state's political order.

James Scott's (2009) work highlights how highlanders in Southeast Asia imitated lowland state forms such as architecture, funerals, and regalia, which did not result in the lowland state exerting political power over them. Rather, highlanders simulated these elements to assert their autonomy or rebellion. Symbolic subordination to the state allowed highland leaders to claim authority over their own communities (Scott 2009, 111–116). This article draws on Scott's discussion and illustrates how the modern socialist state can serve as a source of authority that people can appropriate for their religious practices; however, it does not explore whether the Raglai are attempting to achieve autonomy from the state. For the Raglai, mimicking state symbolism supports the validity of their recreated rituals in reflection of local values.

Methodology and Research Site

This article is based on fieldwork that I conducted for 16 months between 2016 and 2020. The research site was Bac Ai District, Ninh Thuan Province, located in South-Central Vietnam.

The total population of Bac Ai District was 30,598 people, and 86 percent of them were registered as ethnic Raglai (Vietnam, Tổng cục Thống kê 2019). Residing in the mountains and valleys, the Raglai of Bac Ai historically have had religious and economic connections with the Cham who reside in the coastal areas of Ninh Thuan Province.[1] Although a handful of households in Phuoc Thang have converted to Christianity, the rest conduct a ritual for spirits that is collectively called *yac*, which is similar to the *yang* of the Cham.

Revolutionary forces operated in this area from the 1940s to the 1970s and contributed to the "liberation" of South Vietnam and the establishment of the socialist nation in a unified Vietnam. Many Raglai residents joined the revolutionary forces' operations in the 1960s and 1970s. The Vietnamese government continues to pay them an allowance and give them other forms of preferential treatment for their contribution to the revolution. Nevertheless, the government finds this region one of the most economically challenged in Vietnam, with nearly 54 percent of households in Bac Ai classified as "in poverty" or "in semi-poverty" (Vĩnh Phú 2018).

I attended 13 funerals, eight of them in Q hamlet, where I spent most of my time during the fieldwork. The rest were in adjacent hamlets and villages such as Phuoc Dai Village, Phuoc Thanh Village, and T hamlet in Phuoc Thang Village (see Fig. 1).

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1) Cham peddlers have been active in the region for decades. According to local elders in their seventies, the Raglai in Bac Ai engaged in bartering with the Cham, exchanging forest resources such as water buffalo, betel nuts, and resin for goods such as salt, clothes, jewelry, and bronze and ceramic items such as gongs, jars, jugs, and bowls. Commercial transactions were suspended during the Vietnam War but resumed and continue to this day. The Cham peddlers who sell clothes and ceramic products still ask the Raglai to store the goods in their houses, although the Raglai more often purchase products from Kinh and Cham merchants who have been setting up stores in Raglai hamlets after Đổi Mới.

Meanwhile, the Raglai in Bac Ai have incorporated elements of Cham religions, such as the worship of Ina Lagar, similar to the Cham's Po Ina Nagar, and Aluah, who is worshipped by Islam-influenced Cham Bani (Shine 2009, 167; Yoshimoto 2010, 226; Sakaya 2013; Noseworthy 2015, 120). Further, a structural similarity can be observed in funerary practices between the Cham and the Raglai (see note 9).

Compared to the Raglai in Binh Thuan Province and the southwestern Ninh Thuan Province, identified as Southern Raglai in Vietnamese ethnology, the Raglai in Bac Ai and Khanh Hoa Province, identified as Northern Raglai, have had relatively tenuous commercial and religious connections with the Cham. This is likely because Dai Viet took over Khatuhara (today's Phu Yen-Nha Trang in Khanh Hoa Province), which was one of the religious centers of Champa in the seventeenth century (see Sakaya 2013, 628–629). Some Southern Raglai worked in the paddy fields of Champa's royal families until the 1960s. They also protected the treasure houses of the Champa kings and continue to perform rituals related to these houses (Shine 2007, 115, 141–146). In Ninh Phuoc District, Ninh Thuan Province, the Southern Raglai play a symbolic role as keepers of a Cham garment during the Kate Festival, at which the Cham worship the divine beings of Champa.

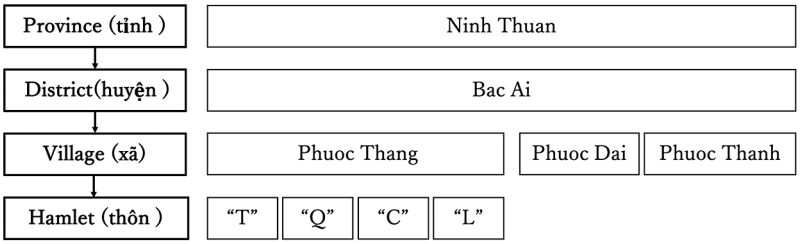

Fig. 1 Administrative Division of Ninh Thuan Province and Villages and Hamlets Addressed in This Article

Q hamlet is one of four hamlets in the Phuoc Thang administrative village.[2] Prior to their relocation in 2005, Q and C hamlets in Phuoc Thang District were relatively isolated from the surrounding communities in comparison to T and L hamlets. This was mainly because of their distance from the district center and a national road. Although T hamlet has a small population, its residents have maintained a strong relationship with the Communist Party, resulting in high-ranking political positions for their family members within local government and Party cells in Bac Ai District. On the other hand, residents of L hamlet have not been deeply involved in the network of state institutions but have established connections with the Christian Raglai living around the city of Cam Ranh due to marriage. This affinal tie has brought relative economic stability to L hamlet by facilitating successful cash crop cultivation. Notably, L hamlet is the only hamlet in Phuoc Thang with Christian residents.[3]

While residents of T and L hamlets found ways to establish a political presence or economic stability, Q and C hamlets were left behind in terms of economic development, even after their relocation resolved the issue of their remoteness. However, since the 2000s, Q hamlet has gained recognition for preserving its “traditional gong culture” (see, for example, Nguyễn 2017), as the government has recognized the importance of preserving the traditional culture of ethnic minorities. Many residents of all ages in Q

2) In this article, the names of my informants and the hamlets they live in have been changed to ensure confidentiality. All the photos in this article were taken by the author with the informants' consent.

3) It is uncertain when the conversion started. According to a retired cadre in Q hamlet, there were at least eight Protestant households in L hamlet as of 1981, but the number reduced to three after “persuasion” by the cadres. I confirmed at least ten households in L hamlet whose members were either Catholic or Protestant, but further investigation was restricted because of the implicit pressure by the local government and state agencies cautious of foreigners contacting ethnic-minority Christians. A few of my informants in L hamlet told me that they had converted to Christianity after marrying a Christian Raglai from Cam Ranh City, with the aim of evading the ritual burdens imposed by traditional customs.

hamlet possess gong-playing skills as more descent groups there inherit a set of gongs compared to other hamlets and villages in Bac Ai. Some of them have even been selected to represent the region in trans-local cultural festivals. Notably, as of 2016, two of the four "meritorious artists" (nghệ nhân ưu tú) in Bac Ai came from Q hamlet.[4] Conversely, residents of C hamlet do not actively participate in cultural programs.

It is worth noting the basic structure of the Raglai's kinship as it is closely intertwined with their ritual practices. Their language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian family, and their society is matrilineal and matrilocal. Each household, called a *sac*, represents the basic socioeconomic unit of Raglai society and typically comprises a married couple and their unmarried children. Married couples each have their own house and agricultural land and manage their own property, except for the youngest daughter and her husband, who live with her parents and are responsible for caring for them.

The matrilineal descent group is a fundamental unit for the practice of *adat*, which the Raglai explain their ancestors established to ensure the descent group's succession. *Adat* regulates property rights and mandates religious practices and life-cycle rituals to manage the animistic flow of potency in material forms to ensure health, fertility, and prosperity (see Schrauwers 2019, 743). Although state law is enforced in most of Raglai life, the Raglai retain their customs through life-cycle and religious rituals and the constitution of kinship and affinal relations.

Procedure and Efficacy of Funerals

This section illustrates the procedures and efficacy of Raglai funerals. A Raglai funeral is conducted mainly at the house where the deceased spent the last days of his or her life, and the household members who took care of the deceased at their house cover most of the funeral expenditures. The deceased's sisters, nieces (sisters' daughters), and children—even though they may live apart from them—are encouraged to provide a pig to express their affection for the deceased. In addition, distant relatives of the deceased, along with the villagers, bring cash and offerings such as eggs, rice, liquor, incense, and sometimes chickens.

Each ritual procedure during a funeral is conducted by three men, called *jalat cadjaq* (those who lead the road), who take the role of ritual masters to lead the

4) Since 2002, the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists has been recognizing Vietnamese citizens who contribute to preserving intangible cultural heritage as "folk artists" (nghệ nhân dân gian) (Oizumi 2015, 258) and awarding some of them the title of "meritorious artist." In Ninh Thuan Province nine people have been recognized as meritorious artists (Phượng Vỹ 2016).

prayers. They are identified as "the leader of the dead" (*po atau*) or "the one who leads the road of the middle" (*jalat cadjaq khrah*), "the one who leads the road of the head" (*jalat cadjiaq acoq*), and "the one who leads the road of the feet" (*jalat cadjiaq takai*).[5] In this article, these individuals are referred to as the "leader of the dead," "leader of the head," and "leader of the feet," respectively.

During the funeral, the deceased undergoes a process of symbolic decomposition into three elements—a head, bones, and skin—that correspond to the three integral social relationships in Raglai society: the matrilineal descent group, the household, and the community. Each element is represented by a material object: a bowl, corn, and chicken. Subsequently, these material objects are recombined into the material flows that reproduce the three social relationships.

A Raglai funeral consists of four phases: burial, a period of mourning, feasts called *vidhi*, and a post-funeral procedure. Following is a generalized description of the procedure at each phase, based on my observations of funerals in Q hamlet.

Burial

Burial is performed a few days after a person dies. Before that point, relatives and villagers visit the deceased's house with offerings and say prayers led by the ritual masters. During this period, the corpse is wrapped in white clothing and laid on the floor. At night the ritual masters wear the traditional male costumes of the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) and dance along with the sound of gongs to ask permission from the deceased to have a small feast for the visitors.

On the day of burial, the leader of the dead prepares a wooden stick called *gai tuah* to direct the "spirit of the dead (*yac atau*)," which is in a liminal state of losing its soul and living body. The family members prepare a ceramic bowl called a *jalut acoq*, which translates to "bowl of the head."[6] This bowl is considered to represent the head of the deceased, and it is believed that the soul of the deceased will follow it.[7]

5) In Q hamlet, at most funerals, except those of married men, a "leader of the dead" is chosen from the matrilineal descent group to which the deceased belonged, while distant relatives or villagers take on the roles of "leader of the head" and "leader of the feet." If the deceased is a married man, a non-relative assumes the role of leader of the dead, and a man from the deceased's matrilineal descent group takes on the role of leader of the head. The leader of the feet is selected from the descent group of the deceased's wife.

6) It used to be made of copper (Nguyễn 2000, 170).

7) In Phuoc Thang, the customary use of *jalut acoq* was abolished and substituted by ceramic bowls and cups called *caya kir*, which the two descent groups in an affinal relationship exchange after the funeral. I include *jalut acoq* in the description of the procedure to clearly show the way the funeral addresses the three different kinds of social relationships, but the transformation itself is not discussed here because it is beyond this article's scope.

The corpse is placed in a wooden coffin and brought on a trolley to the cemetery outside the hamlet, followed by the ritual masters, family members, relatives, and villagers. The coffin is buried in an unmarked grave. A small prayer is offered on the grave to promise the deceased that feasts will be held in the near future. This marks the end of the burial, and the wooden stick and bowl are kept in the house until the feasts are held.

Period of Mourning

Burial is followed by a period of mourning that can last for months or even years, although this phase is sometimes skipped in cases where the death is considered inauspicious. During this period, it is forbidden for the deceased's widows/widowers to remarry and for the deceased's family members to marry. Furthermore, additional sacrifice is required for the spirit of the dead when family members conduct any ritual during this period.

Feasts

The mourning period ends with feasts for the deceased. Once the dates of the feasts are decided, the family members of the deceased start brewing beer, called *tapai*, made from cassava or banana; ask skilled people in the village to construct a tomb; and go to the fields to collect firewood, fruit, and rice.

The tomb, known as the "house of a spirit of the dead" (*sac atau*), consists of six to 12 wooden poles and a roof made of wood or galvanized iron (see Photo 1). An additional wooden decoration (*kagor*), curved in the shape of a ship with a dragon and birds, is prepared according to the household's economic situation and placed on the top of the roof (see Photo 2). The day before the largest feast, a small prayer is conducted to inform the deceased of the completion of the tomb-preparation process.

The following day, the largest feast is conducted after the tomb's completion. In the morning the ritual masters and family members visit the grave to offer a small prayer for the deceased, and the tomb is set up on the grave. In the afternoon the masters, family members, and relatives head again to the cemetery to inform the spirit of the dead about the tomb's completion and invite the spirit to the feast, bringing the wooden stick, the bowl of the head, and offerings such as pigs, chickens, beer, liquor, rice, and incense. During the visit to the cemetery, the masters, wearing the male traditional costume of the Kinh, dance and go around the tomb, followed by four to seven gong players striking gongs (see Photos 3 and 4).

After 15 to 20 minutes of dancing the prayer begins, followed by another dance sequence. At the end of the dancing at the cemetery, the leader of the dead stops on the west side of the tomb and throws a chick over the roof toward the east end. A handful

Photo 1 Tomb at the Cemetery of Q Hamlet

Photo 2 Decoration to Be Placed on the Top of the Tomb (*Kagor*)

Photo 3 Ritual Masters Dancing and Walking around the Tomb

Photo 4 Gong Players Striking Gongs at the Cemetery

Photo 5 Daughters and Grandchildren of the Deceased Waiting to Catch the Chick

of the closest family members of the deceased—possibly children, grandchildren, parents, grandparents, nieces, and aunts—wait at the other side of the tomb and catch the chick on a piece of white cloth (see Photo 5). One of them will raise the chick later in their garden.

Hy, a respected shaman in his fifties who often takes on the role of a ritual master in Q hamlet, explained that the purpose of the prayer after the construction of the tomb was to "allow the deceased to accept one's dead body." The subsequent act of throwing a chick is meant to prevent the deceased from taking all their vitality to the afterlife. Vitality (*so*) is said to be lost with the skin of the deceased and reincarnated as offspring, while the bones remain in the grave and become a ghost who lives alone in the tomb and looks after the activities of the offspring (see Nguyễn 2000, 142–144, 254). These procedures at the cemetery indicate the bodily transformation of the deceased.

After the tomb-building procedure is complete, the spirit of the dead is invited to the house of the deceased's family in the hamlet. When people return to the hamlet, another group of three old men (not the *jalat cadjaq*), chosen from among the relatives or villagers, wait outside the house to welcome the spirit of the dead and the ritual masters back from the cemetery. The groups of men chat and share cigarettes and beer with each other, surrounded by audiences made up of relatives and villagers (see Photo 6). After a while, these men start dancing along with the sound of gongs, enter

Photo 6 Group of Men (right) Welcoming Ritual Masters Who Have Returned from the Cemetery

the house, and go around the pole built in the middle of the ritual space. After the dance, offerings are prepared around the pole and the deceased is offered prayers. During the intermission following the prayer, several plates filled with pork and chicken are prepared for the spirit of the dead (see Photo 7). The largest feast begins with the dance of the ritual masters and is followed by prayers. During the prayers, the family, relatives, and villagers who prepared the offerings enter the ritual space and throw cooked meats, rice, and bananas into the basket made for the deceased.

The next morning, the final feast is held to bid farewell to the deceased. The procedure is the same as in the previous day's feast, except for the last sequence, where the basket filled with offerings from the previous day is taken outside the house. After a prayer outside the house, the leader of the dead breaks the wooden stick that was used to direct the spirit of the dead and places it in the basket. From this point onward, it is forbidden to grieve or mention the deceased's name, and the relationship between the living and the spirit of the dead is terminated.

Prohibiting the mention of the deceased's name is related to the personhood of Raglai society. First, calling the deceased's name could cause the spirit to return to the world of the living and attack their family or relatives, because the spirit misunderstands himself/herself to be alive. Second, it could cause newborn children to become sick as the deceased inherent in them is able to "view" the world of the living. In Raglai society a newborn is understood to be the reincarnation of a relative from the

Photo 7 Ritual Masters, Managers, and a Female Relative of the Deceased Preparing for the Largest Feast

previous generation, and it is dangerous for a child to remember their previous life because it confuses their social identity, which happens when the name of the deceased is mentioned.

Reincarnation occurs in the form of various social relationships: one may be reborn as a member of one's matrilineal descent group, one's relative, or even the child of a widow/widower who has remarried. In Raglai society, a name is significant as it is recognized by the community and it is necessary to have a personal identity in the world of the living.

Post-funeral

Immediately after the final feast, a post-funeral procedure is conducted. The leader of the feet and the young male relatives take the basket filled with offerings to the tomb. At the cemetery, the leader of the feet picks up an ear of corn hanging under the roof of the tomb. The corn is used in a humorous skit later performed in the hamlet. In this skit, the ear of corn is treated as a little child found in a forest and handed to the deceased's family to raise. The corn is considered to be part of the deceased, and the family actually plants it in their field later, and this is believed to help the fertility of the household.

The skit is followed by a few additional rituals. First, a procedure to terminate an affinal relationship is required if the deceased is married. Representatives of the two

matrilineal descent groups of the deceased and their spouses exchange items such as bowls, dishes, jars, and clothes and sing an impromptu reciprocal song to express affection toward each other. Both the act of singing and the sharing of items confirm a peaceful termination of the affinal relationship between the two descent groups that have been temporally connected through the marriage of their members. If the deceased is a married man, the bowl of the head is handed over to his sister or niece (sister's daughter) along with other items. Then, one of the female members of the deceased's matrilineal descent group brings back these items to her house and conducts a small ritual involving the sacrifice of a couple of chickens to affirm the items' connection to her house. According to Raglai cosmology, a house is linked to the world of ancestors and other spirits. It is believed that the soul of the deceased follows these items and is subsequently integrated into an ancestor spirit of one's matrilineal descent group after this ritual procedure, while the items are passed on down the generations as ancestral objects of this descent group.[8] Following the procedure, a small prayer is conducted at the house of the woman who stores the bowl of the head. The prayer involves the sacrificing of a couple of chickens to complete the merging process.

A Raglai funeral involves separating the deceased into three elements—the head, bones, and skin—and subsequently recombining each element into cycles to reproduce each social unit, such as the matrilineal descent group, the community, and the household. The deceased's soul follows the bowl to be merged into the world of the matrilineal descent group's ancestors, thereby securing the succession of the descent group. While the skin is lost with the deceased's vitality, part of it, represented by a chick, returns to the world of the living. The descendants of the deceased keep the chick to sacrifice for spirits that help give birth to a new human in the community. The deceased remains in the form of bones in the grave, separated from the household to which the deceased belonged, but the part of the deceased represented by the corn returns to

8) One of the ritual masters in his late forties from Phuoc Thang told me that the soul of the deceased is divided into three after the final feast. The three parts are called the feet, middle, and head, corresponding to the identification of the ritual masters. The ritual master also explained that "the soul of the feet" stays in the cemetery, "the soul of the middle" returns to the village, and "the soul of the head" goes back to one's matrilineal descent group. Although this kind of explanation is not popular in Phuoc Thang, I found similar beliefs in different villages. In Manai hamlet, Phuoc Thanh Village, Chamalea Lip, in his seventies and respected by the villagers for his knowledge about customs, told me a human consists of three souls. Nguyễn Thế Sang (2000, 52), who conducted fieldwork in Khanh Hoa Province in the 1990s, also introduced an understanding similar to Lip's. Despite the diversity of conceptual understandings about Raglai's personhood, Raglai funerals share similar sequences to reproduce the three social relationships: the matrilineal descent group, the household, and the relationship between the living and the dead.

the household and helps to improve its fertility.[9)]

In addition to specific procedures, the aesthetic and technical aspects and scale are crucial for a successful funeral (see Tambiah 1985, 135). People often repeat the word *laghe* during rituals, which means "good," "effective," or "beautiful," thus implying auspiciousness. The number of offerings and participants, the general mood of the rituals, and the aesthetics of the ritual performances, such as chanting, dancing, striking of gongs, and acting, determine the perceived success of the funeral. A successful funeral is supposed to help with the health, fertility, and prosperity of those who contributed to it.

All the people participating in funerals strive to take their roles seriously. The deceased's family ensures that the guests have plenty of food and drink, while managers are required to check that the offerings are adequately prepared. The role of each guest is to boost the mood by chatting in a friendly manner with other guests. People often discuss the correct way to conduct funerals according to their conventional understandings.

A funeral is the life-cycle ritual to which the largest amounts of time, labor, and expense are dedicated. The largest feast during a funeral often draws more than seventy people from within and outside the hamlet. The ritual usually takes more than four days, while other life-cycle ceremonies take two days at most. Approximately five pigs are sacrificed at an average funeral. A grown pig costs over VND 5 million (approximately USD 210), while the monthly wage gained through seasonal labor in Lam Dong Province is some VND 3 million (approximately USD 130). Additional expenditures for beer, liquor, rice, and incense are required as well.

The Raglai devote enormous amounts of time, attention, and material resources to funerals, but many people at Q hamlet, regardless of their sociopolitical position, emphasized that they had simplified the procedure. The following two sections examine the influence of cultural policies and sedentarization, which have had a significant

9) Structural similarities can be identified in the funerary rituals of the Cham and the Raglai. The Cham Ahier bury the body of the deceased and conduct a secondary funeral several years later. During the secondary funeral, the skull of the deceased is chopped into nine pieces and placed in one box, while the other bones are put in a separate box. These boxes are then placed in a family graveyard called a *kloang*. Approximately 15 years later, the box containing the skull pieces is transferred to the *kut*, the graveyard of the matrilineal descent group. While the Raglai divide the dead body into three symbolic elements, the body of a dead Cham person is physically separated into three components. During the period between the first and secondary funerals, the skin of the body decomposes, the bones are interred in the family graveyard, and the skull, representing the deceased's head, is placed in the matrilineal descent group's graveyard (based on the author's observation of a Cham secondary funeral from April 7 to 11, 2018, in Chat Tuong hamlet, Ninh Phuoc District, Ninh Thuan Province, and the description in Jatrai [2013]).

impact on the traditional ways of life of upland ethnic minorities in socialist Vietnam, to explore how state policies have affected the transformation of Raglai funerals.

Cultural Policies

This section highlights how the cultural policies of socialist Vietnam have evaluated ethnic-minority culture and how they have influenced the Raglai's religious and cultural practices.

During the revolutionary era in Vietnam, leaders purged religious and cultural activities that interfered with the socialist reform project. Spirit worship, geomancy, divination, and mediumship were prohibited as "superstitious" (*mê tín*), "backward" (*lạc hậu*), and "outmoded" (*hủ tục*) practices and were considered to be socially exploitative (Imai 1994, 157–158; Taylor 2004, 38). Additionally, communal house sacrifices and temple festivals were regulated, and wedding and funeral ceremonies were required to be downsized and modified in ways that matched the socialist ideology (Malarney 1996; Taylor 2004, 38). These reforms were aimed at avoiding waste of resources and reproduction of feudal social relations (Imai 1994, 162; Taylor 2004, 38). The Raglai's healing and agricultural rituals, involving the worship of non-human spirits, were categorized as superstitious practices under the ideology of the Vietnamese socialist state (Nguyễn 2000, 307–308), and this caused the agricultural rituals of the community to fade.

However, as the nation became more deeply engaged with the global market economy, the Party came to realize the value of indigenous ethnic cultures, viewing them as a resource to support national unity (Taylor 2004, 43; Salemink 2008, 276; 2007, 580–582; Oizumi 2015, 257). The Party's attempts to enforce its new cultural policy recognizing the value of indigenous ethnic cultures intensified during the 2000s in the Central Highlands and surrounding regions. One of the underlying causes was the political tension that built up in the Central Highlands in the early 2000s. Beginning in 1975, Central Highlanders in Vietnam increasingly abandoned their traditional religion, which required intensive resources to fulfill ritual duties, and converted to Christianity. This drive accelerated as communities were rapidly drawn into the global economic circuit after Đổi Mới (Salemink 2016, 328).

The Vietnamese socialist state has been cautious about the highland population's conversion to Christianity, suspecting that it may have connections to imperialism or foreign agents. The state also sees it as a social problem that could lead to the destruction of traditional culture, weakening of ethnic solidarity, and impoverishment (Ngô

2016, 208–212). In particular, the Central Highlanders' riots demanding freedom of religion and land rights in the early 2000s, articulated by the anti-Communist diaspora, shocked the Vietnamese state's leaders, and the leaders took multiple actions to handle this "threat." One of their strategies was to recognize ethnic minorities' religious and ritual practices as distinctive cultural heritage, whereas in the revolutionary era they had been suppressed as "backward" and "superstitious" (Salemink 2016, 333).[10] The most significant symbolic outcome was the inscription of the highlanders' intangible cultural heritage. In 2008, UNESCO recognized the gong culture of the Central Highlands of Vietnam and inscribed it on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization n.d.).

Following the implementation of the new cultural policy, Vietnam's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism recognized the funeral ceremonies of the Raglai in Khanh Son District in Khanh Hoa Province and Thuan Bac District in Ninh Thuan Province as Vietnam's intangible cultural heritage in 2012 and 2018, respectively (Vietnam Museum of Ethnology and Viet Nam National Institute of Educational Sciences 2020, 150). The gong performances and funerary rites of the Raglai in Bac Ai are excluded from these lists, but the selections affect the way the Raglai in Bac Ai are involved in cultural preservation campaigns at both the local and national levels. Music performance groups are organized and occasionally invited to cultural ceremonies across Vietnam and to the tourism village of Vietnamese ethnic minority groups in Dong Mo, on the outskirts of Hanoi. Members of these troupes perform traditional music and demonstrate funerary rituals. At the local level, the authorities organize seasonal cultural ceremonies and educational programs for local students.

The new cultural policy, however, does not guarantee ethnic minorities autonomy in cultural representation. Although the Party and the government encourage the preservation of the distinctive cultural traits of every ethnic group, the state authorities often take the initiative, deciding what should be preserved, transformed, or eliminated. Any practices considered to endanger state unity and the socialist progress of the nation may become a target of regulation or reform (Nguyen 2016, 175). Other practices considered culturally distinctive, such as music, dance, and crafts, are decontextualized from conventional values, commodified as a resource to attract tourists, and "folklorized" as a veil to cover up the socioeconomic marginalization of ethnic minority groups (Ó Briain 2014; Nguyen 2016, 175; Salemink 2016).

10) Other attempts involved, for instance, planning to enact the new "ethnic law" to control the ethnic minority population and permitting officially registered religious activities of ethnic minority Christians (Ito 2009; Ngô 2016, 215).

In my research site a few individuals reacted to the contradictions inherent in cultural policies, but most residents accepted the state's recognition of Raglai customs.[11] Those who actively participate in such programs are often members of the local Party cell, along with their families and relatives. However, this does not mean that the influence of policies is limited to cadres and their families. Those who are not cadres or related to them occasionally participate in or observe gong-teaching classes in the villages and instruct children. Additionally, educated younger people in their twenties to forties, regardless of their political position or involvement in cultural preservation programs, are interested in preserving the "distinctive culture" of the Raglai.

Despite appreciating their own culture, some residents insist on downsizing their funeral rituals. This can be seen as accepting another aspect of the state's cultural policy that continuously instructs them to avoid organizing large-scale rituals that could impoverish their households (Directive 05/CT-TTg, dated February 9, 2018).[12] However, as discussed in the following section, the decision to downsize rituals does not necessarily stem from compliance with the cultural policy; rather, it can be traced to socioeconomic changes since the 2000s.

Sedentarization and Authority of the State

Residents of Q hamlet informed me that the decision to downsize funerals was made not during the revolutionary period but after their relocation in 2005. This section investigates how the relocation that took place in 2005 resulted in changes to both the traditional land system and the livelihoods of residents in Q hamlet, providing a contextual background for the transformation of funeral practices.

Residents in Q hamlet were originally from the four different traditional villages in the mountains on the border with Khanh Hoa Province. After 1975, when the Vietnam War was over, residents were required by the local government to relocate to the base of the mountains, and the area was claimed to be the Phuoc Thang administrative village. However, the socialist reform had only a limited effect on the land system and livelihoods. Residents in Q hamlet continued swidden farming in the mountains by following *adat*, which requires moderate segregation among matrilineal descent

11) Gen, a knowledgeable peasant in his fifties who was not a Party member, was critical of the staging of cultural ceremonies; he said that staging a mock funeral was considered taboo (*ukhi*).

12) Despite the official policy, certain households in Bac Ai, including those of cadres, continue to organize large-scale rituals. During my fieldwork I witnessed magnificent funeral feasts and splendid tombs in T hamlet and Phuoc Thanh Village, specifically among those where the deceased or their families held district-level cadre positions.

groups when cultivating the land. According to Trat, a man in his sixties and a "reputable person" (người có uy tín)[13] in Q hamlet, the local government ordered the creation of a farming group to initiate cooperative farming as part of the socialist reform project in Q hamlet. However, it did not draw much attention and was disbanded around 1982, four years earlier than the end of centrally planned state-led agricultural cooperatives in Vietnam. Unlike the Central Highlands, Bac Ai was exempt from the "New Economic Zone" program and saw only a limited number of migrants from outside the region until the early 2000s.

In 2005, residents in Phuoc Thang experienced drastic socioeconomic changes. The residents had relocated to the new settlement because of a reservoir construction project that aimed to provide flood control and water for industrial, agricultural, and general purposes in Bac Ai and neighboring districts (Trường Đại học Thuỷ Lợi 2011). With the implementation of poverty reduction and agricultural development policies after Đổi Mới, schools and a clinic were built in the new settlement, houses had running water and electricity, and a road was constructed in the early 2000s, improving access to the village.

The implementation of these development projects led to the transformation of the customary land system in Q hamlet. Prior to the relocation in 2005, households from the same matrilineal descent group cultivated adjacent land, and outsiders were not allowed to enter or cultivate the area without the owners' permission. Land was considered the descent group's inalienable domain and was not viewed as a commodity to be sold or purchased. However, after the relocation the local government allocated land to each household for wet-rice farming, making it impossible to maintain segregation by descent groups; the land now belongs to each household as their property. Although the land is still supposed to be passed on through the maternal line, residents are now free to sell or rent out their land at their discretion. Moreover, the land in Phuoc Thang has become attractive to Kinh migrant farmers because of its improved accessibility to the national road. As a result, Raglai residents often sell their land when they are in urgent need of cash.

An increased need for cash has arisen from the recent unstable farming conditions. The sedentarization policy aimed to promote wet-rice farming, but in Q hamlet nearly 75 percent of households are unable to engage in it due to insufficient irrigation and

13) Based on the Party's resolution approved in 2003 (Resolution 24-NQ/TW 12/3/2003), local governments are to recognize a person respected by local residents from each ethnic minority community and appoint him/her as a "reputable person," expecting him/her to take on the role of conveying the Party's point of view and the state's policy and law to local communities and representing the community's interests (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2021; Học viện Chính trị Khu vực II 2022). In Ninh Thuan Province, as of 2015 there were 37 appointed "reputable persons" (Nguyễn 2019).

poor soil conditions.[14] Even on land suitable for wet-rice farming, residents struggle to adapt to an unaccustomed way of farming (Nguyễn 2012). Furthermore, their former settlements have been zoned as forest reserves where forestry enterprises are operating. Despite this, some continue to farm in the old settlement, while others cultivate land on steep mountains nearby, which was traditionally forbidden. In most cases, the local authorities permit illegal cultivation as long as farmers do not allow the land to lie fallow or expand the cultivated area. However, farmers sometimes lose their land when they violate either these implicit rules or the business interests of forestry operators. Therefore, these restrictions lead to unsustainable agricultural practices.

The breeding of domestic animals in Phuoc Thang is also a challenge. Cattle became crucial livestock for the Raglai after 1975, replacing water buffalo, which used to be bartered with other ethnic groups. The Raglai used to let their cattle roam in the nearby woods or fields. However, since the surrounding fields of the new village are mostly dry with little grass, the cattle need to roam farther afield. Households with insufficient workers are not able to manage this task.

They also complain about the greater risk of disease to which their other domestic animals, such as pigs and chickens, are exposed. This is partly because of the increased population density in the hamlet, as the People's Committee assigns a living area for each household. In 2019 an outbreak of African swine fever in Ninh Thuan Province decimated the pig population in Bac Ai (Công *et al.* 2019), and the majority of Raglai have refrained from breeding pigs since then. People in Phuoc Thang reluctantly purchase pigs, which are essential sacrificial animals in large rituals, from Kinh breeders. Because of the hardships involved in farming and livestock breeding, the younger generation in their forties or below are having to increasingly rely on wage labor.[15]

Given these unstable economic conditions, it is understandable why people have had to simplify their funerals. However, residents do not see the simplification as merely a compromising of their traditions. To rationalize the simplification, they utilize idioms of cultural policies and administrative formulations, as discussed in the following sections.

These conditions also raise a question about how people in Q hamlet perceive the

14) According to the oral survey I conducted with 290 households in Q hamlet from February 20 to April 10, 2018, 229 households did not have land suitable for wet-rice farming. Among the remaining 61 households that did have land fit for wet-rice farming, 11 households rented out the land or kept it uncultivated.

15) Several poverty reduction programs have been implemented, such as microloans from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies, a model production program (*mô hình sản xuất*) to support cash crop cultivation, cattle sharing programs, and occasional supplies of rice and livestock. However, these programs do not efficiently contribute to the residents' economic stability, from what I observed during my fieldwork.

authority of the state in everyday life. They often complain about the inability of the local authorities to help them become more economically stable, blaming ineffective and inequitable implementation of poverty reduction programs. Despite their criticism of the local authorities, they rely on state agencies when facing troubles relating to housing, land, and livestock. They go to the local administrative offices and ask them to handle these issues for them. Elderly people report that these problems used to be mediated by men knowledgeable about the customs in each community—known as "the leader of the village" (*po palei*) or "the leader of the mountain" (*po cho*)—before the revolutionary state was established in the South, but the state (*nhà nước*) and cadres (*cán bộ*) have now taken over their roles. Administrative officers are perceived as agents of the state authority, and residents expect them to secure their property rights.

Furthermore, official affiliation is sometimes perceived as evidence of spiritual abilities. For example, a famous Raglai shaman who is active in Ninh Thuan and Khanh Hoa Provinces was a chief of the local women's union (although she resigned amid accusations of embezzlement). Sau, in his forties, a peasant who hired her for his son's healing ritual, attributes her former affiliation to her credibility in divination. While people are not fully content with the state's policies, they selectively avail themselves of the authority of the state. This tendency is found also in people's ways of organizing and legitimating changing funeral rites.

Legitimating Modifications

The funeral changes in Q hamlet can be classified into the following two types: (1) the omission of certain traditional funeral procedures, due to changes in the ritual organizers' relationships with specific spirits or spiritual entities; and (2) a shortening of the time dedicated to funerals. In this section, I discuss the former by examining how people legitimize the change in their relationship with spirits and how it affects the ways in which they conduct funerals.

People in Q hamlet used to sacrifice a pig and chicken yearly for a spirit of corn and rice (*yac ghilo*, *yac padai*) and periodically for spiritual entities internal in the human body to help with farming and raising domestic animals (*aluah ghilo padai*, *aluah un manyut*), but some villagers discontinued these rituals after the relocation in 2005. This led to a discontinuation or modification of the chick-throwing sequence as well as humorous skit in funerals. In five cases in Q hamlet, the humorous skit was not performed or the corn was substituted by a piece of crumpled cloth, and in three funerals the chick-throwing sequence was omitted.

The motive for skipping or modifying these sequences is sometimes attributed to inauspicious incidents. For instance, at the funeral for Khai, a veteran soldier who died in his early seventies, the chick-throwing sequence was omitted. I asked some women in their late forties who were guests at the funeral why this was done. They were not sure about the reason but inferred that "something might have happened" to the family with regard to the ritual. One of the women told me that a long time ago, when they were performing chick throwing at a funeral for her relative, a wildcat cut in, caught the chick, and ran off with it to the forest. After that, her relatives decided not to perform the sequence. She speculated that a similar incident might have happened with Khai's family, and other women agreed with her. A few weeks later I met one of Khai's four sons, Triet, a peasant in his late thirties, and asked him about the reason. He answered that his family had had an incident in which the chick that had been thrown in the funeral did not grow but instead died. Since then, his family has not performed a chick-throwing.

Similar inauspicious incidents are used to justify the modification of ritual processes. They are used also to legitimate changes in a relationship with an ancestor spirit. In Q hamlet, residents reportedly stopped worshipping an ancestor spirit in 2005. The residents used to pray to an ancestor spirit at the beginning of the year, when they started cultivating land, and at funerals and weddings, but they said that they had abolished the custom. At funerals in Q hamlet, the practice of praying to an ancestor spirit and offering foods to it is no longer observed.

According to residents in Q hamlet, the decision not to pray to an ancestor spirit was led by a respected shaman who lived in the hamlet and passed away years ago, and every descent group in the hamlet followed his instruction. The shaman also instructed the residents to stop praying to spiritual entities within human bodies that help with farming and raising domestic animals.

Pon, a peasant in her fifties, explained to me why they no longer prayed to their ancestor spirit. She recounted an incident where an ancestor spirit allegedly "killed" a person who could not afford a sacrifice to compensate for premarital sexual intercourse, which angered the spirit. Pon stated, "We are poor, so we got rid of it. It's too late to get rid of it after everyone dies." Her husband, Thap, a peasant in his sixties, told me that many residents in Q hamlet had stopped praying to certain spirits: "We threw away what is 'backward' because [spirits] could kill people and are dangerous."

This change led to the abolishment of the custom of using a bowl of the head. According to Gen, a peasant in his fifties and knowledgeable about the custom, the shaman told residents in Q hamlet to stop using a bowl of the head, claiming that keeping it in an improper manner brought calamity to the descent group.

While the residents of Q hamlet described the termination of relationships with

an ancestor spirit in a somewhat mythological manner, residents in other hamlets denied the possibility of severing connections with an ancestor spirit even under the influence of state religious regulations. Rat, a veteran soldier in his sixties, admitted that most residents in L hamlet continued to pray to an ancestor spirit. He said, "The state allows us to pray to ancestors but prohibits us from praying to God (*thần*)" (implying the Christian God). Lip, a retired cadre and respected elder in the Phuoc Thanh District community, remarked that the Raglai people put an end to agricultural rituals because the government deemed them "superstitious," but that they could not stop praying to an ancestor spirit as the spirit "controls (*quản ly*)" the Raglai: "Without ancestors, how do we exist? Doing away with an ancestor spirit means abolishing the entire ethnic group. It is just that people in Phuoc Thang don't know how to explain it."

During the revolutionary era, the Party and the government dismissed village-level ceremonies as practices of the old regime, while allowing ancestor worship as a means of controlling households (Imai 1994, 158–161). More recently, the government and the Party have increasingly accepted and promoted ancestor worship among the highland people, as the leaders are concerned about the highlanders' potential conversion to Christianity (Ngô 2016; Salemink 2016). The statements of Lip and Rat reflect this position.

Despite the above situation, residents of Q hamlet claim that they have abandoned ancestor worship. One of the factors underlying their decision was a change in the customary land system. An ancestor spirit is closely tied to the customary land system (Phan *et al.* 2003, 447–448), and a bowl of the head was used as a ritual object at the beginning of each year when the Raglai cleared the fields to pray for the fertility of the land, indicating the connections among the ancestor spirit, the descendant group, and the land. The destruction of the traditional land system influenced their decision regarding ancestor worship.

The decision to skip rituals for certain spirits is also connected to the difficult farming conditions in the new settlement and the increased dependence on wage labor.[16] However, the explanations provided by residents in Q hamlet suggest that they are not simply modifying their rituals in response to socioeconomic changes or denying the power of spirits. Instead, they insist that they are acknowledging the power of spirits by pointing out the negative impacts allegedly caused by them. Their narratives demonstrate that changes in ritual practices are their own decision. They use terms and logic

16) The termination of regular worship of certain spirits for farming is not merely a reflection of recent socioeconomic conditions but also correlates with the changing animistic networks among humans, nonhuman beings, and spiritual entities in Q hamlet. A detailed discussion of this theme is beyond the scope of this paper.

derived from the state's religious policy to explain and legitimize their choices.

This section examined how residents in Q hamlet legitimate the recent changes in funeral procedures in relation to spirits. However, not every funeral change is associated with the influence of spirits. The next section focuses on the reduction of time spent on funerals, which people link to conserving resources, and argues that the simplification is seen not just as based on economic rationality or as a compromise of efficacy but as the new way to organize funerals.

Pursuit of a Well-Organized Funeral

Many people in Q hamlet told me they used to dedicate at least a week to burials and funeral feasts. Every preparation process, such as building a tomb, brewing beer, and slaughtering pigs, required prayers along with a sacrifice of chickens. Chanting, dancing, prayers, and the intermissions were much longer, and the feasts continued until midnight. Lien, a peasant in her fifties and daughter of a veteran soldier, shared with me how the recent challenges in breeding domestic animals had impacted the organization of funerals:

> Two additional rituals were conducted prior to the feast. But we climbed down here [the new village]. The chickens died. The pigs died. It costs millions [of VND to conduct a ritual], so we discarded [these rituals]. This was slightly better during war. At that time, we were able to raise chickens and pigs.

The duration of mourning has also been shortened. In places other than Q hamlet, it is considered ideal to have a period of mourning to show affection for the deceased. The period of mourning is skipped only when the deceased is young or newly married or when a death is considered inauspicious. In these cases, all funeral procedures are completed in two or three days, with only limited offerings. In contrast, the mourning period was skipped in seven of the eight funerals I observed in Q hamlet, regardless of the cause of death. Many people in Q hamlet explained that skipping the period of mourning and completing the funerary procedures all at once saved money and labor because they could avoid an additional sacrifice for the deceased, which is required during the period of mourning.

However, I wondered whether these changes were made only to save resources, as the villagers insisted. First, an additional sacrifice during this period requires only one small chicken. Second, as a pragmatic explanation, the period of mourning allows people to prepare offerings by going out to engage in wage labor or breeding domestic animals. Therefore, in T hamlet, where people often take one year to mourn, a family in

poverty told me that it took more than five years until they conducted the feast for their father. Nguyễn Thế Sang, who conducted fieldwork in Raglai settlements in the 1990s, also noted that the omission of the mourning period is possible only when the household has sufficient resources for the funeral (Nguyễn 2000, 218).

Third, in Q hamlet I confirmed at least two cases in which people borrowed money at a high interest rate from a moneylender to rush the organizing of the feast. In both cases, the families received condolence money from the government. In one of the cases, the couple in their late twenties who organized the funeral for the wife's grandfather reported that to afford the expenditure for the funeral, they sold a cow for VND 11 million and borrowed VND 10 million from the moneylender at 8 percent monthly interest. The couple were expecting to receive around VND 20 million from the government as condolence money, although they were unsure about the exact amount and date. The couple told me that half the money would be transferred to the niece (sister's daughter) of their grandfather and the rest would be repaid to the moneylender. The couple chose to pay interest to get the funeral over with rather than waiting to receive the condolence money. Their choices made me think there was an alternative purpose for skipping the period of mourning as well as other funeral procedures.

The following incident shows how the omission of a certain ritual procedure is justified by a man concerned with the custom's authenticity. After the funeral of Dat, a veteran soldier who died in his late seventies, I went to his niece's (sister's daughter) house to observe the ritual of merging his soul with the world of the ancestors. The ritual finished around noon, and on our way home my Cham friend So and I met Hung on the street. Hung (in his late fifties) is a member of the Communist Party and a "meritorious artist." He knows a lot about the myths, cosmology, and customs of the Raglai and was managing Dat's funeral as Dat's distant nephew (Dat's wife is a sister of Hung's mother). Hung asked us how Dat's niece had conducted this procedure. We replied that they were praying by offering slices of pork and liquor. Hung replied that there should be an additional sacrifice of chickens in the afternoon. However, we confirmed with Dat's niece that they would not organize additional rituals in the afternoon, and this is what we told Hung. He replied, "That is also correct. Recently, people have kept rituals tidy [*ngắn gọn*]." Responding to Hung's comment, So told him that Dat's funeral was not long compared to another funeral he and Hung had participated in earlier. Hung replied that "they did [the funeral] very carefully. We cannot stand such a lengthy funeral."

Hung, as the respected man in his matrilineal descent group, vigilantly directed Dat's funeral to avoid missing any important ritual procedures. Simultaneously, he legitimated the simplification of ritual procedures as the "correct way," using the word

"tidy," a word often used by Raglai to describe ritual simplification. This word choice implies people's intention not to associate a simplification of rituals with a decrease in their efficacy.

A similar statement was made by Binh, a peasant in his late forties. He is a successful farmer who breeds more than twenty head of cattle and is respected for often facilitating funerals in the hamlet. He brought up the simplification of the funeral procedure while explaining the "termination" of ancestor worship:

> [Praying to] an ancestor spirit is costly, so we stopped calling [praying to] it. We call it, and it catches [kills] us. For what do we call it? Our kids and grandkids wouldn't know about an ancestor spirit. The spirit of the dead [funeral] is worse. Now, we dance and strike gongs for the spirit, but it will fade away eventually. Our kids and grandkids won't do it. . . . [At the funeral], we go back and forth [between the cemetery and the house] for the spirit. At the funeral of my mother[-in-law], we went [back and forth] three times! Oh! It's easier in C hamlet. They go to the cemetery once, invite the spirit [back to the house], and [the feast] finishes around 5 or 6 [p.m.]. Here [in Q hamlet] it takes longer. But it is more correct. No, C hamlet is also correct. They are just doing it tidy.

How, then, can ritual efficacy and simplification of a ritual be compatible? To explore the question, I focus on people's pursuit of "well-ordered" rituals that emerge in other aspects of ritual management. One of the ways to formalize a funeral among the Raglai is by appointing literate middle-aged men, usually local state officials or police officers in their thirties and forties, to manage the funeral proceedings. Residents refer to them by the Vietnamese term *bán tổ chứ*, which translates to "managing board." Here again, we can see the importance of state instructions that often require government officials to participate in and direct rituals while simultaneously monitoring residents' activities (Malarney 1996, 548–549, 554). However, the appointment of state officials for ritual management is not mandatory, so non-officials are sometimes assigned.

One of the criteria applied by the villagers for choosing a manager is whether they are literate. In many of the funerals that I observed, the manager was required to record information in Vietnamese, such as the number of offerings brought by guests, the names of people who brought the offerings, and the division of roles. In Q hamlet, while the literacy rate of those in their thirties and forties is low, all the managers of the funerals, including non-officials, were fully literate.

However, the purpose for keeping records in the notebook was not clear. The notes were not used for accounting purposes since they did not include any information on spending. On one occasion, a literate young granddaughter of the deceased referred to the lists of names in the notebook to invite guests to the final feast of the funeral. Apart from this, I barely observed a situation in which the managers or family members con-

sulted the notebook during or after the funeral.

The following incident illustrates the Raglai's indifference to the use of the notebook. During the funeral of an 11-year-old boy, I was unable to photograph the notebook, so I revisited the house several days later. The deceased's grandmother told me that her son-in-law, Sinh (in his thirties), might know where the notebook was. Sinh had graduated from junior college and used to work at the forestry management office. When he returned home, I asked him to show me the notebook. Sinh appeared uncertain of its location, but he made an effort to search for it in his well-organized home. He went so far as to go to his parents' house to ask his brothers-in-law, who had assisted in directing the funeral, but was unable to locate its whereabouts. We were unable to find the notebook, and Sinh told me, "The Raglai forget everything after the funeral, so we don't really care about the notebook."

It is important to note that Q hamlet residents generally take great care in storing their important documents. During my research on a microcredit project, I observed that every household I visited stored their bank passbook in a plastic case along with other official documents. However, in the case of funeral records, once the funeral is over, little attention is paid to the notebook, despite it being considered essential for managing the funeral. Even though the notes are forgotten or paid little attention after the funeral, the act of taking notes is still considered important in managing the funeral.

A similar feature can be found in the following aspect of funeral management. Guests who bring a chicken are allowed to chant during the feast, holding the cooked chicken with them. In order to conduct the ritual, the manager jots down the guests' names and lets them come up to the area where the cooked chickens are prepared in baskets. The guests form a line, and the manager calls out their names one by one. Each person walks forward, receives a basket, and walks down to the ritual site. The procedure for preparing the ritual is highly formalized and stark, as if the guests were obeying orders from a teacher or a higher official. This contrasts with other ritual performances that attract audiences with their aesthetics and liveliness.

What is the purpose of recording information in notebooks and giving commands? I argue that the managers are adopting actions derived from state institutions to formalize funerals. They are not only concerned with the faithfulness of the rituals to customs but are also open to imitating actions introduced by external actors who hold power in the current political order, and whose authority they occasionally rely upon. In this sense, skipping a period of mourning or other ritual procedure is aligned with this disposition. While imitating state institutions and simplifying funerals may contribute to facilitating the logistics of ritual management or conserving resources, it also leads to the establishment of a new style of organizing funerals.

Extending the State's Rhetoric

While many Raglai are attempting to shorten and downsize funerals, some people are skeptical about oversimplifying them. Some of the younger educated residents are more committed to the preservation of customary ways. One day I met Sinh (who was introduced in the previous section) just after he had returned from a funeral in Phuoc Dai. He was not pleased with how the funeral had been conducted and told me that "they [the people in the other village] don't know how to chant. They don't play gongs either, although they have them. They've lost our customs!"

Triet (who was introduced as a son of Khai in Section entitled "Legitimating Modifications") has been seeking ways to contest the recent trend of simplifying funerals. Triet is a peasant and the son of a veteran soldier. He is neither a Party member nor an official, but he is periodically employed by a local public corporation because he is literate. He was one of my informants who was knowledgeable about Raglai customs.

Triet's attempt at contestation was observed at his father's funeral, where his eldest brother, Luyen, was in charge. Luyen is in his early forties, an independent house contractor and a trusted man whom the villagers often ask to perform the role of ritual manager. In the process of deciding what sequences to conduct for the post-funeral, Luyen's mother, Vy, hoped to sing a reciprocal song. Luyen accepted his mother's request but decided not to perform a skit so they could save some time. After the final feast, Triet and other young men were preparing to go to the cemetery to take the final offerings to the deceased. Luyen reminded Triet that they would not perform a skit and told him to come back to the hamlet as soon as possible. Luyen was inclined to avoid a prolonged and old-fashioned ritual.

I followed Triet to the cemetery. After the group made the offering, they moved to the nearby river, sat under a tree, and began drinking. Triet told me that they would perform a skit, so they needed to wait for a while in the field until the soul of the deceased had returned to the hamlet. Triet said, "It's our custom, so we need to do it" (even though Luyen had decided against it). While they were drinking, Luyen kept calling Triet, and Triet kept replying that they were on their way. Approximately an hour later Triet and the others headed back home, and they started the skit without prior notice as soon as they arrived. As the skit required a response from the ritual masters and elderly people waiting at home, the latter had no choice but to respond to the younger relatives and join in the skit because ignoring the call would be considered inappropriate. The skit was successfully completed, but Luyen decided to skip the reciprocal song although his mother wanted it.

Triet's quest to contest the call for simplification was seen at another funeral where he was appointed as manager. At this funeral, I was joining people to paint a tomb at the cemetery. The painting was finished around 4 p.m., but the ritual masters and the relatives of the deceased had not arrived. One of the people at the cemetery made a phone call to Triet, and Triet replied that they were still cooking pigs to be offered at the later ritual. In most funerals that I observed, the prayer at the grave was conducted in the early afternoon, but the people at the cemetery explained to me that it used to be conducted in the late afternoon or evening. Despite their explanations, I thought that the delay was simply caused by Triet's inexperience in managing funerals.

The ritual masters finally arrived at the cemetery around 6 p.m. and began the prayer, surrounded by the audience. After the prayer, everyone returned to the hamlet and began another sequence, where the ritual masters and the older relatives of the deceased sat on the ground, invited each other over for beer and cigarettes, and enjoyed themselves. This sequence was like an improvisational play where these men acted as if they were truly enjoying the moment. At this funeral, this part took longer than usual. After around forty minutes, the "leader of the deceased" finally told the gong players to start striking their gongs so that the masters could start dancing and move on to the next prayer. However, despite the request, the masters did not start dancing for a while as they were still preoccupied with drinking and smoking. Finally, one of the gong players urged them to start dancing, saying that his hand hurt!

After the dancing, the masters took a break while the managers prepared the offerings for the final feast. However, the break took so long that I had finished two bottles of beer while chatting with the gong players. I looked for Triet so that I could photograph his notebook. He was in a hut, drinking and playing cards with friends. Eventually, around 8 p.m., the prayer started. The ritual masters spun around seven times very slowly inside the house, to the sound of gongs. Many people, both young and old, surrounded the house to watch the performance. Another intermission followed, and the next prayer did not begin until 9 p.m. Triet entered the ritual site at every intermission to make sure the offerings were prepared correctly, but he did not try to control the time schedules.

Then, Binh—in his early thirties, an official of the People's Committee of Phuoc Thang, and a distant relative of the deceased—came to the ritual site and shouted to the ritual masters, "What time is it? It's already 9 p.m. We need to keep the ritual tidy." Female relatives sitting next to the ritual masters told Binh, "The ritual masters are now smoking." However, the final prayer started almost immediately. I was surprised because people had often told me that the masters' decisions must always be respected. However, no one at the site complained about Binh, and the rituals continued as if

nothing had happened.

I initially thought that Triet was inexperienced in ritual management. However, I later realized that he was deliberately stepping back from controlling the ritual procedures. I noticed that the masters' performances were attracting many spectators, including myself, who were taking in the atmosphere. I realized that Triet was trying to avoid the newly introduced ways to manage funerals that were becoming increasingly popular and involved time-saving and somewhat bureaucratic formalization. Even though the Raglai do not deny their customs or the power of spirits, the newly adopted ways of management inevitably damage the aesthetic aspect of the rituals, which is an integral element of a successful funeral. Ironically, the state's rhetoric of the "preservation of distinctive cultures" legitimizes what Triet was doing. Triet was not ignoring or denying the state's principles; he was interpreting the state discourse differently from the state's ideology and showing the virtues of a slower, less-disciplined ritual.

Conclusion

The socioeconomic transition caused by the implementation of state policies has had an impact on the religious life of Bac Ai. This has taken the form of a simplification of funerary procedures. However, the changes are not seen as a compromise but rather as an alternative way to organize funerals that is more in line with people's current way of life. To legitimize these changes, people adopt the discourse that was disseminated during the revolutionary era and justify their changing relationship with spirits while still recognizing and sustaining the power of the spirits. Moreover, to ensure the simplified rituals' efficacy, they have adopted administrative formulations such as designating managers as the "management board," appointing literate personnel to take notes, and incorporating a management style that resembles that of a military or a school. Furthermore, those who opposed the modifications sought to extend the ritual to restore its aesthetic elements, which had been compromised by the changes, and used the state's discourse on preserving distinctive ethnic cultures to justify their claims and efforts.

Although the state continues to be an actor that controls people's religious practices in Vietnam, after the relaxation of regulations in the 1990s its authority is perceived to support the validity of religious practices. Previous studies have shown how people integrated or accepted elements derived from the state authority into their religious practices and viewed this as an act of ensuring the legitimacy of their religious practices under state control. In contrast, this article illustrates how an ethnic minority group

borrowed and imitated the state's idioms, techniques, and rhetoric to reform their religious practices in negotiation with conventional perspectives and local values. This imitation does not solely signify the pursuit of state recognition but represents a creative approach to the construction of religious practices.

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Where Do the Ravenous Spirits (*Phi Pop*) Go? Nakasang Village in Southern Laos as a Place of Cultural Healing

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Spirits are ubiquitous and important in the everyday lives of ethnic Lao people. Amongst the most feared of those are ravenous spirits (*phi pop*), which are believed to use human hosts to cause illness or even kill other humans and livestock by eating their internal organs. Because of the severe danger that ravenous spirits are believed to pose, those believed to be harboring them are typically forced to leave their communities, sometimes permanently. So, where do these ravenous spirits go when they are chased out of their villages? Many accused *phi pop* from as far north as Luang Prabang and as far south as northeastern Cambodia end up in Nakasang, a bustling trading center on the banks of the Mekong River in Khong District, Champasak Province, in southern Laos. That is because Nakasang—and a few surrounding villages—are well known for welcoming those who are shunned in their own communities. In this article, I describe the process that allows those accused of harboring ravenous spirits to stay in Nakasang, and the cultural healing ritual program that they undergo once they have moved there. More important, I explain how the belief in ravenous spirits allows communities to expel disliked people even when they are not actually *phi pop*. Indeed, the belief in ravenous spirits has become a convenient way of ridding undesirables, with Nakasang playing a critical role in Lao cultural healing. Cultural healing helps locals deal with *phi pop* and position themselves in relation to the state.

Keywords: spirits, spirit mediums, cultural healing, Laos, possession

Introduction

Within the cosmology of ethnic Lao people living in Laos, northeastern Thailand, and northeastern Cambodia, spirit beliefs/beliefs in occult forces are frequently intertwined with Buddhism (Esterik 1982; Holt 2009; McDaniel 2011; Terwiel 2012; Kanya 2017). Ethnic Lao people in mainland Southeast Asia typically believe in a particular type of malevolent spirit (*phi*) that enters human bodies and causes other people and livestock

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to become ill or die, especially young children, by eating their livers and other internal organs without their victims knowing. They are ravenous spirits or *phi pop* (*phi pope*, *phii pòòp*, ຜີປອບ) (Hours 1973; Sangun 1976; Supaporn 1999; Pasakorn 2011; Kanya 2016; 2018), a type of *phi* frequently portrayed in Thai films (Tanadet n.d.) and reportedly similar to *phi ka* in central Thailand (Phya Anuman and Coughlin 1954) and northern Thailand (Anan 1984). They are also similar to *phi phu* amongst the ethnic Shan in northwestern Thailand (Tannenbaum 1993). *Phi pop* can anthropologically best be described as types of "witches," a term that E. E. Evans-Pritchard defined based on work in Africa as involving "belief that a certain individual has immanent mystical powers which can be used to harm others" (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 21). Indeed, Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg (2013, 2–3) include "witchcraft" in a long list of phenomena that are frequently included under the heading of "magic."

I first heard of *phi pop* in 1993 when I was living in Hang Khone Village, on Khone Island, in the southernmost part of Laos. I had been residing in the village for less than a year when locals suddenly declared that a *phi pop* had been eating the livers of babies who had recently died in the village. At first the villagers did not know who the culprit was, but eventually evidence emerged that a man in the community had been practicing magic before becoming the host of the *phi pop*. Finally, many villagers reportedly approached the man and asked him if he was connected with the deaths. He initially denied any involvement but later reportedly admitted (*oke pak*, ອອກປາກ) that he was a ravenous spirit. According to Phya Anuman Rajathon and Margaret Coughlin:

> The obsessed person when ill will say something like this: "I get inside this man as a revenge for a wrong he has done me. My name is so and so, my wife and children are so and so, and I live in such and such a village." (Phya Anuman and Coughlin 1954, 165)

Referred to as *oke pak*, this is a kind of confession in Lao. Thus, it became untenable for the man to remain in the village. He and his family had to abandon their house and farmland and move elsewhere.

The man accused of being the *phi pop*, Mr. Bounsou, had previously been in charge of Hang Khone Village's accounts. He collected land taxes for the state. However, some people claimed that his misuse of magic had resulted in him becoming corrupted and thus vulnerable to being possessed by a *phi pop*. In any case, Bounsou soon realized that if he remained in the village he would be blamed for all unnatural deaths, thus putting his own life at risk, due to potential retribution from other villagers. Therefore, he took what he could and left, and soon after his wife and daughter followed. I will return to the story of Bounsou's dramatic departure from Hang Khone, but for now it is worth mentioning that even thirty years on, Bounsou has not returned to the village he was

forced to leave in 1993. After departing Hang Khone, Bounsou initially resided near the Mekong River in Nakasang Village, also in Khong District, but later moved to Mai Sivilay Village (officially part of Nakasang Village), where he told me, in 2017, that it was easy for him to make a living building cement chedis (stupas). He squatted on a piece of land and built a small house. When I met him again, his first wife had died eight or nine years earlier and he had remarried.

Phi pop, or ravenous spirits, are sometimes accused of being active when an unusually large number of people in a community experience health ailments that cannot be easily explained, although people typically rely on empirical evidence to assess the circumstances (Kanya 2018). This is a common trope in studies on "magic" and/or "witchcraft," presenting this as a "residual category" when other explanations fail (see Otto and Stausberg 2013). If a *phi pop* is believed to be causing illness or killing people, community members typically attempt to identify the spirit's host. That person, once identified, is then chased out of the community,[1] and sometimes his or her house is burned down. This article seeks to answer a number of questions. Where do these human hosts of *phi pop* go when they are forced to leave their villages? How does Lao society address this group of outcasts? What cultural healing process is adopted for addressing the *phi pop* phenomenon? I also intend to answer a question that I did not initially raise, but which emerged from my informants during fieldwork: Is there a particular social function played by the expulsion of people accused of being *phi pop*, and if so, how does that work?

Cultural healing is a key concept in this article. There are many kinds of cultural healing, associated with different types of mental and physical illness. Jean Comaroff (1980), for example, emphasized how shared symbolic categories amongst particular cultural groups are often used for cultural healing processes. R. Vance Peavy (1996) has also advocated for considering certain types of counselling as cultural healing. In addition, Indigenous societies in Canada have long utilized visual arts, dance, music, drama, and storytelling for purposes of cultural healing (Archibald and Dewar 2010). Here, I consider cultural healing to be something that can occur in a variety of ways, often using multiple approaches, and is frequently related to traditional forms of justice.

Kanya Wattanagun (2018) studied the subject of ravenous spirits by examining ideas about magical beliefs vis-à-vis scientific knowledge in northeastern Thailand. Here, however, I adopt a different approach. On the one hand, in line with Kanya (2018),

1) According to Phya Anuman and Coughlin (1954, 154), after an accused *phi pop* is chased away, sometimes villagers will ask a Buddhist monk to chant certain inscriptions in the middle of the village to keep the *phi pop* from returning. However, I have not heard of this happening in southern Laos.

I do not pass judgment about who is and who is not afflicted by a *phi pop*, or whether *phi pop* are real or not. Instead, I accept that *phi pop* are malevolent spirits that have a significant meaning for ethnic Lao people. However, based on my interviews with the headman of Nakasang Village, people previously accused of harboring a *phi pop*, and regular ethnic Lao people living in Nakasang and other villages in the area, I have come to view the ravenous spirit phenomenon as often serving as a vehicle for dealing with community social conflicts caused by individuals in the community.

In this article, I focus on the five communities clustered around Nakasang Village, an important transport and market hub adjacent to the Mekong River in Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos. However, I also draw upon other interviews conducted in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia. I am interested in the centrality of the Nakasang cluster of villages, including why it has emerged as a location for the cultural healing of *phi pop*. Indeed, the Nakasang cluster is possibly the only grouping of communities in southern Laos that explicitly accept people accused of being *phi pop* for the purpose of being cured from the affliction.

I am particularly interested in other functions associated with the belief in *phi pop*, and how the idea of *phi pop* sometimes serves to reduce social conflict in ethnic Lao communities. One contention of the village headman of Nakasang, Phone Savanh—one of my main informants—is that the idea of *phi pop* can address community social conflict by allowing people to accuse someone of being a *phi pop* and then using that pretext to force the accused to leave the community, thus reducing exploitative economic relations of various kinds. Furthermore, at least three years of disciplining away from the home village can have an important effect. People who are seen to incite conflict are removed from the community, which often leads to improved social harmony (*khvam samakhi*, ຄວາມສາມັກຄີ). Here, I make three main arguments. First, that Nakasang Village serves an important social purpose offering cultural healing for people afflicted with a *phi pop*. Second, I contend that the idea of *phi pop* itself is more than just about malevolent spirits. It is often a means for expelling unpopular people from communities. Third, even though the idea of *phi pop* is used to expel unpopular people, that does not mean Lao people do not believe in *phi pop*, even if they recognize that most people accused of being afflicted with a *phi pop* are not actually so. Thus, this article contributes to better understanding how cultural healing related to *phi pop* is typically conceptualized and conducted in southern Laos, what the social role of *phi pop* within southern Lao society is, and how local people position themselves in relation to the state when it comes to dealing with accused *phi pop*.

The article includes the following sections: First, some background about beliefs in *phi pop* is provided, in the context of more general Lao beliefs and practices. I then

turn to providing more information about the methods used for this study, before explaining and interpreting the system of cultural healing of *phi pop* adopted in the Nakasang cluster of villages, including providing a firsthand account of one of the rituals associated with this process. I then consider the social purpose of *phi pop* in Lao society, before finally providing some concluding remarks.

The Lao and the *Phi Pop*

Phi pop, or ravenous spirits, are widely known as *phi* spirits in ethnic Lao cosmology.[2] As Kanya (2018, 79) has perceptively argued, belief in *phi pop* can be seen as part of the broader Lao belief system, one that—like science itself—is often based on (1) a body of propositions and practices grounded in the assessment of the empirical evidence, and (2) speculation on the possible causes of a phenomenon. The latter is inferred from the phenomenon's manifested effect, albeit one that is only partial.

One thing that needs to be clarified is that *phi pop* are not the same as standard Lao spirit mediums (known as *nang thiam* to the Lao in Laos and Cambodia or *lang song* or *rang song* in Thailand). Spirit mediumship has been subject to considerable academic inquiry in recent decades, and it typically involves a person becoming possessed by one or more spirits, often the spirits of important and respected ancestors or community leaders (Tambiah 1970; Turton 1972; Irvine 1984; Muecke 1992; Mills 1995; Morris 2000; Cohen 2001; Grow 2002; Denes 2006; Stengs 2009; McDaniel 2011; Nilsen 2011; Baird 2014). In such cases, spirit mediums frequently provide advice about various important aspects of the lives of the people who call on them. They help to cure people who have been cursed, but they also provide information about stolen water buffalo and cows, help with personal relations between husbands and wives, and provide unsolicited advice to community leaders at certain times of year. Spirit mediums are not blamed for things they say when possessed, as they are understood to have no control over their words. As Guido Sprenger (2021) pointed out, possession and shamanism are typically differentiated, with the former being involuntary and the latter requiring a quest for information. Roy Ellen (1993, 6) similarly differentiates between witchcraft and sorcery, with the former being seen as involving involuntary possession and the latter intentional magic, although Otto and Stausberg state that both often come

2) Tanadet Torsri (n.d.) translated *phi pop* as "ogre," but I do not think this translation fits well with what ethnic Lao people understand *phi pop* to be. Following Benjamin Baumann (2016), even the word *phi* cannot be translated unambiguously. We need to see *phi* as having a more complex meaning.

under the heading of "magic," a term that is used "to refer to a wide range of phenomena" (Otto and Stausberg 2013, 2–3). However, there are various subtle differences between types of possession, and the intertwined nature of influences is important. In this case, we are talking about involuntary possession, witchcraft possession. The host is not fully blamed for the actions of the *phi pop*, but the situation is somewhat different from spirit mediums because *phi pop* spirits are much more malevolent and dangerous. In addition, the hosts are often believed to have become involved in magic or sorcery, thus unintentionally, but still carelessly, facilitating the possession. Therefore, the host is somewhat to blame.

Crucially, *phi pop* are widely recognized as malevolent and dangerous, unlike spirit mediums. Thus, even if the hosts of *phi pop* are not explicitly blamed for the harm that *phi pop* do, because they are hosting a dangerous spirit, it is recognized that the only way to rid the community of this danger is to either kill the host (which rarely happens today) or expel the host along with the *phi pop*. In addition, it is recognized that *phi pop* hosts can be cured through particular culturally grounded practices, something that is not required for spirit mediums.

While Lao people typically refer to ravenous spirits as *phi pop*, these spirits are also sometimes referred to as *phi pop phi phong*. According to ethnic Lao informants from Sesan District, Stung Treng Province, northeastern Cambodia, *phi pop* are a less dangerous version of *phi phong*. These informants believe that *phi pop* can cause someone to become ill but that they typically do not kill people. *Phi phong*, on the other hand, are believed to be much more dangerous and are the extreme version of *phi pop*, the one that kills people. Sometimes ethnic Lao people say that people "*pen pop pen phong*" (are *pop* are *phong*), indicating that the latter is more dangerous than the former.[3] However, according to Phya Anuman and Coughlin (1954, 161), the word *phong* means "glowing," making *phi phong* the "glowing *phi*." Ethnic Lao informants also report that those who become *phi phong* often possess a tuberous plant or *van* believed to have special powers. These people are often considered quite contagious, especially if they spit on someone. Phya Anuman and Coughlin (1954, 163), however, claim, in contradiction to my ethnic Lao informants, that *phi phong* do not harm people. In any case, due to these unresolved contradictions, in this article I refer to both *phi pop* and *phi phong* as simply *phi pop*, conflating the two as most Lao people do, even though such a practice may not seem correct to some. Phya Anuman and Coughlin (1954, 165) also claim that it is believed that *phi pop* cannot harm their own kind, and that they do not hurt digni-

3) Ethnic Lao couple, personal communication, Phluk Village, Sesan District, Stung Treng Province, June 10, 2022.

taries or people from cities, for fear of becoming impotent.[4] According to the anthropologist Katherine Bowie, the northern Thai equivalent of *phi pop*, *phi ka*, can be translated as the "greedy spirit," a point I will return to later.[5]

Sangun Suwanlert (1976), a Thai psychiatrist, provided some other clues for understanding the phenomenon, through the following observation about the type of people he saw being accused of being *phi pop* in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

> Working in the health station and in the villages, I was soon able to recognize a person who had been possessed by a *phii pob*. A possessed woman was usually distinguished in her beauty, dramatic in manner and charmingly seductive . . . the possessed hosts were sensitive and easily stimulated, quick-tempered, self-centered, and susceptible to suggestions. (Sangun 1976, 81)

However, one difference between the past and present is that Sangun found that most *phi pop* hosts in northeastern Thailand were women, while more recently I found that most *phi pop* hosts in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia were men. This fits Kanya (2018), who also found that most *phi pop* in northeastern Thailand were men. This may be because the role of women in matrilineal Lao society in the past was stronger, and so they were often seen as the greedy ones and thus worthy of being accused of being *phi pop*, whereas nowadays men have gained more prominent social roles and thus are more frequently accused of being greedy (Baird and Soukhaphon, forthcoming). Furthermore, Sangun (1976) did not suggest that the personality of those accused of being *phi pop* could be a major reason why others did not like them and accused them of being *phi pop*. As will become evident below, it is not just wealth but how people use their wealth and power that is important.

One important aspect associated with the beliefs and practices connected to *phi pop* is that people in the Lao-speaking world typically consider Buddhist rituals and rituals related to spirits, *phi pop*, or spirit mediums to be firmly separated from Buddhism, even if certain ritual aspects have been borrowed from that religion. Crucially, Buddhist monks do not attend spirit medium or *phi pop*-related rituals, and spirit mediums do not participate in Buddhist rituals, and spirit mediums and Buddhist monks are not considered compatible.

Following is a short account of one recent incident that was alleged to have been associated with *phi pop*, which I present here to provide a better sense of how beliefs related to *phi pop* often play out in Laos. In May 2019, a healthy middle-aged woman in

4) Anthropologists typically refer to possession involving the involuntary hosting of a spirit in a human body as witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1937), including in Laos (Sprenger 2021) and Thailand (Tannenbaum 1993).

5) Katherine Bowie, personal communication, Madison, January 17, 2023.

Hatsaikhoun Village, Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, fell down in her bathroom. She was rushed to the provincial hospital in Pakse, but ten days later she died without the doctors being able to say what the cause of death was. In June 2019 her husband, Somphong, an old friend, explained that other villagers told him that they believed his wife's internal organs had been eaten by a *phi pop*. Somphong said it was not easy for him to believe that she had died due to this, but there was no other explanation. What he meant was a scientific explanation, one that conformed with the Marxist-Leninist state's insistence on exclusively physical causation. There was more to the story, however. Prior to the woman's death, a man from Pakse had come to live in the village. He was a professional fortune teller (*mo dou*), and he rented a house in the village. Soon after the man's arrival, two people became inexplicably ill, although they were reportedly cured by someone in the village before their conditions became too bad. Later, other villagers chased the fortune teller away—but since he did not have any government paperwork affirming his residence, he could not move to Nakasang. At the time I spoke to Somphong, the man's whereabouts were unknown.[6] This sort of story is common, with there being typically various unresolved aspects of a particular situation, as is the case here.

Methods

This ethnographic qualitative study represents the accumulated work of many years of casual and more focused research among ethnic Lao people in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. As mentioned in the introduction, I first became aware of *phi pop* in late 1993, and I have been informally learning about the belief system surrounding them ever since. I have also developed long-standing relationships with many of them living in the Nakasang area. However, in 2017 in particular, I decided to focus on studying the circumstances in Nakasang Village, the central location for receiving and curing people afflicted by *phi pop* in southern Laos. In May 2017 I conducted a long interview with the village headman, Phone Savanh, who was responsible for managing the new *phi pop* who arrived to stay in the community each year. On the same day, I also attended a ritual and curing session for *phi pop* who had come to stay in Nakasang and a few surrounding villages: Phiang Dy, Hat Khi Khouay, Mai Sivilay, and Phon Pho. These five communities are included in three official villages. On the same day, I also interviewed Bounsou, the man whose circumstances were recounted in the introduction. I conducted

6) Somphong Bounphasy, personal communication, Hatsaikhoun Village, Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, June 22, 2019.

other key informant interviews with people in Khong District and in Paris.

In May and June 2022 I conducted ten additional interviews about spirit mediums, including in some cases about *phi pop*, with ethnic Lao people living in Preah Vihear, Stung Treng, and Ratanakiri Provinces, in northeastern Cambodia. However, my focus during those interviews was more on spirit mediums, and there was not as much detailed discussion about *phi pop* as had been the case in southern Laos. These interviews deepened my general knowledge of local understandings about *phi pop* but were hardly the core of my research on *phi pop*. However, they did allow me to confirm that ethnic Lao villagers from northeastern Cambodia also send accused *phi pop* to the Nakasang cluster for cultural healing. They have heard about Nakasang from relatives and friends crossing the border, and it has not been difficult for people in northeastern Cambodia to come and stay in southern Laos. Some stay just for the three years of treatment, some for longer, justified by the need for cultural healing.

Managing *Phi Pop* in Nakasang Village

Although Nakasang and the surrounding villages encompass the only known place in Laos where *phi pop* can reportedly be culturally healed, Nakasang is better known as a thriving trading community. Its inhabitants are almost all ethnically Lao and are involved mainly in either fishing, fish trading, or small consumer goods trading. Some villagers work for a sawmill in Phiang Dy. However, most people also cultivate rainfed rice, mainly for their own consumption. Except for Mai Sivilay Village, which is located about two kilometers from the Mekong River, most of the wooden stilted houses in the villages stretch along the edge of the Mekong or are close to other houses adjacent to the river.

Nakasang is an economic center and transport node, although this development occurred long after Nakasang started culturally healing *phi pop*. Essentially, public transportation to Pakse and Vientiane leaves from Nakasang. In addition, Nakasang is the main trading hub for the many villages located on islands in the Mekong River in the southern part of the Siphandone area, including the Khone Falls. Each morning dozens of motorized long-tail boats can be found docked at the banks of the river in front of Nakasang, since many villagers from dozens of island villages go there to sell fish, buy various consumer items, board buses to travel elsewhere, or simply have a morning coffee and talk with friends.

In May 2017, Phone Savanh had been the headman of Nakasang Village for many years and was quite familiar with the *phi pop* situation in his village and the other sur-

rounding villages that are considered extensions of his community with regard to accepting and curing *phi pop* (the Nakasang cluster).[7] The cultural healing process, which includes important rituals overseen by village spirit mediums, also connects the communities. Phone explained that each year about ten people accused of being *phi pop* elsewhere come and ask to move into his village in order to undergo the cultural healing process. This process is a necessary precondition to coming to the Nakasang cluster to cure afflictions related to ravenous spirits. Once the people take up residence in the communities of the Nakasang cluster, they need to undergo a series of rituals designed to cure their affliction by ravenous spirits. Sometimes these people, mainly men, come alone, but the majority arrive with their immediate families, predominantly spouses and children.

There are important similarities between *phi pop* beliefs and practices and aspects of what is referred to as witchcraft in Africa. As is the case with *phi pop*, just being labeled as a witch in South Africa can cause serious problems (Mavhungu 2000), with the stigma being as significant there as in Laos. However, there are also important differences. For example, in Nigeria witches have demanded that witchcraft be recognized as a religion (Bachmann 2021), a debate that is not occurring in Laos or other parts of Southeast Asia, at least as far as I know.

Phone explained that there was now a clear system for accepting people accused of harboring *phi pop*, as more people were coming to the village than ever before. However, Nakasang has been essentially accepting people accused of being *phi pop* for as long as anyone can remember. Phone emphasized that it was important for him to follow the state law (*kotmai*, ກົດໝາຍ) but that he also needed to consider cultural and social norms. He explained that there were two main rules that had to be followed by everyone who came to stay in the Nakasang cluster: first, they had to bring official paperwork from the leadership of the village where they previously lived, indicating that their departure from that village was recognized and acceptable (see Fig. 1 for an example). This was important, Phone explained, to prevent criminals from coming to his village pretending that they were *phi pop* when they were actually trying to evade the authorities. People were also not allowed to come to Nakasang to escape debt. Phone claimed that in the past a few murderers had come to the village falsely claiming to be accused *phi pop*. In those cases, Phone reported the newcomers to the police, and they were arrested. He also required that family members, at least initially, accompany the new arrival. In addition, if a Buddhist monk was a *phi pop*, he was required to disrobe before

7) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, May 1, 2017.

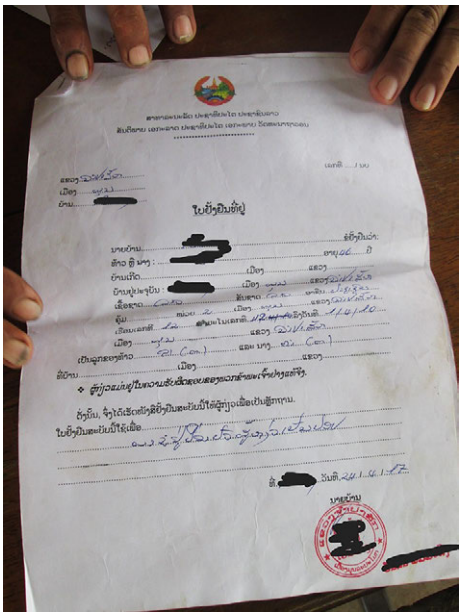

Fig. 1 An Official Residence Document Confirming that a Man, Aged 46, Who Lived in a Village in Mounlapoumok District, Champasak Province, Wanted to Go to Nakasang Village to Receive Treatment for Being a *Phi Pop*. The Document Is Dated April 24, 2017 and Is Signed and Stamped by the Village Headman

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

coming to Nakasang. Phone also claimed that the village spirit medium warned him if something was wrong. The second rule was that those who wanted to move into the Nakasang cluster had to admit that they were *phi pop*. If someone came and did not accept that they were a *phi pop*, they would not be accepted by the community leadership; the rationale behind this is that a person can be treated only after accepting their circumstances. Thus, acceptance of being a ravenous spirit is a necessary precondition for being allowed to live in the Nakasang cluster. Here we can see how pressures related to social relations can lead to the acceptance of cultural healing.

Furthermore, once a new arrival has accepted that he or she is a *phi pop* and has moved into the Nakasang cluster, that person is required to participate in the community's healing program. That means the person has to participate fully in two ritual sessions a year over a three-year period, or six sessions in total. These sessions typically occur on the third day of the third lunar month according to the Lao lunar calendar (typically in February) and the third day of the sixth lunar month (typically in May). If an accused *phi pop* comes to the village and refuses to participate in two sessions per year for at least a three-year period, that person will be expelled from the community

due to not being willing to receive treatment. Details of how these sessions are conducted are explained in the next section of the article.

Phone explained that if someone missed one of the six required sessions for whatever reason but still agreed to be treated, that person had to start over and complete six consecutive sessions before they were deemed to have been cured. However, if someone was sick and could not attend a ritual for medical reasons, he or she was allowed to make up the missed session—but before the session started, that person's relatives had to come and explain why the accused *phi pop* could not attend. Clearly there is some discipline to the process. Phone said that about 90 percent of the *phi pop* who came to his village followed the rules. He claimed that those who refused to do so and left the village often died soon after. He was essentially suggesting that refusing the cultural healing offered in the village could have life-or-death implications.

Phone said that in one case, a person who had come to Nakasang as a ravenous spirit wanted Phone to prepare a letter explaining that he had never been a *phi pop*, even though he had initially agreed that he was one in order to be able to move to Nakasang. However, Phone told the man that even if he was not a *phi pop*, he needed to continue to acknowledge that he was one, at least until he had completed the three-year treatment program required by the village leadership in the Nakasang cluster. If not, other villagers would chase him away.

Phone claimed that about 70 percent of those who came to Nakasang as accused *phi pop* ended up staying in the community permanently, while the other 30 percent eventually returned to their original villages, the ones they had been expelled from. He said that he gave those who completed treatment documents allowing them to return home, but that he always wrote on the documents that the returnee needed to listen carefully to other villagers. However, he admitted that some former residents lapsed and had to return to Nakasang for a second round of treatment. When people first arrived in his village, they were required to offer a pig to the local spirit medium, and the total cost of the offering ritual was about 500,000 kip (about US$50 at the time of the interview). However, if people had to return a second time, they were required to pay 1 million kip, a measure that was presumably intended to punish those who had not sufficiently heeded community advice. Phone noted that almost everyone accused of being a *phi pop* could afford the cost of coming to Nakasang, suggesting that very poor people were hardly ever accused of being *phi pop*. Phone said that traditions (*heet khong*) were used to benefit the community. He did not refer to the law, but he implied that *heet khong* functioned like traditional law, thus indicating how traditions could be used for the benefit of the community. Phone acknowledged that he served as a sort of traditional authority, although he also represented the state and recognized the need to uphold

government law as well. He insisted that as village headman, he did not keep any of the money for himself or his family but used it for developing the village. He also claimed that even though not all the rules related to *phi pop* were written down, the district government knew about them and did not object. He said *phi pop* had been coming to Nakasang for so long that nobody could remember how many people in the village were previously connected with *phi pop* accusations. However, most of those in the cluster of villages had once been accused of being *phi pop* themselves, were relatives of someone previously accused, or were descendants of a person accused of being a *phi pop*—although nobody could provide any definitive statistics, since there was no village-wide data collection on the subject. I was told by villagers that many did not want to admit they had been accused in the past.

One of the differences between *phi pop* in southern Laos and *phi ka* in northern Thailand is that while the former are not typically considered to run in families, heredity is more common in northern Thailand for *phi ka* (Anan 1984). This may also reflect regional differences between spirit mediums, or cultural differences between the Lao and Nyouan/Lue in the area, as I have noticed that spirit mediums in central and northern Laos, and upper northeastern and northern Thailand, tend to have more hereditary links to other spirit mediums compared to southern Laos, lower northeastern Thailand, and northeastern Cambodia. Evans-Pritchard (1937, 23) reported that witchcraft in the area of the Sudan that he studied was largely hereditary.

Phone could not tell me how long Nakasang had been serving as a center for curing *phi pop*, but he said that it had served this purpose since before he was born. However, he explained that the characteristics of *phi pop* coming to his village had changed in recent years: in the past, *phi pop* were usually above fifty years old; but an increasing number were now just over thirty years old.[8)]

Phone claimed that people came to Nakasang from ethnic Lao villages as far north as Luang Prabang in northern Laos and as far south as Stung Treng Province in northeastern Cambodia.[9)] Word about Nakasang appears to have traveled extensively but not uniformly by word of mouth. However, Phone noted that only three or four families

8) When I was in Paris in 2013, a Catholic priest told me that while he lived in southern Laos, between 1969 and 1976, a Lao Catholic priest known as Khoun Pho Thansamai lived in Phia Fai District (now Pathoumphone District), Champasak Province, and protected people accused of being *phi pop*. Villagers reportedly gave the priest fruit for solving the *phi pop* problem (Father Moreu, personal communication, Paris, August 2, 2013).

9) Villagers in Srekasang (Nakasang Village) in Siem Bok District, Stung Treng Province, northeastern Cambodia—the ethnic Lao village farthest down the Mekong River in Cambodia—confirmed that if they had a *phi pop* in their village, they would tell that person to go to Nakasang Village in Laos for treatment (personal communication, villagers in Srekasang Village, June 13, 2022).

had previously come from as far away as Luang Prabang. He reported that nobody from northeastern Thailand came to be treated in Nakasang, as they typically did not know about the role played by the village.[10] He also emphasized that the only people who came from Cambodia were ethnic Lao, and that no ethnic Khmer people came to be treated at Nakasang.[11] Confirming Phone's claims, an ethnic Lao 76-year-old spirit medium living in Phabang Village, Siem Pang District, northeastern Cambodia, told me that many years earlier a man and his whole family had been banished from her village because the husband was accused of being a *phi pop*. She said that they went to live in Phiang Dy, one of the villages in the Nakasang cluster. Later the villagers in Phabang Village burned down the house of the expelled family, and they never returned.[12]

Phone said he had heard there was a place in northeastern Thailand where those accused of being *phi pop* were also treated, but that there the cure involved certain chants (*mon*).[13] He claimed, however, that the method of cultural healing used there was not as effective as that used in Nakasang.[14]

Curing the *Phi Pop*

On May 1, 2017, I attended one of the two cultural healing sessions held each year for *phi pop* living in the Nakasang cluster. The day of the ritual was chosen according to the Lao lunar calendar: the third day of the Lao sixth lunar month. However, it was the beginning of the rainy season, and there had been very little rain so far. This made the curing pond, or *nong cheut* in Lao, quite dry, with only a little water at the bottom. It resembled a small mud hole more than a pond. According to villagers, this natural pond was made sacred (*saksit*, ສັກສິດ) for cleansing before anyone could remember, and

10) The political divide between the Lao PDR and Thailand that has existed since 1975 may have prevented information about Nakasang from traveling to Thailand, and it may also have kept people from crossing from Thailand to the Lao PDR for treatment.

11) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, May 1, 2017.

12) Me Thao Peng, personal communication, Phabang Village, Thmor Keo Commune, Siem Pang District, Stung Treng Province, northeastern Cambodia, June 7, 2022.

13) Banna Saonan Village, Nahuabo Subdistrict, Punnanikom District, Sakhon Nakhon Province is one place in northeastern Thailand known for curing people accused of being *phi pop*, but patients are required to drink holy water as part of the treatment (Tanadet n.d.). Phya Anuman and Coughlin (1954) also reported that sometimes many people accused of being *phi pop* in Thailand form a village and live on their own.

14) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, Khong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, May 1, 2017.

Fig. 2 Villagers in Nakasang Bring *Khanh Ha* to the Village *Ta Ho*. May 1, 2017

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

the spirits that inhabit the bodies of village spirit mediums are still responsible for sanctifying the villages for the purpose of dealing with *phi pop*. The *nong cheut*, sanctified by the spirit of *pho thao* Teum (Grandpa Teum) and rituals conducted by spirit mediums at the adjacent *ta ho* (spirit house), are intended to neutralize or make "tasteless, bland, watered down, or weak" (*cheut*) the *phi pop* in those afflicted; this hints that being a *phi pop* is viewed as an illness that needs to be weakened or cured.

The *ta ho* is a simple wooden building on stilts, like many others found in villages or in forests near villages. This is where the rituals occur. One of the two female spirit mediums in the Nakasang cluster arrived at the *ta ho* at the agreed-upon time, and she went up into the spirit house and sat down.

Apparently every family in the Nakasang cluster sent a representative to the ritual, so as not to anger the spirits. They all came with a small assemblage of flowers, candles, and a small amount of money (*khanh ha*), materials that typically accompany spirit medium rituals (Fig. 2). In effect, they are required to make the spirits happy. Villagers also brought small bottles of Lao whiskey and hard-boiled eggs (one of each per family) as offerings for the spirits. As they arrived, a member of each family carefully placed these items on a long wooden plank on the ground in front of the *ta ho*, which had been set up in advance by the spirit medium assistants, known as *cha ho* in Lao. I asked a few people why these particular offerings were made, but nobody could provide a clear

Fig. 3 Accused *Phi Pop* Sit under the *Ta Ho* in Nakasang Village, Awaiting the Healing Ritual; Other Villagers Look On. May 1, 2017
Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

answer. The ritual started after lunch, with people gathering at about 2 p.m., and the whole process took about three hours. The people took the bottles of whiskey home at the end of the ritual, and the eggs were consumed by the attendees. The candles and flowers used to make *khanh ha* were left behind at the *ta ho*.

Apart from regular villagers, the accused *phi pop* who had not yet completed the healing cycle also assembled at the spirit house. Eventually they were instructed to sit, crouching as a group, directly under the floor of the *ta ho*, where the first spirit medium and other villagers were sitting and standing. There were 28 people receiving treatment that day, six of whom were women (Fig. 3). The positioning of the accused *phi pop* is important: they are required to sit on the ground under the *ta ho* in order to demonstrate their willingness to follow the village rules, with other people above their heads (in Southeast Asia it is considered degrading to have people's feet above one's head).

Most of the villagers sat outside of the perimeter around the *ta ho*. Their presence forced those accused of being *phi pop* to degrade themselves before the whole community. There are two spirit mediums in the Nakasang cluster, one in the northern part of the cluster and the other in the southern part. The first spirit medium from the southern group of villages (Nakasang, Mai Sivilay, and Phon Pho) arrived at the *ta ho* together with a drum (*kong*) player, a Lao mouth organ (*khene*) player, and a small cymbals (*ching*) player. There were also three *cha ho* assistants and a *me khanh mak*, a woman who

prepares the *kheuang* (ເຄື່ອງ) (including powerful occult items) for the spirit medium.[15] They arrived first, since the *ta ho* is located in their village. The first spirit medium to arrive was dressed in red. She became possessed by the spirit of *pho thao* Teum. Nobody remembers exactly who *pho thao* Teum was, but he is assumed to have been an early inhabitant of the Nakasang area. Oddly, even though *pho thao* Teum is referred to as a man, Teum is actually believed to be a woman. So, in the end, a woman spirit medium channeled the spirit of a woman, but one referred to as a man. Crucially, *pho thao* Teum, as a spirit, is believed to be able to heal people afflicted by *phi pop*. However, there is more to it. There are two spirit mediums involved, but only the one for the northern villages—*me nhai* Thone, based in Phiang Dy Village—is able to cure *phi pop* as well as provide more general curing for the community. The spirit medium for the southern villages, based in Nakasang, *nang* Douang, also channels *pho thao* Teum but only supports the healing of *phi pop* and does not do regular healing like *me nhai* Thone. They both attend the biannual rituals at the *ta ho* in Nakasang. Therefore, during the ritual, both *me nhai* Thone and *nang* Douang channel the spirit of *pho thao* Teum. They both join in and dance during the *phi pop* ritual.[16]

Once she became possessed, the spirit medium from Nakasang wrapped a red scarf around her forehead. She then drank whiskey directly out of a bottle. Within a short time, she had consumed a small bottle of whiskey. The claim is that spirit mediums cannot get drunk, and the spirit medium is able to impress the villagers by being able to drink so much without becoming inebriated—but the reality of her sobriety may be quite different. In any case, she started dancing with an old sword she had, while the musicians played, in order to create an atmosphere appropriate for facilitating spirit medium dancing. This was part of the process, along with chanting—inspired by Buddhist chanting—for sanctifying the water that was then used to bathe or cleanse those who harbored *phi pop*. Lit candles were placed on the sword (Fig. 4). All this was done as part of the process to sanctify the water so it could be used to cleanse the *phi pop* under the *ta ho*.

Then the second spirit medium from the northern villages (Hatkhikhouay and Phiang Dy) arrived with her own entourage of villagers, young and old, male and female. They came later because they were from other villages, not from the village with the special cleansing *ta ho* and pond, a place powerful enough to control the *phi pop*. Soon, the two spirit mediums were dancing together in the *ta ho* as the cultural healing ritual

15) There are normally two *cha ho* per spirit medium, but the headman of Nakasang told this spirit medium to choose three in case one could not attend certain rituals due to sickness. In addition, the village is large.

16) Phongsavath Kisouvannalat, personal communication, Hatsaikhoun Village, January 20, 2023.

Fig. 4 Spirit Medium at Nakasang Village Dancing in the *Ta Ho*, with Musicians to the Left. She Drinks Lao Whiskey from a Bottle as She Dances. May 1, 2017

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

continued (Fig. 5).

Meanwhile, the villagers had prepared buckets of water with fragrant herbs in them. The buckets were brought up into the *ta ho*. Eventually, the spirit mediums turned their attention to the buckets. Candles were lit on the rims, and the water was made sacred. The spirit mediums then dipped their feet in the water and moved them around until the buckets tipped over and the water spilled onto the floor of the *ta ho*. It flowed through the cracks between the floorboards and onto the heads of the accused *phi pop* crouching below (Fig. 6).

It is significant that the spirit mediums' feet are used to stir the water. The feet are the lowest part of the body, so using them to stir the water would normally be considered impolite, degrading. But in this case it shows that the community spirit mediums are in control of the *phi pop*, since the accused *phi pop* hosts are willing to have water stirred by the spirit mediums' feet poured over their heads. Regular people would not condone

Fig. 5 Two Spirit Mediums Dance in the *Ta Ho* of Nakasang Village. May 1, 2017

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

Fig. 6 Spirit Mediums Tip Over Buckets of Fragrant Water in the *Ta Ho* of Nakasang Village, Wetting the Accused *Phi Pop* Underneath. May 1, 2017

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

this, but the *phi pop* are located in a power relation that forces them to be humble and oblige.

Moments later, the spirit mediums stamped their feet on the floor of the *ta ho* three times. The accused *phi pop* below, recognizing the signal, immediately stood up and started running into the *nong cheut* pond nearby. Most ran unhesitatingly straight into the pond, but a few stopped short and put water over their heads before running in. The *nong cheut* is believed to have sacred cleansing properties. That is why everyone must pass through it and wet their bodies with its water. Before, *phi pop* were required to take off all their clothes when passing through the pond, but that has now changed because some were embarrassed to run naked. Some did, however, take off their clothing, discarding items randomly along the way. The accused *phi pop* did not stay long in the muddy pond before running out to the nearby Mekong River. This seemed to symbolize that they were fully devoted to the ritual and were prepared to swim in the river for hundreds of meters. Once they reached the Mekong River, the accused *phi pop* jumped into the water and started swimming downstream with the current, situating themselves ten to twenty meters from the shore. Again, their actions showed that they were obeying the ritual requirements and were willing to humble themselves and be humiliated in front of the whole community. However, villagers were also there to support the cultural healing process, so it was a mixed situation.

Once the swimmers reached a designated location in the southern part of the community, near the *ta ho* there, they came out of the water and put on new dry clothes provided by their waiting relatives. The *phi pop* then separated into two groups. The group from the southern villages gathered at the *ta ho* of the southern villages adjacent to the Mekong River (not the one near the *nong cheut*), while the other group assembled at a different *ta ho* for the northern villages in Phiang Dy Village. However, I was told that both groups then did the same thing, just at two different locations, since each spirit medium and *ta ho* is designated for people from the associated community or communities.

Once assembled at the southern villages' *ta ho*, an elderly man, one of the *cha ho*, recited Buddhist-inspired chants before the *phi pop*. Meanwhile, the *cha ho* took attendance, recording in a simple notebook how many times each *phi pop* had participated in the ritual so far. In addition, a woman was admonished for undergoing the ritual twice and then leaving the village before eventually coming back. She was told that she would have to start over. The spirit medium then used leaves to splash some water over the *phi pop*, who were sitting in the center of the *ta ho*. This water splashing was intended to bless them at the end of the ritual (Fig. 7).

There are clearly aspects of the rituals related to spirit mediums that have been

Fig. 7 After Swimming in the Mekong River, the Spirit Medium at Nakasang Village Splashes Holy Water on the Heads of the Accused *Phi Pop*, Marking the End of the Healing Ritual. May 1, 2017

Source: Photograph by Ian G. Baird

borrowed from Buddhism, including lighting candles, sprinkling water on people, and chanting; but the villagers are emphatic that these rituals are not related to Buddhism, at least in their understanding. As a result, Buddhist monks never attend events involving spirit mediums, and vice versa. In southern Laos, monks and spirit mediums are often situated as being opposed to each other or in competition with each other, even though most villagers believe in both.

Phone, as the village headman, then gave a speech in which he emphasized the need for everyone to follow the rules. He also said that all the *phi pop* had a disease (*phanyat*, ພະຍາດ) that needed to be cured,[17] and for that reason they had to follow the rules. Once his speech was over, the ceremony was complete, and the attendees dispersed and returned to their homes. A pickup truck came and collected the people from Phiang Dy Village, since they lived farther away, about three kilometers from the *nong cheut*. We returned to Nakasang and had a short discussion with Phone before leaving the village.

17) Referring to this as a biomedical condition, or *phanyat*, can be considered one way in which the *phi pop* tradition is reconciled with party policy.

Local Functionalist Understandings of the *Phi Pop* Phenomenon

Crucially, Phone explained that there are four types of *phi pop* that come to the Nakasang cluster. The first is the traditional *phi pop*, which can be called *phi pop sing* (a ravenous spirit who possesses people). *Phi pop* typically enter a person's body and use the person as a host for attacking and causing illness or killing other people (Sangun 1976). Phone claimed that this type of *phi pop* used to be common in the past but is now rarer.

The second type of *phi pop* is *phi pop visa*, someone who has studied magic or sorcery related to *phi then*, a type of spirit, but does something wrong in relation to the teaching, such as breaking taboos (see also Sangun 1976), and becomes a malevolent *phi pop* spirit instead.

Phone's explanation of the next two types of *phi pop* was initially surprising to me. One is a person who does many bad things in their original village, such as engaging in petty thievery or beating their wife or children. It may not be possible to arrest this person and send them to jail, due to a lack of evidence or for other reasons. Therefore, the person is instead accused by other villagers of being a *phi pop*, in order to provide a culturally acceptable excuse for expelling the person from the village.

The final type of *phi pop*, according to Phone, is similar to the third type but involves a person who subtly cheats other villagers. That person, who is essentially considered a troublemaker who damages the tranquility of the community through legal means, typically does not listen to appeals to change his or her ways from the village headman and other community members. Neither can the person be killed. Phone explained that in Laos, "Socialism does not allow that (people be killed)," thus again reconciling *phi pop* practices with party policy. So instead, the person is accused of being a ravenous spirit, and that becomes the stated reason for expelling the person from the village, thus solving the social problem that the accused is believed to have caused. However, Phone added that sometimes these accused people are killed by others who have special abilities.

Crucially, the above two non-magical reasons for accusing people of harboring ravenous spirits are intertwined with continued beliefs in magic or sorcery. In line with this, Tanadet Torsri (n.d.), when writing about *phi pop* in northeastern Thailand, pointed out that rich traders are often accused of being *phi pop*. However, he failed to make a clear connection between their behavior and their being accused of being *phi pop*. Anan Ganjanapan (1984) discussed how accusing someone of being *phi ka* allowed other people in the village to take control of their land. This may occur in some cases, but my research results differ from Anan's in that in southern Laos it is typically the richer villagers, the greedy ones, who are accused of being ravenous spirits—not the poorer

villagers, as Anan suggested. My understanding is in line with that of Bowie, who came to a similar conclusion during her own field research on this topic in northern Thailand.[18] In other words, Bowie and I similarly see this practice as being what James Scott (1985) referred to as "weapons of the weak," a way for people who typically have less power to assert their influence relatively safely. In this case, normal villagers are considered to be weaker than the rich and greedy villagers usually accused of being *phi pop*.[19]

Phone provided some examples from the Nakasang cluster. He spoke of a man named Simuang, from Long Island in Khong District. Simuang had been accused of being a *phi pop* and had come to stay in Nakasang. He had already been there for two years at the time I interviewed Phone. Previously, Simuang held a strong economic position amongst the villagers on Long Island. However, he got into many conflicts with other villagers, and he was believed to have advanced at the expense of other community members. Therefore, the other villagers thought that Simuang was too rich and greedy, and they claimed that he must have studied magic or sorcery to get so much money. Eventually this led to him being accused of being a *phi pop*. Once he was accused, and he realized the seriousness of the accusation, he decided to leave the community—he felt that would be better than losing face by being physically forced to leave. However, his wife and children remained on Long Island. Phone said that Simuang's family often came to visit him in Nakasang. He added that Simuang had been behaving well, and that he thought he would be able to return to Long Island after finishing the three-year treatment program. Phone explained that Simuang was being treated using *visa* (knowledge about magic or sorcery) known as *vetsouan*, which is applied to fight against Hanuman, the Hindu monkey god, who was believed to have caused Simuang to behave poorly in the past. However, Phone emphasized that Simuang would need to be careful not to instigate conflicts with villagers after he returned to Long Island. Phone concluded the story by explaining that most of the accused *phi pop* who arrived in the Nakasang cluster had been relatively wealthy in relation to others in their village.[20] Apart from being similar to the situation of *phi ka* in northern Thailand, the situation in Laos also parallels the circumstances regarding witchcraft in parts of Africa. For example, Alison Berg (2005) reported that in 2005 there were one thousand women living in "witch camps" in northern Ghana, after they had been accused of being witches and forced to flee on pain of death. In one district in southwestern Kenya, more than three hundred people were reportedly killed between 1992 and 1994 after they were accused of being

18) Katherine Bowie, personal communication, Madison WI, January 17, 2023.
19) Villagers who are just rich are not seen as particularly problematic. It is the combination of wealth and greed that is the deciding factor.
20) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, May 1, 2017.

witches (Ogembo 2006). As in the case of *phi pop*, in Africa those who are believed to be harboring spirits often face considerable hardship.

I met a 69-year-old woman originally from Champasak named Oky. She had also been banished to Nakasang for two years. Later she moved to Thateng Theung Village in Thateng District, Xekong Province. She told me, when I met her in Nakasang, that when she was in Thateng District she was accused of being a *phi pop*, but she claimed that she had never studied magic or sorcery and that she was not afflicted by a *phi pop*. However, people in the village died, and other villagers blamed her. She reported that she had no choice but to leave the community and come to Nakasang. She arrived with her whole family, seven people in total. Oky admitted that she had had conflicts with villagers before she was expelled. She also acknowledged that she was wealthier than other villagers. However, she claimed that her economic situation, outside of the norm, had actually improved since coming to Nakasang, since she was able to sell one hectare of lowland rice farmland in Thateng and buy five hectares of rice farmland in Nakasang for the same amount. She said that even when her treatment was completed, she would not leave Nakasang. She did not have words to describe her feelings about the ordeal. She explained that she was born a Christian but now believed all religions were good. She claimed that she had abandoned Christianity in order to embrace the treatment she was receiving in Nakasang.[21] However, she did not elaborate.

I now return to Bounsou, who was expelled from Hang Khone Village in 1993 due to accusations of being a *phi pop* and ended up in Mai Sivilay Village. He explained that before 1975 he had been a sergeant in the Royal Lao Army, under the command of General Khong Vongnarat; the general was previously also the governor of Attapeu Province, before Attapeu was overrun by North Vietnamese forces in 1970 (Vongsavanh 1981). Bounsou was a native of Attapeu. He said that he had lived in Hang Khone Village from 1970 until 1993. Bounsou then opened up and told me that he was never really a *phi pop*, but that people in Hang Khone caused him problems because he was economically better off than them due to having some lowland wet rice fields (many other families in Hang Khone do not have rice fields). He claimed that everyone in the village disliked him. He argued that if he had really been a *phi pop*, he would have died in three years.[22] In fact, Phone confirmed Bounsou's story, stating that if someone was a real *phi pop*, that person would die within three years and three months of first becoming a vector for a *phi pop*.[23] This is one of the reasons that Phone believes most people accused of being *phi pop* are not actually so. Otherwise, more would die after three years and

21) Oky, personal communication, Nakasang Village, May 1, 2017.
22) Bounsou, personal communication, Mai Sivilay Village, May 1, 2017.
23) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, May 1, 2017.

three months, but he sees that most do not.

Bounsou also claimed that he never had any magical objects (*kheuang*), as some in Hang Khone Village alleged. He lamented that he had lost everything when he was forced to leave Hang Khone. He reported that he had left on his own, because he had heard rumors about the accusations toward him and was fearful that he would have problems.[24] Nobody actually told him to leave, but he recognized the warning signs. He heard that people were saying he was no good. Hosts of *phi pop* are blamed more than spirit medium hosts, as the former are often believed to have brought on *phi pop* through their risky engagement with black magic. Bounsou felt it would have been worse for him to wait until he was chased from the village. He explained, as I had heard earlier, that only 5 percent of those accused of being *phi pop* are actually *phi pop*. In any case, he went along with the system and completed his six rituals over a three-year period. He accepted that he had to follow the traditions (*papheni*, ປະເພນີ) even though he had been wrongly accused.[25] It was power relations that had compelled him to participate, and he was forced to be humble and accept his fate.

Phone believed more people were being accused of being *phi pop* than before because in this era of economic development there were greater inequities among villagers; this was leading to more resentment against villagers who became wealthier than the rest.[26]

Over the last few decades, scholars and practitioners have taken considerable interest in traditional forms of justice, and how those systems often operate in tandem and intertwined with more formal and official justice systems (Van Kessel and Oomen 1997; West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999; Care and Zorn 2001; Hinz and Mapaure 2010; Ayodele 2018; Winters and Conroy-Krutz 2021). While traditional forms of justice typically adopt different tools apart from incarceration, the fines that the traditional justice system often imposes on offenders are, like the cultural healing described here, designed on the surface to cure people. Deeper down, however, the intent is to partially control people and keep them in line, within certain limits set by whatever cultural beliefs and practices are the norm. Similarly, we can think of the *phi pop* phenomenon as another form of traditional justice, one that applies social understandings and a cultural healing process to discipline people considered unmanageable, to ensure that they adhere to socially approved ideas and practices when interacting with other members of their social and cultural groups. Indeed, accused ravenous spirits are forced to accept their fate

24) Tanadet (n.d.) claimed that accusing someone of being a *phi pop*, and the rumors associated with accusations of being a *phi pop*, are both crucial.

25) Bounsou, personal communication, Mai Sivilay Village, May 1, 2017.

26) Phone Savanh, personal communication, Nakasang Village, May 1, 2017.

and admit that they are afflicted by *phi pop* even when they believe they have been unjustly accused. Then they must adhere to a cultural curing process that compels them to become humble and modest, at least at certain times, and follow the requirements of the program. Finally, these people have to live in the Nakasang cluster for at least three years, which puts them in a subjective position that further compels them to be more modest and humble and not greedy. Based on my discussions with villagers, all this tends to lead to some of the accused recognizing that they have crossed a social line in the sand. They will have to adjust their behavior if they want to return to their original villages, or even if they decide to continue to live in the Nakasang cluster after their required treatment has been completed. The idea of cultural healing is critical.

Crucially, however, I am not suggesting that this cultural healing process is the only way to deal with social problems. Nor am I claiming that this process always works, or that it always works in the same way. The woman who acquired the rice farmland in the Nakasang area shows, for example, that reform is not always easy or successful. However, the people I spoke with in Nakasang, particularly Phone, made it clear that they believed that those who went through this process were often more careful about what they did or said afterward. Moreover, they reported that overall the results of the three-year process were positive, although they recognized that they were not always successful or even helpful, for a range of reasons. Indeed, this cultural healing process is associated with various outcomes.

Conclusion

Everyone I interviewed for this study, including the village headman of Nakasang and people expelled to Nakasang under accusations of being *phi pop*, recognized that the cultural healing process designed to cure those accused of harboring ravenous spirits was a form of disciplining. To be sure, it is intended to help them reflect and improve their behavior in Lao society, whether they return to their original villages or remain permanently in the Nakasang cluster. It is not that people do not believe in *phi pop*, but many recognize that most people accused of being *phi pop* are not actually so. As Phone put it, "There used to be more real *phi pop* in the past, but nowadays most are not really *phi pop*. About 95 percent are just accused of being *phi pop*. The other 5 percent are real *phi pop*." Phone also made it clear that Nakasang is proud of the service it provides to the nation and beyond by being willing to take in *phi pop* and help cure them through a particular type of cultural healing designed to reduced community social conflict. It is recognized that this cultural treatment includes social sanctions for moral transgressions.

Indeed, the cultural healing process that occurs in the Nakasang area can be seen in three ways. First, and most obvious, it is explicitly intended to neutralize the influence of ravenous spirits. Second, the process—which requires those accused of being *phi pop* to acknowledge their position as such, attend six consecutive rituals over three years, and live in the Nakasang cluster for three years—does in fact serve to culturally heal in another sense. From a local perspective, the cultural healing process is intended to make use of community power—the social influence of people living in the Nakasang area—to discipline those accused of being *phi pop*, so that they learn how to follow orders, become modest, and follow community social norms. The process is intended to reduce social conflict and give the accused time to reflect on their past behavior and to adjust it so that they get along better with others, either in their original village or in their new abode in the Nakasang cluster. For example, they might think twice before engaging in predatory financial arrangements with other villagers or moderate how they speak with or interact with others. One might ask, why would people who are not actually *phi pop* agree to leave their villages or undergo treatment for something they are not afflicted with? The answer appears to be that they recognize that denial would make things even worse for them, as they could be attacked or killed by other villagers if they do not leave, and a precondition for staying in Nakasang is admitting that one has been afflicted by a *phi pop*. Finally, the idea of cultural healing helps local people position themselves in relation to the state, which desires to follow a Marxist-Leninist understanding of scientific cause and effect.

Thus, it is appropriate to see the *phi pop* phenomenon, at least as it relates to the Nakasang cluster, as a cultural healing process with more than one dimension, a process that is less fixated on physical or bodily health than on the ways in which people behave within ethnic Lao society—although it is certainly true that the two are often variously intertwined.

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Negotiation under Authoritarian Environmentalism: A Case Study of Mangrove Shrimp Farming in Vietnam

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Authoritarian environmentalism has come under the spotlight. It has often been criticized as accompanying social oppression. However, as some studies have reported an ambiguity in its governance on the ground, which is neither democratic nor authoritarian, its governance process needs further analysis. In particular, little is known about how the authoritarian state compromises with society. Therefore, by unraveling the historical background behind the development of shrimp farming in the mangroves of southern Vietnam, this paper examines the process of establishment of authoritarian environmentalism and considers how the authoritarian state exerts its power in interactions with society. To distinguish features of governance and understand various aspects of interactions among actors, we developed the concept of "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarianism. To this end, we conducted semi-structured interviews with provincial government officials, forest officers, and shrimp farmers in Ca Mau Province and also used secondary materials. The results revealed that mangroves that were previously the frontier until the 1970s had been enclosed by the state, applying modern governing technologies. However, the state failed to optimally utilize its governing power due to an accidental confluence of interests with society and to avoid political instability. Locals also tenaciously coped with top-down governance by adopting unique strategies. These interactions created an informal social order, which ironically created temporal social stability. We conclude that more research is needed to address how the political equilibrium is disturbed or maintained under authoritarian environmentalism.

Keywords: shrimp farming, southern Vietnam, mangroves, authoritarian environmentalism, negotiation

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I Introduction

I-1 *The Rise of Authoritarian Environmentalism*

There are various debates over how to solve pressing environmental problems. In particular, many researchers have argued for the importance of environmental governance as a way to steer sustainable development. Because of criticism of the "command-and-control" approach and appeals for bottom-up development, environmental governance has changed to a participatory and market-oriented model (Balooni and Inoue 2007; Agrawal *et al.* 2008).

However, the extent to which residents and markets are involved in governance is an issue that is open to question. Institutional implementation of decentralization depends on local adaptability and engagement by local governments, administrative organizations, and other actors (Capistrano 2008, 221). Without empowerment of the local community, there can be no improvement in power relations and no change in traditional top-down governance (Larson and Soto 2008, 221). Furthermore, some researchers are skeptical of the present governance system for global environmental issues in the first place. These researchers assert the transnationalization of democracy, or a "green state" that is beyond territorial governance (Eckersley 2004).

While there are calls for democratization and greater environmental governance, the transition sometimes seems to regress to a command-and-control approach combined with market-based mechanisms, as manifested in China and Vietnam. These countries have attained significant environmental conservation results through the use of authoritarian methods. For example, compared with other Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam has continuously increased its forest area (Imai *et al.* 2018) while China has become one of the world's leading countries in the introduction of electric vehicles (Rong *et al.* 2017).

Authoritarianism is not completely absent in democratic countries. Even the governments of the United States and European countries dictatorially implemented strict measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Some researchers argue that such behavior on the part of democratic governments shows the retreat of democracy and the dominance of authoritarianism during critical moments (Diamond 2015; Sato 2021).

In this context, authoritarian environmentalism has come under the spotlight as a new way of state governance (Brain and Pál 2018). Authoritarian environmentalism is defined as a public policy model that concentrates authority in a few administrative agencies to improve environmental outcomes. In contrast, democratic environmentalism is defined as a public policy model that spreads authority across several levels or administrative agencies and encourages direct public participation (Gilley 2012, 288–289).

The differences between authoritarian environmentalism and democratic environmentalism include the degree of citizen participation and the speed and efficiency with which the two forms of governance can respond to environmental crises (Sutherlin and Willson 2012, 188). However, as Han Heejin (2015, 812) argues, even though democratic countries such as South Korea have adopted authoritarian environmentalism as an approach to environmental governance, the political regime of a given country is not necessarily a direct determinant of the adoption of authoritarian or democratic environmentalism.

Although authoritarian environmentalism is often criticized for leading to social oppression and justifying its authoritarian measures for environmental protection (Beeson 2010; Gilley 2012; Li and Shapiro 2020; Lo 2021), research shows an ambiguous relationship between the state, particularly local authorities, and local society (Gilley 2012; Lo 2015; Shahar 2015). These findings suggest that the functioning of authoritarian environmentalism on the ground depends on the specific social political context and environmental issues. Therefore, authoritarian environmentalism is likely to have more diversified than repressive governance features.

I-2 *Study Purpose*

Against the above background, this study examines how authoritarian environmentalism works on the ground by addressing the following research questions: How does a political system based on authoritarian environmentalism demonstrate power, and how does authoritarian environmentalism seek to compromise with society to resolve social and political instability? It is easy to imagine that if the state tried to control society by force, it would lead to social and political instability. Consequently, states might adjust their forces depending on the situation.

To achieve the research objectives, this study investigates the development process of authoritarian environmentalism in the mangroves of southern Vietnam as a case study. First, this study seeks to understand the policies and institutions related to shrimp aquaculture development and mangrove conservation that have been set up by policy makers. Second, it examines the interaction between local state authorities and local shrimp farmers in the implementation process. It also considers the characteristics of state–society interactions that can be identified. In doing so, this study uses our own developed concepts of "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarianism. The details of these concepts will be described in the later section on the conceptual framework.

Through this case study, this research will depict a nuanced relationship between the state and society that constitutes neither confrontation nor collaboration. It will also show how such an accidentally established relationship contributed to each party

realizing its own purposes. In addition to earlier research findings on how the state involved locals in order to achieve policy implementation (Ahlers and Shen 2018) and how locals evaded state governance (Scott 2009), this study shows how the state compromised with local society rather than unilaterally taking authoritarian measures, due to an accidental conformity of interests. Drawing on James Scott's (1985; 2009) perspective to explain this unique state–society relationship under authoritarian environmentalism, this study argues that it was the tenacity of the local people that led to the development of this relationship.

We see Vietnam as a state practicing authoritarian environmentalism. Although Vietnam is considered an authoritarian state with tightly restricted political rights and liberties (Freedom House 2022), it has also been reported that the dynamics of state–society relations in Vietnam are changing because of emerging citizen-led activism (Vu 2017). Thus, it cannot be said that there is no public participation in dealing with environmental problems. However, considering their relative power relationship, the Vietnamese state is much stronger than society because the top-down principle is inherent in the Communist Party regime (Ortmann 2017, 93). From this perspective, at least, environmental governance in Vietnam can be seen as being based on authoritarian environmentalism. It is also worth noting that unlike in China, global actors such as international organizations and international NGOs intervene in environmental governance in Vietnam. This global intervention has affected the development of authoritarian environmentalism in Vietnam.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews previous studies and explains the conceptual framework. This study has adopted the concepts of "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarianism to analyze social and political interactions between the state and society. Section 3 discusses the methodology and describes the research site. Section 4 presents the results. It describes the governing technologies of the state in expanding its power to the periphery and how local residents coped with government control. Section 5 is the discussion section. In this section, the way authoritarian environmentalism works on the ground is interpreted using the concepts of "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarianism. Finally, section 6 is the conclusion section.

II The Conceptual Framework

Research on environmental governance based on authoritarianism has tended to criticize centralized governance without public participation. Under authoritarian environ-

mentalism, individual freedoms are restricted as governments seek to change environmentally destructive behavior (Beeson 2010, 276), and participation in the policy process is limited to the scientific and technological elites (Gilley 2012, 288). In the governance process, the state has been found to benefit from environmental crises by projecting itself as the sole legitimate steward of the environment (Li and Shapiro 2020, 23). It is also perceived that any radical change through top-down governance without public participation may increase inequality and push socially deprived groups into more disadvantaged situations because of the lack of flexibility and autonomy (Lo 2021, 7).

Alongside these concerns, the merits of authoritarian environmentalism have been revealed. Governments following this approach can exert a rapid, centralized response to severe environmental threats and mobilize state and social actors (Gilley 2012, 300). This characteristic is visible in state governance. In particular, China has reformed its bureaucracy—through the creation of environmental police and the establishment of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment—and improved the framework of environmental law. Furthermore, digital technologies such as GIS, GPS, remote sensing technologies, and big data approaches have been adopted for governance (Kostka and Zhang 2018). In Vietnam there have been attempts to collect information on violators of the forest laws and to create a database in order to strengthen the management of national parks (Nguyen *et al.* 2022).

It also appears that society does not necessarily disagree with centralized governance. For example, amid the unrest caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, people around the world found help, guidance, and hope in a higher power. In this situation, it is argued that citizens are more tolerant of governments (Popat 2021, 279). It has also been reported that more socially advantaged citizens, such as wealthier, better-educated, and urban residents, approve of a centralized monitoring system (Kostka 2019, 1569). These results suggest that a state based on authoritarian environmentalism is not always subject to criticism simply because authoritarian measures of governance are adopted to solve environmental problems.

On the other hand, it has been shown that the situation on the ground is ambiguous, displaying a mixture of authoritarian and liberal features. One case study in China showed that local governments and businesses enjoyed a surprisingly high degree of freedom and flexibility despite authoritarian rules (Lo 2015, 158). Bruce Gilley notes that not all environmental policy models are biased toward either democracy or authoritarianism; they can display a mix of both (Gilley 2012, 289). Coby Shahar describes these as hybrid regimes that are neither democratic nor authoritarian (Shahar 2015, 361). These findings imply that authoritarian environmental governance does not necessarily involve coercive measures.

From these studies, it is evident that regardless of the extent to which states based on authoritarian environmentalism strengthen their political power, the central government by itself either cannot or intentionally does not fully govern society, and that even authoritarian states, to varying degrees, can display democratic features. Erica Frantz, who studied the survival strategies of authoritarian leaders, found differences in behavior by viewing authoritarian regimes in different countries as lying along a continuum rather than lumped into one category (Frantz 2018, 68). Han has also noted that there is no simple, predisposed relationship between mode of environmental policy making—democratic or authoritarian—and political variables such as regime type (Han 2015, 824). This indicates that environmental governance under authoritarianism is diverse, and further research is needed.

Therefore, this study will view authoritarian environmentalism as a hybrid of "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarianism, rather than simply authoritarianism. In this study, "ostensible" authoritarianism refers to political systems that are apparently rigid in terms of political ideology and policy, while "actual" authoritarianism refers to governance that differs from the original aims of a rigid political system. This study describes how a hybrid of "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarianism is applied to environmental governance through analyzing state–society interactions.

Accordingly, this study borrows ideas from studies on authoritarian environmentalism that highlight the importance of path dependence (Han 2015, 824) and policy implementation at the local level (Ahlers and Shen 2018, 315). Furthermore, because there are fewer studies on authoritarian environmentalism combined with Scott's perspective (1985; 2009), this study draws on his ideas to discuss how the ambiguous state–society relationship exists on the ground. Although Kevin Lo (2015, 158) mentioned a relationship among actors on the ground that was neither democratic nor authoritarian, aside from operating under authoritarian rules, his study was about collusion between local authorities and local businesses. In contrast, this study deals with ways in which the state compromises with local society over forest management due to an accidental coincidence of interests. To understand this relationship, Scott's (1985; 2009) perspectives are highly suggestive. Scott sheds light on the tenacity of local people and shows how they cleverly reject state control. He has contributed to dispelling the common belief that those who lack political power suffer from oppression. From his perspective, the ambiguous state–society relationship in this study can be interpreted as arising from the tenacity of local people. This study argues that such tenacious local people can also play an important role in diversifying features of environmental governance based on authoritarianism.

Han argues that there is a need for attention on the impact of history via path

dependency to generate more nuanced, context-rich analyses and explanations of politics and policy making in various settings (Han 2015, 824). Anna Ahlers and Shen Yongdong (2018) also point out that authoritarian environmentalism cannot be assessed by employing a macroscopic approach but requires a more detailed analysis where ultimate policy implementation takes place, i.e., at the local level. Through their case study of China's authoritarian environmentalism, they call for attention to downstream adaptability and flexibility in the policy implementation process. They indicate that a "mixture of authoritarian and democratic features" was observable solely at the implementation stage, and only when it helped smooth or accelerate the process (Ahlers and Shen 2018, 316). Therefore, in order to understand the development of authoritarian environmentalism, this study investigates chronological interactions between the state and society, with particular attention to policy implementation at the local level.

Because of the Mekong Delta's historical and geographical specificity, its mangroves are selected as an interesting case to present governance based on "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarian environmentalism. The state and society were not simply in conflict. This was because while mangroves became a national and international target for conservation, shrimp farming became not only a means of livelihood for local residents but also an important industry for the state to earn foreign exchange. In addition, although shrimp farming was often criticized as a cause of mangrove destruction, local residents needed mangroves for shrimp farming, since their aquaculture practice was reliant on the mangrove ecosystem. This historical and geographical specificity created a complexity of interests among central and local governing actors, leading to the formation of a hybrid political system.

The study site is a peripheral area at the tip of southern Vietnam, which was a frontier until the 1970s. This area has been transformed into shrimp farming sites, which contribute to the domestic shrimp aquaculture industry. Residents of the mangroves, who migrated from neighboring areas in search of natural resources and became pioneers, now practice shrimp aquaculture while conserving mangrove forests in their shrimp ponds. The background to the formation of the production areas is the expansion of the governing authority by the state to the peripheral areas after reunification in 1975 and the resulting interactions between the state and local residents.

The study site was previously a place of refuge from the struggle for supremacy and a place where resources could be freely utilized. In this sense, this area may be considered as a non-state space like "Zomia" (Scott 2009, 14). Scott considered Zomia as an area distant from state governance. Zomia was a periphery with geographical features such as forests, wilderness, deserts, grasslands, swamps, and mangroves that were attractive to those who wished to avoid state governance. The study site with

mangroves on the periphery can be considered to have similarities in historical background and geographical features with non-state spaces.

Therefore, this study considers the development of shrimp farming in mangroves as the transformation of non-state space into state space. In this context, the governing technology that the state adopted to enclose mangroves was examined. How this technology was introduced and how it enhanced state governance will be examined from the viewpoints of the central state and local forest officers.

Conversely, we will also examine how local residents who freely utilized natural resources coped with the government's measures. Scott describes how peasants survived under oppressive control through everyday resistance to minimize disadvantages as much as possible (Scott 1985, 29). By following his idea of "everyday resistance" (Scott 1985), we will pay attention to aspects of the "everyday negotiation" conducted by peasants. In particular, we will depict the various acts of negotiation by local people with forest officers under the establishment of modern governance.

After that, the kinds of order and political system that have been established as a result of interactions will be examined. This study considers the political system as a combination of governance at the central and local levels (Matsushita and Ono 2007, 4). To understand how authoritarian environmentalism works on the ground, this paper will describe the characteristics of both central and local governance and how they affect mangrove landscapes. In interpreting the meaning of the current arrangement for each actor, this paper will refer to "ostensible" authoritarianism and "actual" authoritarianism.

III The Methodology and the Research Site

III-1 *Methodology*

First, to understand the viewpoints of the state and local residents, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Ca Mau (DARD), Forest Management Board (FMB), forest officers, and 37 local residents who immigrated from neighboring areas and were practicing shrimp farming. The interviews were conducted in September 2015, July 2016, and November 2016.

The main questions for each actor were as follows: The question on the DARD concerned the role of the organization and its policies regarding forestry and aquaculture. The question on the FMB concerned the process of enclosure movement in the field, how to strengthen the FMB's administrative ability, and how to monitor local people. Local residents were also asked about the background of their immigration, natural resource utilization after settlement, and measures to cope with institutions

and monitoring by the FMB. Additional semi-structured interviews were conducted in August and September 2019 with 22 local people, in an effort to gauge their consciousness of mangrove conservation as shrimp farmers.

Although the respondents were small in number, they were from various parts of the village, from north to south. Each interview lasted between one and 1.5 hours. Interviews with DARD and FMB officials were conducted in their offices, while interviews with local residents were conducted in their houses. The interviews were conducted in both English and Vietnamese with the help of a translator. Although we were strangers to the locals, we tried to develop a rapport with them by visiting them many times, obtaining informed consent, interviewing them in their homes to make them feel comfortable, and having coffee or beer with them. In particular, Vietnamese research assistants—university students with fieldwork experience—helped us connect with the locals.

Secondary materials, such as existing studies and statistical data, were used to understand the history of mangroves in southern Vietnam.

We compiled the viewpoints of the state, forest officers, and local people based on the results of interviews and data from secondary materials, the kind of interrelationships among them, and how such interrelationships created the current landscape.

III-2 *Research Site*

The research site was Ca Mau Province, Ngoc Hien District, and Village V.[1] Ca Mau Province is located in the southernmost part of Vietnam. Its land area measures 5,221.2 km^2, and it has a population of 1.19 million (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, General Statistics Office 2019). Ngoc Hien District is located at the tip of Ca Mau, which is 70 km from the central city of Ca Mau. The main industries in Village V are shrimp farming and forestry. In Ngoc Hien District, a new road has been paved leading to Dat Mui, the southernmost tip of Vietnam. Some roads are passable by motorbike and car. However, most of the houses are accessible only by boat or on foot. This geographical condition of the periphery made it difficult for the FMB to control the land use of residents until modern monitoring technology was introduced.

IV Transfiguration of Mangroves into State Spaces

IV-1 *Overview of the History of Ca Mau*

Currently, the mangrove area in Ca Mau Province is a shrimp production site. However,

1) The study site is anonymized.

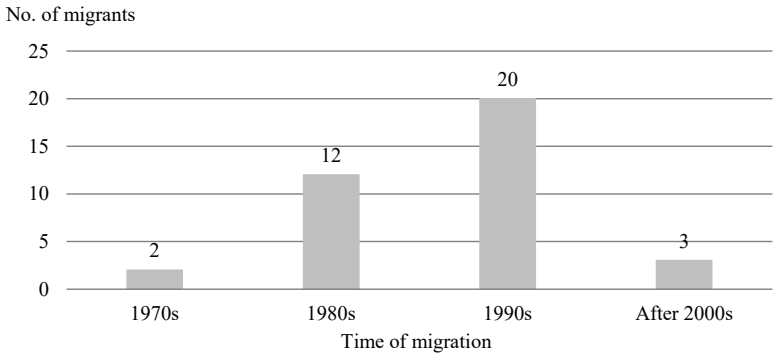

Fig. 1 Number of Migrants to Village V
Source: Prepared by Watanabe Hiroki based on the results of an interview survey in November 2016

according to analysis of aerial photographs, construction of villages began in the 1970s, and shrimp ponds began to be built in the area in the 1980s (Nguyen *et al.* 2015, 506; Van *et al.* 2015, 77).

During the Second Indochina War, the mangroves of Ca Mau became a military base camp and an evacuation area (Phan and Hoang 1993, 77). A few local residents who immigrated to Village V in the 1970s responded that they had done so to escape the war. Since reunification, the population in the wetlands has increased. After the disbandment, military personnel came to live in the mangroves, and the area was designated as an economic development zone, which led to the population growth there (Phan and Hoang 1993, 102).

According to an FMB officer, immigration to Village V increased sharply from the 1990s. Fig. 1 shows the number of migrants to Village V by period based on the results of interviews with local residents. Consistent with the FMB officer's testimony, the number of migrants to Village V increased in the 1980s and 1990s. Based on interviews with local residents who had immigrated by the 1990s, the reason for immigration was the availability of large plots of land and rich aquatic resources, and the ability to earn money through shrimp farming. Some of the interviewees freely claimed land and utilized natural resources, disregarding government regulations.

IV-2 *Appearance of Current Shrimp Ponds*

Fig. 2 shows a shrimp pond in Village V. Mangroves are grown in these shrimp ponds. This landscape, consisting of forest and water surface, is a result of the introduction of land use zoning by the Vietnamese state. Land use regulations require local people to reserve at least 60 percent of their shrimp ponds for mangroves; thus, as local people

Fig. 2 A Shrimp Pond in Village V (photo by Watanabe Hiroki, 2016)

have been assigned the duty of mangrove conservation, they practice shrimp farming while maintaining mangroves in their shrimp ponds.

This description may create the impression that the success of mangrove conservation is due to policy implementation by the state. However, it is not true that local people have been engaged in forest conservation only because they have been assigned the responsibility. Originally, shrimp farming required the presence of mangroves. This can be explained by the shrimp farming method that has been locally developed since the 1980s.

The shrimp farming method practiced in Village V is extensive farming, which can be interpreted as "organic aquaculture." Extensive shrimp farming is different from intensive shrimp farming and does not require investments in water quality improvement or the use of chemicals, aerator pumps, and feed. For example, tides are utilized to replace the water in shrimp ponds. Each shrimp pond is connected to the canal, and water is replaced through a small gate. Additional feeding of shrimp is not needed, because brackish water from the canal provides plankton as a natural feed. Furthermore, mangroves in the pond can be used for water purification. In summary, local people practice shrimp farming that relies on mangrove ecosystems, which is why they need mangroves for shrimp aquaculture.

This extensive method has been implemented since the early pioneer days as the local environment originally provided a habitat for wild shrimp. Locals caught wild shrimp until the 1980s. After that, an increase in the number of migrants resulted in a decline in the wild shrimp population. In addition, because of the higher market price of black tiger prawns, shrimp farmers began to release black tiger shrimp seeds into

Table 1 Local People's Perception of Impacts of Forest Conservation on Shrimp Farming*

Positive Effects	Negative Effects
• Roots provide habitat for shrimp and crabs	• Lower water temperature because of less sunlight
• Functions as sunshade to prevent water temperature from rising	• Decreasing water quality because of accumulation of leaves
• Leaves function as a source of food	• Less space for shrimp growing
• Wild fish and crabs can also be farmed	• As trees grow bigger, productivity decreases
• Timber provides an additional income source	• Profit from timber takes a long time to generate

Source: Prepared by Watanabe Hiroki from interviews conducted in August and September 2019
Note: * This is local people's perception, which does not question correctness based on natural science.

their ponds. Although they began to use shrimp seeds reared in hatcheries, they continued to practice extensive shrimp farming relying on mangrove ecosystems.

Because such a local environment has become the foundation of extensive shrimp farming, local people have maintained mangroves in their shrimp ponds. Therefore, the landscape shown in Fig. 2 is not only the result of policy implementation but the result of spontaneous efforts by local people.

Nonetheless, for local shrimp farmers who depend on shrimp farming for their livelihood, mangroves have less importance. Hence, while conserving mangroves in shrimp ponds, they strive to expand the water surface as much as possible. This is accompanied by a consciousness of mangrove conservation. Table 1 shows local people's perceptions of the impacts of forest conservation on shrimp farming. They recognized both the advantages and the disadvantages of keeping mangroves. Among its advantages, they mentioned that mangrove roots may provide a habitat for shrimp and crab, and mangroves function as shade to prevent the temperature of the pond from rising. Mangrove leaves are a source of food for shrimp. Besides shrimp, the pond environment may provide a suitable habitat for wild fish and crabs. Finally, timber from the mangroves can provide an additional income source.

Among the disadvantages, large trees cause lower water temperatures because they reduce sunlight. They also result in the accumulation of leaves in the pond, which worsens water quality. There is a reduction in the surface area of water as mangroves grow, which results in reduced shrimp productivity. In addition, it takes a long time to generate profit from mangrove timber.

Overall, mangroves serve contradictory functions. For example, although they provide shade to keep the water temperature down, this can cause excessively low water temperatures. Although the leaves can be a source of food for shrimp, the accumulation of leaves can worsen water quality. All interviewees stated that having too

much forest is not good, while having no forest at all is also not good. They noted the importance of maintaining a balanced mangrove-to-water ratio.

Therefore, this study asked residents' opinions on the ideal percentage of forest area, assuming there were no land use regulations. The most popular ratio was 20 percent to 40 percent, which is lower than the stipulated 60 percent. One interviewee stated that the forest was not necessary; they had the idea that a larger water surface correlates with higher shrimp productivity.

There has been no room for local people's preferences to be reflected in the state's land use policy; people just have to follow the rules. This top-down approach by the state has led to confrontations between the state and local people. On the other hand, the state does have one of the same ideas as local people: that too much forest area is not good but having no forest at all is also not good. This is because the shrimp aquaculture industry is important for the state to earn foreign exchange. This accidental confluence of interests has affected the construction process of the mangrove shrimp landscape. The landscape shown in Fig. 2 presents both confrontation and cooperation.

How has this confrontation and cooperation progressed and influenced the development of authoritarian environmentalism? The next section deals with the viewpoint of the state, which has tried to enclose mangroves, and local people, who have coped with state governance.

IV-3 *Domination by the State*

In 1986 the People's Committee of Minh Hai Province, now bifurcated into Ca Mau Province and Bac Lieu Province, issued Instruction No. 21/CTUB to increase forest conservation. At the same time, Instruction No. 359/UBA empowered the committee to exercise strict control over those who cut mangroves illegally for shrimp pond construction (Phan and Hoang 1993, 126). In addition, state fishery-forestry enterprises (SFFEs) were established to address land use problems in the field (Clough *et al.* 2002, 2).

On the other hand, the People's Committee of Minh Hai Province passed Instruction No. 33/CTUB to regulate the development of natural resources. This instruction designated coastal areas into sites for forestry, forestry-fishery, and fishery. However, due to the rapid increase in migrants, this plan did not work effectively (Phan and Hoang 1993, 127). Thus, although the state tried to control activities in these regions through land use zoning, its goal was not achieved.

In 1990, Instruction No. 53/CT was enacted by the prime minister for afforestation to protect the environment in coastal areas and estuaries. In addition, the Ministry of Forestry passed Decision No. 413/QD to carry out 60 km^2 of reforestation along the coastline (Phan and Hoang 1993, 125).

In 1991, the Minh Hai provincial government issued Decision No. 64-QD/UB to divide the forest area into "production forest," "protection forest," and "special use forest" (Phan and Hoang 1993, 127). Instead of being allowed to practice shrimp farming officially in production forests and protection forests, local people were assigned to manage forests. This required them to reserve 75 percent of the area of shrimp ponds as forest (Clough *et al.* 2002, 37).

From 1993 to 1998, Reforestation Program 327 was conducted. In 1994, Decision No. 202 was issued to supplement Decision No. 64-QD/UB. This led to the creation of a land contract between SFFEs and local people. The specifications of rights and duties related to land utilization were decided by the People's Committee. In 1998, after the completion of Reforestation Program 327, a new reforestation program was launched (Truong 2000, 74).

It is clear that the state put efforts into forest conservation by involving local people in forest management and reforestation. At the same time, the state planned to alleviate poverty through the development of shrimp aquaculture. This illustrates the potential for conflicting policy priorities among state bureaucracies. In 1987, the shrimp aquaculture export program was introduced in line with Vietnamese Government Decision 347-CT. The most important and influential policy within this program was supporting the conversion of land to shrimp ponds (Tran and Bush 2010, 1106). In 1999, a zoning plan for mangrove forest reforestation in Ca Mau, Bac Lieu, Soc Trang, and Tra Vinh was approved by the prime minister. This called for a reduction in the percentage of forest area in shrimp ponds from 75 percent to 60 percent (Truong *et al.* 2001, 9). This decision reflected the state's desire to increase shrimp production. The state planned to increase exports from US$145 million in 1999 to US$500 million by 2005 (Clough *et al.* 2002, 3). At the same time, the Vietnamese prime minister approved Decision 224/1999/QD-TTg. This was a program for aquaculture development that aimed to increase exports to US$2.5 billion (Tran and Bush 2010, 1106). In this program, local people were allowed to convert coastal saline rice fields into shrimp ponds (Tran *et al.* 2002, 14). However, they had already converted them on their own (Luttrell 2001, 535).

Based on the above measures, it is evident that the state wanted to change the direction of shrimp aquaculture development while conserving mangroves. However, this development plan resulted in further loss of mangroves. Hence, from the late 1990s the Rehabilitation of Mangrove Forest Project (RMFP) was carried out in shrimp farming areas of the Mekong Delta, with the aid of the Dutch government. RMFP was aimed at the development of a silvofishery model for shrimp farming in mangroves. RMFP also collaborated with the Coastal Wetlands Protection and Development Project funded by the World Bank and carried out the Coastal Belt Zoning Plan to establish a

Table 2 Land Use Regulations of Each Type of Forest Area in Village V

	Residence	Forest Coverage Ratio of Shrimp Ponds	Logging
Production forest areas	Allowed	At least 60%	All trees of harvestable age can be logged at once
Protection forest areas	Allowed	At least 60%	A maximum of 2 ha can be logged at one time
Special use forest areas	Prohibited		Prohibited

Source: Prepared by Watanabe Hiroki based on interviews with FMB in July 2016

buffer zone along the coast (Clough *et al.* 2002, 35). Furthermore, Ca Mau Province joined the Swiss Import Promotion Program to access the market in Switzerland and the EU in 2001. Accordingly, an international environmental certification scheme for shrimp farming was introduced in mangrove areas (Tran and Bush 2010, 1109; Omoto 2012, 73).

Table 2 shows the land use regulations for each forest area in Village V. Forestland is divided into production forest areas, protection forest areas, and special use forest areas from north to south. Each area has different land use regulations. In production forest areas and protection forest areas, local people are allowed to live and practice shrimp farming, but they are obliged to preserve the forest. Local people must maintain shrimp ponds in accordance with the specified forest-to-water surface area ratio. Currently, the forest cover of shrimp ponds is required to be at least 60 percent. With regard to logging regulations, in production forest areas all trees of harvestable age can be logged at once, while in protection forest areas a maximum of 0.02 km^2 can be logged at one time. On the other hand, housing and utilization of natural resources are prohibited in special use forests, where the FMB exercises direct control.

IV-4 *Monitoring by the FMB*

The FMB is a local agency of the DARD. It is responsible for managing forests through afforestation and reforestation, and monitoring local residents living in mangroves. The NM[2)]-FMB, which was the subject of this study, has jurisdiction over Village V and its adjacent village. The NM-FMB is a restructured organization from SFFE–NM, which was originally established in 1989. Funding for carrying out the organization's activities is met through an independent budget, a subsidy from the government, and financial support from a local seafood trading company that buys internationally certified shrimp.

In August 2019, the FMB had 38 staff members. The organization is divided into

2) Branch names are anonymized.

Fig. 3 A Small FMB Branch Office (photo by Watanabe Hiroki, July 2016)

executive, administrative, technical, and patrol divisions. There are eight small branch offices, each of which has its own areas of jurisdiction. Fig. 3 shows one of the branch offices of the FMB. About four officers belong to each office, and they monitor local land use every day.

The FMB is tasked with three main responsibilities. The first is daily patrolling. Staff patrol production forest areas once every two days, and both protection forest areas and special use forest areas every day.

The second responsibility is investigating and recording the forest ratio. The NM-FMB investigates the land condition of all households in Village V once every five years to obtain statistical data. Based on these data, the NM-FMB checks the forest ratio a few times each year.

The third responsibility is permission for logging. Local residents are allowed to log mangroves and sell timber once trees reach harvestable age. Profits from timber are to be shared between the FMB and local people, with the latter receiving 90 percent of the profits. After logging, the residents or the contractor plant trees.

According to the NM-FMB, the number of migrants to Village V increased dramatically from 1990 to 1995. At this time, the NM-FMB could not control the influx of migrants and their development of mangroves into shrimp ponds. From 1995 to 2000, the NM-FMB started to allocate land to each household by permitting their existing land use under government support. A land lease contract for twenty years, named a "green book," was made between the NM-FMB and local people. Locals were tasked

with the responsibility of conserving mangroves instead of officially obtaining a twenty-year land use guarantee.

On the other hand, to ensure that local people fulfilled their duty of mangrove conservation, the NM-FMB took the following measures. The first was to encourage local residents to replant. The second was to improve their environmental consciousness through education on the mangrove ecosystem. The third was to enhance its own monitoring capability in local forest management by increasing the amount of fines for illegal logging, establishing more branches, increasing the staff, and applying modern technology.

The NM-FMB continued to raise awareness of the importance of mangroves and carried out 3 km^2 of replantation programs every year in the entire village until 2012. In 2007, the NM-FMB evicted 127 households that had migrated to the southernmost area, a special use forest area under the support of the government and the World Bank. Of the 127 households, 105 were shrimp farmers and 22 were fishermen. Reforestation activities continued after 2012, but the scale of the activities was reduced to 0.6 km^2 of plantation every year. This was because the NM-FMB took farming conditions into account, giving some security to farmers regarding their water surface.

In 2013 an international environmental certification for shrimp farming was introduced, led by an international NGO. The NM-FMB received technical assistance from NGOs to implement GIS for forest management. Earlier, the NM-FMB had measured forest areas in shrimp ponds using a tape measure and compass. After the implementation of GIS, however, the work efficiency and measurement precision improved. However, the NM-FMB stated that they had already solved the problem of illegal logging, and they provided two reasons for this. First, local residents understood the importance of mangrove conservation for shrimp farming. Shrimp diseases spread in the village when illegal logging occurred, especially from 1995 to 2000. This was an opportunity for residents to learn about the importance of forest conservation. The second reason was that local people came to realize the economic value of timber. The price of timber had increased since 2005, and this became an incentive to manage forests.

The NM-FMB continues to monitor local land use by enhancing its own administrative capacity. As mentioned earlier, shrimp farmers are required to ensure that their shrimp ponds comply with the required forest-to-pond area ratio. However, according to the NM-FMB, only a fraction of farmers followed the specifications at the time of this study, and the ratio of forest cover in shrimp ponds was mostly around 40 percent or 50 percent. Those who adhered to the regulations tended to have more than 0.05 km^2 of shrimp ponds, which was larger than the average pond size.

Although the NM-FMB strengthened its administrative power by applying tech-

nology, why did only a marginal proportion of farmers adhere to the land use regulations? The NM-FMB mentioned that it was especially difficult to urge local people who had smaller shrimp ponds to engage in reforestation until they had met the standards. This was because the NM-FMB understood that too much forest cover made shrimp production difficult. In short, the NM-FMB intentionally overlooked people who did not comply with regulations while considering their livelihoods. One of the authors asked an NM-FMB official whether there were any criteria on land size that they took into account when overlooking transgressions. The NM-FMB official replied with a smile, saying that there were no particularly clear criteria.

Therefore, the NM-FMB overlooked local farmers' transgressions based on arbitrary decisions. However, the NM-FMB official stated that the forest area had continuously increased through encouraging people to use relatively large ponds to plant trees on a priority basis. This indicates that the FMB followed a carrot-and-stick approach.

IV-5 *Everyday Negotiation by Local People*

What political decisions have local people made as state governance penetrated the mangroves? This section examines everyday negotiation, which refers to various political strategies used by local people against forest officers under the establishment of modern governance. In particular, we depict four coping strategies[3] used by local people to deal with the rules in the interest of maintaining their livelihoods.

The first strategy is "going along with the state": local people try to maintain their livelihoods by conforming to the imposed rules. As the NM-FMB official stated, locals engaged in reforestation and forest conservation. Interviewees stated that the reasons for this were that they were mandatory, they were rules, and the people would be fined if they did not follow them.

If a forest was large enough, local people expanded their water surface after obtaining permission from the FMB. For example, resident A stated that when there was a large forest, the FMB gave him permission to expand the water surface. Resident B also stated that to expand the water surface, it was necessary to obtain permission from the FMB. These testimonies indicate that state governance infiltrated into the space where previously open resource use was possible.

However, there were those who successfully dodged governance and maintained their livelihoods by adopting other strategies while going along with the state. This approach may be viewed as the "cheap trick" of refraining from replanting the required number of trees in order to expand the water surface. The following examples illustrate

3) We categorize their strategies in the authors' own terms.

this behavior. When agricultural land was converted into shrimp ponds in the early 1990s, resident C was required by the FMB to replant until the forest cover reached 70 percent. When resident C dug his agricultural land to create a water channel, the FMB asked him to replant the rest of the land. However, since the land was only 0.02 km^2, while working on afforestation the resident also voluntarily expanded the waterways.

Resident D planted the required number of trees to reach the mandated forest cover of 70 percent; however, on reaching 70 percent cover, he felled the trees he had planted such that his water surface ratio was reached. Before he began planting the trees, resident D had made the forest cover of his land larger than the water surface cover. He said this was because he would be fined if he expanded the water surface to the extent that the water surface ratio exceeded the forest surface ratio.

Resident E voluntarily expanded the water surface by cutting trees himself after settling in the late 1990s. According to him, a reduction in tree cover goes unnoticed by the FMB if the trees are felled gradually.

Resident F used a pond with a water surface ratio of 50 percent. Therefore, resident F was requested by the FMB to plant trees so that the forest cover would be 60 percent. However, he maintained the pond in the same condition as before planting by cutting the trees he had just replanted. This action was noticed by the FMB when they visited his house, and he was required to replant the required number of trees—but he still carried out the same strategy. In this way, resident F played a cat-and-mouse game with the FMB.

Although these people planted trees once, they took action to maintain the water surface as much as possible. However, as resident E mentioned, such cheap tricks were done in moderation and should not be fined. Such an approach was carried out until the 1990s, when open resource use was still possible. It was less evident from the 2000s, perhaps due to the FMB's increased vigilance and oversight. According to some local people, the FMB has recently been able to draw and map shrimp ponds very accurately using new measuring instruments. These instruments include technologies such as GIS and GPS. One of the locals was surprised that although the FMB did not visit his house, they had a precise image of his shrimp ponds. It is clear that the application of modern technology has enhanced the administrative capacity of the FMB, which has led to a reduction in cheap tricks.

The third approach is a "temporary expedient." A temporary expedient refers to behavior in which the FMB demands reforestation but then the shrimp farmer evades the requirement by smoothing over the moment in some way. A temporary expedient is regarded as an alternative strategy of cheap tricks. As the FMB stated, they urged people with large shrimp ponds to plant trees—and even today, local people are still

asked by the FMB to engage in reforestation. There are some people who avoid the requirement through a temporary expedient. For example, resident G was repeatedly criticized by the FMB for his inadequate ratio of forest cover, although his ponds measured 0.15 km^2. However, he replied with a smile that he had no place to plant trees and ignored the demand. Resident H was also asked to implement reforestation to increase his ratio of forest cover to 60 percent: his pond measured 0.06 km^2, with 50 percent forest cover. However, resident H temporarily ignored the demand by telling the FMB there were no places to plant trees and requesting them to give him more time. After repeated exchanges, the FMB finally gave up. In this way, some local people avoid the requirement of reforestation by temporarily smoothing over the moment when cheap tricks prove difficult.

The fourth way of dodging governance is through "bargaining." In this approach, the farmer attempts to bargain with the FMB over the implementation of regulations. Following are examples of this approach. The first is the case of people who were allowed to not plant the amount of trees initially required by the FMB, because of their small landholding. For example, resident I sometimes talked to the FMB about the ratio of forest cover. Although his land had only 40 percent forest cover, his land use condition was accepted because his land area was small: 0.02 km^2. On the other hand, resident J was fined and his shrimp ponds' gate was destroyed by the FMB after he was caught freely cutting trees on the land that he obtained in the 1990s. However, he was allowed to stay on in exchange for reforesting the land. In addition, he was allowed to use land with less than 50 percent forest cover since his landholding was small.

The second is the case of a person who was allowed to stay on in consideration of his circumstances. Resident K immigrated to Village V in the early 1990s and freely obtained some forest area. Resident K was allowed to stay there without any fines or destruction by the FMB, as he had been a soldier in the Cambodian war.

The third is the case of a person who was allowed to remain on his land on the condition that he engaged in reforestation and maintained the ratio of forest cover. In the early 1990s Resident L freely acquired newly replanted land, where he cut down young trees to make a shrimp pond. However, he was not made to feel welcome, and in fact his house was burned. He endured the violence and stayed put, and the FMB stopped visiting him. Finally, in 2009, he and the FMB agreed that the FMB would give him a green book on the condition that he reforested the land. Resident L did not remember the exact year—but he did remember the events of the early 1990s.

From the above cases, it is clear that there have been instances in which people negotiated their way to being allowed to live in mangrove forest areas and utilize natural resources, though some of them were subjected to violence. From this fact, it can be

concluded that management by the FMB is not completely rigid. This is supported also by the testimonies of residents who were "overlooked" by the FMB.

Resident M migrated and bought land in 2008, and he cut trees freely to expand the water surface. Though his actions initially went unnoticed by the FMB, they finally drew attention when he used wood from the trees to create a water gate. Since resident M did not have enough money to pay a fine, he forfeited his boat instead. His shrimp pond measured 0.01 km^2. The forest area was 0.005 km^2, and the area of the water surface was 0.007 km^2. He stated that the FMB was aware of the condition of his land; however, he was not urged to replant trees given his small land size. This case supports the notion that forest management by the FMB is not completely rigid. It is understood that the FMB exercises both strictness and flexibility.

The last approach used by villagers to dodge governance is "treating." This refers to attempts to establish a good relationship with the FMB. According to land use regulations, local people need to replant trees immediately after logging. However, some interviewees mentioned that if people maintained a good relationship with the FMB, they could postpone replantation and meanwhile produce more shrimp thanks to the lower density of mangroves. To create a good relationship, they invited FMB personnel over for coffee or beer. It was easy for them to contact FMB officials because they also lived in Village V. Although this study did not investigate the veracity of these claims, it is widely believed that maintaining a good relationship with the FMB is one way for villagers to secure their livelihoods.

V How Does Authoritarian Environmentalism Work on the Ground?

V-1 *Combination of Central and Local Governance*

As a result of such interactions, what are the kinds of orders and political system that have been established? In order to understand the features of authoritarian environmentalism, this section examines how the political system is organized through a combination of central and local governance. Characteristics of governance at both the central and local levels are described as follows.

First, the results show that there are two main features of governance by the central government. The first is based on gradualism. With regard to mangroves, the Vietnamese government first tried to manage local areas by deploying SFFEs in the 1980s. However, following the high influx of migrants to mangroves, the government could not control the resource utilization by migrants and instead involved them in forest management. On the other hand, although the ratio of forest cover in shrimp ponds was set at 75

percent, it decreased to 60 percent in the 1990s. From this, it is understood that the government gradually changed its approach. The reduction of prescribed forest cover reflects the Vietnamese state's desire to increase shrimp production and the potentially conflicting policy priorities among state bureaucracies.

The second feature is that the government strengthened its governing power by using a program for mangrove rehabilitation and the development of environment-friendly shrimp aquaculture. With support from international organizations, the government demarcated areas where shrimp farming was allowed and where it was prohibited. It was able to involve local people and apply modern technology such as GIS for monitoring, which increased forest protection and also increased foreign exchange earnings. The government was not able to apply GIS earlier due to budget constraints. This highlights the government's strategy to enhance governance under the guise of sustainable development.

At the local level, it was evident that discretion by forest officers based on the local social context helped residents to survive with top-down governance, though this was dependent on arbitrary decisions by the FMB. As explained previously, the requirement to maintain a forest ratio of 60 percent is a significant burden for local residents. Groups of villagers even visited the FMB office to try to negotiate for a revision of land use regulations. However, the FMB replied that it was a rule and there was no room for negotiation. Therefore, it was not realistic to implement bottom-up governance that reflected residents' ideas in the decision-making process. Instead, local people survived top-down governance by carrying out negotiations to maintain their livelihoods. The FMB also played an important role in helping local residents by exercising discretion based on the local context; however, this was dependent on arbitrary judgments by FMB officials, and not everyone received equal treatment.

How is the combination of central and local governance reflected in landscape construction? Fig. 4 shows the pond area and ratio of forest cover of each population in Village V. Different points show the different coping strategies of local people. Fig. 4 demonstrates the gap between institutions and reality. This gap has resulted from the interaction between the FMB and local residents. There were more people who maintained 50 percent forest cover than those who met the stipulated 60 percent. There were those who maintained 60 percent forest cover in spite of trying various strategies to avoid it, and there were those who maintained 50 percent forest cover by going along with the state. People whose ponds had 50 percent forest cover after they went along with the state gave various explanations for the shortfall. For example, some stated that the water surface expanded naturally due to erosion of embankments, without the cutting of forest. Others said the FMB accepted forest cover of at least 50 percent.

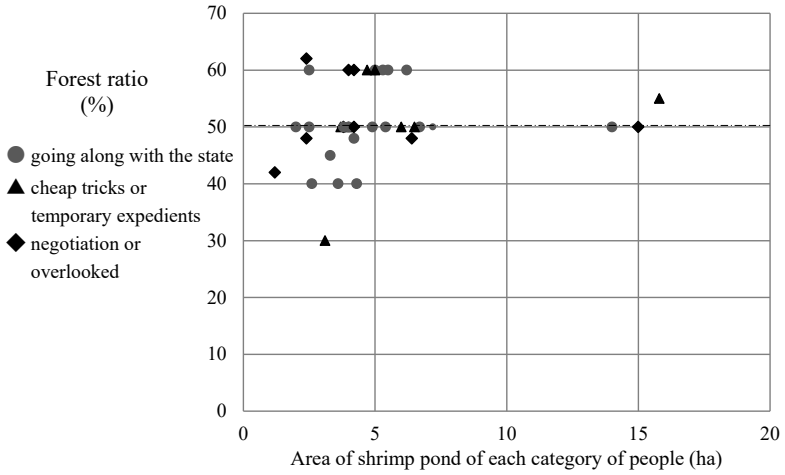

Fig. 4 Ratio of Forest to Shrimp Pond Area
Source: Prepared by Watanabe Hiroki based on the results of interviews conducted in November 2016

Hence, discrepancies in the ratio of forest cover resulted from interactions between the FMB and local residents.

Although there was no change in top-down governance by the state and strong monitoring systems were established, authoritarianism in Vietnam was actually different from what we usually imagine when we hear the word "authoritarianism." Alternative governance was unintentionally developed based on social context in the field site. The FMB played an important role as coordinator between the central government and local people. Although the FMB is a governmental agency, it arbitrarily took into consideration the local context when functioning as a street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 2010). This feature of the political system shows a mixture of "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarianism. When considering the institutions and monitoring measures, one might gain the impression of a rigid political system, but in reality there was flexibility in governance on the ground. As Ahlers and Shen (2018) discovered in the case of China, authoritarian environmentalism in Vietnam also had significant nuances at the local level. However, our case shows a different aspect of interaction than existing studies. This point is discussed in the next section.

V-2 *What Does the Hybrid System Mean to Each Actor?*

What does the current combination of "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarianism mean to the state and local people?

First, from the viewpoint of the state, the fact that most villagers have shrimp

ponds with at least 50 percent forest cover means that the government has succeeded in enforcing the rules. In other words, the state has been able to enclose non-state spaces. And from the viewpoint of local people, the fact that the ratio of forest cover is between 50 percent and 60 percent means that they have been controlled by the state.

Conversely, it is also clear that many people use their land with a forest cover of less than 50 percent instead of the stipulated 60 percent. This means there is a gap between the state's objectives and the actual conditions on the ground.

Considering the recent measures taken by the Vietnam government against the spread of Covid-19, it should be possible for the government to increase the forest cover of shrimp ponds to 60 percent if it is serious. In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government imposed a strict lockdown to limit the flow of people. Particularly in Ho Chi Minh City, the state tried to control the behavior of the population by any means possible: enacting numerous regulations, blocking major roads, and deploying troops. Thus, when the state is intent on something, it leaves no stone unturned.

Why does the state not go all out to increase forest cover? There are two possible reasons for this. The first is the existence of conflicting policy priorities between mangrove conservation and shrimp farming, as well as the fact that shrimp aquaculture is an important export industry that earns the state foreign exchange. The FMB exercised discretion and overlooked shrimp farmers who did not follow land use regulations. It stated that the upper levels of bureaucracy knew about this. In addition, a staff member of DARD Ca Mau understood the opinion of local people that increasing forest cover caused a reduction in shrimp production. It is easy to imagine that a decrease in shrimp production will be disadvantageous for the state in light of tax revenue and foreign exchange earnings. Therefore, because of an accidental coincidence of interests, the state and local people are complicit in creating the landscape.

The second reason for the state's non-enforcement of rules is that current political and social conditions are stable. In the past, there was a confrontation between the state and local people when the state enclosed mangroves. If the state tries to force reforestation, it will incur the antipathy of local people and society will be destabilized. For a state that desires a well-ordered society, such a situation is best avoided. People surviving under strict top-down governance also expect local governance to be flexible though arbitrary.

Thus, it may be concluded that for the state, the current situation is the second-best arrangement for preventing social instability and a decrease in shrimp production, even though policies have not been implemented exactly according to land use regulations. For local residents, too, the current situation may be considered as the second-best arrangement, because it allows for a certain degree of informal land use though it is

a top-down governance that does not reflect the opinions of local people. Therefore, the current arrangement is far from the best one for both, but it is still accepted as the second-best solution. This is because the relationship between the state and local people is not merely one of rivalry or one of conformity. This equivocal relationship has led to the creation of "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarianism.

While other case studies have revealed aspects of interaction between the state and local people—such as the state enacting coercive measures (Ahlers and Shen 2018), the state and firms colluding (Han 2015), and local people circumventing state governance (Scott 2009)—our research shows that the state and society coincidentally share common interests and have thus developed a somewhat cooperative relationship, albeit one marked by tensions. Our findings at this local level can contribute to a more diverse view of authoritarian environmentalism.

VI Conclusion

This study aims to clarify how authoritarian environmentalism works on the ground for political stability, and in particular how the authoritarian state reaches a compromise with society. Through a case study of wetlands in southern Vietnam, by conducting a field survey in Ca Mau Province, we examined chronological interactions between the state and locals over shrimp farming and mangrove conservation. Our analysis demonstrates that the Vietnamese state strengthened its governing ability and succeeded in building a sophisticated monitoring system for mangroves. However, there was a gap between the functioning of forest management institutions and actual conditions on the ground. Not all shrimp farmers followed land use regulations. This gap can be explained by aspects of the interactions between the state and local people. Rather than making optimum use of its capacity, the state reached a compromise with villagers by arbitrarily overlooking and more or less cooperating with locals because of an accidental confluence of interests and to avoid political instability. On the other hand, local residents also adopted unique coping strategies as they lived under top-down governance. Although their choices of coping strategies decreased with the establishment of modern governance, they were still resilient against state governance. These interactions between the state and locals created an informal social order through everyday negotiation under authoritarianism. In particular, local forest officers played an important role in connecting the central state and local governance. As in the case of dam watershed management in central Vietnam, this eventually led to some sort of temporal political equilibrium (Ubukata and Hoang 2020, 91).

Vietnam is considered an authoritarian country. However, this study revealed that the image we usually have of an "authoritarian state" can be different from the actual situation on the ground, and previous studies include mention of hybrid regimes. Our study clarified that the Vietnamese political system includes aspects of both "ostensible" and "actual" authoritarianism, and that authoritarian environmentalism does not necessarily mean the suppression of society. This hybrid political system is based on an equivocal state–society relationship. It results from potentially conflicting policy priorities, the scale of state bureaucracies' operations at both the central and local levels, and the interactions between local authorities and local residents. Although the authoritarian state has strong powers, the state may not have strict control over society. As a future challenge, the dynamics of temporal political equilibrium should be approached. As this equilibrium is temporary, there is no denying the possibility that it may be disturbed in the future depending on changes in power relations. Will the equilibrium be maintained in the future or will it collapse? To track this issue, more research is needed to study interactions between the people and the authorities under authoritarian environmentalism and to take into consideration power relations.

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The Camphor Tree and the Elephant: Religion and Ecological Change in Maritime Southeast Asia

FAIZAH ZAKARIA

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The accolades for Faizah Zakaria's *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant* (on the publisher's website)—"Absolutely fantastic" and "Insightful work on such a vital subject"—by the notable scholars Johan Elverskog, author of *The Buddha's Footprint*, and Bradley Camp Davis, co-editor of *The Cultivated Forest*, is high and deserving praise. The "vital subject" alludes to the less-focused research on the intersection of religion and the environment, particularly in an Asian context, which is famed for its diverse cultures and religions. In this regard, Zakaria's volume is a valuable scholarly contribution to the interdisciplinary fields of Asian studies, Southeast Asian studies, environmental studies, history, environmental history, and postcolonial studies.

The postcolonial lens brings the book's thesis into sharp relief: "What is the role of religion in shaping and structuring interactions between the human and nonhuman in nature? How do they change? And why are Muslim and Christian organizations generally not a potent force in the region's environmental movements?" (p. 2). A central motif in the book is conversions; this is first embodied in religious conversions of Batak people in upland Sumatra and Malays on the Malay Peninsula from animism to (traditionalist, then modernist) Islam and Christianity during the long nineteenth century, heralding a shift from a human-nature interdependency to a relationship of alienation, from enchantment to disenchantment of spirits of the seen and unseen worlds. A corollary conversion is manifest also in the environment, which was greatly impacted by the exploitation of natural resources and rationalization of the landscape (e.g., deforestation and cultivation of cash crops) by Dutch and British colonialists in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, respectively, and their local allies and elites. This led to the devastation and loss of prestige of camphor trees and the megafauna elephants—emblematic of indigenous pride, tradition, and heritage—which gave rise to the book's arresting title, *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant*.

Local folks accord agency to these nonhuman forms as spirit-filled rather than insensate beings that coexist with spirits of the departed. We recognize this as an extension of the decolonizing and

desecularizing (p. 3) impulse. This, in turn, challenges tired dichotomies that ordinarily frame conservation discourses, chiefly civilized (environmentally conscious) colonialists/uncivilized natives; human/nonhuman; sacred and otherworldly/mundane and worldly; rationalized religions and theology (God talk)/everyday religions, e.g., local customs (*adat*), folklore, and superstitions. Zakaria astutely opines, "The everyday indexes the entanglement of two modalities of conversion—embracing both a new religion and internal reform—as being religious responses to the same ruptures and dislocations in politics and environments" (p. 8). In this regard, conversion entails not only an ideological shift from one religion to another but also the material changes of lived religion—religion that is lived—within a faith tradition, e.g., traditionalist to modernist Islam.

The Anthropocene—humanity's indelible and irreversible impact on the environment—in the everyday, in turn, indexes yet reframes the mutually constitutive environmental and conversion narratives in terms of timeline and agency. Each of these narratives is more commonly positioned as inversely proportional to the other, with conversion narratives "highlighting ascent" and environmental narratives highlighting "decline" (p. 6). But from the uncommon and fuzzy lens of the Anthropocene in the everyday, "environmental narratives grow more sensitive to how beliefs through which humans make meaning about nonhuman worlds can impact the material realm" (p. 6). And conversion narratives go beyond the all-defining "moment of enlightenment" (p. 6) in valuing the long-term processes of individual (e.g., male local elites, anticolonial heroes, shamans) and collective (e.g., the Batak of North Sumatra and Malays in the Malay Peninsula) meaning-making. Negotiating change and reform in this regard is both externalized in the ecosystem of flora, fauna, and spirits, and internalized. Zakaria privileges a "spiritual Anthropocene" that more faithfully encapsulates "the world of spirits" (pp. 3, 188) as this spiritual Anthropocene is grounded in the materiality and messiness of the everyday, as an inseparable part of the environmental and conversion narratives.

The Anthropocene in everyday, lived religion finds expression through a tapestry of personal and historical artifacts such as family histories, shamanic charm books, and folktales, along with colonial and ethnographic archival materials, e.g., diaries. These artifacts ground the narrativization in *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant*'s three parts—"Structures," "Representations," and "Materialities"—with poetically named chapters, two in each part. The first part's two chapters are titled "A Time Before Religion" and "Rupture and Resilience in Conversion." Chapter 1 sets the stage by taking readers through a "cycle of birth, life, and death" in Batak society. In doing so, it enables us to better appreciate the coexistence of the human and nonhuman and the ways in which the heterogeneous minority of the Batak people (taking into consideration their subgroups) within the Indonesian political landscape acquired "agency over the local environment" (p. 13). It also enables us to appreciate the change that awaits them in the period under study, the long nineteenth century. Chapter 2 puts the spotlight on the Padri War, the civil war between 1793 and 1838 that facilitated the Dutch intervention which sided with West Sumatran

Minangkabau *adat* leaders who were losing the fight against Islamists (p. 14). The colonization of West Sumatra is memorialized through the confessional manuscripts of the Padri War leaders that delineate how the uplands were transformed for the colonizer's accessibility and profit through coffee cash cropping.

The "displacement of local spirits" (p. 14) as a consequence of the dislocation of the human from the nonhuman is highlighted in the first part of the book. The phenomenon is elaborated on in the second part, "Representations." Chapter 3, "Secularizing 'Literate Cannibals' through Scripture," and Chapter 4, "Mountains, Waters, Derangement," showcase new genres of writing, such as biographical writing, school textbooks by indigenous teachers, and family history. It becomes apparent that the then emerging "environmental optic" among the locals sadly became "less attuned to the nonhuman agentive power" (p. 14), which was further fractured by the locals' complicit exploitation of resources, namely, tin mining and camphor harvesting. The advent of capitalist colonialism heralded not only a shift from animism to monotheism (i.e., Christianity) but also the ascendancy of the human over the nonhuman, as Christianity's worldview is anthropocentric: it centers the human in creation.

Despite the author's claim that the "book's ambitions are modest" (p. 15) where Batak historiography is concerned, the third part, "Materialities"—consisting of Chapter 5, "Camphor and Charismatic Retreat," and Chapter 6, "Disenchanting Elephants"—is a standout. This is the heart of book and discusses the fate of the nonhuman world in the hands of its human stewards. The decline of this world is exemplified by the decimation of camphor trees, with the colonial economy in Sumatra favoring benzoin cash cropping. The author carefully avoids romanticizing indigenous spiritualities, which can be a pitfall of faith-based environmentalisms, given the documented evidence of local complicity in changing the environmental landscape. She asserts, "linking indigenous claims to pristine forests and timeless ecological wisdom is flawed" (p. 154). In the Malay Peninsula, the megafauna elephants that were once depended upon for transportation and a marker of status among Malay leaders became redundant and at risk of extinction with the rise of riverine transportation during the British colonization of the Straits Settlements. The Islamization and Christianization of upland Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula—both equally anthropocentric—gradually supplanted shamanic influences along with human and nonhuman coexistence, embodied in a forgotten respect for the "elephant's personhood" (p. 16). Disenchantment indexes the "loss of wonder, a reduction in intrinsic value, and a dis-recognition of agency in the material body of a living being" (p. 156) with the eventuality of dehumanizing the human, however unintended.

The book's conclusion, aptly titled "Faith-Based Environmentalism in the Anthropocene," cements the book's thesis: that "the Muslim and Christian environmentalisms variously taking shape in the region today lack a radical edge" (p. 16), unless a concerted (rather than diffused and ineffectual) sense and practice of accountability in tracing the unprecedented and early ecological

damage in these regions under study is effected. Therein lies the hope that the book offers to us. The conclusion starts by referencing *Laudato Si'* (p. 187), which is globally touted as the green encyclical of the current Pope Francis. It shows the potential of long-standing anthropocentric faith traditions to not only renounce but also repent for their misguided teachings of human stewardship as having abusive dominion over nonhumans. In that vein, the book is disappointingly gender-blind. Zakaria's *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant* leaves us with a prophetic voice, in the spirit of old traditions: it is an invitation to "[rethink] what it means to be human, humanity's responsibilities, and ecological imagination" (p. 194).

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Stone Masters: Power Encounters in Mainland Southeast Asia

Holly High, ed.
Singapore: NUS Press, 2022.

While *Stone Masters: Power Encounters in Mainland Southeast Asia* initially introduces itself rather humbly as an examination of "stone veneration in mainland Southeast Asia" (p. 5), it quickly expands into a much more ambitious comparative analysis of regional similarities and differences in materiality, cosmology, myth, ritual, and social organization across the region. As an exercise in comparative ethnology, the volume seeks to integrate fine-grained ethnography, local social history, regional historiography, and anthropological theory. Ranging broadly across mainland Southeast Asia, the volume contains three case studies from Laos, two from Myanmar, two from Thailand, and one each from Cambodia and Vietnam.

The two chapters by Holly High and John Holt in Section 1, "Stone Theory," analytically frame the volume's nine subsequent case studies in terms of key concepts and prior scholarship. Stones of various sorts (such as megaliths, statues, city pillars, termite mounds, mountains, stupas) are treated as physical manifestations of locality-centered occult presences and potency which require, even demand, negotiation for successful social life. "Masters" in the book's title refers to authoritative nonhuman presences mediated by these stones, agentive figures that are owners of territory, fertility, and bodies and display both the generative power to create life and the destructive power to take life. Simultaneously caring and capricious, these masters are appeased more than worshipped, pacified more than adored; and human collectivities are compelled to craft mutually beneficial relations with them. The localized cults emerging out of these relations give rise to multiple types and sources of power that nonetheless display thematic, discursive, ritual,

and social commonalities across the region. Nonetheless, the historical instantiation and development of these cults in concrete social encounters is open-ended, uncertain, and dependent upon changing cultural, political, and economic conditions. The volume's highlighting of the moral ambiguity of these stone masters is contrasted with how prior scholarship has treated guardian and tutelary spirits as solely benign, even as both High and Holt emphasize that the volume's approach builds upon Paul Mus's earlier study of the cult of the earth god in monsoon Asia and the need for human intermediaries in interaction with deities.

Section 2, "Living with Mounds, Stones and Soil," presents ethnographic-centered analyses of stone veneration. In Chapter 3, High compares how ethnic Kantu in contemporary Laos organized the cultic veneration of stone masters in their own village, both before and after the village's physical relocation, with how these villagers responded to calls made by government officials to participate in state-led public rituals centered on a provincial city pillar and a Buddhist stupa. In Chapter 4, Courtney Work examines how Cambodian villagers pursue fecundity, prosperity, and harmony by cultivating caring relationships with the chthonic energies of water and land via rituals framed less in the punitive terms of duty, sacrifice, and obligation than in the festive terms of eating, dancing, drinking, play, and conviviality. In Chapter 5, Paul-David Lutz explores the cosmology underlying a hierarchical pantheon of chthonic vitalities residing within an ascending jurisdiction of mountains surrounding a Khmu hamlet in upland Laos, and how the villagers' nurturing of reciprocal care with the custodian of the local mountain was disrupted and undermined by the political, economic, and technological interventions of socialist modernity initiated by the developmental Laotian state. Benjamin Baumann, in Chapter 6, argues that termite mounds in Thailand's Buriram Province house overlooked chthonic, vital forces that serve as a key nexus around which local rituals of care, well-being, and belonging are developed and through which the mutual imbrication of persons, communities, and territorial place is fashioned in everyday life.

Section 3, "Pillars and State," approaches stone cults from a more historical perspective. In Chapter 7, High documents five historical versions of the myth about the goddess Lady Luck, who is associated with the city pillar of Vientiane, and then compares their structures and thematic elements in the manner of Claude Levi-Strauss, in the process teasing out the abiding core and changing features of this mythic complex as it has evolved over time. In Chapter 8, Sally Bamford documents and analyzes how the spatial layout of twelfth- and nineteenth-century Myanmar royal palaces, and the pillars, shrines, statues, and pavilions within them, cultivated relations of care and submission toward a diverse pantheon of spiritual entities which in turn protected and celebrated the earthly sovereignty of Myanmar kings and their kingdoms. Fukuura Kazuo describes the myth of the pillar of Indra in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in Chapter 9, explaining how its construction and worship were central to the founding of the city and kingdom in the ancient past, as well as how in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries its worship has been reinvented several times in relation to a contentious community of resurgent spirit mediums serving the tutelary spirit of the city

residing within it. In Chapter 10, Klemens Karlsson unpacks the territory cults of village and town spirits among the Tai Khuen people of Chiang Tung, Myanmar, analyzing the ritual sequences and offerings underpinning these cults in order to show how the ceremonies not only bring fertility, wealth, and prosperity but also provide symbolic and mythic legitimacy for the domination of displaced indigenous residents by the Tai migrants who claimed legal rights over land as civilized propagators of agriculture. In Chapter 11, Ngo Thi Diem Hang examines the mutual entanglement of a local cult, mythological figures, and the modern Vietnamese nation-state at the temple on Hung Mountain, documenting the ancient veneration of kings at the temple, the appropriation of this worship by the state during different periods of Vietnamese nation-building, and how contemporary Vietnamese devotees treat Hung kings as auspicious, powerful ancestors in their personal lives. The section and book conclude with an afterword by Penny Van Esterik, which critically reflects on the materiality of stones, the male scholars and grand narratives that haunt the Southeast Asian scholarship about stone masters, the promise and possibilities of a new regionalist comparative ethnology, the challenge of incorporating stones from prehistoric Southeast Asia into the analysis, and the necessity of wrestling with the ideological and social complications introduced by the arrival of hegemonic world religions into the worlds of stone masters.

Much more than these brief chapter summaries suggest, the substantive descriptions, anthropological arguments, and theoretical reflections of the case studies in *Stone Masters* resonate with each other across multiple dimensions—myth and ritual, ethnographic detail and cultural history, cosmologies and social organization, popular efflorescence and elite appropriation, social dynamics and political conflicts. The close attention paid by the authors to local terminologies, conditions, processes, and structures in the unfolding of specific cases of stone masters precludes any quick or easy generalizing about consistent and shared regional patterns and characteristics, except in broad strokes. Nonetheless, the reader cannot help but walk away with the clear sense that the contributors have opened up an illuminatingly fruitful domain of regional analysis worthy of further study, if only in order to more clearly elucidate the sociocultural contours and characteristics that define this family of shared phenomena. As an exercise in comparative regional ethnology, therefore, the volume is a thought-provoking success.

As much as the volume is about stone masters as prominent nonhuman figures of potency and efficacy within Southeast Asian society and culture, the book is also equally about the diverse, unruly pantheons and cosmologies within which these caring and capricious figures of potency reside. In fact, some of the chapters and arguments touch only lightly in a concrete or focused manner on either stones, masters, or stone masters per se. Instead, they delve more robustly into the encompassing cults and cosmologies of chthonic potency and sovereignty that would seem to be derived from ontologies that preceded both world historical religions and the naturalist vision of scientific rationality. Threaded in a hidden fashion across the various arguments within *Stone Masters*, therefore, is a larger comparative question about how ideas of personhood, agency,

efficacy, fecundity, productivity, well-being, prosperity, and humanity are conceptualized rather differently within the ontologies of "animism," world historical religions, and secular scientific naturalism. In this sense, the book is also an exploration of how these contrasting understandings reinforce, negate, supplement, or undermine each other in the daily lives of contemporary mainland Southeast Asians. Hopefully future scholarship about stone masters will more directly investigate these questions as well.

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Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories: Jarai and Other Lives in the Cambodian Highlands

Jonathan Padwe
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020.

Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories delves into the relationship the Jarai of Tang Kadon village have forged with their land as it has been tested through times of historical upheavals and intrusions by the "other." From the French protectorate through the Khmer Rouge regime to the recent waves of monocrop cultivation, the history of the village and its inhabitants is intimately intertwined with the villagers' interactions with the landscape.

The book is rich with information on land use in this part of Cambodia's northeast, where hill rice farmers have—often by means of deference and caution—interacted with the forest. To describe the physical and spiritual landscapes that have shaped the lives of the Jarai of Tang Kadon for centuries, the author uses different narrating styles to illustrate different aspects of the local agricultural system. In the first few chapters, Jonathan Padwe immerses the reader in old Jarai tales with the eloquence of a traditional village storyteller. The following chapters are written under a magnifying glass that demands scientific precision. This is particularly the case with the detailed study of rice. From the loss of Cambodian rice varieties at the end of the 1970s to the reintroduction and spontaneous reappearance of several endemic types in Tang Kadon and beyond, the examination of rice cultivation is clinically thorough. The book ends with the author reflecting on Tang Kadon and its immediate region today. To best illustrate how large companies' investments have given a finishing touch to this interactive canvas, the author switches voice to write his concluding remarks in the fashion of a development report, which summarizes the devastating impact of large and powerful companies' presence.

Padwe writes that "landscapes of memory are often portrayed as passive: they appear in these accounts as inanimate canvases, assigned meaning only through human action" (p. 15). In

the context of a land ravaged by war, the various features that compose the physical environment are rarely muted and inactive. In the case of northeast Cambodia, which suffered during the heavy bombardment of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, fragments of conflicts are simultaneously distinct and dangerous actors that command appropriate human behaviors. Appropriate behavior is referred to in a vignette where Twek, a villager on a mission to burn and clear his land for cultivation, takes the cautious decision to leave a cluster of trees marking the precise location where victims have been violently buried. In this context, explosive remnants of war and those who succumbed to bad and violent deaths are potent agents with the ability to influence human beliefs and actions. In light of this, "disturbed fragments, forest memories" are at play where explosive remnants of war buried in the landscape unexpectedly bring back traumatic memories of hiding in the fields or running into the forest to seek protection from the bombs. During the time of the US bombardment, defoliants were also used to destroy and obliterate. The purpose was to turn the forest into its own memory while exposing insurgents, and nullifying supply routes and caches. Fragments of war continue to be found, but they are not made up solely of heavy metals. Fragments of human bodies can also be unearthed, although when they belong to foreigners (i.e., those missing in action) they are not merely disturbed in their long-buried slumber but can be "disturbing" for the ones who find them. The reluctant finder will need to reach a compromise: either by taking the bones to the vast US military program intent on bringing every American soldier back home or by leaving the remains and the *böngat* (soul) of the dead to rest in situ as they are now an integral part (and a fragment) of the local geographical and historical landscapes.

Because the traditional world of the Jarai is animist, their landscapes of memory are replete with a multitude of voices: the voices of the *yang* (spirits) present, living, and embodied in various instances of nature. In *Bois–bambou: Aspect végétal de l'univers jörai* (Bamboo: Vegetal aspect of the Jarai world), Jacques Dournes, who spent most of his life with cousins of Tang Kadon's inhabitants in a Jarai village in the highlands of Vietnam, wrote:

> [P]lants suffer from ill treatment. They cry, and they complain. In days gone by they were able to speak like any other living beings; without our knowing where appearance ends and reality starts, mythological characters appear as plants and humans, animals and humans. (Dournes 1969, 402)

Although we can hear the calls of the white-crested laughing thrush alerting the Jarai hunter, Padwe's landscape is otherwise inaudible. The sounds of water, wind, animals, and insects are not as loud as the sound of the rice. Equally, people who travel seamlessly from the village to the forest, or from the world of humans to the other world, are hardly mentioned. To name only a few, these are the ghosts, the insane who are often naked (*móhlŭn*) and whose mind and body are irresistibly attracted by the call of the forest, the *pöjau* (traditional healers), and the *pötao* (masters of the elements; there are three of them). The *pöjau*, who have been given power by the *yang* to communicate with them and perform healing rituals, are also slightly muted in spite of their crucial

social function. Dournes wrote that the art of the *pöjau* originally came from Laos, where people from different ethnic groups would come to learn the art of the supernatural (Dournes 1978, 168). Finally, those endowed with more-than-human attributes also include the *pötao* or "masters of the elements." Fleetingly mentioned in *Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories*, the cosmic and social powers of the *pötao* were, according to Stéphane Dovert, "the guarantors of social cohesion" within the community (Dovert 2005). The *pötao apui* (connected with fire), *pötao ia* (connected with water), and *pötao angin* (connected with air) were revered marginal beings (wearing few clothes and living in the periphery of the villages) believed to have the power to control the elements. As a result, they historically played a significant role in establishing strong alliances with the Khmer kings, who would seek their support in times of conflict. Such long-term relationships were based on mutual respect and involved exchanges of sophisticated gifts from both sides (Moura 1883; Mikaelian 2009).

Likewise, the voices of those whose work in the region has contributed to a nuanced understanding of ethnic minority groups are unusually absent. The author makes few references to the existing body of literature on ethnic minorities in Ratanakiri Province. The works of geographers, anthropologists, historians, Christian missionaries, journalists, and development consultants who have extensively studied the Jarai, the Tampuon, and the Kreugn—among several other ethnic communities—are worth mentioning, if only to add shades and layers to the overall canvas. One example is the comprehensive work being done at the time of Padwe's research by the French historian Henri Locard (2023), with the support of the anthropologist Frédéric Bourdier (an expert on ethnic minorities in Cambodia and the region), on Phi Phuon, one of Pol Pot's Jarai bodyguards.

Although Padwe's description of Tang Kadon documents in great depth the changes in agricultural practices since the time of the French protectorate, there is more to say about the space where the world of the human slips into nature and where nature takes over. Rituals are moments that create this in-between space. They create a sensorial experience where humans can observe the act of sacrifice; hear the sound of the gongs; smell, taste, and touch the rice wine jars; and dance. The moment the blood of the buffalo is spilled, the villagers open up a corridor that connects the world of the living and the dead so that good wishes may be fulfilled, illnesses may be cured, and the *böngat* of the dead can start its journey to the other world. This space is important in the ordinary life of villagers, and it deserves more scrutiny in order to comprehend the Jarai's perspective on nature, with its codependence and partnership. Such a partnership is best experienced through funerary rituals. In this instance, man starts the process of burial and the construction of the grave, which can be completed only when the forest takes over and breaks the edifice through the effects of time and erosion. Nature's agency is potent and serves the purpose of completion (Uk 2016). But without human intervention to inject meaning in the works of nature, the world of the Jarai would be even more fragmented and disturbed. And when this world falls prey to the predatory investments of rubber companies and the forest is consumed in its

entirety by the rapacious influence of capitalism, there are no more physical markers. With no more forest fragments, memories, identities, and historical narratives are profoundly disturbed.

Padwe associates "fragments" with the narration of marginal and subaltern histories. This is visible in the way the book is written, with chapters and sections of chapters being of different depths and lengths. Some appear like large shards that illustrate the story of villagers under the oppressive and brutal authority of the Khmer Rouge, while others act as splinters revealing slightly more of an outline to the jigsaw. Fragments do not always conjure up ideas of marginality, however. They are not necessarily the result of things and beings that are at the periphery, out of place, disordered, or a source of anxiety. As extensively documented by Dournes, the Jarai people have a tradition of purposefully breaking objects to facilitate the transfer of these objects from the world of humans to the world of *yang* (Dournes 1975). Upon reaching their destination, the objects are believed to be made complete again and able to be used by the dead. The breaking of historical accounts, although conditioned by times of trauma, crisis, and healing, may also be more manageable to some Jarai in a fractured way, whereby memories of past events are condensed and transmitted through short vignettes. These are jigsaw pieces of different shapes, sizes, and materials that tell the stories of "Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories," narrate "Disturbed Fragments, Forest Memories," and evoke "Disturbed Memories, Fragmented Forests."

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The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory

Kevin Blackburn

Singapore: NUS Press, 2022.

Kevin Blackburn's *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory* broadens understanding of "comfort women"[1] by uncovering the "disappeared" collective memory of Singapore as a onetime "centre for comfort stations" (p. 3). The book adds to debates on the silenced voices of comfort women, exploring the interplay of nationalist and paternalistic discourses in Singaporean politics and culture around sexual labor before, during, and after World War II. This book sets out to examine the silence of Singapore women, which is noticeable compared to their counterparts from other Asian countries, including Korea and Indonesia. The absence of the voices of local women coming forward with their narratives led the author to draw on alternative sources, such as the diaries of a brothel manager and a Japanese colonel or the testimony of a doctor or an errand boy who could observe lives at the comfort station. Along with archival records and secondary literature, the creative use of source materials enriches our historical understanding, presenting both strengths and weaknesses of personal written records, which are "credible as not influenced by the heated debates over the circumstances of the comfort women" (p. 72), and oral histories, which are "special connecting the past as memory with the present" (p. 63).

This book begins with Lee Kuan Yew's 1992 statement that the presence of Korean comfort women "saved the chastity of many Singaporean girls" (p. 17) and its silencing effects. Putting aside the statement's incorrectness and insensitivity, the importance of this statement is claimed in its "setting the tone for the public debate" and "discouraging local women from coming forward to speak out" (p. 25), given that many survivors from Korea and other countries had started to seek truth and justice following the Korean survivor Kim Hak-sun's testimony in 1991. Chapter 2 explores comfort women's issues in relation to Singaporean people's fear of rape at war and masculinized understanding of the sexual needs of men, locating it in a broader context of sex work. Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate the daily lives of women, largely from Korea and Indonesia, at comfort stations in Singapore, engaging with diverse sources. The narrative moves on to postwar situations in Singapore in Chapters 5 and 6, focusing on the silencing effects of political and

1) Many scholars and activists, including myself, use quotation marks to indicate that this was a euphemistic term created by Japan's Imperial Army to deceive and downplay the nature of sexual enslavement. In this review the quotation marks have been deleted in the interest of readability, following the book author's choice (pp. 1–2).

public reactions to former comfort women. Chapter 7 elaborates on how the Singaporean link with the transnational comfort women issue has been represented as "dark heritage" sites and in popular culture. This chapter demonstrates how the history of comfort women is narrated and somewhat selectively memorialized in Singapore.

Blackburn skillfully engages with existing arguments and materials, tracing the possible reasons behind the silence of local comfort women. However, this book does not address how the debates around comfort women issues or women's agency—as exemplified by watching a movie (p. 74)—are conceptualized. Bringing more attention to the politics of power and knowledge would be welcomed. As the book notes, the diversity of national and socioeconomic contexts and paths to becoming comfort women, power differences, and dynamics should be considered in order to understand historical accounts. Furthermore, the long debates on the comfort women issue involve elucidating "who generates which knowledges and for what purposes, and what or whose knowledges are considered legitimate or valued" (Newman 2023). This book's contribution to broader scholarship would be more substantial with a detailed analysis of the nature and consequences of knowledge production and dissemination. At present, the materials present variations in recruitment processes or some women's agency, though very limited and contingent upon the different styles of comfort station managers. The variations can be questioned from a human rights perspective, given the enforceable nature of the military sex industry, or even can be unintentionally used by those who deny the integrity of victim-survivors' testimonies. For example, this book mentions that monetary compensation could lead some comfort women to break their silence, while "many Singapore women who were financially better off had little to gain" (p. 184). Despite the author's careful approach to "compensation," what comfort women have demanded is "reparation," which aims at correcting a prior injustice and restoring the dignity and humanity of victims (Khatchadourian 2006). The author's attempts to consider diverse reasons for local women's silence can be distorted by some history denialists, who have invalidated the testimonies of comfort women survivors, calling them money grabbers (Dudden 2022).

Importantly, Blackburn highlights the role of the feminist movement and media in breaking the long silence of victim-survivors in Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. Their awareness-raising campaigns enabled victim-survivors to come forward with their stories, and the testimonies enhanced the public's understanding and sympathy. This book seeks to provoke readers into rethinking "memory suppression in Singapore" (p. 135). Societal silencing appears to have multiple layers of discrimination by gender, nationality, and ethnicity. As a result of such intersectionality, victim-survivors from other Asian countries were called "fallen women" (p. 110) or "a danger to society" (p. 118) and blamed for an increase in the incidence of venereal diseases. As discussed in Chapter 5, those who decided to stay on in Singapore to avoid humiliation and shame in their home communities had to go through detention in the name of "rehabilitation" (p. 124) before being accepted. Comfort women from other parts of Asia faced defaming and

othering practices both inside and outside the comfort women system. Thus, greater attention should be given to the abusive and discriminatory nature of the system, which can resonate with current issues such as sexual violence at war, human trafficking, and vulnerability of the marginalized. In that sense, comfort women survivor-activists, including Kim Bok-dong,[2] who is briefly mentioned in this book as a Korean comfort woman drafted to Singapore, show how they meaningfully exert their agency by working for transnational solidarity based on the commonalities of suffering and structural violence.

Another thing to mention is the book's presentation. The book cover shows the darkened image of the former comfort station at Cairnhill Road, possibly to serve the notion of a "dark heritage." Given that the book will certainly attract international readers, I wonder whether such readers would find the illustrations, primarily maps of comfort stations in Singapore, interesting or engaging. The inclusion of photos from movies, television dramas, and plays mentioned in Chapter 7 would have been more helpful for readers, as they would capture the representations of comfort women in popular culture.

The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory is an important addition to the history of comfort women in Singapore, which has remained largely unknown. Blackburn's book emerges in the company of recent monographs and edited books on the past and present of comfort women issues, including Katharine E. McGregor's *Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in Indonesia* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2023), Sachiyo Tsukamoto's *The Politics of Trauma and Integrity: Stories of Japanese "Comfort Women"* (Taylor & Francis, 2022), Eika Tai's *Comfort Women Activism: Critical Voices from the Perpetrator State* (Hong Kong University Press, 2020), and Ñusta Carranza Ko's edited volume *New Ways of Solidarity with Korean Comfort Women: Comfort Women and What Remains* (Springer Nature Singapore, 2023). Along with these scholarly works, Blackburn's book expands our understanding of the complexity around comfort women issues, confirming the transnational nature of memory and activism against gender-based violence.

As the book sets out to accomplish, it sensibly investigates how gender ideologies have shaped local and other Asian women's shared and often differentiated experiences. Blackburn, with great care, explores encounters between comfort women from other countries and Singaporean society during and after the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945. This book suggests the Singaporean political, social, and cultural contexts as a fragmentary force that divided women into local and others. Although local women's experiences of engaging in the comfort women system were silenced and erased in the public sphere, the collective memory has left visible and invisible marks in Singaporean society. Central to the analysis are local communities' experiences of having

2) Kim Bok-dong (1926–2019) established the Butterfly Fund with Gil Won-ok (b. 1928) to support survivors of gender-based violence in armed conflicts across the globe, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Palestine, and Vietnam.

comfort stations, which were intertwined with historical, international, and structural relations. In this light, scholars and students of Asian history, women's history, gender studies, international relations, and memory activism would find much of interest in this book. The book would also attract a wider readership with its accessibility through the provision of relevant background in text and footnotes. Without a doubt, this book is a significant contribution to the memory scholarship in Asian history, successfully demonstrating the extent of complexity and tensions in the past and present of comfort women issues.

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Burmese Haze: US Policy and Myanmar's Opening—and Closing

Erin Murphy
Ann Arbor: Association of Asian Studies, 2022.

The United States has diverse national interests and poses strategic threats in several Asian states, with significant diplomatic, economic, security, and geopolitical implications. China's rising power challenges the United States' status quo in multiple arenas and spheres, ranging from friction with Taiwan to strategic competition in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific space. Meanwhile, North Korea has expanded its nuclear capabilities as a disruptive player in Asian security systems and is dubbed a rogue state by hawkish American policy planners and others.

Myanmar has become a battlefield of great power rivalries due to its geopolitical location linking Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and the Indian Ocean. It is, and will continue to be, a conflict zone. Much of its peripheral highlands are still under the de facto control of ethnic armed organizations. Under the rule of the military junta, Myanmar was considered a pariah state accord-

ing to the condemnatory rhetoric of American policymakers.

US foreign policy on Myanmar has several intriguing aspects; it was termed a "boutique issue" during the 2008 US presidential campaign, according to David I. Steinberg (2010). Myanmar's political problem, Steinberg explained, was not a major crisis rivaling other US foreign policy formulation issues, but it has gained increasing attention from American policymaking communities. Over the past three decades, US foreign policy on Myanmar has consistently included anti-junta sanctions, aimed at promoting democracy and human rights. Nevertheless, the Obama administration did not approve of sanctions as the sole effective pressure strategy for Myanmar and called for a policy review. To engage Myanmar in democratic reforms, the administration concluded, it was essential to maintain a flexible approach in addressing obstacles during the country's political transition away from full military rule. Senator Jim Webb, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs during the Obama administration, underlined the need for the US to strike a balance between its aspirations to develop Myanmar democracy and its own regional strategic interests.

Covering the above characteristics of the United States' Myanmar policy, Erin Murphy's *Burmese Haze: US Policy and Myanmar's Opening—and Closing* is an outstanding work. It deserves a wide readership among those interested in contemporary Myanmar and US diplomatic approaches in Asia. Policy practitioners and advocates may gain valuable insights from the book, especially into the way Obama administration leaders engaged and interacted with different political stakeholders in transitional Myanmar. Murphy, a former Asian political and foreign policy analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency, spent over a decade working in and around Myanmar, and her expertise is evident.

The book comprises eight chapters, with a prologue and epilogue. Murphy sees Myanmar as unique in many ways: its foreign policy approaches, military affairs, ethnic conflicts, sectarian strife, and democratization. These special issues reflect obstacles and a potential trajectory for US strategy in Asia. The first four chapters focus on humanitarian assistance, national reconciliation, geostrategy, and democratization in Myanmar. Chapter 5 deals thoroughly with the United States' engagement policy with Myanmar, while the remaining three chapters focus on sanctions, economic investment, and the Rohingya crisis. Although the sources and empirical evidence presented here may be found in the general literature on Myanmar politics and society, in-depth information in the context of the United States' Asian strategies adds to the book's usefulness.

In World War II, while Burman nationalist soldiers fought alongside the Japanese army, ethnic minorities launched a counterattack against the Japanese, siding with the Allied forces. The Allied forces included the US military, CIA staff, and Detachment 101 of the Office of Strategic Services, who fought alongside ethnic Kachin, opening a strategic route for General Joseph Stillwell's forces (p. 19). Under Than Shwe's military administration, security ties strengthened between Myanmar and North Korea. This proved to be a challenge for US strategy in Asia. Given the Myanmar

military's fear of a US maritime invasion after monitoring regime changes in Iraq and Libya, they signed a memorandum of understanding with North Korea. This encompassed the construction of military facilities and development of strategic missiles, potentially guaranteeing Myanmar's military survival (pp. 33–34).

The heart of the book is Chapter 5, comprising accounts of US engagement with Myanmar during the Obama administration. Murphy offers valuable data about American diplomatic chiefs' trips to Myanmar, both secret and publicized. Derek Mitchell was appointed by President Barack Obama as special envoy to Myanmar. In September 2011, Mitchell and US delegates traveled by US military flight from Bangkok to Naypyidaw. The delegation met with Upper House Speaker Khin Aung Myint, Lower House Speaker Shwe Mann, and parliamentary members from diverse political parties. They exchanged ideas about Myanmar political reform and the Myanmar-US bilateral relationship. The US delegation requested to visit the military parade grounds in the new capital, and surprisingly, Myanmar officials agreed, giving them a guided tour. After meeting with representatives of leading political-legal agencies in Naypyidaw, Mitchell led the team on a visit to Yangon to hear about problems from ethnic groups, civic organizations, political activists, businesspersons, former political prisoners, and, of course, Aung San Suu Kyi (pp. 73–74).

Murphy also offers previously unpublished information about the US Department of State's strategic planning and preparation for the Myanmar visits. From late November to early December 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar. She met with President Thein Sein, Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin, and parliamentary officials and dined with Aung San Suu Kyi. Clinton's delegation researched and assimilated information from leading publications before and during the Myanmar expedition. These included Steinberg's *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Thant Myint-U's *The River of Lost Footsteps*, Pascal Khoo Thwe's *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, Emma Larkin's *No Bad News for the King*, and George Orwell's *Burmese Days*. Clinton met with Thein Sein in the Presidential Palace in Naypyidaw. Thein Sein spoke about significant steps in Myanmar political reform and foreign relations. Overall, the conversation between Thein Sein and Clinton was genuinely substantive (p. 83).

The detailed narrative accounts of leadership interactions during these meetings are the major strength of the book. Murphy discusses the visits by American leaders at critical junctures of the US-Myanmar relationship. Myanmar under the Thein Sein administration underwent major political-economic reform and embarked on a new foreign policy trajectory, distancing itself somewhat from China and engaging more with the US and the West. Meanwhile, the Obama administration's pivot to Asia strategy amounted to a significant shift in US foreign policy orientation. This geopolitical strategy was intended to counter China as a rival superpower by deepening diplomatic ties with East Asian and Southeast Asian states near China. In this context, Myanmar in political transition was a key target for Sino-US competition. However, Murphy believes that the US retained advantages over China by actively working with civil society; building capacity for

local development; providing social space for political actors; and developing essential agriculture, education, water, and health programs at the local level. Ultimately, the US democratic model may contribute to Myanmar's democratic reform (pp. 175–178).

Despite the book's informative data obtained through interviews with American foreign policy community informants, its lack of any foundational theoretical underpinning is a weak point. US foreign relations are determined through complex decision-making processes involving elite groups in the White House, Congress, Department of Defense, National Security Council, and CIA along with Department of State policy planning staff. In international relations, foreign policy analysis (FPA) is the conceptual study of foreign affairs management; it includes foreign policy formulation stages such as goal setting, policy option identification, and formal decision making. Discussions of the power structure behind US foreign policy formation and foreign policy procedure within the FPA framework can improve the quality of academic works on US foreign policy studies—but Murphy's book lacks such a discussion.

Since the early 1980s, engagement has been a frequent, albeit controversial, US foreign policy strategy, as seen in the Reagan administration's constructive engagement policy toward South Africa. Richard N. Haass and Meghan L. O'Sullivan (2000) viewed engagement as a foreign policy strategy dependent on positive incentives to achieve policy objectives. A distinguishing characteristic of US engagement strategies is "reliance on the extension or provision of incentives to shape the behavior of countries with which the US has important disagreement" (Haass and O'Sullivan 2000, 114). The impact of scholarly conclusions in *Burmese Haze* might have been strengthened by a more systematic theoretical analysis of the United States' Myanmar policy.

By comparison, Kenton Clymer's *A Delicate Relationship: The United States and Burma/Myanmar since 1945* (2015) offers a more conceptual diplomatic history, drawing on US, Australian, and British archives as well as the author's interviews with diplomats, politicians, and political activists in Myanmar and the US. Clymer examines how Myanmar fits into the broad pattern of US foreign policy by tracing the history of the bilateral relationship—from the challenges of decolonization after World War II to the United States' strategic anxieties related to the domino theory in Cold War politics and the rise of human rights policies in the 1980s and beyond. He concludes with President Obama's state visits to Myanmar in 2012 and 2014 and the visits to the US by Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein, which led to a new, warmer relationship between the US and a relatively open Myanmar.

Unlike Clymer's *A Delicate Relationship*, Murphy's *Burmese Haze* does not provide strong analysis with systematic documentary research adding insightful comprehension about the US-Myanmar relationship. Nonetheless, the selling point of *Burmese Haze* is its harmonious combination of compelling stories about contemporary Myanmar and its informative database on the United States' strategic worldview and Myanmar policy format. Murphy's work experience with Asian studies and the United States' Myanmar policy comes through clearly in most of the book's

contents. This helps readers understand the author's purpose and thought, making the book essential reading for policy practitioners, diplomats, and anyone interested in Myanmar politics, foreign policy studies, and Asian international relations.

Overall, *Burmese Haze* is an impressive work that will enable readers to better understand the complex relationship between Myanmar and the United States.

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Repossessing Shanland: Myanmar, Thailand, and a Nation-State Deferred

Jane M. Ferguson

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021.

Since its independence in 1948, Myanmar has not experienced prolonged political stability either with respect to relations between ethnic groups or with respect to civil-military relations. One could argue that the civil war in Myanmar is perhaps the longest running in the world, with democratization never having been established in the country. The causes of ethnic conflict and democratization overlap in several ways. However, both are based on the same assumption: that the Myanmar army is the cause of the conflict, as any authoritarian regime poses an obstacle to peace. In the views of various ethnic groups, fighting against the Myanmar army is unavoidable. The conflict has forced people to join armed groups to fight against the Myanmar army for their own survival. The Shan people are one of the original ethnic groups of Myanmar, and they are familiar with several aspects of the ongoing conflict. This is because they were the leading group who signed the Panglong Agreement and who established the liberation army in the early years after Burma's independence from Britain in 1948. In the intense fighting of 1950 to 1980, Shan nationalists were severely suppressed, which compelled many of them to relocate to border areas. When Shan people crossed the border and settled in Thailand, they hoped to encounter their new home as a friendly state. However, they found themselves needing to assimilate into a challenging

political and social context. Further, they were unable to obtain Thai citizenship, which led to additional difficulties.

There are several modern academic works on the life of the Shan in Thailand, including those along the Thai-Myanmar border, focused on issues such as migration and ethnicity. Jane Ferguson, a scholar from the English-speaking world, has examined ethnic identity changes on the border and in the capitalist society of Thailand.

In the prologue of *Repossessing Shanland*, Ferguson emphasizes the historical background of Shanland. She notes that conflict and differing political views among the Shan people hinder political movements, preventing success. Understanding the history of political failures and their own true history will help the Shan people realize the need for unity to achieve freedom from the Myanmar state.

The book's introduction details how the Shan people gained political legitimacy while fighting for independence from Burma. It also describes the nature of Shan ethno-nationalism: the people, language, religion, and history. The introduction also attempts to clarify how ethnic identity can be studied during periods of conflict or war. It concludes that the study of Shan life along the border should look at cultural movement and assimilation rather than analyzing only Shan-ness. Shan people continue to fight against the Myanmar army while living along the border and in Thailand.

Chapter 1 explores various aspects of the history of the Shan. The critical thing to note here is that the Shan were the original ethnic group in Shan State before the British colonized the area. Shan race and ethnicity are linked with Thai and Lao race and ethnicity. In the view of nationalists, the Shan empire was prosperous and powerful until it tragically collapsed—not only due to its enemies but also at the hands of the Shan themselves. In other words, unity is a crucial aspect of the nationalist movement, and the Shan must prioritize it. In the colonial era the British allowed the Shan to govern their own area, officially called the Frontier Areas. Shan ethno-nationalists use this political history to point out that Shan State has never been governed by Burma. The Panglong Agreement is the guaranteed mechanism that carved out the precise territory of Shan State and was later marked as the source of the ethno-nationalist movement.

Chapter 2 emphasizes the context that changed the nature of the Shan elite in forming the nation-state. Aung San's death led to political instability in Myanmar. In the meantime, the emergence of a new Shan ethno-nationalist, Kwan Song, led to a new phase of the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) under his leadership. New technology was used as a crucial tool for spreading ethno-nationalism—along with Buddhism, which was incorporated as part of the ideology. Interestingly, the Cold War brought Shan people face to face with the world of capitalism, including the black market on their border. Chapter 3 presents the active role of the SURA in mobilizing language learning as a vital requirement for strengthening the nationalist movement and fostering unity. It can be said that the modernization of the printing industry was a crucial

factor in the education of the Shan people about their collective memories and the strength of their ethnic identity. Other facets of Shan identity were also formulated along the Thai-Myanmar border where the Shan ethno-nationalist movement was based, such as music and tattoos.

Chapter 4 explores the transitional periods of the Shan ethno-nationalist movement after the SURA was integrated as part of the Mong Tai Army (MTA). Although the military wing of the Shan armed groups was strengthened dramatically, the new leader, Khun Sa, was controversial, including being labeled a drug lord. His leadership tarnished the political image of the Shan movement. After Khun Sa's surrender to the Burmese army, factionalism arose among the Shan. Chapter 5 sheds light on the lives of the Shan people in Thailand, who experienced unexpected traumas even though the ethnic ties between Shan and Thai were very close. Because there was no Shan refugee camp and no official work permit system for Shan workers, Shan were exploited and hid their identity in order to survive in a capitalist society. The Shan State Army (SSA) was viewed as offering new hope for the Shan people, and many Shan came from Thailand to celebrate Shan National Day and support the SSA.

Chapter 6 discusses tourism growth in Thailand, including the growth of ethnic communities at tourist sites on the border. On the one hand, tourism that turned ethnic communities into tourist sites empowered Shan identity on the border; but on the other hand the same people had to assimilate themselves into the capitalist dynamic of Thailand. The everyday experiences of Shan are discussed to show that sometimes the narrative of the relationship between Shan and Thai-ness does not hold true in the real world.

Chapter 7 details the Shan's comparative cultural dynamic between living in Thailand and living in Burma. Although ethno-nationalism made an enemy of the Burmese, the Shan accepted Burmese culture in several ways, such as through music, while living in Thailand. Shan living in the border areas reflected on the past, when they enjoyed a good relationship with the Burmese. Thus, Burmese are not always seen as the enemy in Shan memory. Chapter 8 explores the fluidity of Shan identity on the border through the Poi Hsang Lawng festival. This festival is regarded as a must-see for tourists and is important for the Shan people to come and celebrate their religious identity. However, since the event is sponsored and supported by Thai officials, the Shan have to compromise and adapt their cultural identity and celebrations to fit with Thai nationalist discourse.

The conclusion emphasizes how Shan people can balance the relationship between the Thai state and the SSA. They continue to support the Shan nationalist movement indirectly and directly while supporting the work of Thai authorities on the border by working together as a community. With their ethno-nationalist efforts being challenged in many ways, the Shan are learning from history why their nation-state building project is not a success. The era of Sao Pha, SURA, and MTA is historically filled with tragedy. Cultural mechanisms can manifest in the form of traditional events and cultural activities. All such activities serve as markers to remember past events, and these memories and cultural elements can be used for political purposes.

Overall, this book makes a valuable contribution to our knowledge of Shan identity on the Thai-Burma border. However, two of its drawbacks must be highlighted: its limited field research and its limited discussion of the Shan ethno-nationalist movement.

First, the author uses the Shan community at Wan Kan Hai as a research site. This bases the book's arguments on an imprecise premise, because the research site and community do not represent the whole of the Shan community in Thailand. Of course, the main base of ethno-nationalists was in Wieng Hang District, Chiang Mai, during the era of the SURA, and all the SURA's political ideology was formulated there. But the reality is that other communities were equally representative of the rise of Shan ethno-nationalism during the MTA era (1985–96), especially Hin Theak Village in Chiang Rai Province. These two streams of ethno-nationalism (Shan United Army and MTA in Hin Theak Village and the SURA in Wieng Hang District) highlight the differences in the collective memory of the Shan people, mainly regarding the identity of the real hero in the contemporary period (Thitiwut 2017). The reborn Shan nationalist movement, known as the SSA, is actively supported by the former SURA as well as the MTA. At the Shan National Day festival in Loi Tai Lang well-known Shan traditional dances are showcased, with the performers including dancers from the Mae Sai area, which used to be a critical area controlled by Khun Sa. Hence, the book lacks a precise discussion of shared identity among the Shan communities along the border since it presents the perspective of only the SURA-supported area.

Second, there is the problem of how Shan ethno-nationalism emerged, as the book looks only at the core ideology formulated by the SURA. The reality is that there are many types of Shan nationalism in Shan State, depending on where ethno-nationalism was established. For example, if Shan ethno-nationalism was formulated on the China-Burma border, it had to accept the Communist ideology during the Cold War period. At present, there are two Shan ethno-nationalist movements: the Shan State Army–North/Shan State Progress Party (SSA/SSPP) and the Shan State Army–South/ Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS/SSA). These two groups have different ideologies and political positions. However, the author conducted research only in the area supporting the RCSS/SSA. It cannot be asserted that this group's ideology is the main ideology of the entire Shan people; there are other ideologies within the SSA/SSPP group. Indeed, the two groups have fought each other politically and strategically even though they are both Shan. Thus, the RCSS wields power only in its interaction with specific Shan communities on the Thai-Burmese border, not in the whole of Shan State.

Shan support different sides for political mobilization in ethnic armed groups. For instance, many Shan people support the United Wa State Army and the National Democratic Alliance Army. Interestingly, both groups' supporters also work in Thailand. Therefore, at this point it cannot be concluded that all Shan workers support the RCSS/SSA. As such, the hybridity of Shan immigrant community workers and ethnic identification is complex, particularly in Thai capitalist society.

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Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in Indonesia

Katharine E. McGregor
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023.

The issue of "comfort women" is about the history of sexual violence and Japan's military-enforced slavery system in Asia. At the same time, it touches on issues of nationalism, Japan's imperial past, and the politics of historical remembering. Therefore, it has been a major topic of diplomacy and social/transnational activism involving Japan, Korea, and beyond; and for a long time it has been an important research area in both the modern and contemporary history of East Asia and beyond. Kevin Blackburn's *The Comfort Women of Singapore in History and Memory* (2022) added long-awaited research into the scholarship on comfort women from Singapore and contributed to the wider scholarship on comfort women studies. In 2023, following in the footsteps of Blackburn's brilliant work, Katharine E. McGregor in her *Systemic Silencing: Activism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in Indonesia* takes up the more formidable task of coming to grips with the past of highly marginalized groups—*rōmusha* (laborers), *heiho* (auxiliary soldiers), and, most prominently, *ianfu* (comfort women)—thereby offering the first sustained analysis of the Indonesian comfort women system that was silenced in the *long durée* of Indonesian colonial and postcolonial history. By skillfully situating sexual violence and the human rights movement in the broader context of transnational activism and memory, McGregor breaks new ground in adding much to our understanding of the complex vicissitudes of comfort women—not only in Indonesia but also in Korea, Japan, the Netherlands, and more.

McGregor carefully periodizes more than a century of Indonesian history and deftly arranges the book into different themes against a backdrop of major historical events or movements. Aside from an introduction and a rather short conclusion, the book unfolds in nine chapters. Chapter 1 traces the long history of sexual exploitation of women in Indonesia and Japan. It further examines how women and children became a matter of international concern due to trafficking and explores

the origin of shame and stigmatization associated with sex workers and *nyai* (a form of concubinage, live-in housekeepers/wives). Chapter 2 explains the connection between the Japanese licensed prostitution system and its development in the Japanese empire. In addition, this chapter reveals a larger pattern of how the Japanese occupying forces tapped into local human resources through coercion and deception in order to recruit *rōmusha*, *heiho*, and girls/women. However, Chapters 1 and 2, for this reader at least, can be read as a comprehensive review of historiography, interweaving the analyses of sexual exploitation of women and the enforced military prostitution system. The chapters hence lay a solid foundation for the ensuing discussions as well as provide rich historical background information for the reader.

That said, the real meat of the book gradually starts from Chapter 3, which looks at the commonalities in how deception and coercion, arguably, became a key strategy to bring, for example, girls and women into a system of enforced military prostitution. In this process, a cluster of factors contributed to the recruitment, for instance, the Indonesian feudal/patriarchal values and Japanese military occupation, etc. Chapter 4 charts the different postwar relations the governments of Indonesia and the Netherlands pursued with Japan and further details how shame and societal stigmatization against women operated in the immediate wake of Japan's surrender. Indonesia's increasing economic dependence on Japan complicated its memory of its wartime experiences under Japanese occupation. The combination of these factors, including the conservative New Order regime, which suppressed women's activism (e.g., censorship and repression of women's studies in universities, etc.), set the stage for what unfolded in later activism and restitution movements.

Chapter 5 shifts attention from Indonesia to Japan and Korea, where war redress and activism first took place and then discursively influenced the Indonesian perception of human rights. Moreover, the social milieu of the Korean *minjung* movement (literally the "people" movement, a mass movement for democracy and against the exploitation of the working classes) effected change in the way women participated in activism. Of particular importance are the feminist research and teaching carried out in universities in Japan and Korea, such as Ewha Womans University, which provide significant intellectual support for research into marginalized historical groups and women's activism. In this regard, Indonesia was a latecomer (almost two decades behind Japan and Korea), due to the authoritarian New Order regime. Chapter 6 turns attention back to Indonesia, examining its nascent activism by juxtaposing its domestic sociopolitical and academic situation with that of Korea in the 1990s. In Indonesia the sociopolitical ramifications of the New Order still hampered women's activism, whereas Korea had transitioned into a post-*minjung* movement period of democracy and advocacy for human rights. As the ideology of the New Order regime lingered in Indonesia, it effectively constrained how the comfort women issue was framed, reported, and accepted within the country.

Chapter 7 maps out the transition from Indonesia's emerging activism to an escalating activ-

ism, which was largely facilitated by a visit by the delegation of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, the most representative body of lawyers in Japan. The experiences of comfort women and *rōmusha* surfaced again, to be viewed through the lenses of military sexual violence and human rights violations. The media this time turned the spotlight on Mardiyem, Indonesia's answer to the "iconic" Korean survivor Kim Hak-sun. Here, McGregor particularly highlights an interesting yet ironic dilemma posed by an "ideal" victimhood (pp. 153–154) as represented by Tuminah, the first Indonesian survivor to publicly come out, and Mardiyem, the first Indonesian iconic survivor. Chapter 8 considers the inherent nature of the Asian Women's Fund (AWF) and the divisive consequences it brought to different parties and stakeholders, such as the rejection of AWF by the Korean Council, the Indonesian government's controversial agreement with AWF, and the survivors' decision on whether to accept payments or not.

Chapter 9 takes on a few dramatic regime-changing events that occurred in mid-May 1998, including massive sexual violence against Chinese Indonesian women. As a result of the changes and in the wake of the New Order period, military sexual violence captured public, media, and international attention. The attention came first through the cases of rape of an estimated 168 Chinese Indonesian women (p. 189) in 1998 and then through the historical cases of comfort women. Ultimately, women's rights activism culminated in Indonesian women's participation in the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in Tokyo in 2000, which raised the international profile and recognition of Indonesian comfort women survivors—even though it was "a form of symbolic justice" (p. 206).

A short review certainly cannot do justice to McGregor's impeccable work, but below are highlighted some of the enduring insights into sexual violence and women's activism contained in her well-researched scholarship. First and foremost, McGregor makes a critical intervention in the extant literature regarding what methodology should be used to interrogate the sexual violence surrounding comfort women. By extension, what sources should be used? The author gives a clear example of holding both archival material and testimonial evidence in high regard. This provides a piquant counterpoint to the hotly debated issue of the value of non-textual sources (Ueno 2012). The combination of archives and testimonies makes a strong case in the context of the Indonesian history of comfort women studies that empirical historiography can be supplemented by non-textual historical materials such as testimonies.

In this way, the reconstruction of women's experiences was possible in McGregor's work, providing a fine example for comfort women studies in general. Furthermore, the author's thorough analysis of the issue of Indonesian comfort women relies on, and benefits from, literary sources such as the novel *Kadarwati: A Woman with Five Names* (pp. 99–101). In her work, literary sources serve their purpose well by corroborating the main thesis. However, should they be separated out as a single subsection, or should they be integrated into the examination of comfort women? It may sound like a judgment call, but after all, all good social history holds cultural sources

in high regard.

Another insightful aspect of the book is the light it casts on the discourses of the "ideal" victim (p. 153) or "model victim" (Ueno, cited on p. 154). Though McGregor does not drill too deep into this part of history (pp. 153–155), the empirical research she offers on an interesting contrast between Tuminah and Mardiyem will have a lasting impact on the debates over what experiences of sexual violence will be considered acceptable or which comfort women will be considered "worthy victim[s]" (p. 154). As McGregor claims, this particularization of certain comfort women's experiences seems to have characterized the early days of Indonesian activism; fortunately, Tuminah's experiences were memorialized in 2013. Worryingly, the simplification of comfort women's diverse experiences created and promoted by certain stakeholders unwittingly overshadows the experiences and voices of those who do not conform. The empirical cases of the two Indonesian comfort women mentioned above also point to the dominant Korean comfort women discourse, leading us to face a challenging, sensitive question: Why do we privilege one kind of experience and marginalize others? This is another thought-provoking point the book leaves us to ponder.

Despite how rigorous and compelling it is, the work is prone to some minor typos ("military policy force," p. 70), a few grammatically incorrect instances ("to be heard from the first time," p. 121; "I examine the how in the early 1980s," p. 124), and, most important, some inconsistent and inappropriate romanization of Japanese phrases. Not to be pedantic, but as a historian of modern East Asia I find the Japanese romanization and inconsistency in italicization jarring—for instance, *kenpeitai* ("the kenpetai commander," p. 67; "the *kenpeitai* (military policy force)," p. 70; "two or three policemen (*kenpeitai*)," p. 76); *kankokujin* ("*kankojin*," pp. 110, 112, 213). These trivial issues could have been easily amended by the copyeditor(s) or the author's Japanese translation assistant(s) mentioned in the preface (p. xiii).

Regardless of these quibbles, *Systemic Silencing* offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of sexual violence and transnational activism involving not only Indonesia but also Japan and Korea, among others. It therefore sets the transnational human rights activism in seeking justice for marginalized historical subjects such as comfort women in the wide sociopolitical and historical contexts of Indonesian domestic politics and international relations. Equally important, its fascination lies in the painstaking attention to detail it brings to the Indonesian history of a normalized gendered violence against women and international human rights activism. McGregor leaves no stone unturned in her research into the topics under discussion. What is more, the book's sophisticated use of, and the depth of, different genres of sources—archival materials, testimonies, literary sources, etc.—throws new light more broadly on the problems of sexual violence and human rights issues. Either assigned as a whole or each chapter as a stand-alone article, the book will appeal to a wide readership of undergraduates, postgraduates, and scholars alike.

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Signs of Deference, Signs of Demeanour: Interlocutor Reference and Self-Other Relations across Southeast Asian Speech Communities

Dwi Noverini Djenar and Jack Sidnell, eds.
Singapore: NUS Press, 2023.

The edited collection *Signs of Deference, Signs of Demeanour* is an important milestone in bringing the insights of linguistic ethnography into conversation with the field of Southeast Asian studies. The book also signifies the expansion of the field outside the traditional centers of Europe and North America, stemming from a collaboration between Australian and North American scholars and published in Singapore, which makes it more readily available for an Asian readership.

The topic of the volume may sound a bit obscure at first glance, but for anybody who is even slightly familiar with the languages of Southeast Asia the subject matter will be immediately relatable. The book is ultimately about how we refer to ourselves and to others in everyday conversation, and how that affects social and intersubjective relations and intersubjective relations on both micro scales—for instance, power asymmetries between kin—and more macro contexts, such as political speech. In each case, the choices we make in how we refer to ourselves and others are crucial to understanding how we as speakers are perceived and how our speech acts are interpreted by our interlocutors.

The book's motivation draws from the domination in sociolinguistics over the years of the Brown and Gilman model of interlocutor reference. Roger Brown and Albert Gilman wrote an influential article in which they generalized the European pronoun division between T (from the French *tu*) and V (from the French *vous*) to pronoun usage universally across languages, arguing that T forms signal "intimacy" and V forms are used in asymmetrical "power" relations (Brown and Gilman 1968). This argument has been criticized in later sociolinguistic and linguistic ethnographic study, but the "common sense" underlying the argument still holds sway in much of the discussion about person reference cross-linguistically.

However, as the editors of this volume argue in the introduction, and as the case studies elucidate quite nicely, even a surface examination of language use in Southeast Asia presents a highly complex picture of interlocutor reference that cannot be encapsulated by Brown and Gilman's broad formulation. Most Southeast Asian languages are classified as open class in terms of interlocutor reference (Fleming and Sidnell 2020), which means that there are a variety of noun forms such as kinship terms, usages such as "master-slave" and "teacher-child," as well as proper names and nicknames that can be used as speakers refer to one another. In addition, the pronoun systems are much more complicated than the binaries of T and V—for instance, the alternations one can use in Javanese, Malay, or Indonesian, providing different "shades" of social and pragmatic meaning. The editors argue that the Brown and Gilman model placed an undue emphasis on "deference," or the elevation of the addressee by the speaker; this led to what was to be called "politeness studies," which also has a large tradition in Japanese sociolinguistics (Ide 2012). Instead of focusing on deference alone, they argue that for Southeast Asia, one has to look at the complex interplay between deference and "demeanour," which is how the speaker seeks to comport themselves in relation to the addressee, and how they wish to be perceived by the interlocutor. Consequently, Southeast Asia presents a classic case of how speakers do not simply elevate their addressees but also manipulate how the addressees view them; the performance of "self" is as important as the respect given to the "other."

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, called "Systems," includes a comprehensive examination of person reference in Kri, a Vietic language of upland Laos (N. J. Enfield), as well as Javanese (Joseph Errington). Enfield and Errington are well-known scholars in the field of linguistic ethnography and have worked for decades in their field sites. Their chapters provide a comprehensive summation of the dynamics and changes of linguistic systems over time, touching on issues of how complexities of kinship, social class, and perceptions of modernity influence the ways in which speakers refer to one another.

Part 2 of the book is titled "Practices" and also contains two chapters. The first is on vocatives in the Cirebon variety of Javanese (Michael Ewing). This is important as vocatives are not considered in discussions of person reference, even though in languages such as Javanese they are quite common and play a role distinct from pronominal forms. The second chapter, by Sarah Lee, is on the use of the English "I/you" in Kuala Lumpur Malay. This is the only chapter in the volume that looks at language contact between English and Southeast Asian languages and also brings in ethnic diversity, discussing how the choice of person reference terms in English and Malay influences perception of ethnic difference in the diverse urban space.

Part 3 of the book is titled "Intimacies" and has three chapters, including two by the editors and one by Charles Zuckerman. This section perhaps sheds the most light on the complex relations between deference and demeanour that form the title and major theme of the book. Jack Sidnell's chapter is based on an extended Vietnamese conversation between two couples and their use of

kinship terms. He takes the idea of "respect those above, yield to those below" to show how asymmetry in person reference is not simply about power and solidarity but also elucidates the delicate ways in which senior-ranking interlocutors include and "yield" to lower-ranking interlocutors to create a smooth, collaborative interaction that maintains the norms of respect. Dwi Noverini Djenar's chapter is useful because it extends the study beyond the interpersonal domain to show how something seemingly minute like first person pronoun alternation in Indonesian has large-scale effects. The chapter deals with the case of media interviews with political candidates during the 2019 national election campaign. Finally, Zuckerman's chapter is notable because while many of the chapters discuss hierarchy, Zuckerman looks at the egalitarian relation implied by the Lao term *siaw1*, which is used by friends who are roughly the same age. He makes the astute observation that while the use of such terms entails a highly intimate relationship where interlocutors are more free and open in their interactions than with "elder" brothers or sisters, it also means that the social obligations to maintain these relations are less stringent, leading to quicker dissolution. The constraints that govern asymmetrical reference therefore lead to a tighter social bond than the looser, more dynamic relations implied by egalitarian social reference.

Part 4 of the book is titled "Theories," and here Luke Fleming draws on several cases to look at how Southeast Asian (and also East Asian) person reference can provide a different starting point for understanding interlocutor reference more broadly. He first suggests that with the exception of Taba, no Southeast Asian language follows the model prevalent in European address systems, where the pronoun is directed exclusively from speaker to addressee (T/V). In fact, languages of Southeast and East Asia have honorific registers targeting not only the addressee but also the speaker (self-humbling), and they also have discourse referents outside the interaction. Therefore, analysts need to pay particular attention to "pragmatic salience"—what aspects of the social context the interlocutors are bringing in at what time, and how their choices are motivated not only by the context in situ but also by prevailing language ideologies, kinship structures, and sociohistorical conditions. The "open class" structure of interlocutor reference in these languages makes it all the more important to look at how speakers are focusing their points of reference to determine the social uptake of their utterances.

While the book covers an important topic that has not received as much attention as it should in the study of Southeast Asian languages, it is more a representative sample of theoretical and empirical developments in the field and should not be seen as an introduction to linguistic ethnography per se. It includes several complex formulations that can be understood only by those with some exposure to linguistic ethnography. However, for those interested in Southeast Asian languages, if they are willing to make a little extra effort in order to grasp the theoretical architecture of the book, the case studies provide an excellent resource and entry point for examining in greater depth this crucial though understudied aspect of Southeast Asian languages. As of now, the field of linguistic ethnography is mostly established in the centers of the Global North, such as North

America, and now Australia, as is attested by the affiliations of the contributors to this volume. My hope is that with more volumes like this, the field can expand and be taken up by those located at institutions in Southeast Asia who can bring a native-speaker and context-specific sensibility to the subject matter, expanding and deepening the discussions even further.

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