Haunted Borderland

The Politics on the Border War against China in post-Cold War Vietnam

by

Juhyung Shim

Department of Cultural Anthropology
Duke University

Date:_______________________

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Charles D Piot

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Michael Hardt

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School
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2014
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation deals with the history and memory of the Border War with China in contemporary Vietnam. Due to its particularity as a war between two neighboring socialist countries in Cold War Asia, the Border War has been a sensitive topic in Vietnam. While political sensitivity regarding the national past derives largely from the Party-State, the history and memory of the war has permeated Vietnamese society. The war’s legacy can be seen in anti-China sentiments that, in the globalized neoliberal order, appear to be reviving alongside post-Cold War nationalism. The Border War against China represented an important nationalist turn for Vietnam. At the same time, the traumatic breakdown of the socialist fraternity cultivated anxiety over domestic and international relations. The recent territorial dispute over the South China Sea, between Vietnam and China, has recalled the history and memory of the war in 1979. The growing anti-China sentiment in Vietnam also interpellates the war as a near future.

As an anthropological approach to the history and memory of war, this dissertation addresses five primary questions: 1) how the historiescape of Vietnam’s past has been shifted through politics on the Border War; 2) how the memoriescape involving the Border War has been configured as national and local experience; 3) how the Border War has shaped the politics of ethnic minorities in a border province; 4) why the borderscape in Vietnam constantly affects the politics of the nation-state in the
globalized world order; and 5) why the border markets and trade activities have been a realm of competing instantiations of post-Cold War nationalism and global neoliberalism.

In order to tackle these questions, I conducted anthropological fieldwork in Lạng Sơn, a northern border province and Hà Nội, the capital city of Vietnam from 2005 to 2012, and again briefly in 2014. A year of intensive fieldwork from 2008 to 2009 in Lạng Sơn province paved the road to understanding the local history and local people’s memory of the Border War in a contemporary social context. This long-term participant observation research in a sensitive border area allowed me to take a comprehensive view of how the memory of the Border War against China plays out in everyday life and affects the livelihood of the border’s inhabitants. In Hà Nội, conducting archival research and discussing issues with Vietnamese scholars, I was able to broaden my understanding of Vietnamese national history and the socialist past. Because Vietnam is one of the countries with the fastest growing use of the Internet, I have also closely traced the emergence of on-line debates and the circulation of information over the Internet as a new form of social exchange in Vietnam.

As a conclusion, I suggest that memory and experience have situated Vietnam as a nation-state in a particular mode of post-Cold War nationalism, one which keeps recalling the memory of the Border War in the post-Cold War era. As the national border has been reconfigured by the legacy of war and by fluctuating border trade, the border
challenges unbalanced bilateral relations in the neoliberal world order. The edge of the
nation-state becomes the edge of neoliberalism in the contemporary world. The
Vietnamese border region will continue to recall the horrors of nationalism and
internationalism, through the imaginaries of socialist fraternity or in the practices of
contemporary neoliberal multilateralism.

KEYWORDS:

Vietnam, China, Lạng Sơn, the Border War, Memory, the Cold War, the post-
Cold War, Neoliberalism.
Dedication

To my parents, with appreciation and love
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Lang Son, 1989
By Nguyễn Duy
10th anniversary of the border campaign (2/79-2/89)

I returned to the old battlefield
to you . . . the late peach blossom spring of Ky Lua.
The wind gone, the rain freezing cold.
You gone, even your footprints that once pierced the road.

The open-stall markets did a great business,
but what did I have to sell?
A pack full of thoughts?

Friendship Pass—How bitter the name.
Had there been no blood spilled over that gorge?
A Qui* seized Chi Pheo** by the hair.
Two soldiers on either side held their rucksacks.***

How painful that story of To Thi.
Could we forget how many times it happened;
could those rocks come alive;
could they tell us the right path on to the heavens?

Could I have failed to meet you?
No longer be in debt from that rendezvous at Ky Cung?
Could it be that you’re home and married;
could it be that ball of thread didn’t hopelessly knot a stranger’s hear?

Translated by Nguyen Ba Chung and Kevin Bowen
Manoa, Vol.7, No. 2, New Writings from Viet Nam (Winter, 1995), p. 96
University of Hawaii press

* “AQ” from The True Story of Ah Q [阿 Q正传] by Lu Xun
** “Chí Phèo” by Nam Cao
*** The original sentence is “để hai bác linh nhà nghèo cùng thua” [for two soldiers of poor families lost together; My translation].
1. Introduction

*End(s) of the Communist Internationalism*

Ah! Ah! Sharing an idea, sharing a heart!  
On the road of Lenin with the red flag of revolution  
Ah! Ah! Our peoples will forever sing  
Hồ Chí Minh! Mao Zedong!

- A Song, “Việt Nam-Trung Hoa [Vietnam-China]”  
  by Đỗ Nhuận (1955)

Gunfire echoed on the sky of the border,  
calling the whole people into a new battle,  
The invaders of the barbarous expansionist Beijing  
trampled upon the frontier of the territory.  
Flames blazed and blood spilled all over the border…

  by Phạm Tuyên (1979)

At 5 am on February 17, 1979, the People’s Liberation Army of China (PLA) began to attack Vietnamese military posts, including the Friendship Border Gate [Cửa Khẩu Hữu Nghị] and all other border passes, in Lạng Sơn province with artilleries and tanks followed by a mass of ground troops. The war broke out not only in Lạng Sơn

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1 According to the interview with Lao Động (February 17, 2014), Phạm Tuyên composed this song as he listened to the news about the war in the borderland on February 17, 1979. He was in charge of music at Voice of Vietnam at that time. This song was the first ever song about the Border War recorded on February 20, 1979.

2 The Classified Report (April 6, 1979), “Summary Report about Fighting against the Invading Army of
province but also in all other northern border provinces in Vietnam simultaneously.

Fierce battles continued across mountains to mountains and valleys to valleys along the 1,400km (approximately 870 miles) long border between Vietnam and China. The PLA had succeeded to occupy major towns in Vietnam’s border provinces such as Cao Bằng and Lào Cai and finally had Lạng Sơn in control on March 5, 1979. On the same day, Vietnam urgently issued the General Mobilization Order to call on the people to fight against China. The Beijing government, then, announced its completion of a “lesson for Vietnam” and the withdrawal of its troops from Vietnam. As the PLA retreated from the occupied border towns, Vietnam declared another historical victory in its national history over the greater power, China—the “expansionist [bành trướng]” invader.

The deteriorating relationship between the two neighboring socialist countries began to develop into a military conflict in the early 1970s. In 1974, Vietnam formally asked China to determine the maritime border in East Sea, also known as the South China Sea, in order to hasten oil exploration for the economic recovery from the aftermath of the American War. China refused Vietnam’s proposal and they had a harsh
one-day naval warfare in the Paracel Islands. In fact, the socialist international fraternity
had been dramatically split since the Chinese-Soviet border crashes in 1969. China
considered Vietnam’s close relationship to the Soviet Union as a threat. The political
tension between the two countries was exacerbated since the Socialist Republic of
Vietnam (SRV) initiated its economic development program and the socialist economic
policy in 1976. The forceful unification of the country and the collectivization of the
economy were resisted particularly by ethnic Hoa people in the south. The historically
complicated status of the citizenship of ethnic Hoa people in Vietnam (Amer 1996;
Chang 1982; Han 2009; Porter 1980) became the major political issue between the two
countries.

In terms of political economy, Vietnam’s entry into the Soviet Union-controlled
Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) in 1977, allowed Vietnam to seek
multilateral economic aid while it implied Vietnam’s departure from dependency on
China. In the middle of this shifting landscape in the world of communism, China
became anxious about its hegemony over Southeast Asian socialist countries. The SRV’s
invasion into Cambodia in 1978 alarmed the PRC which was about to normalize its
relationship with the U.S. Once calling each other “brothers and comrades” the two
countries burned the ragged red flag of the socialist fraternity and shed the blood of the
other at the border.

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4 In 1969, China started its negotiation with the U.S. for establishing the diplomatic relationship.
Benedict Anderson (1991: 1) has argued that the war between Vietnam and China (and also Cambodia) signaled “a fundamental transformation in the history of Marxism and Marxist movements.” The war among the socialist countries evidenced “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (ibid., 3). Anderson’s analysis of the war implied that the war between Vietnam and China had demonstrated an irresistible truth that the Marxist notion of internationalism had failed and could not eliminate nationalism. Anderson’s insight helps us to understand the revolutionary’s fetishization of national historiography and the Vietnamese postcolonial historian’s desire to construct new national history for state building in Vietnam. Yet, in my view, it is questionable whether the outbreak of the Border War was exclusively related to the “universally legitimate value” of nationalism. Answering this question, and others, is a central concern of this dissertation project.

The Border War between Vietnam and China ruptured the value of nationalism in the political economy of the socialist internationalism. The virtue of fraternity and reciprocity among the socialist countries were defiled as the “war economy” in the Cold War era undermined domestic economic structures. As other scholars have argued, the political value of nation-ness has been reconfigured and fluctuating (Malkki 1997) since the end of the Second World War. It has been the “particularly legitimatized value” rather than “universally legitimate value” in specific political situations and locations in the global landscape. The Cold War situation curbed and partitioned the scope of
relations between the state, the people and individual. Yet, it should be noted that the polarized world had also established a closed circuit of mutuality. Vietnam joined COMECON for international cooperation as a formal admission to the communist internationalism, and COMECON in the Cold War era served as a regime for a globalizing political economy of the socialist world (Brine 1992; Wallace 1986; Woodside 1979). Thus, while the Border War between Vietnam and China could be seen as a conflict over territorial issues, it was a rupture in the communist internationalism and a symptomatic event for the emergent world order.

*Politics of Accountability on the War*

The Border War ended with the failure of the establishment of a peace agreement between Vietnam and China. The two countries constantly rejected the other’s proposals. The peace talk were suspended in March, 1980 (Duiker 1986: 88-89). As it was open-ended, the military crashes at the northern borderland of Vietnam occasionally continued until the late 1980s. When the end of the war was declared, Vietnam was reluctant to release comprehensive information on its damage and the extent of the mobilization of the army and its citizens during the war. Instead, Vietnam claimed that the nation had fought against about 600,000 troops of the PLA encroaching on its
territorial sovereignty. In a recent estimate, 472,000 Chinese troops fought against 50,000 Vietnamese troops for a month-long battle in Vietnam’s northern borderland (O’Dowd 2007:48). Although no official records are available even after thirty five years since the war, it seems certain that the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) was hard to cope with the better equipped and larger scale Chinese forces. As Khoo (2011: 130) has calculated the ratio, a soldier of the PAVN fought against nine soldiers of the PLA as long as the estimate were accurate. In fact, as Vietnam claimed they “disarmed [loại khỏi vòng chiến đấu]” 62,500 Chinese soldiers at the end of the war, a PAVN soldier at least “disarmed” a PLA soldier. All of these estimations suggested that the war was like a David and Goliath contest. While the PLA’s poor performance was criticized, the war greatly intensified Vietnamese nationalism as “the victory” was contextualized within the “historic victories” in the anti-colonial war against France and the American War.

As Clausewitz famously defined, war is “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will” (Clausewitz 2007: 13). Scholarship on “the Sino-Vietnamese war” has accordingly suggested that China did not intend “a regime change” in Vietnam, but

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5 Nhân Dân (March 20, 1979) noted that even the estimated 600,000 PLA troops did not included Chinese militias [dân binh].

6 Duiker (1986:85) provided a different calculation of the mobilized military force during the war: “According to Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese attack force comprised about 100,000 troops, with additional units of 120,000 kept in reserve.” He estimated that the People’s Army of Vietnam comprised about 600,000 combat troops at that time but only about 60,000 to 80,000 Vietnamese troops could fight against the PLA since “the cream” of the Vietnamese army was operating in Cambodia.

7 Nhân Dân (March 20, 1979)

8 Vietnam actually overthrew the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime and declared “the liberation of Cambodia” on January 7, 1979. Recently, due to the growing anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia,
expected to support the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia\(^9\) by breaking up the PAVN’s capacity. China was also anxious about Vietnam’s close relation to the Soviet Union with which it had hostile political relations since the border crashes of 1969. The rule of “an enemy’s friend is also an enemy” was applied while China grew closer to the U.S.--the crucial enemy of Vietnam since the American War.

The meaning of victory in the blood-filled Border War has been unclear in a traditional sense since it resonated with the political rhetoric of “a punitive lesson to Vietnam” asserted by Deng Xiaoping.\(^{10}\) Regarding Deng’s words, the war as a punitive tool not only showed off the military capacity of the PLA by occupying the closest border town, Lạng Sơn, from Hà Nội, but also aggravated the precariousness of Vietnam’s already desperate economy. The PAVN resisted strenuously, and the costs for Vietnam were tremendous. “Collateral damage” (Khoo 2011) caused by the war prevented the continuation of the war by the two countries. With the enumeration of the war—for example, China counted towns they occupied and Vietnam listed the numbers of disarmed soldiers and destroyed armaments of the PLA, the peace was seemingly reinstated. The official end of the Border War in 1979, whose exact date was disputed in

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\(^9\) The Pol Pot regime was assisted and backed by China.

\(^{10}\) Zhang (2010) argued that the decision making process to go to war on Chinese side was heavily influenced by Deng Xiaoping.
the official views\textsuperscript{11}, was spurred by “the improbability of victory” in the meaning of the war and “its unacceptable cost” (Clausewitz 2007: 33)\textsuperscript{12}.

The modern state exclusively monopolizes the rights of the use of violence and the initiation of war while socialist countries equate the state apparatuses of violence with the ideological tag of the “People.” The people’s armies from Vietnam and China fought at the borderland. And yet, strangely, their brutal battle was hardly related to each other. Although the Border War can be seen as a kind of political racism against the ethnic Hoa, the war was not really about the “ethnic issue.” The explanation for the cause of the war has been dominated and controlled by the political needs of the communist parties of the two countries. A Vietnamese word, “Vô Nghĩa [meaningless]” is widely taken for describing the Border War as the matter of the Party-States on the two countries, while the Party-State of Vietnam tries to promote “Bảo vệ tổ quốc [protect the fatherland]” with the memory of the war in recent years. The unusually commonality in these expressions about the Border War is the eradication of China as the responsible subject for the war. Considering the previous wars in the history of the SRV, the subjects accountable to the war such as France and the U.S. are clearly marked in official discourse, though Vietnamese people no longer attach strong feelings of

\textsuperscript{11} In Chinese perspective, the end of the Border War was dated on March 16, 1979 while Vietnam officially recognized that March 18, 1979 was the end of the war. The Vietnamese declaration of the end of the border was reported on Nhân Dân (March 20, 1979).

\textsuperscript{12} Clausewitz referred “the improbability of victory” and “its unacceptable cost” as the two grounds for “making peace.”
hostility to those countries. “Anti-China” sentiments in Vietnam however have never subsided. They keep growing, for example, in the ongoing territorial disputes over the East Sea, also known as South China Sea. Although the appellation tended to stir a nationalist sentiment on the struggle over territoriality, the Border War has always interpellated China into contemporary politics in Vietnam. The matter of suspended accountability on the war has renewed unsettled resentments toward the two countries. “Historical fraternity” in the shared revolutionary past has faded.

The “Actual” Cold War with Vietnamese characteristic

For Vietnam, the Border War against China was an opening of a new war: the “actual” Cold War. During the period of the American War, although encountering enormous hardships, Vietnam was at the center of the global political landscape. Aid from the international socialist communities flooded into Vietnam. Political solidarity with other socialist peoples was impressively strong. However, with the end of the American War, the situation began to shift. The tangled deteriorating relationship with China and the Border War put Vietnam into an unusually harsh predicament in the Cold War era. While many Eastern socialist countries contested with “capitalist” countries, Vietnam had to stand up to the excessively bigger power, China at its borderland. The war-torn economy from decades-long warfare could not be easily
recovered, for it would be required to pay a lot of military expenditure even if the Border War was declared to end. The invasion into Cambodia had also put Vietnam into an even greater economic predicament.

Heonik Kwon (2010) has argued that the Cold War history has been hegemonically focused on the great Western powers such as the Soviet Union and the U.S. and it has overlooked “differences” in the Cold War experience. There had been “not cold” areas such as the Korean peninsula and Greece, as he has argued. In my view, the Border War experience in Vietnam presents us with an even different Cold War situation. While it was isolated from the capitalist Southeast Asian countries, it had to protect its sovereignty against the neighboring socialist country. The Cold War predicaments of Vietnam were seriously aggravated by the outdated political experiments of the state subsidy and collective economic system since the unification of the country in 1976. In the 1980s, extreme poverty was epidemic throughout the country. Particularly, the northern border provinces which turned to be a concentrated military zone suffering extensively from the aftermath of the Border War. The recovery process was slowed down by the incapacity of government to manage the dire situation.

The Đổi Mới [Reform] policy was finally adopted by the 6th national congress in 1986. The de-collectivization and re-marketization of the country were not an easy task. The socialist global economy had already been seriously deteriorating while the isolation from the capitalist world made Vietnam struggle to carry out the policy. As the
government was aware of the situation, it began to resume talks with China. For the prerequisite condition for loosening political tensions, Vietnam withdrew the PAVN from the frontline. With these limitations, it also allowed the local residents in the border provinces to visit their relatives and close acquaintance separated by the Border War. However, this resulted in uncontrollable border crossing activities and disabled effective governance over the border. The situation at the northern borderland in late 1980s is comparable to the fall of Berlin Wall which was “accidentally” spurred by the announcement of free travel to West Germany. The militarized and tightened security on Vietnam’s northern border also resulted in the flood of people and commodities. This turned the borderland into a kind of “governance free” zone.

However, it needs to be emphasized that reopening the border with overwhelming border-crossing activities was a watershed moment for Vietnam. The end of the political atrocity accompanied by the flooding of commodities in fact symbolized the end of the Cold War era in Vietnam. As the emerging post-socialist scholarship in Eastern Europe and elsewhere has demonstrated, many socialist countries experienced the marketization of society as a clear case of “Western” influence. In the Vietnamese case, however, marketization came through an “advanced post-socialist country” — China. The political negotiation between the two countries began to resume as the PAVN finally pulled back from Cambodia. All “causes” of the Border War seemed to be magically reset back to a state of normalcy. In 1991, while the fall of “actually existing
socialism” was inevitable, Vietnam and China announced the normalization of relations. China’s “lesson” for Vietnam this time came in the form of the cause of building cross-border markets, a “gift” exclusively given by China a decade after the Border War. The difference from the previous periods of war and death: Vietnam was now willing to accept the “lesson.”

**A War, Unaccounted for?**

Although it has been more than three decades since the Border War, general knowledge about this period of Vietnam’s history has yet been quite limited. Although many scholars have investigated and analyzed the Border War between Vietnam and China, there has been no reliable and detailed information even about the war records released by Vietnam and China. The partitioned political landscape of the Cold War situation limited the intellectual accessibility to “the other” while it promoted the “peeping” fever through the “Iron Curtain” or the “Bamboo Curtain.” The war between the two socialist countries in Asia also gained a relatively marginalized attention as the war was not directly instigated by the polarized empires of ideology, the Soviet Union and the U.S. (Duiker 1986:92). The war, in this regard, was considered a regional conflict, deserving of limited attention.
In Vietnam, the production and circulation of the Border War related historiographies were mostly intensified before and after the war. The state-owned publishing houses were busy to refresh the memories of atrocities of China against Vietnam and the heroic defense of the nation against the “hegemonist” and “expansionist” China. For a decade, the governance over the public memory of the war continued by the propaganda machines of the Party-State. However, one of the central arguments of this dissertation is that as Vietnam desperately sought to normalize its relationship with China, the general landscape of memory and historiographies on the Border War has been deeply and powerfully reconfigured. With the acknowledgement of the request from China (M.T. Nguyễn 2001), Vietnam began to wipe clean its harsh descriptions about China’s invasion. In official discourse, it worked to reinstate the status of China as “socialist” friend and later as “brothers and comrades.” In short, public discourses and competing memories about the Border War were censored.

The reworking of a newly imagined “socialist fraternity” between Vietnam and China does not go uncontested. The sudden political transition and official intervention in the memoryscape of Vietnam has been contested by the vivid public memories of the Border War by people along the border and throughout Vietnamese society. We must recall that Vietnam from the outset mobilized people in the Northern provinces as well as ethnic minorities in the borderlands to fight against China, to sacrifice their lives. This allowed Vietnam not to retreat from Cambodia as China insisted, for example. When the
General Mobilization Order was issued on March 5, 1979, the war became the general experience of the nation-state. The Order by the state was in fact unprecedented in the history of Vietnam. Such particular aspects of the Border War profoundly have shaped the memoryscape in Vietnam. In the context of the Border War, this memoryscape is not simply about geographical constraints, nor can it be simply configured as “collective memory” (Halbwachs 1992) and as the making of an enduring and uncontested “imagined community” (Anderson 1991).

The restless public memory about the Border War would once again be revitalized when Vietnam decided to redemarcate the border with China in 1999. It would also result in new hauntings of the border region. The borderland again gained its symbolic value as the instantiation of the sovereignty of the Party-State. The contemporary territorial disputes over the East Sea (the South China Sea) dramatically uncapped the lid on the bottle of the public memory. Thus, the memory of the Border War against China has been an extreme constant to constitute Vietnamese nationalism in the neoliberal world. While the memory of the revolutionary histories in the past such the anti-French war and the American War has been ossified, the memory of the Border War has been one of the most controversial historical matters in the contemporary political landscape. Until recently, the government imposed harsh censorship guidelines over media coverage, publications and the Internet postings, while the public memoryscape has been refreshed through re-visiting the “site of memory” (Nora 1989),
discovering the old documents and reflecting upon and expressing one’s personal memoir of the war. Additionally, the memory of the Border War is haunted by social issues such as the flooding of Chinese goods in market, smuggling practices at the northern border, undocumented Chinese workers, China’s direct investment, conflicts over forest leasing in the borderland, and many other emergent social and economic conflicts.

**Neoliberalism: On the Borderland**

Since the normalization between Vietnam and China was officially announced in 1991, Vietnam began to integrate into the global order of neoliberalism. It reestablished diplomatic relations with other Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan. In 1995, Vietnam finally became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and normalized relations with the U.S. It also submitted its application to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Vietnam graduated from the WTO’s review sessions and finally ascended to full membership status in 2007. In terms of the neoliberalization of Vietnam, it is possible to periodize four different stages. The very first stage came with the reopening of the border to China as it sought to reform society and normalize relations with its latest Cold War enemy, China. In this period, roughly from 1987 to 1991, the flow of commodities and people was largely beyond the governance of the Party-State.
Once called “psychological goods [Hàng Tâm lý]” commodities from China gushed into Vietnamese society through one of the most porous and lawless borderlands. The laissez-faire like economy at the borderland was even appropriated by Chinese businessmen. As reported, Chinese car importers tried to bring cars into the Northern provinces in order to avoid the high taxation on cars in China, and they brought cars back to China through the Friendship pass in Lang Son (Chau 2000). After the formal normalization, Vietnam and China decided formally to open border markets along the border. By operating the border market, Vietnam gradually worked to set up basic regulations and new economic systems. This all occurred between 1992 to 1995, before Vietnam’s entry into the system of regional multilateral relations—ASEAN. Finally, the normalization with the U.S. was an emblematic event, the final departure from the Cold War era. From this point on, until 2007, Vietnam made progress in its integration to the global order. The contemporary moment – 2007 to the present -- can be characterized as “the graduated country” of neoliberalism.

As a Socialist Republic which maintains one party rule and state controls, the neoliberal effects on Vietnam have been based in establishing standardized measurements on market and fair competition for commodity exchange. As neoliberal governmentality has become prevalent, a major shift erupted along the borderland. Since reopening of the border to China, the two countries tried to recover and build a strong bilateral alliance. The border markets were exceptionally governed by the two
countries with tax benefits and mutual agreements. However, as both countries acquired membership into the WTO, they reconstituted mutual trade activities. The major impacts were made in the borderland. Once known as a “shopping paradise,” the border markets have now lost their special privileges. The standardized market management on circulation and distribution disabled the traditional business activities and relations in cross-border trades. The local people could no longer compete with people from the big cities. For example, Tân Thanh border market which used to be crowded with shoppers from all other province is no longer clogged by containers of agricultural products from the southern provinces. Failing to attract customers, many kiosks were closed. The newly built modern shopping center in Lạng Sơn was shut down only a year after it opened. While the local economy dramatically plummeted, the retail shops of the business conglomerates have opened in border towns, pushing locals out of the market and marginalizing them in the new neoliberal moment of “socialist fraternity.”

Given that small-scale local business of border trades cannot compete with the big investing companies, border smuggling has emerged. And yet, the “ordinary commodities” brought by risk-taking smuggling business have not generated favorable profits. “Dangerous goods,” which can hold exceptional exchange value, have been coming across the border. The banality of illegality in the borderland has been frequently covered by the state media. In recent years, it has become the generalized image of the borderland and the activities of local residents.
Derrida’s notion of “the rise of phantom state” (Derrida 1994) is useful here. It suggests organized crimes and the prevalence of illegality were empowered by bringing neoliberal orders and economic logics to Vietnam’s northern borderland. The sanitization and standardization of the market have ostracized ethnic minority porters at the border market and undermined familial/ethnic trans-border businesses. Many of them have thus taken to working as smugglers, making use of their familiar knowledge about hidden border passes.

The Comaroffs have argued that, “crime looms large in the post-Cold War age. Increasingly flexible in its modes of operation, it often mimics cooperate business, constituting an “uncivil society” that flourishes most energetically where the state withdraws (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 74).” The withdrawal of the state from the market is what neoliberal organizations like the WTO make happen. In Lạng Sơn province, the custom officers, economy police and even border patrol units of the army have been notoriously involved in smuggling businesses. Many local parents I interviewed told me that their first expectation for their children’s future career was to be a “customs officer [Hải quan].” The second choice was “policeman [Công an]” and the third choice was a “businessman [Thương gia].” The regime of corruption and illegal business was already burgeoning in the area. It was now irrevocably linked to the other regions of the country and to the other side of border. It has been developing as what Derrida called “a New International” (Derrida 1994) for organized crime.
The banality of illegality and disorder in the neoliberal world has also created new technologies of governance (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). Under the growing precariousness of market and society, the technologies for the constant policing of people, spaces and commodities such as CCTV, digitalized barcode systems, and other emerging systems of surveillance are now commonly developed and installed. The borderland has become a contested realm of isomorphous governances—the state, neoliberalism and “the New International” of the disavowed.

Into a “sensitive problem [vấn đề nhạy cảm]”

“Brother, it’s a sensitive problem in history. No one would like to talk to you about this,” said my informant in Hà Nội in the spring 2005. Many Vietnamese people I met in the very early stages of my dissertation research suggested I find “other interesting topics” rather than “sensitive topics.” The Vietnamese word, “Nhạy cảm” was one of the most frequently enunciated words during my research. Nhạy Cảm can be translated into English as sensitive or delicate. It can be used for a wide scope of problems, from a corruption case in the Party to a pornography scandal on the Internet. The people who discouraged me explained that “Vấn đề nhạy cảm trong lịch sử [a sensitive problem in history]” could bring trouble; the security police would not like it. I felt frustrated at first but began to contemplate how a sensitive / delicate problem in
history is left as undetermined in a society and why some dare not to talk about certain issues in public. Since these early moments in my fieldwork, the situation dramatically changed. The rapid development of the Internet in the country has opened a new public sphere of opinions and discussions. Once a social taboo, the history and memory about the Border War against China have appeared even on the state media, especially in recent years as the territorial dispute over the East Sea (South China Sea) has fiercely developed.

The major challenge for my research on the war has been the availability and accessibility of research materials. Many publications on the Border War silently disappeared from circulation. The used bookstores, national library and local provincial library, national archives and personal collections thus have been sites of fever and relentless searching for my archival research on the Border War. Many Western scholars on “the Sino-Vietnamese War” or “the Third Indochinese War” seemed to take advantage of the Chinese sources or Vietnamese sources available in English. My intention was to delve into deeper layers of memoryscapes on the Border War. I made it a point to rectify this by “collecting and using” documents in Vietnamese, whenever available.

The social life of publications, particularly historiographies, has offered me with an in-depth understanding of social changes in contemporary Vietnam. As the Party-State owned and controlled practically all publishing houses in the country, the life-
history of publications reveal political sensibilities in a certain period time. Ferguson (1990) once suggested that the use of documents for anthropological research is to consider them as “artifacts.” For Vietnam, the publications during the Cold War era were strictly planned as a collective work and censored by the Party-State. They were thus already part of the social governance of the regime.

Since the legacy of knowledge production about the socialist bloc in the Cold War era, political scientists have long been concerned with the Border War between Vietnam and China. While their scholarly efforts focused on the regime and policy changes, my interest has been to trace effects on the national scale and at the local level in Vietnam. As an anthropological research on the politics on the Border War against China, I decided to conduct my fieldwork in the harshest battlefield during the war, Lạng Sơn province.

Lạng Sơn province is located approximately 160km (about 100 miles) north of the capital city, Hà Nội. The province is directly connected by National Road 1 and the international train line from Hà Nội to Nanning, Guangxi, China. The provincial capital, Lạng Sơn, is also connected through National Road 4, also called as „Đường Lịch Sử [Historic Road]” which connects from the seashore in Quành Ninh province to Cao Bằng province. The accessibility and proximity of the location has characterized the town and the province of Lạng Sơn. During the Border War, as Duiker (Duiker 1986: 87) recorded, the battle for Lạng Sơn was excessively fierce as “more than 200,000 troops were
involved in both sides.” The PLA’s occupation of Lạng Sơn was a “symbolic victory” for China while it pushed Vietnam to issue the General Mobilization Order, as already outlined above. This complicated local history of Lạng Sơn motivated me to understand the history and memory of the war.

Lang Son is in fact not only about the past. As a Vietnamese newspaper once described, Lạng Sơn has been “a gateway of every change [cửa ngõ của mọi biến động]”13 in Vietnam. While Lạng Sơn has suffered from every important historical moment, which can be dated back to the feudal invasion of China and the French invasion to Vietnam in the 18th century, it has developed very distinctive cultural characteristics as a mountainous region with multi-ethnic minorities. Thus, during my fieldwork in Lạng Sơn, I could learn from the richness of this complex and troubled region’s history and the distinctive forms of its cultural practices of everyday life.

The Haunted Borderland: Chapter Overview

This dissertation consists of five chapters. In Memoryscape on the Border War, I trace the lived experience of the Border War in Vietnam and analyze the “sites of memory” on the war. There has been no comprehensive narrative on how Vietnamese people actually experience the war in 1979. I have tried to reconstruct the national and

13 Vietnamnet (November 20, 2011).
the local history of Lạng Sơn province through the primary documents of the Party-State and through memories of the many people with whom I spoke. I then move onto the most famous movie about the Border War, Thị Xã trong tầm tay [A Town within Arm’s Reach] (1983) by the director Đặng Nhật Minh. The movie as a form of popular culture represents a view of the collective memory on the war. The movie is a mnemonic tool about the war, circulating extensively in contemporary Vietnam. Lastly, I delve into the local sites of memory in Lạng Sơn province in order to analyze the exclusive local memoryscape. For instance, the local cemetery and war monuments are regular sites of commemoration organized by the local government. Although those serve to establish collective memory, a dead soldier sprouts a singular narrative about the war and connects to other intimates. I end with a relatively odd memorial to a Japanese reporter, Takano Isayo, killed in Lạng Sơn.

In the chapter, Historyscape on the Border War, I trace the genealogy of Vietnam’s national historiographies and analyze its contemporary debates about the Border War. The obsession to write a new history by the post-colonial historians has aimed to constitute the authenticity and antiquity of Vietnam as a nation-state. The restoration of the feudal history about China’s invasion to Vietnam has constructed the image of an atrocious China, and has been extended to the Border War narrative. The shared revolutionary history between Vietnam and China in the past has also mattered in the historiographies as the revolution has to be contextualized in the longevity of the
nation. The national historiographies exclude the history of ethnic minorities. The majority people of Vietnam, the Kinh, has been the sovereign historical subject in Vietnam. In this chapter, I unravel the contemporary shifting historiescape through the recent public discussion of history education. I then analyze the limited circumstance for the production and circulation of historiographies on the Border War by focusing on the boisterous debates over the translation of the Chinese author and Nobel Literature Laureate Mo Yan’s book, Ma Chiên Hữu [Reunion of Comrade-in-Arms]. The Chinese author’s book about the Border War further aggravates public anxieties about who has the right to author Vietnam’s national history in the globalized world.

Ethnoscapes in the Borderland traces the complicated life-history of an ethnic Hoa in Lạng Sơn. The ethnic Hoa population has maintained a distinctive ethnic identification among the officially recognized 54 ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. While the end of the American War greatly affected the ethnic Hoa in the south, the Border War in 1979 was a tragic event in their lives. Ethnic Hoa people in the Northern provinces have been considered a relatively naturalized ethnic minority group. However, after the war the ethnic Hoa people were discriminated against as suspicious and untrustworthy since their ethnic identity is related to the Chinese. Although their economic success through the border trade offered a rapid recovery in terms of everyday livelihood, the political discrimination against the Hoa has yet been strong. The story of the rise and fall of an ethnic minority family seeks to shed light on how the
Border War has affected the politics of ethnicity. Additionally, my ethnography of ethnic Tày and Dao people in a remote border commune aims to open up new thinking about ethnic minority politics in this particular borderland. Lạng Sơn province and other border provinces are generally seen as the indigenous homes of mountainous ethnic groups in northern Vietnam, unlike the majority, Kinh, who have historically resided in the southern delta region. The differences in their ethnicity and way of life sheds light on the differential neoliberal effects on ethnic minorities in this mountainous area.

In Borderscape Reconfigured, I analyze the recent completion of the territorial border demarcation and its local celebration in Lạng Sơn province. The border demarcation process allows me to engage and rethink the politics of bilateralism and multilateralism in the neoliberalized world. China’s exclusive desire to build bilateral relations with Vietnam may limit the autonomy of Vietnam. As the borderland is further trapped in an exclusive bilateral relationship between the two countries, the people living there have become increasingly vulnerable to and dependent on China’s intentions. Although the border demarcation process could pacify troubled memories of the Border War, I show how it constitutes the borderland as a land of continual dispute. This is nowhere more evident in the forest lease scandal in 2010, which I explore to demonstrate “frictions” over corruption, land exclusion, and ethnic marginalization. This section also shows how a new sense of the national security, and sovereignty, has been competing with the making of neoliberal orders in these
borderlands. As I highlight, the memory of the Border War is now frequently referenced in the new security regime in Vietnamese post-Cold War nationalism.

Lastly, in Heterotopia of Border Markets, I analyze the historical transformation of Lạng Sơn as a central marketplace. Located in the historical pass between Hà Nội and Beijing, Lạng Sơn has long been known as a transnational marketplace. However, the Border War in the middle of the socialist collectivization of the economy until 1986 completely shut down cross-border trade. As the political tension between Vietnam and China dissipated in the late 1980s, Lạng Sơn has been an emblem of the widespread socio-economic changes seen throughout Vietnam. Although many people simply naturalize the banality of smuggling across the border, in Lạng Sơn the smuggling activities represent, in my analysis, the double failure of nationalism and neoliberalism. The nationalist desire for trade and development and neoliberal opening fails to govern the porous borderland, while the neoliberal regime sterilizes the borderland as it promotes the fiction of the equality of markets in the nation’s territory. The prevalent illegality of smuggling paves the way for the return of repressive governance regimes, which penetrate everyday life through the generalized condition of policing.
2. Memoryscape on the Border War

“Close the past to look toward the future”

“Khép lại quá khứ, hướng tới tương lai”

- A Vietnamese Post-Cold War Motto [Phương Châm]

“Ike Actually Occurred War”

In a chilly afternoon of January, 2005, Toàn, working for a Japanese motor company at that time, visited my room at Nhà Khách A2 Bách Khoa [The A2 Guest House] and asked me to join his trip to Lạng Sơn, where his uncle lived. The trip was scheduled just before Tết Nguyên Đán năm Ất Đậu (the Vietnamese Lunar New Year Festival of the Year of Lamb). Toàn explained that “for Vietnamese, it’s time to visit [thăm] all relatives around the country.” Toàn had graduated from a nationally renowned university just a year ago. As he now worked for a foreign company, the trip seemed to show to his relatives how he had “advanced.” Yet Toàn is not from Lạng Sơn but originally from Hải Phòng, the nearest port city and 75 miles east of Hà Nội. I was, then, curious about why his uncle lived in such a remote place, far from Toàn’s hometown. “My uncle was mobilized to join the war when he was a high school
After the war, he got a position in a local government office and got married in Lạng Sơn,” said Toàn. “Which war?” I asked, as Lạng Sơn was not specific enough for my handful of knowledge about the history of war in Vietnam. I continued, “The revolutionary war against the French or the American war?” “No, it was the war against China in 1979,” he corrected me. This was my first encounter with the unknown Cold War history of Vietnam, which situated Vietnam as a postsocialist country in a particular memoriescape.

While the history of the Border War against China is relatively low profile, in contemporary Vietnam it is almost impossible to miss the overflow of historical discourses about war against the French colonizers and the American intruders. As Schwenkel (2006; 2009) and others (Alneng 2002; Henderson 2000) have discussed, such national wartime pasts have been commodified as tour programs and souvenirs. The emergence of this commodified national history and its fetishization of war remnants has been spurred by the neoliberal global order of which Vietnam is eager to be a part. The social process of commodification and fetishization has been targeted to not only foreign travelers but also local Vietnamese. The foreigners’ commodity fetishism of Vietnam’s past intersects with the pilgrimage-style sightseeing programs (thăm quan) for locals, which are selectively organized by the Party-State.

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1 When I met him in January 2014, Toàn told me that he finally acquired a high school diploma in 2013.
When I visited the home of Toàn’s parents in the countryside of Hải Phong, I was impressed by the living room decorated with certificates of merits [Bằng Khen] from his farther’s participation in the war and souvenir photographs of his parents’ group travel\(^2\) to various historical battlefields such as Điện Biên Phủ. While I was looking around, his father, a war veteran, silently played a travelogue VCD of his recent travel to the Hồ Chí Minh Trail as if he understood my interest in Vietnam as a foreigner. What he spoke about however, mostly concerned the service had received: the kind of bus his group traveled on, how comfortable the roads and hotels had been, how favorable the food and establishments in the historic areas. The quality of commodified services in his travel seemed to ensure the value of the historic areas and even history itself. Through those commodities, the “partial” engagement of local people in national history could be contextualized as part of a “comprehensive” national past.

For both foreigners and locals, the contemporary memorabilia of Vietnam’s past has largely excluded the 1979 Border War against China. The Cold War situation configured a particular form of knowledge production in a polarized world. Insofar as the war did not clearly take place between the socialist and the capitalist bloc, it tended to be disregarded as a matter from another world. Access to knowledge production about the other was also limited by either “the Iron Curtain” or “the Bamboo Curtain.”

\(^2\) As Toàn’s father explained, the district [huyện] or even commune [xã] level government organizations have offered group travel for villagers like him. He also said that his comrade-in-arms, now scattered around the country, organize an occasional trip to “the historic areas” [khu di tích lịch sử].
The partitioned knowledge and memorabilia in the era of the Cold War was also left behind after it ended; no orderly global transition occurred in Vietnam with the opening of “the Curtain.”

As Francis Fukuyama (1989) notoriously declared “the end of history” at the moment of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the “universalization of Western democracy” could not value any socialist past in the new world history. This prevailing perspective entailed a generalized view of socialist history as pathological. As post-socialist countries urgently rushed into the market economy and attempted to assimilate to the neoliberal global order, the capitalist bloc has been busy celebrating its historic and ideological victory over world socialism.

Right before I was heading to Lạng Sơn with Toàn, I encountered a retired veteran at a street café, adjacent to the guesthouse. As he heard of my travel plans to Lạng Sơn, he gave me a lengthy lecture about foreigners’ narrow views of Vietnam’s past: “Many foreigners think that Vietnam ended the war in 1975. When they saw the famous picture of a tank of the People’s Army of Vietnam [PAVN] finally breaking into the presidential palace in Sài Gòn. They came here and asked us only about France and America, pointing out our problems of underdevelopment. But, the end of the American war was only an end of one war for the Vietnamese people. In 1978, we had another war against the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, and shortly afterwards, China invaded us. From North to South, we Vietnamese survived a lot of hardships [vượt qua nhiều khó
khăn]. We finally could get a glimpse of peace in our country as negotiations with China resumed in 1986 and the PAVN in Cambodia returned home in 1989. As you can see, we are still poor and pretty much underdeveloped. But you must understand that we have only had less than twenty years to reconstruct the country from its war-torn environment.” His explanation held a strong sense of Vietnamese nationalism but he certainly offered different knowledge and a different sensibility about Vietnam’s past, from an insider’s point of view.

For Vietnamese, the history of the Border War has been silenced in the public sphere by the Party-State. Since normalization with China in 1991, the Party-State has strictly censored any public mention of the Border War. The production and circulation of the old historiographies about the Border War have also been banned.3 The introduction of mobile and internet technology to Vietnam configured a new environment for memoryscapes on the Border War. Yet the official historiographies have not been written or released. The history of the Border War then turned out to be a matter of memory per se. As the tension and conflict in the East Sea [Biển Đông], more widely known as South China Sea,4 has intensified, state newspapers have recently

3 I will discuss this more in detail in Chapter 3.
4 Vietnam does not use the name, South China Sea, which Vietnam considers as Sino-centric view of geography. Instead, it employs “the Sea of the East” as a more general term. Here, I use the “East Sea” as I focus on the view of Vietnamese.
started mentioning the Border War to spur anti-China sentiment. They do so cautiously however, needing to navigate the censorship authority with great delicacy.

In many cases when I asked people about the Border War during interviews, they expressed reluctance to speak about it and told me that the Border War was a matter of “nhạy cảm” in history. The Vietnamese word, “nhạy cảm” can be translated as a status of being “sensitive,” “vulnerable” or “emotionally delicate.” Although the word can be used to refer to a wide range of social phenomena from pornography to the CPVN in the public sphere of discourse, when it comes to national history, it designates specific periods or events before the post-Cold War period. As I will discuss further in Chapter 3, there are certain periods and locations in Vietnam, which require an “assessment” of historiographies. The Border War is not officially categorized as a historical event of “nhạy cảm” but, as it is assumed to affect the current political relationship between Vietnam and China, “strategic ambivalence” has constituted the politics of memory on the Border War.

While some people directly pointed to government censorship and political repression in explaining their reluctance to “recall” the memory of the Border War, others brought up a matter of “điề kện [conditions].” By “điề kện” people generally referred to the post-Cold War situation of Vietnam. A reporter of Vietnamnet, one of the most popular online newspapers in Vietnam, told me that, although he hated government censorship, he acknowledged how sensitive relations were with China at
the same time, given that Vietnam’s economy largely depended on China. He added, “In
the past, we had clear alliances. Whether China or the Soviet Union, we could expect
help from our ally when in danger. However, now we don’t have any trustworthy
alliance [Không có đồng minh nào cả]. Since the Border War and the fall of the Soviet
Union, we have to survive all alone...China is a big country. In 1979 we had the Soviet
Union behind us. If we had another war, I am afraid no country would help us. In this
regard, it is better to avoid raising sensitive issues which could agitate China against
us.”

Cuong, a staff officer for the Department of Foreign Affairs, the people’s
committee of Lạng Sơn, also asserted that “I personally don’t like the situation but
without China’s help, Lạng Sơn as a border province cannot do anything. If they closed
the border gates against us, which actually happened several times in the past, we
simply could not find any alternatives. In 1979, we could barely defeat them in the
Border War. Now? I highly doubt that. We are living in a different world. A small
country like Vietnam needs to adopt “strategic” [chiến lược] thinking.”

So far, I have introduced the public memory of the Border War merely at the
level of discourse. But there are also the conditions of the war itself, the legacy of which
the country still struggles with. The hasty social transition to post-socialism and the
neoliberal world order left remnants of the Cold War deeply embedded in national
history even while the post-Cold War political landscape of Vietnam is one of
uncertainty and fluidity. To recall the history of the Border War remains a topic of “nhạy cảm,” which is formed as a political sensibility about the past of the Cold War that fails to be represented in the new world order.

But in recent years, with growing Chinese influence and tension over the territory, the memory of the Border War in 1979 has prompted more mention and discussion of public discourse. While the Vietnamese government reiterates its historic friendship with China, Vietnamese people treat the memory of the Border War as historical evidence of the “unconquerable” national sovereignty against China. Under political pressure and growing anti-China sentiment, the Vietnamese government has recently initiated official discussion of whether or not the Border War history should be included in new history textbooks. It could be only a political gesture to encompass the tide of nationalist political sentiment but, as it opens a public sphere for the memory of the Border War, post-Cold War nationalism in Vietnam will enter into another stage.

In the following sections, I will unravel the memoryscapes of the Border War in 1979. First, I will trace how the Party-State created the official memory of the Border War during and after the war and how Lạng Sơn constituted its own memoryscape of the Border War through mediascape and historyscapes. Although the Border War broke out all over the northern border areas in Vietnam, Lạng Sơn became the site of a fierce battle between the PAVN and the PLA. Its local history was also reshaped in the memory of
the Cold War. Next, I will treat popular memory of the Border War through the film, Thị Xã Trong Tâm Tay [A Town within Arm’s Reach]. Next, I will examine what was an interesting, and odd, element of the Border War that extends it, into an international memoryscape: the cruel death of a Japanese correspondent, Takano, at the hands of Chinese, which has become a sign of international solidarity in Vietnam’s Cold War past. Lastly, by examining the circulation of memory on the Border war, I will discuss how people in Lạng Sơn deal with their war memory in the post-Cold War order.
The War of 1979

On January 8, 1979, the official newspaper of the CPVN, Nhân Dân [the People], reported that the PAVN “completely liberated” the capital city, Phnom Phen (January 7, 1979) and was now advancing to the rest of Cambodia. On the same day, the People’s Committee of Lạng Sơn province issued a top secret document (No. 5 UB/CT) which urged cadres in the province to prepare for the imminent war at the border between Vietnam and China. It included a detailed plan for evacuating old and young people to the south of the province, for preparing more beds in hospitals, and for mobilizing transportation for emergency use. Since May, 1978, military collisions at the Friendship Pass [Cửa Khấu Hữu Nghị] had been increasing. As the PLA intensified its military attack against Vietnam at the border, the local government perceived the imminence (Ban Chấp Hành Đảng Bộ Tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1996: 199-201) of attack.

About a month later, the Border War against China broke out, as Chinese troops began to cross all along the northern border of Vietnam on February 17, 1979 (Ban Chấp

5 Lạng Sơn is both a name of city and province. In this section, in order to avoid confusion, I will use Lạng Sơn for the city.
6 Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Tỉnh Lạng Sơn, January 8, 1979, “Chi Thị - Về việc tích cực chuẩn bị sẵn sàng chiến đấu đối phó trước tình hình hiện giờ Việt Nam - Trung Quốc ngày càng xấu [Order - About active preparation and readiness for combat and embattlement ahead of the exacerbating state of affairs at the border between Vietnam - China ” stamped as “Tối Mật [Top Secret]”; At the end of the document, there is a special instruction for processing the order such as “do not publicize it on newspaper or radio.”; Retrieved at the Provincial Library of Lạng Sơn in 2009.
The Vietnamese government initially declared war against “the invasion of the people holding power of China” (see, Figure). In Lạng Sơn province, on the first day of the war, Đồng Đăng, a mile from the Friendship Pass and about 10 miles from Lạng Sơn, was falling into the PLA. Lạng Sơn became the bloody battlefield between the PLA and the PAVN as both concentrated their firepower and manpower on the area surrounding Lạng Sơn.

The Border War between Vietnam and China was a war between two socialist countries in the Cold War era. The political propaganda machine was still powerfully governing the social ideology and collective view of the people. The newspapers, radio, and organized political meetings of the Party-State had great influence over the reportage of events on the ground. In this regard, the information appearing in Nhân Dân about the war could be considered the medium, and means, for producing (what would become) the memory of the war. The production and circulation of information, discourses, and images about war were also a type of psychological warfare against China.

On February 22, 1979, a political cartoon [tranh đả kích] and a photo of a dead Chinese soldier in Lạng Sơn appeared in Nhân Dân. While the photo showed the horror

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7 China has claimed that the Border war was a defensive war and not an invasion. However, many scholars have agreed that China initiated the war against Vietnam and invaded Vietnam’s territory.

8 It might be fair to say that the PRC at that time was in transition from the Cultural Revolution to Modernization, while the SRV was just following the Stalinist model for social reform.
of war and Vietnam’s defensive stance against China, the cartoon demonstrated the view of the SRV about the war. In the cartoon, Deng Xiaoping, the leader of the PRC at that time, was described as a barbarian across the border urging soldiers to enter Vietnamese territory. The cartoon shows him taking off his uniform of the communist party and leaving it behind. The Vietnamese government’s initial reaction to China’s PRC was to make a distinction between the “reactionary [phản động]” and “hegemonic [bá quyền]” Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese communist “friends.” It was an attempt not only to conduct a psychological war against Chinese society, but also to differentiate the communists of Vietnam from the PRC. Since the August Revolution of 1945, Vietnamese people had been exposed to the political propaganda that featured socialist friendship and internationalism between Vietnam and China. With the undressed Deng image, Vietnam tried to insist that the war had occurred not between communists but had been caused by “traitors” who had betrayed communism.

This political view was however understood by Vietnamese in a different way. In Lạng Sơn townsfolk were of the opinion that the war had nothing to do with the peoples of the two countries. An owner of a clothing shop in Ký Lừa market, a historic market in the center of Lạng Sơn, for example, told me that people in Lạng Sơn had lived peacefully with Chinese and ethnic Chinese but that politicians in both countries [các

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9 The collection of political cartoons about the Border war (Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1979) is also full of images of Deng Xiaoping. Deng Xiaping was the major lampoon character for the Vietnamese political arena against China since the Border War.
chính quyền giữa hai nước] were the ones fighting each other and, by doing so, brought hardship to ordinary people. “I didn’t care about Đảng Tiểu Bình [Deng Xiaoping],” he added. Not only local people in Lạng Sơn but also people around the country often expressed their impression of the war as “meaningless [vô nghĩa]” and “unreasonable [phi lý]” since the war was seen as a conflict between the two countries’ communist party leaders.10

Although the PLA might be confident enough to say “Eating breakfast in Lạng Sơn and lunch in Hà Nội [ăn cơm sáng ở Lạng Sơn, ăn cơm trưa ở Hà Nội” at the beginning of the war, the situation did not develop as many predicted. The PLA certainly had the advantage in terms of more soldiers and resources but the PAVN was well-equipped and trained as a result of the previous war. Many people in Lạng Sơn fled to Chi Lăng and Văn Quan districts, where there were military bases, and where they could be farther from the border. The PLA’s advance was slowed by the PAVN as well as by the Beijing government. On several days after the outbreak of war, Deng Xiaoping announced “the limited nature of attack,” saying he had no interest in overthrowing the Vietnamese regime (Duiker 1986: 85-86). While the battle dragged on in the northern border, Hà Nội was busy trying to find a way to end the war.

10 It might be correctly noted that the Vietnamese leader, Lê Dương, who fought against Deng Xiaoping has been unpopular as his Stalinist development model turned out to fail. The Reform Policy, Đổi Mới, in 1986 was made possible with political criticism on Lê Duẩn’s leadership in Vietnam.
From the outset, the Nhân Dân newspaper daily reported the steadily rising numbers of soldiers killed and tanks destroyed by the PLA by the PAVN. In addition, many patriot poems and mention of feudal legends against the Han Chinese appeared that boosted the nationalist sentiment against the PRC. The story of the Trung Sisters [Hai bà Trương], the heroic leaders of rebellion against Han Chinese rulers, resonated with a political desire to encourage female participation in the Border War (Nhân Dân, March 4, 1979). And, the story of Liễu Thanh, a general of the Ming, China, who was beheaded by the Vietnamese in Chi Lăng, Lạng Sơn (see Chapter 3), also appeared to boost nationalist support for fighting against China. In this wartime propaganda, in fact, one can see a departure from the political agenda of socialist solidarity between Vietnam and China before the war. As the issues of ethnic Chinese and the territorial border between Vietnam and China gathered war clouds, what was really behind the war became increasingly understood as a long history of nationalist hostility between two nations. The invasion of Chinese, as well as the defense made by Vietnamese, was historicized and naturalized by reviving pre-revolution hostility towards the other in both countries.
Figure 1: The Declaration of the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam about the Invasion War of the People who holds the Power of China on February 17, 1979; published in Nhân Dân (February 17, 1979). Author’s collection, from the Vietnam National Library in Hà Nội (acquired in May, 2010)
Figure 2: A Political cartoon and picture in Nhân Dân (February 22, 1979). Deng Xiaoping removed his communist party uniform and came across the border, brandishing soldiers barbarously in Vietnam (left, Nguyễn Nghiệm); A Chinese soldier killed by the PAVN in Lạng Sơn (right, Phạm Ngọc Long). Author’s collection from the Vietnam National Library in Hà Nội (acquired in May, 2010).
On March 4, 1979, the state radio station, Voice of Vietnam (VOV) urgently broadcasted the Appeal [Lời Kêu Gọi] of the Central Committee of the CPVN against China. That night, about 300,000 people gathered and protested against China in Hà Nội as they listened to the appeal (Nhân Dân, March, 5, 1979). The complexion of the war was dramatically shifting in the northern border. It had been two weeks since the war broke out. Lạng Sơn fell to the PLA. Although Vietnamese media and historiographies did not acknowledge the occupation of Lạng Sơn by the PLA,\(^{11}\) it was clear that the CPVN was shocked and had to officially reorient its perspective on the war. On March 5, 1979, in response to the Appeal of the Central Committee, the General Mobilization Order was issued (Figure 3). By the order, the Border War escalated to a total war and all Vietnamese were forcefully subjected to becoming part of the war. The Order [Lệnh] is an exceptional political right of a sovereign subject, which is the CPVN in Vietnam. Border rights by individuals were suspended by the war and the party asserted its absolute power in Vietnam. At the same time, it was a trial of sovereignty of the CPVN in governing its population and resources.

\(^{11}\) The History of the Communist Party of Lạng Sơn vaguely noted that the opposition army (The PLA) “flooded into the north of Lạng Sơn” on March 4, 1979 (Ban Chấp Hành Đảng Bộ Tỉnh Lạng Sơn, 1996: 207).
It was the first time in the history of Vietnam that a General Mobilization Order had been issued. The Order required that all people and organizations should be militarized. According to the Decree (No. 83-CP; March 5, 1979), all men between 18 and 45 years old and all women between the ages of 18 and 35 were mobilized into military service. In addition, all workers were required to work ten hours per day, which included two hours for military practice and defense activity. High school and

12 The Committee of the Government [Hội Đồng Chính phủ], Decree 83-CP (March 5, 1979), “About the militarization of all people and arming all people for the victory over the reactionaries of Chinese invaders and the defense of the fatherland [Về Việc Thúc Hiện Quân Sự Hóa Toàn Dân, Vũ Trang Toàn Dân Để Đánh Thắng Bảo Phån Động Trung Quốc Xâm Lộc, Bảo Vệ Tổ Quốc.”
university students were also required to take a military training session lasting two hours per day. Meanwhile, children at school sang a song composed by Phạm Tuyên: “Tomorrow Teacher sets off going to serve as a soldier. Good bye to the beautiful school for going up to the border area...Wish teacher health and establish meritorious service in war...” They sang this repeatedly as military trucks packed with new young soldiers headed to the northern border provinces. In its mnemonics of war, these wartime songs have inscribed a vivid image about the Border War for generations. The order made the war a performative experience for people on a national scale, as it forcefully regulated people’s everyday lives.

For people actually living in the northern battle area, the order took away the individual’s right to mobility. Without permission, people were not allowed to evacuate to safer places. In fact, all personal vehicles such as motor bikes were confiscated for military and government use, and not allowed for private usage. Practically, there was no way for people living in Lang Son to leave the battlefield. This meant that, effectively, local people were being ordered to remain and defend their territory against the PLA. Without doubt, the order resulted in many casualties among local people.

13 The song, “See Male Teachers off Going to Military [Tiễn Thầy Giáo Đi Bộ Dỏi]” was composed about a week later the General Mobilization Order. The name and lyrics are my translation. This song is still sung by children in Vietnam. The renowned composer of the song, Phạm Tuyên in an interview with VTC 1, broadcasted on March 5, 2014, said, he received phone calls from people in Hà Nội that the song was played as they were departing for the northern border.
In response to Vietnam’s General Mobilization Order, China, on the very same
day, announced that the PLA would be withdrawing back to China as it had already
achieved “the goal.” The occupation of Lạng Sơn by the PLA was considered “the
victory” of the Chinese side. The PLA was moving back to the border (Ban Chấp Hành
Đảng Bộ Tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1996) and Lạng Sơn was rehabilitated by the PAVN on March 5,
1979. However, the Chinese announcement did not guarantee a cease fire or peace
agreement between the two countries. The intensive war continued at the border for
about two more weeks.

The Border War was officially declared to be over on March 18, 1979 as the PLA
stepped back from all towns in the northern border provinces. The front page of Nhân
Dân [The People] on March 20, 1979, celebrated this as the defeat of 600,000 Chinese
soldiers in the northern border region, illustrating the victory with a picture of cheering
Vietnamese soldiers. In the upper right corner, it was proclaimed that “Another Victory
[has been] Written in the History of Defeating Invaders against Our Nation” [Thêm Mộ
Chiến Công Hiển Hách Ghi Vào Lịch Sử Chống Xâm Lược Của Dân Tộc Ta]. There was
also a set of pictures which highlighted the unconquerable sovereignty of Vietnam
(Figure 5). The Border War was valorized as being as important as the previous war
against the Western powers. In the 1980 constitution of the SRV, the Border War was
recorded as when “the Chinese hegemonic aggressors” confronted “our people who
were longing for peace to build their homeland.” This phrase however faced revision in

The declaration of victory on March 18, 1979 however failed to bring peace to the northern border region. For Chinese, it was neither a defeat nor a retreat. They did declare a celebratory victory and the withdrawal of the PLA from the Vietnamese territory was claimed as enough of a “lesson” for Vietnam (Duiker 1986). Since the two countries failed to have peace and restoration negotiations after the war, the official declaration of victory by both sides did not prevent what became essentially a more sophisticated border conflict that lasted a decade. The so-called victory of the Border War was, in fact, not the end of the war but the start of a new war against China. The PLA had occupied several mountain peaks along the border which Vietnam claimed as part of its territory. The war after the officially recognized Border War became a real border war with disputes of territoriality. As frequent military conflicts continued, many mobilized citizens and soldiers at the northern border had to stay in the area longer than they expected. In the name of stabilization, restoration and security in the border area, Lạng Sơn became a military town which deeply suffered from the aftermath (and de facto continuation) of the war.
The French Army on the left, the American army in the center, and the Chinese army on the right. Vietnam National Library, Hà Nội.

**Lang Son in War**

The Border War did not simply destroy but also constructed a new socio-political structure. The war, although it was a defensive war¹⁴ as claimed, forcefully reconfigured the political landscape of the Lang Son province. The map of the administrative area was urgently reset right before the war. As Vietnam completed its political unification in 1976, the national assembly decided to remap the administrative division throughout the country. According to the decision, Lang Son and Cao Bang province were consolidated into one province, “Cao Lang” province (Ban Chấp Hành Đảng Bộ Tỉnh

¹⁴ Until today, Vietnam and China both claimed that the Border War was a “defensive” not an offensive war.
Lạng Sơn 1996:196). The decision was supported by the claim that consolidation would increase the effectiveness of the government and the party and constitute a border province comparable to that of China. Both Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng province face the Guangxi province of China. However, as the “effectiveness” did not concern the local situation, people in Lạng Sơn province felt upset. Many old people in Lạng Sơn remembered that period as a serious mistake [sai lầm]. Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn were neighboring provinces but, except for their geographical proximity, they had little in common. In addition, it is still difficult to travel between Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn. Since the area is mountainous, the road conditions are poor and frequently blocked by landslides. Still today, it takes longer to travel from Lạng Sơn to Cao Bằng than from Lạng Sơn to Hà Nội.

The national assembly however enacted the consolidation of the two provinces and proposed a five year development plan for Cao Lạng province. People in Lạng Sơn were skeptical about the decision of the Party-State. A retired director of the department of culture in Lạng Sơn province asserted that the name Cao Lạng even sounded to him like a disgrace to the Lạng Sơn people. “It was not Lạng Cao but Cao Lạng, which means Cao Bằng is politically superior to Lạng Sơn,” he continued. “The decision was a complete mess. Cao Bằng city became the center of Cao Lạng province. Lạng Sơn lost its political importance for the first time in its history. We were provincialized from the
view of the central politicians. In Lạng Sơn, people prefer to call the province proudly “Xứ Lạng,” meaning a village with unique cultural characteristics. Consolidation was anxiously seen as occurring at the expense of a historic cultural identity.

The political experiment of consolidating two provinces could not last long. As the relationship between Vietnam and China started to erode in 1978, the conflict at the border dramatically worsened this relationship. The Friendship Border Pass [Cửa Khẩu Hữu Nghị] in Lạng Sơn province became the political theater of Vietnam’s and China’s deteriorating relationship. The remote provincial capital of Cao Lạng could not manage the border affairs in Lạng Sơn effectively. As the war at the border became imminent, Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng province were urgently separated into two provinces in December, 1978 (Ban Chấp Hành Đặng Bộ Tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1996:201). As mentioned in the previous section, the first important, but secret, task of the new people’s committee of Lạng Sơn province was to prepare for imminent war.

When the war broke out, the situation in Lạng Sơn was extremely precarious. While the PLA concentrated on attacking Lạng Sơn as it was the shortest path to Hà Nội, the main forces of the PAVN were in Cambodia. From the very first day of the war,

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15 As one of the high ranking party members in Lạng Sơn, the former director of the department of culture told me that the consolidation was supported by the comrades of Cao Bằng but not of Lạng Sơn. He allegedly claimed that because Hồ Chí Minh returned to Vietnam through Cao Bằng in 1941 and stayed there, many comrades of Cao Bằng who had a chance to be close to Hồ Chí Minh became more powerful than cadres of Lạng Sơn. As he claimed, the matter of effectiveness in governance is seen to be related to a struggle of political ambitions inside of the party.

16 I will discuss this issue more in detail in Chapter 6.
Lạng Sơn was formidably attacked by the artillery and tanks of the PLA (Ban Chấp Hành Đảng Bộ Tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1996:203). Lạng Sơn had to mobilize militias [dân quân] from the beginning. Considering the demography of Lạng Sơn, the percentage of Kinh majority only constituted 10% of its population before the war (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1999:131).17 This means most militias were composed of members of the ethnic minorities living in mountainous communes.18

Although the battlefields of the war didn’t extend to other provinces outside the northern border provinces, the intensive and concentrated nature of battles (lasting for about a month in a limited area) almost completely destroyed the infrastructure, buildings, agricultural areas, and forest farms. According to the initial statistical report in Nhân Dân (March 20, 1978), “reactionary China” employed “600,000 soldiers (without adding up militias), 580 air planes, 480 cannons with 1260 mortars, 550 tanks and armored cars, and 195 battleships” only for a month. The veracity of these numbers might be questionable since they came from the Vietnamese government on the day it reported victory and there are no reliable sources to prove it. However, these numbers

17 The data available here is from 1960. According to the 1995 census, the population of Kinh reached around 15% (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Tỉnh Lạng Sơn, 1999:131). Considering the strict regulation on the mobility of people and poor transportation environment, the population in 1979 would not be changed much from 1960.

18 The history of the Communist Party of Lạng Sơn recorded that “self-defense army” was organized
are at least suggestive of the intensity of the attack and the damage it caused in the northern border provinces in Vietnam. As a renowned teacher in Lạng Sơn at that time recalled, “All government offices were demolished. The Kỳ Cùng Bridge was bombed down. On the river, dead bodies were floating endlessly” when he returned to the city.

After the declaration of victory, the local government attempted to recover the town and provinces. An internal document (Tỉnh ủy Lạng Sơn 1986) and historiographies (Ban Chấp Hành Đảng Bộ tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1996; Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1999) revealed that for almost a decade Lạng Sơn remained a war-torn town which suffered limited resources for rebuilding its towns and infrastructures, while the security of the border area was fortified as defense against possible attack from China.

For the social structure, the party organization in Lạng Sơn province had been considerably enlarged since the war. Before the war there were about 10,602 party members in the province but the number increased to 17,000 by a year after the war with 632 branch offices (Ban Chấp Hành Đảng Bộ tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1996:198, 211-212). This could be considered evidence for the priorities in the recovery [khảm phục] process in Lạng Sơn.

19 The Nhân Dân report compared “the reactionary China” to the French Colonizer and the imperial America. It asserted that the military power used in the anti-France war for nine years and the anti-American war for eight years was comparable to that of the PLA for one month attack.
20 The major bridge in Lạng Sơn connects the north and south of the city over Kỳ Cùng River.
The border region became a ghost town after the war brought its breezes of gunpowder and the clouds of bomb explosion followed by the horror of the dead, wounded, and demolished buildings. Even after the PLA withdrew, people were exposed to leftover unexploded ordnances (UXO) in the daytime. Children could not freely play outside, but some of them collected leftover empty shells for black market exchange. The region continued to be rocked by the frequent exchange of artillery and gun fires along the mountains between Vietnam and China at night. Rumors circulated about secret operations of Chinese spies [hoạt động gián điệp] which made local people suspicious and anxious towards each other. Robberies and burglaries were everywhere since many people were without jobs. Many evacuees actually hesitated to return to their homes due to the lack of security, sanitation, and livelihood in the border towns and villages. For them, there was nothing that could be done but blame the situation on China. Even public resentment about the failure of the socialist economy since the unification of the country tended to be blamed on the Chinese invasion. The feeling of “Hận thù [grudge]” began to spread its roots more strongly in the everyday life of people in Lạng Sơn, in the course of recovery from the war.
"A Town within Arm’s Reach"

In the middle of the Border War and before its final stage, the cabinet council of the Vietnamese government [Hội Đồng Chính Phủ] established the Investigation Commission on War Crimes of Invasion of Expansionist and Hegemonic China [Ủy ban Điều tra tội ác chiến tranh xâm lược của bon bành trưởng và bá quyền Trung Quốc].\textsuperscript{21} The Minister of Wounded Soldiers and Social Affairs was the chairman of the commission. It was not only established in the central government but also in district level governments throughout the country. By the investigation, the commission, as stated, would: First, establish war crime museums or displays at history museums; Second, help to report the war crimes of “reactionary” China to the nation and to the international community through bodies such as the United Nations; Thirdly, support Cambodian people fighting against the Pol Pot regime, the henchman of China, with evidence of Chinese war crimes.

The establishment of a commission on war crimes is based on the Geneva Conventions. With growing international awareness of humanitarianism and peace, to report violations of the conventions to the United Nations has become a common

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\textsuperscript{21} It was reported in Nhân Dân, March 14, 1979. The commission was established by Decision 99-CP, March 11, 1979.
practice of nation-states seeking international support. It is also a way of legitimatizing war as a “just war.” For Vietnam, to invade Cambodia for removing “the Pol Pot regime” was asserted as a “police action” (Hardt and Negri 2000:12) for the peace of Indochina, while the Border War against China was claimed as an “ethically” and “traditionally” justified war. As the commission aimed for, the latter war was also appropriated to legitimate the former war. In this regard, Vietnam insisted that China should take responsibility for both wars. In fact, there is currently no official report of the commission circulating publicly, and the huge display room in The Exhibition House for Crimes of War against Invasions22 has disappeared. Yet the commission was maintained for a decade and their collections and narratives constituted the official memory of the Border War.

There were not only the activities of the investigation commission but also the creations of popular culture that governed the popular memory of the war. Along with the literary tradition of poems, memoirs, and propaganda songs, new technology such as film became popular in Vietnam. The Vietnam Cinema Association was established in 1970. After the unification of the country, with the support and influence of the Soviet Union, some feature films have been produced. As Foucault famously pointed out about the role of film in popular memory (Foucault 1975), a film can reprogram the way people interpret past-present relations and film can be appropriated as a means of

22 This was the old name for the War Remnants Museum in Hồ Chí Minh City before 1995.
controlling people’s memory and for governing the dynamism of people. As the war ended, the Party-State sponsored directors to make films about the Border War. One of them about Lang Son, *Thị Xã Trong Tầm Tay* [A Town within Arm’s Reach], was highly regarded by the Vietnamese government as well as the public.

On a day in 1982, a young movie director visited Trương Thanh’s house near a soccer field of Chi Lăng district in Lạng Sơn. The director, Đặng Nhật Minh, an internationally renowned Vietnamese movie director today, came up with a draft of a screenplay to make a movie about the Border War in Lạng Sơn. Thanh was initially asked to join the film production as a local consultant. Yet, later he even played a role in the film as a political commissioner of the province. The movie, a 77-minute monochrome feature film, was shot in Lạng Sơn for a month.

As a feature film of a socialist country, the movie was greatly in debt to the tradition of the Soviet-style socialist realism in representing the reality of the war-torn town of Lạng Sơn and adversities of the local people. Local soldiers and people, like Trương Thanh, also participated in the production of the movie as a collective work for the people’s creation of art.

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23 I introduced him in Chapter 3. He is the former principle of a school in Chi Lăng district.

24 It was Đặng Nhật Minh’s first feature film in his career after he made documentaries as an agricultural engineer.

25 Also, as Charlot (1994) points out, the low budget for the film production in the centrally planned economy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam could limit the possibilities of resources. However, with the benefit of the party-state sponsorship in the movie production, many nationally renowned artists such as a music composer, Trịnh Công Sơn, joined a young movie director’s project.
The movie, *Thị Xã Trong Tâm Tay* [A Town within Arm’s Reach], begins with a woman, Thanh, looking up at a tree and catching the falling egg of a bird. She smiles and tries to hand it to her boyfriend, Vũ. They look so happy for a second, but the egg accidentally slips down to the ground and breaks. She then looks desperate and looks up at the sky with earnest eyes. This is what Vũ dreams while he is on a train to Lạng Sơn. His dream continues with a reminiscence of another day with Thanh. The couple lie on the lawn enjoying beautiful weather. Their sweet repose ends with an argument about the tale of Nàng Tô Thị [Lady Tô Thị], a famous tale of Lạng Sơn, about a woman with a son waiting for her husband who never returns home and eventually becomes a lime statue on a mountain in Lạng Sơn. Vũ interprets the tale simply as a possible story for a couple but Thanh flares up with Vũ’s idea as irresponsible for the future of a couple. The quarrel gets interrupted when a train crew shakes Vũ awake to inspect his ticket. The train crew then warns all the passengers in the cabin about the situation in the border region. He states, “Although the enemy has run away in the border region, there still are possibilities of being bombarded.” Soon there is the sound of a bomb blast and the train stops abruptly without any explanation. When Vũ finally arrives in Lạng Sơn, the military truck he was sitting on is moving to the Headquarters of the military

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26 My translation. According to some previous English translations, for instance, “A Village in the Palm of the Hand” or “City under the fist” is available. I however note that “Thị Xã” (District Level Town, in administrative divisions of Việt Nam) in Lạng Sơn Province was the provincial capital, but not a city [Thành Phố, that time] and “trong tâm tay” generally means closeness in distance.
base in a cave, while bombs are dropping along the road. The war continues in the border province.

Vũ’s mission was to report the war crimes of China and the situation in Lạng Sơn. However, due to the ongoing conflict, the political commissioner cannot give him clear information. He then decides to cover the situation in Lạng Sơn by himself while safety cannot be guaranteed. The movie intermingles two stories across time: one is Vũ’s memory about his girlfriend from university and his previous travels to Lạng Sơn when visiting her family; the other is about the horrors of war, atrocities, and the ongoing plots of the Chinese in Lạng Sơn. The stories continuously overlap. The poems and songs about Lạng Sơn keep playing as they remind one of the peaceful past of the town. While mingled with a love story, the movie does not forget to include a political message. It portrays Chinese people living in Lạng Sơn as traitors who serve the PLA and spread the ideology of Mao Zedong. At the end of the movie, a ghost of a Chinese man holding a book by Mao Zedong and a hidden sword is running to Vũ and calling him “Comrade” over and over again. A PAVN soldier shoots him dead. The final scenes reveal that all the stories are his dreams. He arrives at Lạng Sơn and looks for Thanh. Yet, Thanh is already with another man, a heroic soldier of the Border War. A hint of affirmation of the present rather than the past is given with the ending credits.

In 1983, the movie was released at theaters throughout the country. At that time, the number of theaters was growing rapidly. There were “eighty hundred halls and
twelve hundred open-air venues, serviced by over 2,000 cinematographic units, the majority mobile” (Charlot 1994). Tu, a resident of Hoàng Đông commune in Lạng Sơn, told me that a temple in her commune was destroyed for making an open-air movie theater after the war. She said that when there was a movie screening at night by the mobile crew, almost all the local people gathered together for watching, and sometimes a leader of commune or a party member delivered a political speech to the audience at the venue. As the Party-State controlled the production, circulation, and screening process, film was a powerful tool used to govern popular memory.

The movie Thị Xã Trong Tâm Tay was praised at the Sixth Vietnam Film Festival (1983) and won the Golden Lotus prize, the best film prize in competition.27 Afterwards however, this movie also disappeared from audiences for decades as it explicitly depicted the Border War, the Chinese, and the aftermath of the war in Lạng Sơn. Only in the late 2000s, in the wake of the growing territorial dispute over the East Sea (also known as the South China Sea) between Vietnam and China, Vietnamese Internet communities rediscovered the movie and circulated it over the Internet. Although the movie can be seen as a love story, a young generation of Vietnamese consumes the movie as a historical text about the Border War. They ridicule the Chinese characters in the movie and connect the Border War to the current dispute over the East Sea. Đặng

27 The director, Đặng Nhật Minh, received the Hồ Chí Minh Prize, the highest honor for cultural achievement, in 2007, including his work of Thị Xã Trong Tâm Tay.
Nhật Minh’s experimental techniques of mingling time and space powerfully accommodate contemporary audiences’ understandings.
“A Courageous Witness”

On February 17, 2009, it was the 30th anniversary of the Border War. I was in Lạng Sơn but could not find any official ceremony about the war. Lạng Sơn seemed just busy with local festivals. It was after the Lunar New Year festival, the Year of the Ox. As local people recited, the first lunar month of a year is the “month of festivities” [Tháng Giêng là tháng ăn chơi].28 It was going to end in a week anyway.

Anh, a day laborer but also the son of a heroic revolutionary in Lạng Sơn, called me to invite me to attend a local festival. As I had participated in dozens of festivals around the provinces already, I skeptically asked, “Is there still any festival left in Lạng Sơn?” He laughed and answered “Sure. There are dozens coming soon!” He added, since he could not find any work to do for the day, he and his friends had decided to go to a festival at a temple. As he picked me up with his old Honda Wave, we went to Hoàng Đống commune, located in the north of Lạng Sơn.

I actually had passed the place many times to go to border markets, but this was the first time I had entered the temple of Lê Thái Tô, who defeated the Ming army of China and brought independence to the Đại Việt [the Great Viet]. The local people

28 It is part of a local satire song. The lyric goes “January is the month of festivities. February is the month of gambling. March is for alcohols…”
organize a festival on January 23rd every year, but during the period of the subsidy economy [thời Báo Cấp], all feudal and traditional rituals and festivals were repressed as superstitious. As Tu, mentioned in the previous section, later told me, the temple was damaged by the Border War and the local government decided to demolish it in order to build a theater. After the Đổi Mới, the Renovation Policy, the government loosened its strict control over traditional rituals. The local people of the commune rebuilt the temple and organized the festival. Anh explained that since the king, Lê Thái Tô, was a national hero who defeated China, people believed that the temple with his spirit would save people of Lang Sơn from the invasion of China. He said, “It is a superstition [Mê tín] yet good for people and the country.”

As we finished walking around the temple, Anh suddenly asked me whether I would go with him to a cemetery near the temple. He said, “Today is a memorial day for an uncle in my family. I’d like to burn incense at his tomb.” The cemetery was within walking distance from the temple. I followed him to what I had not known before was the municipal memorial cemetery of Lạng Sơn.

The municipal cemetery was usually locked by the keeper but on that day it was open because of many visitors. The cemetery was built around 1990 and many scattered tombs of revolutionary martyrs [liệt sĩ] have been moved here. There were around 460 tombs of the martyrs from the anti-French revolutionary war. The majority, however, were the martyrs who were killed in the Border War. Anh’s uncle was one of them.
Many tombs were in fact “unknown soldiers” [Chua Rỗ Tên]. Anh explained, “During the war, there were many militias who mobilized from ethnic minorities. They were illiterate and many of them did not even have the registration card [chứng minh thư].”

A big monument stands in the middle of the cemetery. The inscription says, “The Fatherland Records Merits” [Tổ Quốc Ghi Công]. On the right hand side of the entrance, there is a house of memorial stones recording the names of martyrs [Nhà Bia Ghi Tên Liệt Sĩ]. Each memorial stone represents a commune where martyrs come from. As they are separated, visitors could compare how many martyrs actually came from each commune, although the monument was obviously intended as an expression of respect for the origin of the martyrs. Anh made a joke about the memorial stones as he saw Đồng Kinh district had relatively few martyrs: “They all ran away. Certainly they were cadres.”

On the memorial stone, the martyrs of the Border War were inscribed as “the defense of the Father Land” [Bảo Vệ Tổ Quốc] while others were specified as “anti-France war” [Chống Pháp] and “Anti-American war” [Chống Mỹ]. Anh was a bit upset about the inscription and said, “What does the defense of the Fatherland mean? If anyone died during military service, that sacrifice could be part of the defense of the Fatherland!” He found a soldier who had died in 1992 and continued, “Here it is! They are all the same! The war in 1979 was not just one’s military service! Perhaps, the government is afraid of the Chinese reaction and then just wrote like this. It’s not good
Later, I learned from the keeper of the cemetery that many martyrs had been moved to the cemetery after the normalization between Vietnam and China. She said, “Lạng Sơn is facing directly to China. It thus should care about China.” It was an understandable excuse but it was certain that the government’s official memory of the Border War tried to hide the war history as remembered by the families of the war dead.

The architectural design of the municipal memorial cemetery of Lạng Sơn is in fact not so much different from other memorial cemeteries, except for one remarkable statue. There is a red triangular pyramid erected on the left hand side of the main monument (Figure 8). It is said to resemble a nib-shape. It is a monument to a Japanese correspondent, Takano Isao, 高野 功.

When I settled down in Lạng Sơn, many local people told me the story about Takano. Some of them actually assumed I was from Japan, while others said it was unique [duy nhất] aspect of the local history of the Border War. In fact, as the official memory is silenced at large about the Border War, heroism in the popular memory is missing. Lê Đình Chính, who was killed at age of 18 in the Friendship Pass, was officially recognized as a hero of the border defense. However, he died in 1978 when the conflict between Vietnam and China was escalating. People found that Takano, as a

29 The story of Takano was included in the movie, Thị Xã Trong Tầm Tay [A Town within Arm’s Reach]. The director, Đặng Nhật Minh, plays the role of Takano.
foreigner killed in Lang Son, could be a good example of how cruel China was in 1979. Takano Isao, 高野 功 was a correspondent of the newspaper of the Communist Party of Japan (CPJ), Akahata 赤旗, in Hà Nội when the Border War broke out.

Vietnam was troubled in the distorted Cold War landscape30. Although Nhân Dân [the People], delivered the news about international support for Vietnam against China during the war every day, that support came mostly from European socialist countries and parties leaning toward the Soviet Union. In Asia, because North Korea was partial to China, there seemed to be no support for the political propaganda. Under the circumstance, the communist party of Japan was highly regarded as a “comrade.” The Prime Minister, Phạm Văn Đông, had a personal interview with “comrade” Miamoto Taro, the chief bureau of Akahata. The lengthy interview was published in Nhân Dân on the same day that the news of the outbreak of the war was delivered (February 18, 1979).

As Vietnam issued the General Mobilization Order and China announced the withdrawal of the PLA from Lang Son, the government invited “foreign” correspondents to Lang Son. As Mai, who at that time worked for the Department of Culture in the local government, remembered, on March 7, 1979, she was ordered to guide foreign correspondents from Hà Nội. From Chi Lăng district, the southern district of Lang Son province and the shelter for evacuated people from the border area during

30 I will discuss the complicated Cold War landscape of Vietnam in Chapter 3.
the war, she and the group of foreign correspondents, which included Takano, went up to Láng Sơn. When they arrived, Takano was absorbed in covering the situation in Làng Sơn. While he was taking pictures of the town from the central area of the local government building, he was shot and killed. His body was transported to a hospital in Đồng Mô, Chi Lăng District, and later sent to the Viet-Soviet hospital in Hà Nội.

Since an obituary of Takano was published in Nhân Dân, March 10, 1979, many articles including pictures of him, poems and essays about him appeared for a month. Even songs about Takano were composed. “Takano--A courageous witness,” by a renowned musician, Nguyễn Hữu Thành, was widely played. Many contemporaries remembered Takano from their memory of the song. The public attention to Takano seemed to be unusual. The prime minister met Takano’s family in person. Poems and essays about Takano praised his bravery, while accusing China of killing an innocent person.

In Láng Sơn, although no one knew who was responsible, a shrine for Takano was built in the middle of Quang Trung Street, where he was shot dead (Figure 9). Since the shrine was on the main street of town, people in Láng Sơn remembered him clearly. When the new memorial cemetery was built in Hoàng Đông commune, the shrine was removed and the new monument for him erected next to the main monument.

Although many people vividly remembered the shrine of Takano, there was also skepticism about the story. Some were suspicious that Takano could be shot accidentally
by the PAVN not the PLA. They claimed that as reported, the PLA was already back at the border on the day the government announced his death. In fact, factual information about Takano’s death is slightly different in historiographies. While Nhân Dân reported that Takano was killed on March 7th, the history of the communist party of Lạng Sơn recorded the incident: “From March 5, 1979, the opposite side [đối phương; The PLA] continuously retreats from all front lines in the border area. On March 5, 1979, a Japanese news reporter, Takano, was shot to death at the south shore of Kỳ Cùng river while recording situations involving the retreat of the opposite side in the town of Lạng Sơn” (Ban Chấp Hành Đảng Bộ Tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1996:207). It noted March 5th as the day of the incident. Some others claimed that he died on March 6th. Because only a few people actually witnessed his death, there is relentless suspicion circulating about Takano.

In addition, the inscription on the monument for Takano is misspelled. The newspaper he worked for is not “Hakahata” but “Akahata” (Figure 8). Some local people pointed out that it could be just a mistake but at the same time, the local government was not clear about him and his death from the beginning. In addition, the government excused the traffic problem when the shrine on the street was removed. My host family, who lived adjacent to the street, told me that the reason to remove the shrine might be it could be too legible to Chinese visitors in town as Lạng Sơn reopened to China. The secrecy in Vietnamese politics does matter to this case. In addition, as the
A tragic but odd incident involving a foreigner during the Border War could slip into the core memoriescape as the void in the memoriescape of the Border War in Vietnam. As Takano’s shrine was removed from public eyes, the social memory of Takano was attenuated for decades until recently. As Japan had a similar territorial dispute over islands with China, Vietnamese people refreshed the story of Takano. While suspicions regarding the story persist, the political conditionality of memory is affected by the global political landscape. The courageous man in Lang Son and the Border War has been resurrected in Vietnam.
Figure 6: The Temple of Lê Thái Tô, Hoàng Động Commune, Lạng Sơn Province. Photograph by author, February 17, 2009.
Figure 7: Nghĩa Trang Liệt Sỹ Thành Phố Lạng Sơn; Photograph by author, February 17, 2009.

Figure 8: The Municipal Memorial Cemetery of Lạng Sơn. Photographed by author, February 17, 2009.
Figure 9: The place of Takano killed on Quang Trung Street, Lạng Sơn City. Provided by Nguyễn Duy Chiên, a correspondent of Tiễn Phong newspaper in Lạng Sơn.
3. Historyscape on the Border War

Our people must know our history
To understand thoroughly the origin of our country

Dân ta phải biết sự ta
Cho tướng gốc tích nước nhà Việt Nam

The History of Our Country [Sử nước ta]
Nguyễn Ái Quốc,¹ 1941²

Prelude

In contemporary Vietnam, the national historiography is heterogeneous and highly complicated. Throughout the twentieth century, Vietnam was a battlefield of various and incessant wars, from the anti-colonial war against France to the War of National Salvation Against the Americans (1954-1975)³ and its allies, to the Border War against China in 1979. The notorious colonial policy of “divide and rule” made relationships among classes, ethnic groups, and classes antagonistic. Then the August Revolution in 1945 and the War of National Salvation Against the Americans deeply

¹ It was the most famous pen name of Hồ Chí Minh, meaning Nguyễn who loves his country or Nguyễn the patriot, as translated by Duiker (2000).
² Thanks to Tống Văn Lợi, a historian at the Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Sciences, for a scholarly conversation and translation suggestion on this particular work of Hồ Chí Minh.
³ This is the Vietnamese designation for the Vietnam War. In Vietnamese, “Chiến Tranh Chống Mỹ Cửu Nuộc,” “Chiến Tranh Chống Mỹ” [the War against the America] or simply “Chiến tranh Mỹ” is widely used.
inscribed disparities over territories and belligerent ideological separations within the
nation. The Border War exacerbated the historical hostilities between neighboring
nations. In terms of how we analyze the Vietnamese nation-state, its various forms and
moments of nationalism, the degree of heterogeneity and complexity in national
historyscape has increased sharply since the August Revolution as the forms of a
modern state apparatuses actively penetrated everyday life. The disciplinary
technologies of ideology governed the morality and ethics of individuals. These
interventions actually aimed to construct a national unity, with enumerability,
predictability, and manipulability. For this reason, I want to begin this chapter by
tracing the genealogy of the national historyscape of Vietnam in order to disenchant
Vietnam’s post-Cold War nationalism in the era of the contemporary globalized
capitalist order.

In May 13, 2014, about 19,000 Vietnamese workers in an industrial park of
foreign companies in Bình Dương province attacked Chinese people, and plundered and
burned Chinese-owned factories. The riot occurred in the midst of an oil rig dispute
over the South China Sea between Vietnam and China. Some 3000 Chinese quickly fled
for the mainland. It was the largest exodus of Chinese from Vietnam since the Border
War of 1979. There were certain other issues triggering the riot of Vietnamese workers.
While some other foreign companies of different nationalities such as South Koreans

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could avoid damages, so many Taiwanese were victimized. The Vietnamese workers seemed to share the target in the riot.

Anti-China sentiment is not a simple political issue in Vietnam. A Western scholar has pointed to “a long psychological history” (Woodside 1979) that led to the violent dispute between Vietnam and China in 1979. If it is psychological in a collective form, there must be an effective device that stimulates and maintains such a state of conflict. To better tackle the matter, among various possible approaches to this anti-China sentiment, I argue that the Border War between Vietnam and China in 1979 should not be overlooked. Additionally, I assert that the process of building a new history in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) also needs to re-examined. Anti-China sentiment stems not just simply from the centuries-long feudal Chinese occupation history in Vietnam, but from the way history is recorded and revived in a political situation.

For that reason, in this chapter, I will map the competing values of national history, the construction of the national past, the ideological and political appropriation of national historiographies, and the built environment of producing national historiographies, particularly those involving the Border War.

First, I will explore the shifting value of national history in an era of global integration in Vietnam. It is still common that the Vietnamese word for history, “lịch
“sử,” is one of the most frequently used words in the news media and in everyday conversation. Through nationalist and socialist revolution, Vietnam has appropriated history as a powerful political vehicle to mobilize and unite the people. History with a capital H generally referred to the national history of Vietnam. The history of the party and military still occupies the central base of History in the topology of the contemporary historiescape. Yet in the course of Vietnam’s more recent global integration, a noteworthy symptomatic change has emerged: the devaluation of history in the educational system. In the era of globalization, educational pressure by enhanced competition and through temporality in labor market has significantly intensified. The SRV since 1976 has adopted a centralized and universal education which also channeled students’ talents and capacities at as young an age as possible, according to the dictates of the planned economy. However, for the discipline in founding socialist subjectivity, national historical education took on a pivotal role. Since 1986, the Đổi Mới [renovation] era began to loosen the centralized economy and society but the Cold War situation worsened with the war against China in 1979 on Vietnam’s northern border and obstructed the acceleration of the renovation. The shifting global landscape in the 1990s finally pushed Vietnam to deal with the reconfiguration of its ideoscapes of society. China hurriedly returned as a historical comrade of socialism in 1991 while many “brothers” were separated or disappeared. The belligerent ideological and capitalist enemies during the Cold War era became companions in 1995 as Vietnam finally joined
the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and normalized its relationship with the U.S. While all of these shifts shuffled the economy and social orders, the political regime had been reluctantly transformed. National history as a powerful ideological means for discipline and social unity had not been challenged harshly until very recently. History has been an unquestionable machine of legitimacy for the political culture of the state. National history education has been assumed to be an effective machine for reproducing the moral citizenship for the SRV. The recent reports and social debates on the failure of history education unfold national history in motion on the wave of global integration.5

Second, I will trace how Vietnamese national historiographies have been shaped in the course of building a new history for the country. The genealogy of national historiographies unravels peculiar entities in Vietnamese nationalism. The postcolonial ambitions sown on Marx-Leninist doctrines have been struggling with the limitations of an ideological built environment for writing new historiographies. A new perspective on historiography provided by postcolonial historians has contributed to building a new national history. The pre-revolutionary past became the realm for ideological debates and also a dilemma for the postcolonial project. The matter of sovereignty in building

new authorship for national history may help us understand the excessive political influence of the socialist tradition of the “historical sciences.”

Third, I will try to excavate the obsession with antiquity in the national historiographies. To situate the venerable authenticity of Vietnamese nation in national historiography has been a challenging political project as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), North Vietnam, had to compete with the nationalist South. The adoption of a mythological King as the founding father of the nation can be seen as the final but rash step for constructing a new pre-revolutionary past. The constitutional reflections of the Vietnamese nation can also be interpreted as the political stabilization of nationalism. Considering that the security-tightened socialist bureaucracy is still in effect, the narratives in the Constitutions are not simply political rhetoric but a socio-political landmark which governs the social life of nationalist narratives.

Fourth, I will delve into the matter of China in Vietnamese nationalism. As many scholars (Pelley 2002; Womack 2006; Woodside 1988) have discussed, its geographical location neighboring China is one of the biggest concerns for Vietnam. The socialist revolutions in the two neighboring countries set up a temporal but intimate relationship. And yet, the politically ignored “sacred antagonism” relapsed into the horrific warfare in the international history of socialism. The collision between Vietnamese nationalism and Chinese expansionism left distinct scars in national history. The postwar production of anti-China historiographies in Vietnam converted feudalist sacred antagonism to
nationalist secular hostility. For Vietnam, the violent divorce with China enclosed national history with a new sense of territoriality and citizenship.

Lastly, I will discuss the contemporary debates on the authorship of historiography over the Border War. One concerns a recent boisterous debate about a book by Mo Yan, a Chinese author and the Nobel Laureate of Literature in 2012. The Vietnamese translation of Mo Yan’s book released in 2008, *Reunion of Comrade-in-Arms*, has cultivated the nationalist sentiment about who should possess the sovereign authorship of historiography. It is a vivid example about how the Border War experience haunts the writing of national historiography and how political governance in the production of national historiography demarcates national historyscapes in Vietnam.
On a drowsy Sunday in June of 2010, Chiên invited me to join a lunch meeting at his neighbor’s place. When I walked into the house, an old man was watching a popular Sunday quiz show for talented high school students, Đường lên đình Olympia [A way up to the Palace of Olympia].

After introducing each other briefly, he asked us to watch the show together, as if we should not miss it. It was the year-end final competition of the 10th year of the show. The finalists, who tied a red ribbon on their heads like warriors, were selected from high schools across the country. Local teachers and students gathered at schools and cheered for the finalist of their school and township. As the competition went on, the old man was getting excited by solving quizzes himself like one of the participants in the show. He often drew a long sigh when students missed a quiz. He even moaned when none of the finalists could answer a history question: “Oh, no! How could all be ignorant about such basic history of Vietnam? It’s shameful.” He turned to me and continued, “As you see, young generations these days are only good at subjects such as English and computer sciences [tin học]. No History! Even prestigious students pay no attention to such a valuable subject for the nation! It’s really

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6 The show began to broadcast on VTV 3, one of the Vietnamese national television stations, covering mostly entertainment programs. The show has been exclusively sponsored by a South Korean conglomerate, LG, since 1999.

7 According to the South Korean Yonhap news agency (Oct. 6, 2005) reported from Hà Nội, LG electronics in Vietnam asserted that the average audiences of the show were around 15 million throughout the country.
disappointing!” While the finalists had obviously low performance in the subject of history, the winner was determined in the end and received a scholarship to study abroad. The tides of clapping and sighing rising from this remote border town finally subsided.

It might be a common concern today for the nation-states around the world that national history education for young generations is failing. Yet, in Vietnam, the situation has produced a vigorous social debate. The social debates on deteriorating history education is rather directly extended to nationalism, patriotism, and more importantly the leadership of the party in the era of the country’s global integration [Thời hội nhập quốc tế]. Nguyễn Đình Lê, an associate professor of modern history of Vietnam at the Vietnam National University of Social Sciences and Humanities (VNUSSH), Hà Nội, asked the public to be serious about the matter and said in the newspaper of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPVN): “A poor country would bring hardships to the people but if the young generation of a country is indifferent to the national history, it will be extremely harmful and an expensive cost in the future. The young generation’s understanding the national history will gain pride, confidence, and responsibility with the destiny of the country.”

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From its very inception, the historiography of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) was rooted in the people’s desire for a national history. As soon he returned to Vietnam in 1941 for the anti-colonial revolution against Japan⁹ and France, Hồ Chí Minh and the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) undertook the formation of Việt Nam Độc Lập Động Minh Hội [the League for the Independence of Vietnam], as known as Việt Minh. Việt Minh was a united political front which non-communist nationalists and people who supported independence could join. To propagate the league throughout the country and to mobilize the people to join the league, Hồ Chí Minh using his patriotic pen name, Nguyễn Ái Quốc, himself wrote a long poem, Sử Nước Ta [The history of our country]¹⁰ in 1941, and a piece of prose, Nên học sử ta [Should study our history]¹¹ in 1942 respectively. While the prose as a political pamphlet basically aimed to train elite cadres of the league, the poem was carefully targeted at the illiterate people who at that time exceeded 90% of the population.¹² The 208 line-long poem summarized the history of the nation from the ancient Hồng Bàng period to Nam Kỳ khởi Nghĩa [The Nam Kỳ Uprising] which the ICP led in 1940. In order to benefit the oral tradition

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⁹ Since September 1940, the Japanese Imperial Army began to invade the French Indochina. It resulted in a political vacuum in Vietnam, and Hồ Chí Minh with the ICP decided to take advantage of the political situation.

¹⁰ With the name, Lịch sử Nước Ta [Our nation’s history], it was republished by Chính Trị Quốc Gia [The National Political publishing house] in 2009.


¹² Nhận Dần, Jan. 17, 2012, " Xuân Nhâm Ngọ và tác phẩm 'Lịch sử nước ta' của Bác Hồ" [The spring of the year of horse and ‘the history of our country’ of Uncle Hồ]
of poetry, known as “lục bát” [the six-eight form], in Vietnam (Pelley 2002:127-128),
many illiterate people and even ethnic minorities in the northern mountains could recite
the poem portraying the chronicle of the national history from mouth to mouth,\textsuperscript{13} which
from the beginning urged the Vietnamese people to know the history of their nation.
Benedict Anderson (1991) emphasized the role of print media in the construction of
nationalism as an imagined community. His analysis also applies to Vietnam, as the ICP
tried to publish booklets and newspapers from the beginning of the anti-colonial
struggle. However, in places with high levels of illiteracy, oral traditions would also take
an important role. This was true in Vietnam as well.

To learn the nation’s history became a moral duty, which would ensure the
making of a revolutionary citizenship in the anti-colonial movement. Since then, the
meaning of Hồ Chí Minh’s historical writings has been continuously appropriated to
underline the political significance of history education for the people. Malarney
(1997:906-907) has described how the local people unconditionally referred Hồ Chí Minh
without any incredulity, for it is still true to say that people in Vietnam frequently quote
the words of Hồ Chí Minh in their everyday conversation especially when they are

\textsuperscript{13} “Popular knowledge of the classical tradition also stemmed from specific literary device. The six-eight (lục
bát) form, for example, created a rhythmic scheme by alternating between lines of six and eight syllables.
This pattern played a mnemonic role that enabled auditors to memorize substantial segments of the major
texts. In this way, the most cherished examples of the scripted tradition passed into the realm of orality. By
emphasizing the intermingling of the written and oral traditions, it was possible to perceive popular
elements in the “high” culture of Vietnam. After all, many of the great literary works were redactions of oral
traditions” (Pelley, 2002: 127-128).

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discussing social and historical matters. After Hồ Chí Minh died in 1969, the Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum opened in 1975 and Hồ Chí Minh Museum was open to public on May 18, 1990, to celebrate the 100th birthday (Logan 1995). Flocks of students, people and local cadres have made pilgrimage to the places of Hồ Chí Minh since then. Đồng, a local official of the People’s Committee of Lạng Sơn, told me that he was deeply moved when he was selected to visit the Mausoleum for the first time. Today, one of his duties as a local officer is to organize a group of ethnic minority people and guide the group to visit the places of Hồ Chí Minh and Hà Nội, all at the local government’s expense.

Although some ritualistic political cult about Hồ Chí Minh began in 1970s, the habitual citationality of Hồ Chí Minh’s thoughts was intensively precipitated by the Seventh National Congress of the CPVN in 1991. According to the Resolution (June 27, 1991), the Thought of Hồ Chí Minh along with fading Marx-Leninism have been the “ideological basis” [nềnn tânãng tür tuńŋ] and “the guidelines for conduct” [kim chĩ nim cho hành dông] for party members. As he has been an “immortal” figure in the Vietnamese political theater, people internalize……..this is left incomplete...

The national history written under the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh is seen as an instrument to instill a revolutionary spirit into the people. With its political importance and role for ideological discipline of the party, historians are highly valued and socially respected. As a researcher of VNUSSH at Hà Nội recalled, the history department of the

14 Resolution (June 27, 1991),"Cương lĩnh xây dựng đất nước trong thời kỳ quá độ lên chủ nghĩa xã hội"
national university had been one of the largest and the most competitive departments, and many alumni of the department have served as party cadre. Hoa, a researcher at the Institute of History and also an alumna of the department, shared her family story with me. Her parents were good at literature but they both decided to transfer to the department of history in order to ensure a job placement after graduation. She explained, especially after 1975 and the end of the Vietnam War, students of the history department never worried about unemployment as the party and state needed them urgently for building the SRV. Yet, it seems that her parents’ story would not be the case for her generation.

In 2007, Vietnam finally acquired the full membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The government and the newspapers declared that the country had finally entered the new era, “the era of the global integration.” After the end of the Cold War, Vietnam cautiously moved toward the outside world. In 1995, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and normalized its diplomatic relationship with the U.S.\textsuperscript{15} While the political normalization with the major Cold War enemies of the socialist bloc in 1995 could be seen as a moment to end the Cold War

\textsuperscript{15} The year of 1995 was a particularly important moment to the CPVN. Võ Văn Kiệt, the prime minister of the SRV, sent a controversial letter, which generated a national security scandal as the letter was released to foreign media, to the central committee of the party, and the power struggle over the reformation of the country inside of the CPVN was extremely aggravates. See, Elliot (2012:166-172) about the struggle.
era, the accession to the WTO implies that the capitalist economy is constituted as “the base” for the “superstructural” SRV. From the view of the traditional dichotomy of social formation in Marx-Leninism cannot construe the contemporary SRV but the ideological assertion such as “creatively applied Marx-Leninism” on “the new situation” legitimatized the marriage between contradictory political economies.

In the midst of blooming expectations for the era of the global integration, a Vietnamese newspaper (Tiên Phong, August 4, 2007) published an article, titled “‘Catastrophe’ the test score of the subject of History.” According to the article, 21% of the university applicants had completely failed with 0 point, and only 1.3% of applicants got higher than 5 out of 10 points in a university entrance exam in Đà Nẵng. It could be an isolated event but it turned out to be a continuous and nationwide trend. In 2011, the result of the entrance exam for the People’s Police University, one of the most controlled universities by the CPVN, revealed that 50% of the applicants received below 2 out of 10 points. As many worried, this particular case raised a serious question whether someone directly expected to serve for the people, the party and state could be reliable without having a certain degree of knowledge about national history.

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16 In a strict sense, the end of the Cold War is limited to economic and diplomatic relations in many cases. For example, the U.S. still keeps its arms embargo to Vietnam almost 20 years after the diplomatic normalization. The political suspicion still play out along with the frontline of the Cold War.


When I expressed my concern over the report and the vital on-line debate related to it, a young businessman in Lang Son cynically responded: “Never mind. They will just study for making money [ăn tiền] off the people. History? Who cares?” While his response seemed to criticize a banality of the fantasized money-making economy and the problem of corruption in Vietnam, it still alluded that “knowing history” is related to the morality of a citizen. The phenomena of the exclusively low performance in the national history examinations revealed an important shift in sociality and morality in Vietnam.

The trend of intense concern directly grew out of the deteriorating history education in Vietnam’s high schools. Many schools throughout the country did not have a single student who wanted to take the history exam for graduation. Under the current high school graduation system, which is strictly controlled by the government, the history test is selective not mandatory. This means students could receive the high school diploma without any assessment of their knowledge about national history. Moreover, in the university entrance exam, students who do not apply for a college of humanities and social sciences or a university under the direct control of a specific ministry, i.e. the people’s police university, do not need to take the history exam,

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20 The people’s police university is not under the ministry of education but directly governed by Bộ Công An [the ministry of public security].
known as Khởi C\textsuperscript{21}. Thus, for students, learning national history can be seen as having no priority directly attached to their future in a rapidly growing the capital and tech oriented market. The state-controlled evaluation system actually allows students to avoid learning the national history. During the era of the centralized planned economy, only a few students took that way\textsuperscript{22} but recently more and more students have begun to take advantage of the system.

In response to the growing public concern over history education, Phạm Vũ Luận, the Minister of the Education and Training, said the situation would be “vấn đề của thời đại” [a problem of an era] and “điều bình thường” [a general condition].\textsuperscript{23} In his view, the young generations in the new era are supposed to study other subjects than history such as English and information technology due to “the revolution in sciences of technology,” “(social) transformations” and “demands of labor market.”\textsuperscript{24} Considering the government controlled education system, the minister’s response not only excused the growing public criticism over the ministry but also reflects the shifting perspective of the CPVN on how best to discipline the population.

\textsuperscript{21} In the current Vietnamese university entrance exam (2014), there are 4 Khởi (set) exams: A set-Math, Physics and Chemistry (A1 set -English), B set-Math, Chemistry and Biology; C set-Literature, History and Geography; D set-Literature, Math and a foreign language among English, Russian, French, Chinese, German and Japanese. History and geography are only included in the C set exam which is designated for certain colleges of humanities and social sciences.

\textsuperscript{22} Comparing to the PRC, so-called “technocrats” have not gain any viable positions in the CPVN.


To make new citizens, Hồ Chí Minh and the revolutionaries of his time were occupied with the political calculation that asserted that enlightening the people through the national and revolutionary history would constitute the sovereignty of the nation-state. After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the notorious “reeducation camp” for contaminated citizens with the capitalist ideology was informed by the same political calculation. In the era of the national integration, history was appropriated as an instrument for the unity of the nation and the loyalty to the party. In the era of the global integration of the SRV, the Vietnamese government recognized the urgency of coming up with a new calculation to discipline its population, essentially to adopt the techniques of their capitalist counterparts to naturalize the fluctuating labor market through competition and shifting technologies.

On our Friday night dinner at his place in 2009, Đòng, a local official of the People’s Committee of Lạng Sơn recalled his unfortunate past. He said, he was competitively selected to have an opportunity to study abroad in the former Soviet Union in 1991 as an excellent student [sinh viên xuất sắc] and a young member of the CPVN. Yet, only a couple of months later since he started his new life in the USSR, he had to return to Vietnam due to the immanent political dissolution of the USSR. The repatriation order was delivered to him. Although he could take a chance and remain in the USSR, he decided, after much thought, to return to Vietnam. As a promising young member of the CPVN, he thought his life in Vietnam would be better and secure. In the
midst of the collapsing of the international socialist countries, his calculation was based on the assumption of the lasting stability of the state bureaucracy of the SRV. Max Weber famously characterized the bureaucracy of the modern state that “the relative optimism for the success and maintenance of a rigorous mechanization of the bureaucratic apparatus is offered by an assured salary connected with the opportunity of a career that is not dependent upon mere accident and arbitrariness (Weber 1968:968).” For Đồng, while witnessing the shifting world and the uncertainty of the future, he assumed his party membership would guarantee a stable career at a government office in Vietnam.

When he returned, he realized that his career path would take an unexpected direction. The party assigned him to a government office at a mountainous northern border province, Lạng Sơn. Here, in the border zone of North Vietnam, his Russian skills and experience were almost completely useless. “Things changed so fast. When I was a student in the 1980s, I studied literature, history and Russian very hard to be recognized by the party and the state. Now, even my son doesn’t care for them at all… I’ve served the party and the country more than 25 years but I have not been promoted hardly at all in the committee. As you’ve seen, I am just a clerk for the head of the office. This house is all I’ve got and I still have enormous debt to pay off. I often think that the greatest disadvantages in my career was that I was in the Soviet Union and witnessed the fall of the biggest socialist country. Ironically that would be the reason the party
offered me a position here as I don’t have any knowledge or personal relationship to China. My life somewhat got stuck either way,” he told me with a hollow smile.

The students in the quiz show, “A way to the Palace of Olympia,” might be competing with each other in a new regime of assessment, while Đông confronted something quite different. The priority in disciplining the emergent citizen of Vietnam has shifted in the era of the global integration, yet the socialist bureaucracy of the SRV, supported by a complicated political web with the party, the Fatherland front, the People’s council and other political organs has been very reluctant to changed. Đông, although he seemed to be a bit disappointed with the current situation, could feel secure with his position though he worried about his son’s future, who was about to graduate from high school at that time.

The current situation cannot be simply understood as the decline of the Vietnamese nationalism initiated by the deterioration of nationalist history education. The history education, once one of the most important ideological apparatuses for “đào tạo [training]” and “cải tạo [reeducation],” is now combined with the public desire for

\[\text{\footnotesize 25 The dismantlement of Hội đồng nhân dân [the People’s Council], a grassroots state organ, was discussed in the national assembly in 2008. While it generated a political debate over whether it could harm the democracy of low-level administrative communities, the national assembly decided to initiate demonstration operations in selected local districts in 2009. It is not clear whether the people’s council will be completely dismantled or not as many local party members disagree on the plan. If it happens, it would be a major change in the constitutional power structure of the SRV. The dismantlement of the People’s council presumably brings about the elimination of the socialist democracy, known as “soviet.”}\]
Vietnam slips into the global world order, its political structure has been very reluctant to be reformed. The Marxist concept of “relative autonomy” between the economic base and the superstructure is yet in session of experiment. The matter of the national history might be a temporal and relative problem in the transition to the era of the global integration. The public anxiety over the history education actually reinstates and refreshes the public awareness on the importance of the national history through problematization of the phenomena. The CPVN does not lose its grip on the monopolized authorship of the national history through its notorious censorship. In this manner, Vietnamese historians are still asked to “respond to the expectations of the party.”

Recently, the growing anti-Chinese sentiment, especially among young generations, have served timely for regenerating the nationalism without a strict discipline of teaching national history. The Internet and social media, especially the online forums and platforms such as Facebook, instigate young generations to be patriotic. According to Hoa, although the national history education currently matters with unpopularity among high school students, many university students are willing to

26 The phrase, “Dân giàu, nước mạnh, xã hội công bằng, dân chủ, văn minh” [Prosperous People, Powerful Country, Fair Society, Civilization] was introduced to the doctrine of the 10th Congress of the CPVN in 1991. See, the official explanation of the phrase is available on Tập Chí Công Sản, July 6, 2007.

27 In 2013, when the SRV prepared the new constitution, many people and law makers asserted that the SRV should revise its name of the country and adopt a multiparty system. However, both requests were rejected.

28 The speech of the President of Vietnam, Nguyễn Tân Sáng, at the 45 year anniversary of the Vietnamese Association of Historical Science on Oct. 22, 2011.
major in the history of the CPVN as they could still easily find a job at schools or some propaganda branches of the party and the state. She added, those opportunities are hardly unpopular among students in this uncertain era.
Constructing the past from the new perspective

The old man watching the quiz show was Trường Thanh, a retired principle of a school in Đông Mô town [thị trấn]²⁹, Chi Lăng district and the former chairman of the Association of Literature and Arts in Lạng Sơn. He was not a native of Lạng Sơn, as many local intellectuals were. He originally came from Đông Anh, Hà Nội. As soon as graduating from a teacher’s college, he was following the policy of the CPVN, the nationwide campaign for Xoá nạn Mù Chữ [the eradication of illiteracy]. The young graduate was assigned to a school in mountainous Lạng Sơn province for teaching “Tiếng Bác Hồ,” literally the language of “Uncle Hồ Chí Minh.”³⁰ His passion for the students and the cheering squad of teachers on the quiz show was derived from his past career. “Now, the young generations have an auspicious environment for studying that I never had,” he smiled. As a teacher going through the hard time with local students and their families in a war-torn border town, he seemed to maintain pride and the responsibility he had at that time in his life.

Trường Thanh became a renowned local intellectual after his book, Kỳ Tích Chi Lăng [the Miracle of Chi Lăng] (1984 [1980]) was published. While working as a teacher

²⁹ Đông Mô is located in the south of Lạng Sơn province, approximately 60 km (37 miles) from the Vietnam-China border and just 119 km (74 miles) from the capital city, Hà Nội.

³⁰ Although decades-long efforts to promote literacy among ethnic minorities and people living in the northern Vietnam, Lạng Sơn province is yet struggling for the high illiteracy rate and a rapid growing number of poor literacy.
for fighting against illiteracy, he should travel around towns and villages for encouraging school attendances. With the benefit of the close contacts he had with local society, he collected the historical folktales and anecdotes embedded in the mountains, forests and temples around the district. He complied a collection of the local historiographies, poems and tales. Among them, he highlighted a folktale about the death of an admiral, Liễu Thăng, of the Ming Dynasty of China, whose decapitated head and bodily remains were believed to be turned into an oddly-shaped stone peak. The stone peak, which once served as a symbol of the national pride of defeating foreign invaders. But, Trường Thanh delivered a story in the book about an incident during the War of National Salvation Against the Americans [Chiến Tranh Chống Mỹ Cứu Nước].

“người bạn lớn” [the big friend], meaning in a local sense of sarcasm the People’s Liberation Army of China (PLA), irrationally destroyed it for building an air defense base (T.Nguyễn 1984 [1980] :128-129). The construction plan was soon later abandoned as it turned out to be useless. The plan found another location since the location was not suitable enough for the air defense. In the local people’s point of view on the incident,

31 The Vietnam War known as in North Vietnam.
32 The soldiers of the PLA were secretly sent to the northern Vietnam for helping the air defense against US aircrafts during the Vietnam War. Many of them were stationed in Lạng Sơn province to protect the supply route between Vietnam and China. The military and economic assistance from China was undeniably important to Vietnam, also to the local people in Lạng Sơn, during the Vietnam War. In that regard, “bạn lớn” generally implies a friend with power who is sometimes respectable, although people reluctantly admit.
“người bán lón” just mindlessly destroyed this historical symbol of national pride and local heritage without any efforts to appreciate local history.

The folktale about the stone peak of Liễu Thằng [Liễu Thằng Thạch] is based on the history of the battle of Chi Lăng [Trận Chi Lăng] in 1427. The army of the Lam Sơn Uprising [Khởi nghĩa Lam Sơn] defeated the formidable army of the Ming dynasty at the Chi Lang Pass [Âì Chi Lăng]. With such an honorable victory, Đại Việt [The Great Viet] restored its independence from the Ming. As Trường Thanh’s book recalled the historical victory against China with the anecdote about the destruction of the stone peak, it stimulated the nationalist sentiments of his readers. Although he did not directly mention the war occurring in Lạng Sơn a year ago, the anecdote about Liễu Thằng Thạch has been interpreted as evidence for connecting a salient image of China from the fifteenth century arrogant Ming “invaders” [xâm lược] to the socialist “big friends” [bạn lốn] to the contemporary “gang of expansionists” [bọn bành trướng].

While the book was about a small border town, it has been impressively successful.33 Yet, historiographies about the pre-revolutionary past in Vietnam has been a domain of ideological and heated political debates, particularly among

33 The book was reprinted in 1982, 1984 and 2002 by Thanh Niên, also by Sở Văn Hóa Thông tin Lạng Sơn in 1987, in 1993 by Thanh Hóa, in 1995 by Văn học. As a book about a small border town, it has a pretty impressive circulation history through publishers and times in Việt Nam.
“postcolonial” historians who are dedicated to harness Marx-Leninist historical materialism to write new history [lịch sử mới]. As Pelley (2002) has elaborated in his study of the predicaments of postcolonial historians in Vietnam, writing a historiography for the newly-established socialist country was a highly challenging task.

Trần Huy Liệu, the director of the Institute of History, declared “History is a combative work, always active…they must not only write history but contribute to its construction”\(^3\). The construction of new history implies the construction of a revised past through the founding of a new historical subject—the people.

To ensure the combative spirit, there were primarily two important principles for the new history of Vietnam. First, the new history should be distanced from the colonial and elite historiographies which were greatly under influence either by the Confucian tradition of China or the French colonial perspective. The authorship of the national history should belong to the nation rather than the views of outsiders. However, the historical resources about the pre-revolutionary past were very limited if they ostracized the works of feudal elite historians and documents produced by the French colonizers during the colonial period. Second, the anti-colonialism and socialist revolution should

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\(^3\) The term, if not mentioned specifically, has two fold meaning: one is historians “after the colonial period” which generally implies “after the August Revolution” in the Vietnamese context; the other is “official” historians who work for the government controlled institutes of history since 1950s.

\(^4\) In 1950s, North Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV), accelerates the new history project (See, Pelley, 2002: 20-28).

also be legitimized and contextualized in the general course of the historical progress, the so-called Stalinist five-stage model of history, in which the dynamics of class struggle takes a crucial role. The evidences and resources of class struggle in Vietnam, however, are not well recorded since many revolutionaries were in exile and illiteracy was a common problem for “the oppressed people.”

Under the limited condition for writing new historiographies, postcolonial historians introduced “the perspective of new history” [quận điểm sử học mới]. According to the perspective, new historiographies should focus on the livelihood, folktales, and everyday rituals of the people and underscore the value of the oral traditions of the local people. The legacy of feudal historiographies and colonial resources should also be evaluated and reinterpreted through the critical eyes of Marx-Leninism and the postcolonial framework. The bifurcated path for writing new history was aimed for founding the new subject of historiography with an ideological appropriation of history. The work of Trường Thanh could also be characterized with employing such a new perspective. In his book, stories were based on oral histories [tương truyền] and what the local elderly people spoke, “các cụ kể lại,” about history. Those stories were generally orally transmitted stories of heroic warfare, mostly in the feudal era of the independence of Vietnam. They were apparently appropriated to

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37 The Stalinist five-stage model of historical development is from primitive communism to slavery, from slavery to feudalism, from feudalism to capitalism, and lastly from capitalism to communism. Upon Marx’s acknowledgement of exceptions for the Asiatic model of production, some Vietnamese historians accepted the absence, or very short period, of the slavery stage due to the invasion of the Han dynasty of China.
promote the loyalty to the party\textsuperscript{38} and to stimulate the patriotism and forged compatriot-
ism particularly with ethnic Tày - Nùng, the majority of the local people.

\textsuperscript{38} In the very first chapter about the mountain Phoenix (p.3), he passionately stated his loyalty to the party and the dear fatherland Vietnam, like a phoenix.
Postcolonial historians defined the meaning of the August Revolution (1945) as a socialist revolution by the peasants which abolished feudalism and colonialism in Vietnam. While the liberation from French colonialism was an obvious task in the public’s eyes, the matter of anti-feudalism remained as a controversial political issue since the nationalist revolutionaries in Vietnam preferred to restore the Nguyễn dynasty with the support of France. The political landscape in the DRV was unstable even after the French army was defeated in Điện Biên Phủ and the Geneva Conference was held in 1954. Although the Geneva Conference delivered the Accords that brought a ceasefire between the DRV and France and the departure of the French colonial army in Vietnam, it also resulted in the division of the North and the South at the 17th parallel. The nationalist group rapidly formed a government in the South. The DRV would then compete with the South for the unification of the country. Some of the nationalist factions in the Việt Minh were also dissatisfied with the Accords, and challenged the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh.39

39 Duiker (2000) describes the political situation in Hà Nội through the biography of Hồ Chí Minh after the August Revolution with the rich information.
In the midst of this political uncertainty, Hồ Chí Minh made an unprecedented political move. A month before the DRV reinhabitated Hà Nội, he paid an official visit to Đền Hùng [the temple of King Hùng], and praised the soldiers, who were about to approach Hà Nội, with the nationalist sense of duty. At Đền Hùng, located in Phú Thọ province, the northwest of Hà Nội, on September 19, 1954, Hồ Chí Minh made an “immortal” [bất hủ] speech: 40 “Các Vua Hùng đã có công dựng nước, Bác cháu ta phải cùng nhau giữ lấy nước” [Every Hùng King made efforts to establish the country, our uncles and nephews must preserve the country together] (My emphasis). In the message of the speech, the primordial state of the DRV is traced back to the prehistoric period and the present duty for the people is to preserve the country. The speech also insists upon the moral respect for the founders of the country. As the DRV tried to establish a new country of Vietnam, the revolutionaries who sacrificed their lives should also be commemorated by their compatriots. This speech has officially been reiterated to the present day as a honorable teaching of Hồ Chí Minh about the origin, unity and responsibility of the nation.

The era of Vua Hùng [King Hùng], the mythological king of the ancient Hồng Bàng period (~ 257 BC), is recognized by postcolonial historians as the primitive communism stage of Vietnam and the primordial state of the Vietnamese nation.

40 Nhân Dân (Sep.18, 2009), “Ghi sâu lời Bác dặn: Các Vua Hùng đã có công dựng nước, Bác cháu ta phải cùng nhau giữ lấy nước”; See also, VietnamNet, Sep. 22, 2014, “Cuộc gặp gỡ đặc biệt và câu nói bất hủ của Bác Hồ” by Trung tướng Phạm Hồng Cu, the former vice director of the head office of politics and the former vice political commissioner of the 36th regiment of the Division 3.
However, the speech of Hồ Chí Minh which officially endorsed the mythological king and state as “tổ tiên chúng ta” [our ancestors] not only excluded the history of ethnic minorities but also demonstrated the succession of the Nguyễn dynasty. The feudal kingdom of the Nguyễn, Khải Định, firstly enacted the ritual for King Hùng in 1917 and King Bảo Đại, dethroned by Hồ Chí Minh, established the memorial stone at the temple in 1940. Hồ Chí Minh’s visit to the temple and remark on Kinh Hùng asserted that he and his party should be the legitimate decendents of the nation, not the existing feudal king. Two years later, Trần Huy Liệu, a leading figure of the postcolonial historians, also reiterated, “Without the Hùng Kings…there would have been…no DRV.” The political assertion on the mythological kingdom not only situated the DRV in the mythical genealogy of the nation but also symbolically empowered the Vietnamese nationalism over Marx-Leninism as it vowed it allegiance to historical mysticism rather than to “scientific” historical materialism.

The political mysticism about the Hung Kingdom as part of the nationalist history, launched a kind of time travel back to the pristine, mythological but supposedly authentic beginning of the nation’s history. In fact, for postcolonial historians, the Sino-centric view of Vietnam’s past, which neglected the existence of the authentic prehistoric...
state of Vietnam, could not be acceptable (Pelley 2002: 148-149). Distancing itself from the Han Chinese historiographies and the Western colonial archeology, the postcolonial desire to locate the antiquity of Vietnam even claimed that the history of Vietnam antedated the history of China. The older, venerable and authentic narratives about the origin of the nation could effectively convince people to respect the national history in the same way they should respect the elderly. The mysticism infused in the origin of the nation-state effectively sanctified the presence of the nation-being.

The proliferation of the mystified nationalism was accelerated as the SRV renamed streets throughout the country as part of the unification policy in 1976. Vietnamese people could now experience the historical importance of the Hung Kingdom in everyday life. The name of Hùng Vương [King Hung] was granted to major boulevards in townships nationwide. For instance, in Hà Nội, King Hung Boulevard passes the Hồ Chí Minh Mausoleum, the Headquarter of the CPVN, and the president’s residence, and it is directly connected to Thanh Niên [the Young Generation] street. Also in Lạng Sơn, King Hung Boulevard is the entry path to the city center from the national road number one as well as the widest boulevard which passes the local government and party head quarter buildings. Vietnamese people today cannot miss the name of the mythological king that guides them to the present political order.

As the construction of the national past was a political project, its final ambition was literally expressed in the constitution of the nation. The preamble of the constitution
of Vietnam, as a crucial form of political literature that affirms the sovereignty of the
nation-state, reveals how the past of the Vietnamese state has been situated in historicity.
From its inception, the constitution of the DRV (1946) after the August Revolution did
not adopt the historical continuity from a specific historical period. In the preamble, it
was just stated that “the August Revolution won back the sovereignty for the
country…After 80 years of struggle, the Vietnamese nation has freed itself from the
colonialist yoke and at the same time abolished the feudal regime. The Fatherland has
entered a new stage of its history” (My emphasis. Thế Giới 2003:11). The preamble of
the 1946 constitution underlined a historical rupture rather than succession or continuity
of the past. While the colonial past was assumed to be the abnormal state of the nation,
the revolution was interpreted as recuperating the “sovereignty for the country.” In
addition, although the abolition of feudalism was declared, “the country” was not
specifically redefined. Yet, the 1959 constitution, the crafted and comprehensive version
of the constitution of the DRV, first introduced a sense of the historical continuum in
which the Vietnamese nation was situated. In the preamble, it stated that “The
Vietnamese people, throughout their thousand years of history, have been an
industrious working people who have struggled unremittingly and heroically to build
their country and to defend the independence of their Fatherland” (My emphasis; ibid.
35). While the phrase “thousand years of history” embellished a certain immortal sense
to the nation, the preamble also specified the leadership in new history: the party. The
establishment of the ICP in 1930 was clearly recorded as the emergent form of the new leadership for the nation. It asserted that with the new leadership, the revolution “advanced into a new stage…For the first time in their history, the Vietnamese people had founded an independent and democratic Vietnam” (My emphasis; ibid.). Thus, the revolution did not simply “win back sovereignty” but it rather achieved a completely new beginning in the history of the nation.

After the unification of the country, the new 1980 constitution was adopted with the lengthy preamble that highlighted the socialist orientation, referring to Marx-Leninism and “the militant solidarity and great and effective aid of the Soviet Union” (Thế Giới 2003:76) for the first time⁴³. The 1980 constitution of the SRV specified the duration of the past of the nation in a scientific fashion; the preamble began with the phrase, “Throughout their four-thousand year history” (My emphasis; ibid. 73). It also first specified “an advanced stage” of the national history as “the period of transition to socialism on a national scale.”⁴⁴ While the constitution resembled the 1977 constitution of the Soviet Union (V.Nguyen 1983:52), the “four-thousand year history” was, in effect, the constitutional adoption of the mythology on King Hung. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnam again revised its constitution “in responding to the requirements of the new situation and task” (Thế Giới 2003: 132). The 1992 constitution returned to the

⁴³ Marx-Leninism finally disappeared in the preamble of the 2013 constitution.
⁴⁴ This phrase was kept in the 1992 constitution but it was removed in the 2013 constitution.
historical sense of the 1959 constitution and replaced the previous phrase with

“Throughout their thousand years of history”⁴⁵ (My translation). The phrase continued to be used in the recent 2013 constitution.

It is essential to note that the efforts of postcolonial historians in tracing the origin of the nation for decades were in fact lessening its political importance as Vietnam was forced to integrate into the global order. The “scientific” ambition to construct the nation’s past intersected with the mythological view on the nation’s past. It certainly eased the anxiety of legitimizing the “given” sovereignty of the nation. “The new situation” which implied the fall of the world socialism however outdated the historical obsession with the antiquity of the past. The retreat to the phrase in the 1959 constitution was a sign of the acknowledgment of the shifting “postcolonial” historical perspective. As the global landscape was turbulent, the current state of the SRV should urgently be secured not only by the past but also adapted with the emergent global order. In this manner, the replacement of the phrase of the 1992 constitution, which was then maintained in the 2013 constitution, implied that Vietnam began to depart from the postcolonial and socialist view of the progressive model of historical materialism. The antiquity of the nation remains in a mystic sense, as long as it is appropriated for the venerable presence of the nation-state in the global present.

⁴⁵ The English translation, “In the course of their millenia-old history,” is available in Thế Giới (2003:131) but the original Vietnamese phrase, “trải qua mấy nghìn năm lịch sử” (throughout their thousand years of history), is the same phrase appeared in the 1959 constitution. The phrase is also kept in the 2013 constitution.
Lifting shadows

The historical sentiment on the longevity of a nation often idealizes the presence of the nation-being which has overcome numerous dangers and hardships. When Trương Thành establishes a link between the mountain Phoenix to the party and the nation (T.Nguyễn 1984 [1980]:3), he constructs the image of a nation as an indomitable mythical creature. Historical warfare, particularly independent wars against external powers, are generally understood as evidence of the “miraculous” [kỳ tích] capacity of the nation, which serves the construction of a sanctified image. As is widely known, the history of the SRV has been going through consecutive warfare, as seen in the numerous historiographies and memoirs on the anti-colonial war against France and the war of national salvation against the U.S. However, as I conducted archival research at the National library in Hà Nội, I found that the historiographies of warfare against feudal China, and Mongolia, had not been widely published, at least not before the 1979 Border War.

Writing historiographies about the invasion of feudal China, including Mongolia, seemed to be politically ignored, if it was not banned. The PRC was the first country in the world, which officially recognized the DRV as a legitimate country in 1950 (Tønnesson 2004:268). While the nationalist and South Vietnam criticized the DRV’s close relationship to China by reminding them of China’s feudal aggression and tyranny
over Vietnam, it was undeniably important for the DRV to receive support from the PRC. As the DRV took control over the north of the 17th parallel of Vietnam according to the Geneva Conference in 1954, Hồ Chí Minh with the delegation of the DRV made a state visit to the PRC, Mongolia and the Soviet Union in 1955. In Beijing, the friendly atmosphere between the DRV and the PRC was described as “Hà Nội - Beijing 3000 kilometers away” but “like one house [một nhà].” Hồ Chí Minh also expressed his friendship with Chinese that “this is a love with a kin from afar returning. Chinese cousins welcome us like brothers in a family [trong một nhà]” (My translation. Italics are in the original.Văn nghệ 1955:13). Considering the hyperbolic tendency of political rhetoric, the language directed toward the PRC is still remarkable. As Pelley (Pelley 2002:12) has also discussed, the Vietnamese expression for state, nhà nước, is derived from the word for “house” and “family” [nhà]. The word, “anh em” [brother], is frequently used to describe the relationship between Kinh, the majority of Vietnam, and other ethnic minorities in Vietnam. If we take the expression literally, China becomes an extended family of the Vietnamese. In this sense, the ill-fated historic relationship between two countries would be overlooked. Whenever the nationalist and South Vietnam politically accused the DRV of selling out the nation and country to the PRC,

46 As Tønnesson (2004) pointed out, the DRV also provided the military support to the PRC fighting against the Kuomintang at the border between Vietnam and China.
47 “Đây là mối tình đồng với những thân thích ở phương xa mới về. Bà con Trung Quốc đón tiếp chúng tôi như anh em trong một nhà.” (Italics are original. Nhà xuất bản văn nghệ, 1955:13)
48 “Nước” means water in Vietnamese. Thus, literally, “nhà nước” means a house where (drinkable) water is shared.
the DRV asserted that the PRC is a “New” China that marches together with the people of Vietnam to build socialism together. However, the political suspicion on the DRV’s relation to China only proliferated. In an interview conducted by French media on June, 1964, Hồ Chí Minh was directly asked whether Vietnam would fall into a province of the PRC as the DRV was isolated by the Western bloc and heavily depending on the PRC. Hồ Chí Minh answered peremptorily: “Jamais!” [Never] in French.

The shadow of China was densely cast over North Vietnam. The Cold War situation did not allow the DRV any other options. Westad (2010:5) has summarized that “the key concept for Cold War realists was “power,” and implicitly at least, “balance of power”—a global system in which the strategic arms race and formal or informal alliances had moved the Soviet-American relationship toward a high degree of stability and predictability.” However, for Vietnam, its Cold War experience was already under a “shifting” balance of power and only available at very low degree of stability and predictability. Along with the isolation from the U.S. supported Asian countries, Vietnam suffered with the Sino-Soviet conflict in the 1960s. “Big brothers in a family” fought each other and begun to separate. The situation in domestic politics was also unstable. The ambitious socialist campaign of the land reform (1953-1956) faced harsh

49 In 2011, a video clip of the interview was released on Youtube, which made uproarious receptions in the Vietnamese internet community.
resistance from the peasants and abruptly ended with the apology of the party. The livelihood of the DRV was deteriorating while South Vietnam enjoyed economic aid from the capitalist bloc of the world. Even inside of the party the ideological debates over the revisionist Marx-Leninism became acute. The DRV did not choose to be on the side of the socialist big brother, yet the unfavorable political landscape alerted the DRV to avoid being caught in “familial disputes.”

The relative indifference to the pre-revolutionary history, which was complicated with the invasion of the feudal Chinese kingdoms, began to shift as the War of National Salvation against the Americas ended. As many scholars (Chang 1982; Châu 2004; Porter 1980; Stern 1986; Ungar 1987; Woodside 1979) have discussed, the citizenship of the ethnic Chinese population in Vietnam and their rights turned out to be problematic as many ethnic Chinese, particularly living in South Vietnam, resisted the naturalization policy to register them as Vietnamese citizens. Rather, with the influence of the end of the Cultural Revolution and the PRC’s new governing strategy on overseas Chinese populations, some of them wanted to remain as the people of the PRC for securing their separate status from the SRV. An old ethnic Chinese man I interviewed in Lạng Sơn told me, however, that many ethnic Chinese calculated the situation as a matter of scale: If

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50 It could be compared to the North Korean case. North Korea was also put into the similar situation as the Sino-Soviet conflict occurred. As many scholars pointed out, the notorious Juche ideology, the “self-reliance” ideology, stemmed from dealing with the conflicts between two big socialist countries. For small brothers of socialism in Asia, nationalism was a reliable political apparatus in the midst of the shifting hegemony in the world socialism, which could avoid “suffering a side blow in a fight.”
one is forced to choose one of two socialist countries, it would be better to choose the
bigger one. Vietnam, in their views, was not attractive. The country had just ended a
brutal and deadly war and the future of the country was far from certain. It was
reported that some of the residential areas of the ethnic Chinese hung the flag of the
PRC instead of the SRV as a sign of rejection for the naturalization campaign.

Hồ Chí Minh, who had emphasized the SRV’s deep fraternity to Mao and
Chinese people, died in 1969. No other political figure in Vietnam could fulfill the role
of Hồ Chí Minh in relation to the PRC. As the SRV initiated the policy of the centralized
planned economy and collectivized the existing market economy, many ethnic Chinese,
who were dominant particularly in real estate markets and distribution links, started to
oppose the authorities. In addition to that, Vietnam’s growing tension against China-
backed Cambodia aggravated the troubled relationship. In September 20, 1977, the
application of Vietnam to the United Nations was finally approved. Yet the
development of the U.S.-China relations made Vietnam anxious about its future of
political and economic alliances. China handled the economic aid to Vietnam as a
disciplinary machine. For example, in May 1978, “Beijing announced the suspension of
21 complete-factory aid projects promised to Hanoi, in order to “divert funds and
materials to make working and living arrangement for the expelled Chinese…China

51 General Võ Nguyên Giáp was the most popular politician but Lê Duẩn, a notorious iron Stalinist Marxist in
the history of Vietnam, stepped up for Hồ Chí Minh’s position since the mid 1960s.
took a further step by suspending 51 similar aid projects as a response to the “continued expulsion” and “feverish ostracism” of Chinese in Vietnam. As a result, a total of some 1,000 Chinese technicians were recalled from Vietnam” (Chang 1982:213). The relationship between the two countries became increasingly hostile. In 1978, Vietnam urgently decided to join the economic umbrella of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) (Woodside 1979:384) comprised by the Soviet Union against the Organization for European Economic Co-Operation in Western Europe. It was Moscow, not Beijing, who took responsibility for economic and military assistance to Vietnam.53

In the midst of these deteriorating political relations, preemptive military confrontations broke out in the northern border of Vietnam. After the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia in 1978, military conflicts between Vietnam and China became frequent. Harsh political propaganda against each other was exchanged almost everyday through the state media. The war clouds cast over the northern border and, as the exodus of the ethnic Chinese ceaselessly carried on (Vietnam Courier 1978), people became increasingly alarmed about the imminent threat of war. Most people, however, expected the Border War would last for only a month. Vietnam hardly expressed its

52 By July, 1978, all Chinese aid programs to Vietnam were suspended.
53 Woodside (1979:409) noted, “Vietnam has usually exaggerated the inspirations it has derived from the U.S.S.R.; it has usually minimized the ones it has derived from China.”
intension to go to war with China. It kept tossing the responsibility for the hostile situation toward China.

As the war failed to end with mutual agreements, another war quickly followed: a war on the battlefront of history. For two years (1979-1980), with more than 22 researchers working collectively, the Institute of Literature published a book, *The Vietnamese literature on the roads to defeat the invasion of the feudal China,* which covered the period between the 10th century to the August Revolution in 1945 (Viện Văn Học 1981). As the project of a publication was initiated right after the Border War, the book was full of enraged descriptions about China: the “hegemonist” China is suffering from “the disease of short memory” on its frequent defeats by heroic Vietnamese in the feudal era; Chinese pretend to be “Marxist” and “socialist” but they are barbarous as they “sell human meat for making dumplings”; the act of the Chinese brutality during the Border War was comparable to “Hitler” (ibid. 9-29). The 675-page long book tried to disclose atrocities of the feudal Chinese kingdoms against peaceful and autonomous Vietnamese, while highlighting the indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese people. In 1984, an edited history book, “Glorious historical chapters of the Vietnamese nation fighting against the invasion of the feudal China” (Hồng and Hồng 1984) finally came out after “20 years of the intention”(6) of the chief editors.54 There were “many reasons” to prevent the

54 As the book covered the period from the prehistoric era to the 13th century, it complemented the previous book.
publication of the edition. The “biggest difficulty” was, as the editors acknowledged, lack of references. As discussed before, postcolonial historians tried to distance themselves from the Sino-centric historiographies but Vietnamese historiographies on the feudal era are relatively few. The efforts to document local tales and legends, such as Trương Thành’s work, had been encouraged but they were not sufficient. Despite the limitation, Vietnamese researchers attempted to unravel the hostile past of Vietnam-China relations. The aim was to meet the “expectations” of the party on the one hand, while on the other hand it was a method of reconciliation for the Border War by the heroism of the nation.

In some sense, to condemn China in the pre-revolutionary past with the nationalist sentiment was a safe bet for Vietnam. As a country newly unified by war, it was important for the SRV to promote the unity of the nation and stabilize the socialist political economy. If public hostility against the PRC went toward the shared entities such as socialism and friendship since the revolution, there would be possibility of a boomerang effect. To put the excavated feudal historiographies on the table could also divert the public eyes from the war-torn reality of the country. In the Cold War situation, although the PRC was reaching out to the West at the time, the SRV leaders felt the country should suppress its hostile reaction to the PRC: the war was seen at large as fraternal strife, and nothing more. Due to the 1979 Border War, the shadow of China
over Vietnam seemed to be momentarily dispersed. Still, Vietnam had to learn to survive without China until the Cold War order fell apart.
In May, 2009, I met Hà near her publishing house in Hà Nội. After finishing her master’s degree in the modern history of Vietnam, she decided to work at the world of the publishing business. At the meeting, she put a book on the table as a present for me, and explained is was newly published by her company. It was a Vietnamese version of a Korean novel with the new art work on the cover by a Vietnamese painter. She shyly said that it was her first product as a copy-editor. Our conversation smoothly slipped into the condition of the publishing industry in Vietnam. She explained that many publishing houses competed for purchasing the copyrights of foreign books as parents and students got more interested in reading foreign books than books of the local authors. I was reminded of the autobiography of the U.S. president Obama, displayed along with books about Hồ Chí Minh at the bookstore in the Museum of Hồ Chí Minh. She smiled and added, “The market of counterfeit goods and illegal duplications in Vietnam is still enormous. Yet the publishing houses expect that more strict control by the government over the market will be mandatory anytime soon in the near future under the pressure of the WTO agreement on the intellectual property.” As I asked about the current market for foreign translations, she told an interesting story: “It is the same thing just as the flooding of Chinese merchandise in Vietnam. The biggest market for purchasing copyrights, particularly of novels, is for Chinese books. They are popular
as Vietnamese readers feel familiar with Chinese culture. Moreover, the price is affordable and the procedure of obtaining copyright is relatively easy for Vietnamese publishing houses.” I was actually a bit surprised by her explanation as I have met many people who simply and directly express their hostility toward China. “Well, the public hostility towards China would be true but it is a different story in the market of the popular culture products like TV series, music and novels,” she continued. “Wait, recently a book of a famous Chinese writer has just come out on the market but many people are offended by the publication. Do you know? Mạc Ngôn? It’s the Vietnamese pronunciation of the author’s name though. Anyway, he is very famous and I like reading his books too. But the new book was about the Border War between Vietnam and China. As I heard from a friend of mine, the office of the publishing house has received numerous phone calls and complaints about the book from customers.” With the Vietnamese name, Mạc Ngôn, I could not recall who the author would be. She generously said, “Don’t worry, I will send you some information about the book tonight. Anyhow, it is the hottest issue now in the publishing industry and the on-line communities.”

Later that night, as Hà promised, I received the clue and found the last piece of my conversation with Hà. The author, Mạc Ngôn is an internationally recognized Chinese author, then a Nobel Laureate of Literature in 2012, Mo Yan. One of his books, Red Sorghum, became a movie directed by Zhang Yimou in 1987. In my memory, I
watched a VHS version of the film while I was a high school student around 1990 in South Korea. Mo Yan has been one of the most popular authors in Vietnam. Some 11 works of Mo Yan have been translated and many of them became bestsellers. Trần Đăng Khoa, a nationally renowned prodigy of literature and a vice-chairman of the Party Committee of Voice of Vietnam, wrote that he sincerely admired Mo Yan’s work which could be compared to Gabriel Garcia Marquez and he also admired the leaders of China as it achieved the strength in every field in a very short time.

Until his book, Ma Chiến Hữu [战友重逢; Reunion of Comrade-in-Arms] (Mạc Ngôn 2008), was translated to Vietnamese in 2008, Mo Yan was viewed in the Vietnamese literary scene as a renowned author of China. The book Ma Chiến Hữu, meaning “the Ghost of Comrade-in-Arms” in Vietnamese, however, generated

56 Voice of Vietnam (VOV) is the national radio broadcaster of the SRV. It was established in 1945 along with the August Revolution. The Declaration of Independence read by Hồ Chí Minh was broadcasted nationwide through VOV.
58 The English translation is not yet available. All English translations used here are my translation from the Vietnamese book. The original Chinese version was published in 2004. Mo Yan recorded the date of the completion of the book on the very last page of the book as “May, 1992.” He decided to write the book as he witnessed the normalization between China and Vietnam. Considering the completion signature of the author, the book came out in China after 12 years of the completion. As many Vietnamese suspected, Mo Yan’s close relationship to Deng Xiaoping might be a reason to the suspension of publishing. About the controversies over Mo Yan’s career from the West and the Chinese dissidents, see New York Times, October, 11, 2012, “After Fury Over 2010 Peace Prize, China Embraces Nobel Selection.”
controversies. The book,59 a relatively short novel with less than 200 pages, does not
directly mention Vietnam by taking expressions such as “the south of the border of
China,” “contiguous to Yunnan province,” or “a country on the southern side of the
border,” but it was clearly stated that the story is related to the war in 1979 (ibid., 13).
Mo Yan, at that time, served as a propaganda officer of the General Political Department
of the PLA.60 The book, thus, is also a memoir of that time.

The story begins with the reunion of two veterans of the PLA years after the war.
Two main characters, Triệu Kim - a narrator and an officer of the PLA and Tiên Anh
Hảo - a senior soldier during the war and a ghost, both were friends from a poor village
of the southern part of China. They joined the PLA together and were stationed in the
same unit. They were separated for 13 years as Tiên Anh Hảo, described as a smart and
courageous soldier, was killed by the artillery fire of the Peoples’ Army of Vietnam
(PAVN) during the war. As Triệu Kim traveled to a cemetery of the dead PLA soldiers in
Yunnan province of China, he met his old friend on the way. Then, they also reunited
with other comrades as if they all were alive. The border between the world of the dead
and the living is blurred in the book. They share comradeship and their past memories

59 I only consider the Vietnamese translation of the book. The translation issue, like Trang Hà, one of the
most popular female literary critics and translators in the contemporary male dominant world of the
Vietnam literary scene, raised some issues on her personal blog, is not a major concern for the social debate
about the book. The Vietnamese translator of the book in fact had been a dominant figure in translating Mo
Yan’s works to Vietnamese as shown in the interview I mentioned above.

60 Vietnamnet (March 15, 2013), “The Chinese think differently about the 1979 war”; Last accessed on
February 2, 2014
together. The story is filled with comradeship as the Mo Yan’s projection of the Chinese nationalism and it reveals the pity and horrors of the war.

Although it revisits horrors of the war dead, the main theme of the novel is not to give expression to a deep grudge or to seek revenge. Yet, some scenes in the book have been criticized as offending the Vietnamese. For example, at a ceremony for going into war, “soldiers write a pledge with their blood…political officer propose a toast together saying: Wish all comrades establish a lot of meritorious deeds, kill a lot of enemies for building the reputation of the military heroes” (Mạc Ngôn 2008:17). And, when Triệu Kim was drinking wine with his friend, Quách Kim Khô, his friend pours wine into Triệu Kim’s cup and says, “Brother! For the security of the Fatherland, happiness for the people, then let’s sweep the gangs of the intruders! Bottoms up!” (ibid., 137). The stories were part of the inside story of the PLA and China described by Mo Yan. Many readers of Vietnam considered that those anecdotes must be a vivid reflection of a deep-rooted antagonism of the Chinese people against Vietnam. Some renowned writers, such as Bảo Ninh and Đông La, gently defended the book and the author Mo Yan as antiwar, but their attempts hardly suppressed backlashes from both literary critics and public.
In addition to the story of the book, it seems that even Vietnamese defenders for Mo Yan agreed on a legible problem of the book. The publisher’s blurb and picture on the cover was widely criticized as incorrect description of the book. While valorizing the book as an example of anti-war literature, Đông La, an active literary critic in Hồ Chí Minh city, posted his own criticism on his personal blog (April 22, 2009)\textsuperscript{61}. In the blog

\textsuperscript{61} Last accessed on May, 2009.
post, the remark for the advertisement, “a way of the special glorification of the
heroism” [Một cách cá tung riêng về chủ nghĩa anh hùng], and the picture, which
apparently portraits the unit of the PLA along with tanks ready for killing enemies,
actually arouse the public’s antagonism toward the book (See, Figure ). One Border War
veteran of the PVN on a literary forum expressed his feeling about the cover picture as
“frightening” [kinh hoàng]. He wrote, he got the impression that the ghosts of the cruel
Chinese PLA would be ready to swarm into Vietnam once again given the chance. For
the word, “heroism” [chủ nghĩa anh hùng], perspectives were polarized. Literary critics
leaning to Mo Yan blamed the excessive promotion of the book as glorifying war, not as
an antiwar story, and criticized the editor of the publishing house for his abusive
intention. Other readers, however, claimed that the book actually promoted the heroism
of the Chinese nationalism by completely ignoring the Vietnamese victims of the war.

In the book, as the normalization of China and Vietnam begun, a political
commissioner announced to the PLA soldiers, “Comrades! ...About the recent matter of
opening gates of the border the people of these two countries say again the traditional
friendship, and some people feel...“the uselessness of our red blood ”...Comrades! To
think this way is very dangerous...We are soldiers. Our sacred mission is to obey orders.
If the superior authority tells us we should attack somewhere, we rush into that
place...In that time, we and they fired guns for having a conversation with each other.
We went through it, yet today we just acquire peace. People don’t have any hatred
toward each other... We scarified gloriously. Our past is glorious. Today is also glorious. The Future will also be glorious. Whoever dares to doubt our glory are all wrong, exceedingly and seriously wrong” (Mạc Ngôn 2008:171). Through the mouth of the political commissioner, Mo Yan might deliver his own message to his comrades and contemporaries.

Maurice Halbwacks (1992:150) has argued that certain periods in which heroism takes a role to make a moral stance victorious “left more pronounced memories behind them.” Heroism, often presented as a humanized representation of a historical event, tends to absorb other narratives of the past. The commissioner’s statement implies that the given glory of the soldiers of the PLA is unconditionally undeniable as long as they accept the presence with the amnesia of the past. In response to this heroism of nationalism, Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, a known poet from Tuyên Quang province, wrote on his blog (October 16, 2012) that Ma Chíền Hữu attempted to distort the history of the Border War. The PLA in fact invaded Vietnam, not just defended their country. However, in such a narrative, they celebrate themselves as heroes by morally nationalizing their war activities against Vietnam. Some bloggers against the defenders of the book posed the following question: How could the antiwar ideology be compatible with machoist military heroism of nationalism? The matter of heroism in

nationalism particularly matters between countries sharing a history of belligerence. A blogger raised another question: What will it happen if a Japanese author writes a similar story about the Japanese Imperial soldiers fighting against the PLA and the book is published in China?

The debates about Mã Chiến Hữu were not just derived from its literary narrative and the publisher’s market strategy of the book. The criticism about the publication of the book was also toward Vietnamese society itself. In the same year, when Mã Chiến Hữu (2008) came out in the Vietnamese book market, there was a controversial legal scandal in the world of the publishing industry. In June, 2008, the Đà Nẵng Publishing house released a collection of short novels, Rồng Đá [The Dragon-shaped Stone Sculpture] by Vũ Ngọc Tiến and Lê Mai. In the book, a short novel, Chù Minh Phú và Tôi [Chu Min Phu and I], includes the background of the Border War in Hà Giang province, a northern border province. The Ministry of Information and Communication accused the novel, including two others about the War of National Salvation against America, of containing “problems” [có vấn đề] and causing “harmful influence” [đồng chast] to the public. As a result, the publication and circulation of the book has been forbidden. In addition to that, the publishing house must pay a fine, stop

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63 This short novel is about the reunion of two comrades, Chú Minh Phú and the narrator, in Hà Giang province, a northern border province. They experienced the Border War together as they were in the same border scout unit of the PVN, mainly gathering information about the status of the PLA. The life of Chú Minh Phú, described as a Mông ethnic minority, which is on the Chinese side called as “Miao”), has been dramatically changed since the Border War in the reason. The narrator in the book traces the life story.
its business for three months and replace the chief and vice editors.64 It was right after
the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam65 released the Resolution (June 16,
2008) on The Continuation for Constructing and Developing Literature and Art in the
Period I (No. 23-NQIGW) which cited “respect and guarantee the rights of creation,
create the prosperous conditions for upholding the spirit of independence, inspire
creative resources of writers and artists” as the principle viewpoints. With the new
resolution, the Vietnamese literature communities expected to have more favorable
conditions by the resolution. However, they heard the news about the government’s
harsh censorship and the punishment on the publishing house instead. The book,66 of
which even many critics were hardly aware before the case reported, became a litmus
test for the future of the freedom of authorship and publication in Vietnam. Vũ Ngọc
Tiến, one of the authors of Rồng Đá, initially wrote an open letter to the publishing
house on November, 17, 2008, appealing against the government decision. In the open
letter,67 he raised a question about the authorship on the Border War: “They [Chinese]

64 This incident was internationally publicized by the International Publishers Association’s (IPA) report on
Vietnam in January, 2012. Since then, all reports about the incident on Vietnamese Newspapers have been
removed. For the report, see “Freedom to Publish in Vietnam: Between Kafka and the Thang Bom Logic” by
the IPA, January 2012.
65 It is the highest authority of the CPVN between the central committee plenums. The PCPVN practically
governs all policies of the government. The president, prime minister and chairman of the CPVN are
members of the PCPVN.
66 Although the book is illegalized, the entire book has been posted on the internet. As I reviewed the novel,
“Chủ Minh Phú và l” it does referring the Border War in Hà Giang province but as the background of the
67 “Thư ngỏ gửi Nxb Đà Nẵng của Vũ Ngọc Tiến” (http://www.viet-
studies.info/VuNgocTien_RongDa.htm); Last accessed on October 18, 2014.
can write but why do we, frightened by ourselves for disregarding the war, dare not write?” Bùi Minh Quốc, a poet from Đà Lạt, also wrote an open letter on December 13, 2008 and suggested a petition for allowing private reports and publishing houses. In his letter, the censorship of the book and the punishment on the publishing houses showed a violation of democracy and Hồ Chí Minh’s thought, which always emphasized democracy. He also pointed out that the constitution of Vietnam recognizes the basic human rights but laws on newspapers and publishers do not guarantee such rights.

The built environment for historiography in Vietnam has been not favorable for the production of critical historiography on the Border War. Bảo Ninh, an internationally renowned Vietnamese writer who once allegedly faced censorship for his famous, The Sorrow of War: A Novel (Bảo 1993), moaned that: “While Mạc Ngôn [Mo Yan] wrote (about the war) why have I and other writers done nothing? … Actually, I secretly planned to write at least a short novel but hesitated and flinched…Now, working as a writer holding the book of Mạc Ngôn in one hand, adding bitterness, I am

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68 Bảo Ninh denied the public allegation of the censorship on his book in 2008. He stated the book was only “not republished” (Thanh Niên, November, 3, 2008). However, when I met him at a party for the new year festival in Hà Nội, 2005, a lecturer of the teacher’s college in Hà Nội and close to Bảo Ninh, confirmed that his book had been harshly criticized especially by the PLA critics and not been allowed to be republished until Bảo Ninh admitted to revise some pages in the Vietnamese version. Actually, the lecturer asked me to borrow my English copy of the book for making a photocopy. She told me that the original version, published with the modified name-Thần Phận của Tình Yêu (1987, The Fate of Love), of the Sorrow of War is hard to find in Việt Nam. In 2005, The Sorrow of War (Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh), was republished in Vietnam.
truly mediocre. Bùi Minh Quốc pointed out, all publishing houses are under Party-State control. The SRV, directly after the unification in 1976, took over all private publishing houses in the country and collectivized the system of printing and distributing publications. They published the revolutionary and socialist historiographies about the August Revolution, the heroic wars against France and the U.S., nationalist folktales and the new ideological textbooks about Marx-Leninism and teaching of Hồ Chí Minh, etc. It often happened that the publishing house itself became the author of the book. The individual authors, expect prominent and powerful politicians, writers and professors, have easily been targeted for censorship and Party-State controlled newspapers.

While the constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) recognizes freedom of speech as the basic human rights since the 1980 constitution, the productions and publications of historiographical research remained strictly under the

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69 “Đọc “Ma Chiến Hữu” (Văn nghệ trẻ, June 6, 2009); Retrieved from the archived online post (http://chuyentronglang.com/index.php/bien-dong-cuu-binh-trung-quoc-va-ma-chien-huu.html); Last accessed on September 10, 2014

70 The authors of Rồng Đá were actually low profile; See, Nguyễn Đậu Bạc, “Nhận Xét Tạp Truyện Rồng Đá” on December 10, 2008 (http://phamxuannguyen.vnweblogs.com/post/1958/116454); Last accessed on September 10, 2014

71 As mentioned in the previous section, the constitution was greatly influence by the 1977 Soviet Constitution which adopted the basic human rights.
Party-State censorship. According to the 2012 publishing law (19/2012/QH13), the following regulations strongly support the monopoly in publishing activities by the Party-State.

Article 10 Contents and behaviors prohibited in publishing activities
1. Seriously prohibiting the publishing, printing and release of publications with the following contents:
b) Conducting propaganda and incitement war of aggression, causing hatred between nations and peoples; conducting incitement of violence; spreading reactionary ideology, obscence and depraved lifestyle, criminal acts, social evils, superstition and destruction of habits and customs;
e) Distorting historical truth, denying revolutionary achievements; offending nation, well-known persons, national heroes; failing to express or properly express sovereignty; slandering and insulting the reputation of the agency, organization and dignity of the individual.
2. It is strictly forbidden to perform the following acts:
a) Publishing without registration and publishing decision or publishing license;
e) Publishing, printing and releasing publications which have been suspended from release, recovering, confiscating, banning from circulation, destroying or illegally importing publications;

Article 17. Standards of positions of General Director (Director) and Chief Editor of publisher.
1. Standards for General Director (Director):
a) Being Vietnamese citizens residing in Vietnam, having good political and moral quality.
b) Having University level or higher;
c) Having at least 03 years performing work of editing, management of publishing or press, management at the line agency of publisher;
d) Other standards as prescribed by law.

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72 The revision of the law was made after the IPA report came out in January, 2012. However, it did not change major regulations.
3. For publishers organized and operating in the form of enterprises carrying on conditioned business owned by the State and having title as Chairman of the member board or Chairman of the company, the Chairman of the member board or Chairman of the company shall at the same time as General Director (Director) of the publisher.

Article 24. Content of works and materials to be assessed before reprinting.
The following works and materials whose contents have violating signs of provisions of Clause 1, Article 10 of this Law, the publisher must assess them before registering publishing for re-printing.
1. The works and materials were published before August Revolution of 1945; the works and materials were published from 1945 to 1954 in the temporarily occupied areas;
2. The works and materials were published from 1954 to April 30, 1975 in South Vietnam not licensed by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam
3. The works and materials are published abroad.

(Except from PUBLISHING LAW, No. 19/2012/QH13; English Translations are prepared by the Ministry of Information and Communication for reference only.)

Article 10 specifically concerns the question of historiography. The state censorship board reserves its authority to decide which publication is “causing hatred between nations and peoples,” “distorting historical truth, denying revolutionary achievements; offending nation, well known persons and national heroes” such as Hồ Chí Minh and other leaders of the SRV. Clause B sounds relatively reasonable but it attempts to evaluate the emotion. The clause, “Causing hatred between nations and peoples” in the case of historiographies about China is ambivalent, especially about the Border War. The government asserts that the historiographies about the Border War
could easily “cause hatred” against China. As a matter of fact, no authorship emerges from the Vietnamese writers. Some harsh critics on Ma Чиên Hưu actually referred to this clause and noted how the Vietnamese government allowed the translation, publication and circulation of the book, while Rồng Đá was penalized. The strict registration law which is also backed by the socialist legacy of bureaucracy empowered the authorities to exercise its power over the circuit of the production of historiographies.

In the Rồng Đá case, the police authorities inspected bookstores and searched one of the author’s homes. Bảo Ninh’s hesitation in writing a story about the Border War is understandable given these strict “taboos” in publishing activities.

The Article 17 actually prevents a private company’s activity in the realm of the publishing businesses. “Having good political and moral quality” is required for the general director. Since the owner of the company automatically takes the role as the general director, anyone who does not pass the inspection process of “good political and moral quality” cannot even establish a publishing house and can also be prosecuted. Although there is still a possibility to establish a private publishing company, the private companies usually prefer to have a joint venter with an existing government owned publishing house. In the Ma Чиên Hưu debates, some critics pointed out that the book was published by the government controlled Văn Học in association with the private company, Phương Nam. They pointed to the private company’s influence as

73 This clause was kept from the previous 2001 (supplemented) publishing law.
translating an improper Chinese book for making profits through false advertising. Due to this relatively conservative criticism, some concerned writers worried about the freedom of publication. Then, their stance fluctuated between nationalism and capitalism which may be expected to bring some changes to the limited built environment of historiographies. They insisted: it is better to be published than banned for the future of producing historiographies.

Article 24 seriously undermines the built environment for writing historiographies. The specific periodization of publications “before August Revolution of 1945,” “from 1945 to 1954,” and “from 1954 to April 30, 1975” add political sensitivities to the particular time period in the writing of national history. The specified locations of publication such as “the temporally occupied area,” “South Vietnam” and “abroad” partitions the territoriality of publication activities. Hoa, a researcher at the Institute of History, had her research project about the political economy of South Vietnam between 1964 and 1975 but she expressed to me difficulties in finding resources and citing references. She actually asked me to find some Korean and English documents about South Vietnam on several occasions. She said although she could luckily have Vietnamese publications in that period, she should “assess” them whether cited or not. In most cases, to avoid possible disputes over citing “improper” publications, she would better find foreign author’s works or foreign documents. The matter of citationality of publications for producing historiographies is still strictly
governed by the government. The periodization and partitions in the landscape of national historiographies generate certain avoidance effects and tendencies.

These regulations are not only empowering the monopolized publishing activities by the Party-State but also producing disciplinary effects for the writing of history in Vietnam. As many Vietnamese have complained, the absence of histories on the Border War is also constrained by the built environment of the Vietnamese national historiographies. As I experienced during my archival researches, some books and documents about the Border War published by the government offices and publishing houses before the normalization of Vietnam and China have been “banned from circulation and reproduction.” The public anxiety over Mo Yan’s Ma Chiên Hựu is about a “ghost writer” for the national historiographies. Although the law does not reflect the situation, the historiographies produced between 1978 and 1991 about China and writing historiographies about the Border War are certainly “assessed” by publishers as well as the government.74

2009 was the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Border War between Vietnam and China. Vietnam did not plan to organize any official commemoration about the war and war victims. Although the Party-State calculated that the commemoration would cause “hatred between nations,” that calculation actually keeps the old formula alive and

74 It should be noted that the historiographies on Cambodia issues are also under strict control of the government.
unsolved. The absence of the authorship about the national past is directly related to the matter of sovereignty for the nation-state. In the era of the integration to the global order, the ghost writers are haunting everywhere from anywhere.

The unintentional ghost writer Mo Yan perhaps predicted growing anxiety after peace arrives from the above, not from the below.

Hoa Trung Quang (a ghost of a soldier who is killed during the war) fills wine and says:

“Dear superiors, I cry in fact not because of missing my home. The family environments of superiors are also many times more difficult than mine...I cried because this newspaper...”

“What news?” Battalion commander La asks.

“You should read it!” Hoa Trung Quang brings the newspaper to La Nhị Hổ

...Based on a news from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the relationship between two countries, China and Vietnam has started its normalization.

I turned my head and asked again to Hoa Trung Quang

“Why does this news make you cry?”

“Political commissioner...the more I think, the more I feel I am dead. Actually it’s an injustice.”

“Hey, comrade, your thought has a problem there” La Nhị Hổ seriously speaks, “In this world, there is no friendship lasting forever. The relationship between a person and a person is like that. The relationship between this country and another country is also like that...”

...“I don’t understand” - Hoa Trung Quang shook his head and said.

“No understanding also is no problem. A work of the ambassador of the country is not necessarily worried by the people. Also, the dead man don’t need to care,” La Nhị Hổ said “But...”...
“Aren’t you tired?”

...  
This time...voices are boisterous, sounds of horses and donkeys resonate every which way.
We feel in our heart no calm. It’s like we will have some disaster coming.
(My Translation; Mac Ngôn 2008:56-57)
4. Ethnoscrapes in the Borderland

“Now, our country has independence. On behalf of compatriot, Kinh, thank you brothers and sisters.”

“…every ethnic minority achieved equality together with the nation of Vietnam. All are like brothers and sisters in a family and don’t need to be separated genealogically and linguistically any longer. In the past, every ethnic group was united to fight for independence, and now needs to unite all the more for the preservation of the foundation of independence…”

- Hồ Chí Minh (2000:110, 117)

*Looking like a Kinh*

In the summer of 2007, I made a “formal” visit to Lạng Sơn¹. Due to the presence of a complicated socialist bureaucracy and strict surveillance in the border area, I had to pass the security screening process for my long-term research in advance. I was told to prepare an official document [công văn] about my research plan and a letter of introduction [giấy giới thiệu], both of which should be issued and stamped by my sponsoring institution in Hà Nội. Before I left for Lạng Sơn with the secretary of the

¹ I will generally use Lang Son as a town.
institute, who was supposed to assure my background as a researcher to the local authorities in person, the director of the institute tried to ease my mind at a meeting. He said that as the institute had already participated in several government research projects about Lạng Sơn, the bureaucratic process of getting a research permit would be relatively easier than in other “conservative” northern provinces, which would still consider foreigners’ activities in their province as “nhạy cảm” [sensitive]². With his previous research experience in the Northern provinces, he saw Lạng Sơn as distinctive: “as you might already notice, it is difficult to discern ethnic minority people by their clothing in Lạng Sơn. It is not like Sa Pa, Lào Cai. People in the city and townships of Lạng Sơn province are mostly wearing like Kinh³.” My observation from a previous trip to Lạng Sơn was the same. In fact, I even frequently saw that some ethnic minorities parked motorbikes at the outskirts of Lạng Sơn and changed clothing on the street. A local explained that no one would want to be discriminated in a city where officers and store owners are predominantly Kinh people. Wearing clothing like Kinh is in this regard a kind of strategic “mimicry” (Bhabha 1994) in a game of ethnic politics.

The director’s observation rightly drew attention to the fact that the ethnic identity of people in Lạng Sơn is neither strictly preserved and displayed along ethnic lines nor vividly commodified for tourism as in many other northern border provinces.

² I discussed this issue in Chapter 2.
³ The majority of Vietnam but the demographically minority in Lạng Sơn province.
Although some ethnic groups living in suburban and mountainous areas continue to wear their traditional costumes, their appearance is provincialized by the actual ethnic population in Lạng Sơn. More than 70 percent of the provincial populations are actually ethnic Nùng-Tày.

This observation about the ethnoscape in Lạng Sơn also implied a twofold meaning: one is that the ethnic minorities in Lạng Sơn had been relatively modernized and civilized like Kinh, the majority group in Vietnam, so that they were capable of dealing with the long-term presence of a foreign researcher; the other is that they have already been exposed to the avid consumerism of the market economy. The intersection of the Party-State policy on ethnic minorities and the globalized order of capitalism, however, does not simply mean the homogenization of ethnic minorities as “typical” citizens or “universal” consumers. The ethnic minorities looking like Kinh could rather be seen as an example of “vertical encompassment” (Ferguson and Gupta 2002) by the Party-State, which stems from the legacy of the Cold War, including the effects of the Border war on northern ethnic minorities and the precariousness of everyday life.
Living as a Người Hoa [Ethnic Chinese]

When I first visited the house of Lưu near Phú Lộc IV new town in Lạng Sơn on a Sunday morning in 2009, he was busy treating patients. There was no visible sign to indicate that the place was a pharmacy of Chinese herbal medicine outside of the house but many people were sitting on a wood couch and waiting for their turn. Lưu is an unlicensed Chinese traditional medicine practitioner in Lạng Sơn. The local official who introduced me to him told me that he is also a regular patient of Lưu’s and he praised the treatment of Lưu as really effective. He added, “Thuốc Tây” [the Western medicine] could not compete with “Thuốc Bác” [Chinese medical herbs; literally, meaning “the medicine of the north] but these days only a couple of “Gia truyền” [handed down from ancestor] practitioners are still working in Lạng Sơn.

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4 The new town project, Phú Lộc IV located in Vĩnh Trại ward, Lạng Sơn, was implemented in 2006. The People’s Committee of Lạng Sơn and a real estate company from Hà Nội wanted to develop a modern town with a department-style shopping center, Chợ Lạng Sơn [Lạng Sơn market]. In 2008, I attended the opening ceremony and several promotional fairs at the market but after less than a year of operation, the market closed due to the lack of customers and the conflict in rents between the local owners and the real estate company. The expropriation of land for the project was also a political scandal in Lạng Sơn. By 2014, the Phú Lộc IV new town remained a ghost town with a closed market and several vacant modern villas, which symbolized a failure of the local development plan by the People’s committee.
In the house of Luu, two picture frames were placed on the walls: On the left wall, there was a picture of Hồ Chí Minh; a picture of a famous Chinese herbal practitioner, Lý Thời Trân [Li Shizhen, 李時珍] was hung on the alter in the center of the house (Figure 11). While the picture of Hồ Chí Minh seemed to vouch for his loyalty to Vietnam as an ethnic Chinese, the latter assured his credential as a Chinese medical practitioner. He explained that the way he set up the altar for Lý Thời Trân in traditional Chinese style. He proudly said, “The way in which Vietnamese prepare altars for their
ancestors is meaningless. They just mimic the tradition of Chinese people without any cultural knowledge.”

Having a strong sense of cultural superiority over the local Vietnamese, he is from a sixth generation Chinese migrant family coming from Fukien [Phúc Kiến] province in China. Although he was born in Lang Son and did not speak Chinese at all, he differentiated himself from the local Vietnamese. Like many ethnic Chinese in Lang Son at his age – over 80 years old now – he got married with a Chinese woman from his ancestral homeland, who still barely spoke Vietnamese. His family maintains an extended family system. His relatives are living next to his house.

According to a Vietnamese scholar, Châu Thị Hải (1992; 2004; 2006), the history of Chinese migration to Vietnam has been quite complicated for centuries. Due to the political complexity of the relationship between Vietnam and China, it has become difficult to distinguish between ethnic Chinese [Người Hoa] and overseas Chinese [Hoa Kiều] in Vietnam. It might make more sense to identify them according to whether they have acquired legal citizenship in Vietnam or not. Yet, even this would be problematic as many other ethnic minorities in the northern border provinces have also migrated from China.

The ethnic category of Hoa has been unstable in Vietnam (Châu 1992: 11-12). As a conceptual definition of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, Châu (2006: 39) suggested that ethnic Chinese should meet all of the following conditions: First, they should be Han
Chinese or sinicized ethnic minorities from the southern provinces of China who migrated to Vietnam; second, they must have given birth to a child and raised it in Vietnam; third, they should have acquired nationality and citizenship in Vietnam; fourth, they must still maintain the value of Chinese cultural traditions such as Chinese language\textsuperscript{5} and customs; lastly, they must themselves admit that they are ethnic Chinese [người Hoa]. This definition of ethnic Chinese is however also affected by the current civil code (No. 33/2005/QH11) in Vietnam. Article 28 of the civil code, which concerns the registration of ethnicity on the birth record, suggests that:

Article 28. The right to determine ethnicity

1. An individual upon his/her birth may have his/her ethnicity determined in accordance with the ethnicity of his/her biological mother and father. In cases where the biological father and mother belong to two different ethnicities, the ethnicity of the child shall be determined as the ethnicity of the father or the ethnicity of the mother in accordance with practices or in accordance with the agreement of the biological father and mother.
2. A person who has attained adulthood, the biological father and mother or guardian of a minor may request competent state agencies to re-determine his/her ethnicity in the following cases:
   A. To re-determine his/her ethnicity in accordance with the ethnicity of the biological father or mother, if the father and mother belong to two different ethnicities;
   B. To re-determine his/her ethnicity in accordance with the ethnicity of his/her biological father and/or mother in circumstances where he/she is the adopted child of a person belonging to a different ethnicity and has

\textsuperscript{5} As most ethnic Chinese in Vietnam came from the southern provinces of China, their language is mostly Cantonese not Mandarin.
had his/her ethnicity determined in accordance with the ethnicity of his/her adoptive father and/or mother due to the lack of identification of his/her biological father and/or mother.

3. Where the biological father or mother or the guardian of a minor requests the re-determination of the ethnicity of a minor who is fully fifteen years or older under the provisions of Clause 2 of this Article, the consent of such minor is required.  
(My emphasis; “Civil Code” No. 33/2005/QH11, passed on June 14, 2005)

Members of the older generation like Lưu could bring a woman from his ancestral homeland to Vietnam for a traditional arranged marriage. Since the Border War, however, the network of arranged marriages among ethnic Chinese has been defunct for over a decade as the border to China was closed. In addition, discrimination against ethnic Chinese has discouraged people from keeping their ethnic identity. Lưu, who used to serve as a representative of the ethnic Chinese community in the ward, acknowledged that the population of ethnic Chinese simply disappeared not only because of the Border War but also because people were “re-determining” (re-inventing) their ethnicity. He said, even among his generation of ethnic Chinese, those who could not afford the money for an arranged marriage with a Chinese woman often got married to a local woman. In such cases, an ethnic Chinese male often tried to keep his family genealogy in line with his ethnic identity. But as anti-Chinese sentiments grew in Vietnam, these men often tried to “refigure” the ethnic identity of their child according to the ethnicity of the mother.
The matter of ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam has been a crucial political issue between Vietnam and China, particularly since the Geneva Convention in 1954. While South Vietnam initiated a naturalization policy for ethnic Chinese communities, the DRV was “lenient” (Han 2009) about the citizenship of ethnic Chinese. Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam had contributed to the anti-colonial war by organizing Hội Liên Hiệp Ái Quốc Hoa Kiều [the Association of Patriotic Overseas Chinese] in Vietnam (Ungar 1987). Moreover, the role of ethnic Chinese communities in the northern border area was essential to the DRV fight against the French colonizer. After the DRV and the PRC succeeded in their socialist struggle, ethnic Chinese in the DRV were assured that they would enjoy rights as equal Vietnamese citizens. It was a symbol of friendship between two socialist countries. In the view of the DRV, the issue of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam was not a domestic but a transnational issue and it was not a matter between Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese communities but a negotiation between the DRV and the PRC (Han 2009:10). In this regard, the issue of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam was a political one rather than an ethnic one.

In 1955, when China announced at the Bandung Conference that it would no longer support dual citizenship, ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asian countries were made to decide whether they adopted local citizenship or remained Chinese. Although there

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6 The announcement of Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference in 1955 not only eased the anxiety of Southeast Asian Countries toward ethnic Chinese but also ensured the political influence of China in the region.
was an initial agreement between the two communist parties, which stated that Chinese nationals in North Vietnam would be administered by the CPVN, the formal agreement in 1957 decided that Vietnamese citizenship would be offered to ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam. In the agreement, Chinese people in Vietnam could voluntarily acquire Vietnamese citizenship after “sustained and patient persuasion and ideological education” (Evans 1990: 49). While the agreement insisted on a general socialist and nationalist education for ethnic Chinese, it also advocated the “voluntary” normalization of ethnic Chinese and did not specify the time line of the naturalization process. In fact, ethnic Chinese in North Vietnam had a privilege: they could enjoy exemption from the army during the American War (Han 2009:14). Thus, before the unification of Vietnam in 1975, there was no significant problem for ethnic Chinese in North Vietnam.

After the CPVN took over the South, the new regime in the South attempted to govern the population of South Vietnam. All southern residents were compelled to register as Vietnamese citizens. However, many ethnic Chinese in Sài Gòn, the former capital city of South Vietnam, resisted the registration. They hung the national flag of the People’s Republic of China and the portrait of Mao Zedong outside their houses and declared themselves Chinese nationals. It might have been a strategy of ethnic Chinese in the south to choose the winning side, that of the communist rulers. Nonetheless, after the southern provisional government was finally incorporated into the SRV, the
reluctance of Chinese to normalize their citizenship brought big problems. The SRV enacted the policies of collectivization and of a centralized distribution system. Since many Chinese people were engaged in business, the collectivization and the centralized economy threatened their livelihood. The loyalty of ethnic Chinese to the SRV was also questioned. Ethnic Chinese who kept Chinese nationality were dismissed from government offices and could not get the same amount of rations as Vietnamese received. At this time, the exodus of ethnic Chinese in the South sharply increased.

Although ethnic Chinese in the north had already dealt with socialist policies, the growing political tension between Vietnam and China over economic aid and over Cambodia, as discussed in Chapter 2, affected their status as residents. In 1977, the SRV began to secure the northern border provinces by expelling the undocumented Chinese population back to China (Porter 1980: 56). As Benoit (1981) recorded from a Chinese refugee from Vietnam, “In 1977 the authorities tried to get the Hoa living on the border to adopt Vietnamese citizenship. Those who denied were forced to choose between returning to China or moving inland away from the border.” Compared to the exodus of ethnic Chinese in the south, a relatively small number of ethnic Chinese in the north was affected but, as the authority of the SRV tightened its security measures over the Chinese

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7 As Phạm Đức Dương, the former director of the Institute of Southeast Asian studies in Vietnam, referenced Châu’s book (2006): “after the liberation of the South” in 1975 the institute initially conducted a research project about “the secret in making fortune of ethnic Chinese in the South.” The ethnic Chinese in the South, who had strong business networks and dominated markets unlike in the North, was problematized from the beginning of the SRV.
population and the border provinces, it represented an irrevocable breakdown of the socialist friendship between Vietnam and China.
War against the Chinese

Although many Chinese returned to China along the Friendship Border Path in Lạng Sơn, Lưu’s family was an exception. His grandfather was a successful Chinese medicine practitioner making a great fortune in Lạng Sơn and his father joined the anti-French war along with the Vietnamese revolutionaries. Although the wealth of his family made the family potentially politically vulnerable, their contribution to the Vietnamese revolution was well regarded. His family was praised as a family of the revolution [Gia đình của nhà cách mạng]. He was accepted by the CPVN. Lưu told me that his family owned the biggest house in Lạng Sơn and he himself worked for the People’s Committee of Lạng Sơn until the Border War broke out. He lamented, “You know, the war in 1979, that changed everything. If there was no war in 1979, I could be at least the vice chairman of the People’s Committee in Lạng Sơn.”

Lưu recalled the situation in Lạng Sơn before the war. In the middle of the escalating political tension between Vietnam and China, many local ethnic Chinese went back to China but some ethnic Chinese in fact decided to flee to a third country as they were more afraid of being arrested in China than in Vietnam. Some ethnic Chinese in Lạng Sơn followed the Kuomintang army which had taken it as their responsibility to disarm the Japanese in North Vietnam after the end of the Second World War. They were afraid of their relationship with the Kuomintang if the war broke out and the PLA
entered into Lạng Sơn. Lưu did not join any path of exodus since he was confident about the status of his family. He said, on the day of February 17, 1979, when the PLA began to invade Lạng Sơn, he was still working at the local government office collecting documents for emergency evacuation. He even said he might have been the last person to evacuate from the town across the river, Sông Kỹ Cùng, to the south of the province. Although the war ended a month later, his family could not come back to Lạng Sơn for eight years.

At the end of the war, Lạng Sơn was busy recovering but the overall atmosphere [Không khí] in the province was full of hostility toward China. The CPVN intensified its political propaganda against China and warned people about the secret operations of Chinese agents. As the PLA withdrew from towns and villages, public hostility focused on ethnic Chinese around them. Lưu said, “No Vietnamese wanted to help us. We were really desperate. I am a member of the CPVN but the comrades were afraid to get involved [sợ liên lụy] in my situation.” Ethnic Chinese people were discriminated against in the distribution of rations and were expelled from government offices. Under the collectivized and centralized economy, ethnic minorities fell into despair.

A derogatory term against ethnic Chinese, “Tàu Khựa” [filthy Chinese], has been widely and publicly used since then. Due to a long history of Chinese migration to Vietnam, Vietnamese people have used many appellations for ethnic Chinese: Hoa (華), Tàu, Ngô (吳), Khách and etc (Châu 2006). Tàu literally means a ship, and is most
commonly used in everyday conversation among Vietnamese. The origin of Tàu as a label for ethnic Chinese is still controversial but many Vietnamese generally assume that they began to use the term when a significant number of Chinese people took a ship that landed in Vietnam, thereby opening seaborne trade between Vietnam and China (ibid., 32-33). In general, Tàu does not imply anything derogatory but the Kinh, the people of the delta, differentiate themselves from the people of the sea. Khựa has a strong sense of contempt: dirty, filthy or without sanitation. In this regard, Tàu Khựa is a racist term when used against Chinese people. The term was not commonly used before the Border War, as many told me. Compared to other ethnic minorities and even to Kinh, ethnic Chinese in Vietnam were relatively well educated and had their own schools and newspapers until around 1976 (Chang 1982; Han 2009; Ungar 1987). Despite some exceptions, the majority of ethnic Chinese lived in cities and worked in business or offices. However, after the war, the livelihood of ethnic Chinese who continued to stay in Vietnam plunged lower than that of Vietnamese. Lưu said, “We couldn’t even beg for food around the village…Kinh people just insulted us.”

As the political and economic conditions for ethnic Chinese were deteriorating, Lưu and his family looked for a hideout in the forest. “Ethnic minorities in the forest

8 As Châu (2006) explained, there might be an etymological approach that would allow us to trace the origin of the term, Tàu, but most Vietnamese simply recall a ship when they use the term, Tàu.
9 Although it is a historical term, another term for ethnic Chinese, Khách generally means a guest in Vietnamese. Considering the relationship between Chú [a host] and Khách [a guest], Vietnamese also use the term Khách for differentiating themselves from ethnic Chinese.
were willing to help us,” he recalled. Ethnic Nùng people, the majority of those in Lang Son province and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China, had lived across the border. With the extended family relationships that stretched across the border, Nùng people had long been exposed to Chinese culture. Lưu pointed out, “Tày people were likely to ally with Kinh while Nùng in Lạng Sơn were closed to Hoa [ethnic Chinese].” Nùng people in Lạng Sơn generally resided in the mountains and forest. Lưu’s family was able to take advantage of them. Without the family registration document [hộ khẩu], Lưu’s family built a hut in the forest of a southern district of Lạng Sơn province, and disguised themselves as Nùng for a decade (Figure 12). While living in the forest with other ethnic minorities, his family survived by cultivating rice and repairing farming tools. He also began to study Chinese herbal medicine and to sell to neighbors. “Although those days were extremely difficult, one of the benefits to living in the forest for a decade was I could research medical herbs in the mountains and forest,” Lưu said calmly.

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10 Nùng people, Zhuang in China, are still about 40 percent of the population in Lạng Sơn. As the Quanxi Zhuang Autonomous Region was established in the PRC, Nùng people in Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng province, where Nùng people in Vietnam are concentrated, could live across the border without any serious political oppression on their citizenship before the Border war. They could take advantage of the socialist fraternity while they enjoyed their “indigeneity” in the region.

11 The second largest ethnic group in Lang Sơn after Nùng.

12 Pelly (2002) has also pointed out the historical tie between Kinh and Tày.
Figure 12: The family picture of Lưu taken before his family finally returned to Lạng Sơn from his hut in the forest. As seen in the picture, no one wore shoes. As Lưu remembered, a friend of his visited his hut with the news about being permitted to return to Lạng Sơn. Lưu wanted to take a picture of his family for memory’s sake using his friend’s camera before returning to Lạng Sơn. Lưu laminated the picture for preservation and memory. My picture of Lưu’s personal collection (July, 2009).
Returning to “Đổi mới” Lạng Sơn

In December 1986, the Sixth National Congress of the CPVN adopted Chính Sách Đổi Mới [the Renovation policy]. Đổi Mới meant modification of the socialist economy. It paved the road to the re-marketization of society in Lạng Sơn. As many ethnic Chinese were previously dominant in the retail business [buôn bán], the decision of the CPVN signaled the restoration of the livelihood of ethnic Chinese. Notable changes however were not implemented in Lạng Sơn until the PAVN withdrew from Cambodia, as established in the negotiation between Vietnam and China. When negotiations between Vietnam and China resumed, this brought a favorable condition for ethnic Chinese. Since China officially justified the Border War in 1979 with the reason that Chinese nationals in Vietnam were ill-treated, ethnic Chinese who suffered from the Border War became a sensitive matter during the negotiations. In Lạng Sơn, the local government allowed ethnic Chinese who had left their property behind to recover their rights. Although Vietnam did not acknowledge the “ill-treatment” of the ethnic Chinese population, the reinstatement of property rights, generally land rights, gave ethnic Chinese confidence to return to their old homes.

Luu also ended his life as a war refugee. When he returned to Lạng Sơn in 1989, the city slowly regained its old fame as a border town with boisterous markets. The ethnic Chinese community around the historic Kỳ Lừa market, which had governed
border trade in the past, almost entirely disappeared. Many abandoned houses of ethnic Chinese in Kỳ Lừa market had been confiscated by the local government and they were redistributed to Vietnamese. Lưu’s house, as big as 3,000 square meters (approximately 32,300 square feet), was also divided and occupied by local residents. He said, “I could not dare to recover all of my property when I returned. The Kinh and the local authorities were still hostile to ethnic Chinese. Although I am a member of the CPVN, no one wanted to help me to get my property back.” Lưu thought that trying to remove the existing occupants from his property could cause other problems for him and his family. He decided to share some part, about a third, of his land with local people. He lamented, “I cannot lose all of the inheritance of my family. To keep the heritage of my family is my duty in life… If I could not get it all back, it would be better to take at least a part.”

Although Lưu was able to recover part of his old property, his political status was not reinstated. Many Kinh cadres of the CPVN with whom he used to work were still in charge of the government offices but they ignored him. It was clear to him that he could not go back to the office for which he worked. He decided to open a pharmacy of Chinese herbal medicine using his experience in the forest. His children who had not been able to attend school went back to school. However, Lưu’s eldest son did not complete high school because he had problems with his class mates. Although many of his class mates from his neighborhood used to play together, they did not want to be
associated with him anymore and insulted him as “Tàu Khựa.” Although the Vietnamese government always emphasized equal rights for ethnic minorities in the country, Lưu insisted there was a secret exclusion policy against ethnic Chinese: “The Hoa people are excluded from 24 areas of government business—Police [Công an], Customs [Hải Quan], Tax offices [Thuế ụ], Marines [Hải quân], Forest rangers [kiểm lâm]…and etc.” The banned occupations for ethnic Chinese, as Lưu claimed, are generally areas of exclusion for foreigners. It implies that although ethnic Chinese people are considered legal citizens and part of the 54 ethnic minorities in Vietnam, they would yet remain distrusted subjects. Lưu’s son said, “I could not expect to succeed in my studies at that time. No government office would offer me a position if I graduated from high school or even from university…I decided to participate in retail business and trade across the border.”

In 1989, the border trade, although it was not yet legalized, proliferated in Lạng Sơn. As a humanitarian policy for ethnic minorities, people in Lạng Sơn were allowed to visit their relatives in Guangxi province in China during the Lunar New Year Festival. When people visited their relatives in Guangxi, they brought Chinese goods back to Lạng Sơn. Ethnic minorities living near the border thus took advantage of the suspension of military conflict at the border. They went across the border and smuggled Chinese goods to Vietnam. Lưu also took advantage of the moderated border control at that time. As a descendant of a Chinese family, he had many relatives on the other side
of the border, who could help his business. And he had extended his personal network with ethnic minorities while he was in the forest. The Nùng and Dao people, who reside along the border of the two countries, could deliver his business order of Chinese herbs to him from China without government inspection. His business grew quickly.

Ironically, due to the war, many ethnic Chinese medicine practitioners fled overseas and did not return. As he said, he could almost monopolize the local market with the great demand of local people who preferred Chinese herbal medicine to poorly supplied Western medicine.

The market economy was burgeoning around 1989 but the economic success of the Hoa was a mystery. The SRV had implemented a political campaign of anti-capitalism for a decade and, since the end of the Border War, the livelihood of the Hoa had deteriorated. In most cases, their living standard was lower than the average Kinh, which was the opposite before the war. Having capital mattered for initiating a business in the market economy. It would then be a reasonable question to ask how “the primitive accumulation of capital” (Marx 1990) of the Hoa was possible under the socialist economy and the war-torn living conditions. Remittances from overseas Chinese [Hoa Kiều] had in fact directly supported the businesses of Hoa. The Hoa people had many family members emigrating to the developed capitalist countries. Because of strong cultural ties within the family lineage, they were able to receive postal money orders of up to a thousand dollars per year (Chau 2000: 246-247). These funds
from the remittances of overseas Chinese gave ethnic Chinese an advantage in their completion with the Kinh and other ethnic minorities in the emerging market economy. In addition, the Hoa could appropriate the cultural credit economy as they could easily find guarantors on the other side of the border. Exchanging currency between Vietnamese Dong and Chinese Yuan was not beneficial and was practically impossible as the Vietnamese currency was useless to Chinese counterparts at that time. As the local people in Lang Son remembered, the border trade at the beginning was a type of barter economy and payment by Vietnamese was often made with precious metals. Due to the unstable and risky nature of business transactions “trust” and “credit” became crucial deal makers. The network of extended family members provided an unbeatable advantage to the Hoa in the border trade.

As the values of ethnic culture and family relations were fetishized in the border trade, the Hoa in Vietnam gradually began to depend more and more on their ethnic identity. In entering into the market economy and the border trade, their familial values such as “caring” and “responsibility” stood out as a unique cultural identity that was used as effectively as a currency in exchange. Once politically repressed, the Hoa organizations such as “hội” [association; 會] and “bang” [幇] also spread again. Although the Hoa community “was the only major ethnic group that diminished in

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13 In addition to gold and silver, many people in Lang Son remembered that they collected nickel for buying Chinese goods.
number between 1979 and 1989” (Amer 1996:77), their networks were extended overseas with intensified ties.

With the remarkable economic success of his business in a very short period, Lưu was able to buy two imported cars and construct a new house with a huge herbal garden in 1993. His son started a business selling interior equipment from China. His relatives living next to his house ran a bus company traveling between Hà Nội and Lạng Sơn. As he said, “Lưu family around the world was reunited” during this successful recovery. It seemed that his family had completely recovered from the trauma of the Border War and even was better off than before (Figure 13). While the booming economy of the marketization and border trade made him rich, the vulnerability of his ethnic identity was targeted by Kinh neighbors and the local government.
Figure 13: A picture of the new house of Lưu’s family in Lạng Sơn in the late 1990s. The palm trees tell that the area used be part of his own herb garden but was exploited by the local government for urban planning. The tall house on the right hand side also belongs to the family. The property was severed and reduced as the local government forced the expropriation of land for constructing new roads. In the early 2000s, Lưu even had to demolish all houses for another construction plan undertaken by the local government. The area has been completely rebuilt. My picture of Lưu’s personal collection (July, 2009)
Coping with ethnic hostility

Amy Chua (Chua 2004) suggests that “market-dominant minorities” constituted by a globalized capitalist economy spread ethnic hostility around the world. She personally took the case of the murder of her aunt, an affluent ethnic Chinese, by the locals in Philippines as a painful example. In Vietnam, the political normalization with China along with the marketization of the society reintroduced a capitalist form of life to people and seemed to rehabilitate the Hoa from Tàu Khuela [filthy ethnic Chinese] to “affluent” [giàu có] Hoa. Nevertheless, the market economy and global capitalism brought a strong public sense of inequality in society rather than of political liberation. The success of the Hoa businessmen in a very short period time was interpreted by other ethnic groups as a plot [âm mưu] against them by the market economy.

The local residents and the government in Lạng Sơn has started to express hostility toward affluent Hoa people as the economic success of the Hoa became decisive in market. Although the Reformation policy, Đổi Mới, was enacted in 1986, the significant socio-economic changes arrived as the PAVN returned from Cambodia in 1989. The “war economy footing” was lifted and the “all consumer subsidies were eliminated” (Long 1997b:144). The incredible speed of “recovery” and “success” of the Hoa was regarded as a threat and a sense of inferiority to the Kinh majority in the region. In the middle of the night, as Lưu said, someone threw a stone at his house and
ran away. Once, a drunken man shouted “Tiêu diệt Tàu Khựa!” [Decimate Chinese!] and sang a war song from the Border War outside his house. Lưu reported this incident to the local police station but, again, no one would help his family out. The situation got worse as the new urban planning project was implemented by the local government. First, the local government asked Lưu to provide a third of his landed property for widening the main road and to build a new road going through the property. Later, the local government came up with a new town plan, Khu Đô Thị Mới Phú Lộc IV, and requested land which belonged to the house. The local authorities also threatened his “illegal” medical practice in town (because he didn’t have a license from the government). Lưu could not but agree to allow the expropriation of his land. His house was demolished and rebuilt once again.

Lưu realized that under the socialist regime, because of the public’s memory of the Border war, he could not secure the life of his family by economic means alone. He thus thought that reengaging with local politics might increase the public safety of his family. In the late 1990s, he decided to work voluntarily for the district level party organization. His pre-war career as an officer and a member of the CPVN helped him rejoin the local political scene. The main duty for him was inspecting the neighborhood and surveying the livelihood of the Hoa community.¹⁴ Although it was basic work for

¹⁴ He showed me a note about the occupations and ethnic identities of the ward, which he surveyed in person.
lower level cadres, it enabled him to enlarge his contacts and to stand with the party and the government. He was then appointed as a senior leader of the Hoa residents in the ward and officially invited to several political activities beyond the province (Figure 14).

Figure 14: “Vice Prime Minister Nguyên Công Tấn welcomes the representatives of respectable senior leaders of Lạng Sơn Province on August 28, 2001 in Hà Nội”; My picture of Lưu’s personal collection. (July, 2009)

While his political status as a Hoa improved, Lưu’s own business as a Chinese herbal medicine practitioner faced strict government regulations. The Ministry of Health initiated a campaign for cracking down on “unlicensed” and “illegal” medical practices in Vietnam. Many Chinese medicine practitioners who generally succeeded the family
business or were self-taught like Lưu were targeted. Lưu used to hang a big wooden sign written in Chinese characters outside the gate of his business. But now he needed to hide this from the public eye due to the increased surveillance by the authorities. With a reasonable number of regular patients, he managed to continue practicing but a challenge to his business arose from the border. As Vietnam started to prepare for joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2005, the governance at the border has become dramatically modernized and tightened. Lạng Sơn is considered exemplary in the way the government exercises its power over border control. The primary issue for Lưu has been obtaining the necessary medicinal herbs from China for his business. With tightened customs’ inspection at the border, medicinal herbs have been particularly targeted. As Lưu does not have a legal license, he cannot legally import these herbs. He needs to either find a third party to make the purchase or take advantage of smuggling agents at the border to get them into the country. But due to the increased risk and procedures involved in obtaining them, the price of medicinal herbs has gone up, becoming prohibitive for local patients. When Lưu had an herb garden at home, he could cultivate a number of these scarce herbs himself. But now he doesn’t have this garden. For him, he understood the situation as an example of the ignorant Kinh ruled Party-State. “The Kinh people cannot understand such a long history of Chinese medicine. They have simply bought them from Chinese. And, as they do not have ability to understand the value of traditional Chinese medicine, they simply adopt Western
In fact, I suspect that they may be afraid of medical dependency on China like in the past. Some precious and scarce herbs are hard to find in Vietnam. Just like the prohibition on firecrackers, Vietnamese worry about an ethnic Chinese dominant market,” Lưu said.

In summer 2012, when I returned to Lạng Sơn, I had some difficulty finding Lưu’s house. He had moved to his son’s place and the consulting room was almost completely hidden from the outside. Lưu said, he was consider retiring from his profession as a practitioner. He lamented, “Hết thời rồi” [It’s over already]. Year by year, government control has been increasing and getting more sophisticated in Lạng Sơn. People have become eager to buy counterfeit Western drugs that are cheaper. He did not want to put himself at risk by confronting the authorities either. As our conversation continued, he showed me an official emblem of “Union of World LIU Association Limited.” It was an international association of the Lưu (Liu) family in which Lưu actively participated. As a senior member of the association, he was in charge of Lạng Sơn. He said, his lineage has spread all over the world. Although his own family is living in Lạng Sơn, through the association he felt connected to the world. He showed me a picture of himself with his grandson practicing Chinese martial arts. “I have taught

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15 Although people in northern border provinces still illegally set off firecrackers during the Lunar New Year festival or wedding ceremonies, the production, sale, and use of firecrackers at any occasion has been banned since 1995 (Direction, No. 406-TTg/August 8, 1994). The government announced that using firecrackers could set fire and cause harm to individuals. Many believed however that Vietnam was alerted by the excessive trade imbalance with China by importing firecrackers. The prohibition also served to differentiate the tradition of Vietnamese from Chinese.
my sons and grandsons to be proud of keeping up Chinese traditions as my father and grandfather did. “It’s tough,” he continued, “but the effort is worthwhile.”
In February, 2009, right after the Vietnamese Lunar New Year Holiday, Tế, I was invited to a feast at Thụ’s house. Thụ was a 49 year-old single male working at the provincial court of Lạng Sơn. Phúc who suffers from diabetes had been looking quite unhealthy those days but he urged friends to gather at his house to celebrate recent house renovations he’d done and to pray for Thụ to marry before he turned 50 years old. Considering the early marriage custom of ethnic minorities still prevalent in Lạng Sơn, a man or a woman who lives alone at Thụ’s age was quite unusual.16 For those not pursuing higher education, even teenagers were already married with a child. Many people around Thụ kept pushing him to get married at almost every occasion. But, this time, all Thụ’s friends were excited because he had begun dating a woman. His house renovation project was generally interpreted as Thụ’s wedding preparation. As we looked around the renovated house, Phúc praised Thụ’s efforts and said, “Oh, now everything is ready except a woman!”

Thụ is a Nùng born in Cao Bằng province17, a historic border area where Hồ Chí Minh first settled down with revolutionaries in 1941. Most of the Nùng population in

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16 In fact, some of my neighbors talked behind his back that: “He must be a gay [đồng tính]. You should be careful when hanging out with him!”

17 Cao Bằng, a border province, neighbors with Lạng Sơn. Shortly after the reunification of Vietnam in 1976, Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng were merged into a single province, “Cao-Lạng” province, which did not last long. A retired high-ranking official of Lạng Sơn People’s Committee told me that many Cao Bằng people had a
Vietnam is concentrated in either Lạng Sơn or Cao Bằng. Thu joined the army right after the Border War ended. As an ethnic minority speaking Nùng-Tày language, he was assigned to a special border security unit which had aimed to spread political propaganda and police the ethnic minority populations living along the borderline. His military unit was fairly new to the region. It was established right after the Border War.

Thu’s personal woes started from his military duty at this time. As part of these operations, he went on assignment to the mountain where he stayed with an ethnic minority community for a period of more than three months. When he set out for the village, he’d been in a serious relationship with a primary school teacher in Lạng Sơn.

But this woman couldn’t stand Thu’s work. It was common then for young soldiers to develop relationships, and then marry, ethnic minority woman after having contact like Thu did in local villages. In fact, it is not difficult to find Kinh men in town today, mostly mobilized from other provinces during the Border War, with second or third wives who come from the provinces. But, when a Nùng soldier, Thu did not take advantage of his duty in this way. Rather, his relationship with the woman in Lạng Sơn was broken while he was in the mountain. The intensive political operations with the good relationship with the central government since Hồ Chí Minh had stayed and hidden out there for a several years. Then, they wanted to expand their power over relatively well-developed Lạng Sơn and named the merged province, not “Lang-Cao” but “Cao-Lạng.” He said, it was impossible to govern two provinces as one since no infra-structure was in-place. Cao Bằng is populated with ethnic minority groups such as Tày, Nùng, Dao and H’Mong.

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ethnic minorities in the border region affected his entire life. Phúc teased him frequently: “The government [Chính quyền] should take responsibility for Thư’s solitude for about 30 years.”

The serious political and cultural campaign against the ethnic minority population in the northern border provinces started as early as in 1974. As the U.S. stopped its air strikes to North Vietnam and agreed to withdraw its combat troops from South Vietnam, the DRV began to prepare the imminent end of the American war. The DRV, then, started recovery of the war-torn northern provinces. The Politburo issued a resolution (No. 229-NQ/TW, January 22, 1974) about the recovery of North Vietnam. In its resolution, it specifically outlined the establishment of a new life style that would abolish superstitions [mê tín dị đoan] and backward rituals surrounding funerals and weddings. The resolution did not directly mention ethnic minority communities, as a matter of fact. In July, 1974, the Ministry of Culture [Bộ Văn Hóa] organized a conference in Lạng Sơn about the new lifestyle for ethnic minorities in northern mountainous provinces (Bộ Văn Hóa 1974). For three days, cadres and officials of Lạng Sơn and other northern provinces discussed how to implement “the new socialist lifestyle” among Nùng, Tày, Dào, and H’mong communities. This particular campaign was influenced by the culminating Cultural Revolution in China. Although the cultural campaign against “backward” minorities in Vietnam was not as violent as in China, the local authorities had already begun to confront ethnic minorities as they attempted to
ban totemic rituals and the activities of shamans. Many ethnic minorities resisted the new lifestyle campaign and they, with a long tradition of “Zomina” (Scott 2009), tried to flee to the mountains and valleys where the governance of the Party-State was attenuated. In the town of Lạng Sơn, only about 10 percent of its residents were ethnic minority people, excluding the Hoa, in 1974 (Bộ Văn Hóa 1974:68). As the war yet continued in the south, there was no intensive political campaign in the north; however, the targeting of ethnic minorities as “backward” revealed how the CPVN perceived the issue of ethnic minorities in the border region.

When the Border War broke out, many ethnic minorities did not have the chance to evacuate. Their significantly high rate of illiteracy prevented them from attaining news and information about what was happening. The lack of the communication system also made it difficult to reach ethnic minorities in mountains and valleys. In addition, as many local people witnessed, while the ethnic Kinh people could evacuate to the south and find means and support to get by, ethnic minorities such as Nùng and Dao [Yao in China] were unfamiliar with the delta region since their traditional way of living was “slash-and-burn” agriculture and forestry economy. Due to these limitations, ethnic minority people who resided in the mountainous area, were trapped in-between Vietnamese and Chinese troops. A local Nùng said, many people in the mountains were

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18 The Hoa population was about 30 percent in town. As discussed in the previous section, the Hoa people generally resided in towns with the Kinh majority.
19 Among other ethnic group, Tày people were relatively living close to the Kinh people.
simply abandoned by the local government and they were abused by both sides of the army.20

Although they had no place to go, they were forced to decide what side they were going to align with. Unlike the official report of the CPVN, as a Nùng witnessed, many Nùng people who had relatives in China preferred to follow the PLA other than the PAVN. He said that, after the war, many abandoned huts were found in the forest and, as the border reopened, many Vietnamese-speaking Nùng returned as traders [mâudev dịch]. In a well-known picture from the Border War, an ethnic Tày woman is holding a gun and capturing Chinese PLA soldiers (Figure 5 in Chapter 2). Although the government propagated the story of the heroic militias of ethnic minorities, there are almost no in-depth stories or memoirs about their border experience.

The silenced but appropriated memory of ethnic minorities in the Border War could be analyzed in terms of the question of the speakability of the “subaltern” (Spivak 1988). As discussed in Chapter 2, the mere mention of an ethnic minority’s memory of the Border War served to ban a short novel Rồng Đá (Vũ and Lê 2008). The Chinese author, Ma Chiến Hư (Mạc Ngôn 2008), also excluded the ethnic minority’s experience in the war. It implied that the majority of the SRV and the PRC, Kinh and Han

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20 A local veteran told me that, in some cases, the PAVN accidently killed ethnic minorities but they reported them as “enemy.” He insisted that the PLA might be the same during the war.
respectively, have tended to marginalize the ethnic minority communities along the border in their national historiographies.

In 1980, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) promulgated its new constitution. The Border War in 1979 affected the new constitution, particularly Article 5 which determined the role of the state sovereignty over ethnic minorities.

Article 5
The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is the unified State of all nationalities living in Vietnamese territory, with equality in rights and obligations. The State protects, strengthens, and consolidates the great unity of all nationalities: it strictly prohibits any act of racial prejudice and any attempt to sow discord among nationalities. All the nationalities have the right to use their own spoken languages and scripts, and to preserve and promote their fine customs, habits, traditions, and cultures.

The State accepts responsibility to take corrective measures to gradually eliminate inequalities in the levels of economic and cultural development between the different nationalities.


Although the autonomous zones21 (Khu tự trị) were dismantled in 1975, the constitution of 1980 disallowed any political autonomy of ethnic minority dominant provinces. As we can read from its language, the SRV attempted to pursue the

21 There had been two autonomous zones in North Vietnam until 1975. The Việt Bắc autonomous zone was established in 1956 with mainly six provinces: Cao Bằng, Bắc Kạn, Lạng Sơn, Tuyên Quang, Thái Nguyên and Hà Giang. The Tây Bắc autonomous zone, including previous Thái-Mèo autonomous zones (1955-1962), was formed in 1962 with Lào Cai, Yên Bái, Son La, and Lai Châu provinces.
centralized governance of the Party-State and to integrate all ethnic groups. The word, dân tộc thiểu số [ethnic minority], also disappeared in the constitution. There have been debates over the expression, “thiếu số” [minority] or “ít người” [literally, small number of people] which, though possibly politically incorrect, nonetheless demarcates different ethnic groups. But instead of this term, the expression, “dân tộc” [national], for all citizens, was used in the constitution reflecting a political indifference to the ethnic minority issue. In addition, as “any attempt to sow discord among nationalities” was constitutionally prohibited, the rights of ethnic minorities were significantly limited.

After the Border War, the political urgency for Vietnam was to secure its northern border. The war was declared ended but the limited military conflicts over the border continued until 1986. Due to the fact that there was no initial peace agreement after the war, there was consequently no demilitarized zone set by both countries, which means there was also no terrestrial buffer for the existing military antagonism between the two sides. Vietnam set up land mines along the border. As many local people told, although the land mines were everywhere, the border itself was porous due to its geographical complexity. With a long history of living in the mountains and forests, many ethnic minorities knew hidden passes which they could go use to cross the border. Due to the difficult border control, the Vietnamese government was anxious about Chinese secret agents operating in the border area and possible ethnic uprising provoked by them. Although the local government encouraged the settling of the ethnic
minority in the lower land area and urged the Kinh people to move up to the high lands.

At the same time, it was not easy getting the ethnic minority to leave their homes to
resettle in the lower area. Therefore, the special border security units had to go up to the
ethnic communities in the mountains to govern them directly on site.
Tày in the lowland and Dao in the highland

Thự was well-suited to the military task he was assigned with the ethnic populations. As he told me, many agents from the delta region, mostly Kinh, were new to the mountainous area to which he was familiar as he had grown up in mountainous Cao Bằng province. Many Kinh agents were uncomfortable coming into contact with ethnic minorities due to their different customs and lifestyles. Many believed that ethnic minorities were uncivilized and backward. Most of all, the language barrier was a big obstacle in communication as most of the ethnic minorities living in the mountains barely attended school and couldn’t speak Vietnamese and, of course, the agents rarely could speak the local language. In this mix, Thự, as a Nùng, stood out as one of the most reliable soldiers who could meet the military demands of dealing with ethnic populations.

These ethnic minority communities in the highlands had long been remote and isolated. Thus the propaganda and policing operations did not prove to be easy.. The strategy of the special unit was to live and work together. As Thự recalled, he participated along with the villagers in their “slash-and-burn” agriculture and hunting wild animals. The biggest benefit of all this to the ethnic minority communities was to have a house built and the roof of their hut repaired by agents. Sometimes, the agents brought construction materials from the lower land and, if a community was willing to
collaborate, they’d begin their mission: teaching Vietnamese, telling revolutionary stories, surveying the livelihood and political structure of the local people in order to report back to their superiors, etc. The main purpose of the operation was to make these ethnic minorities into Vietnamese citizens.

On a chilly day in February, 2009, Thứ invited me to join his trip to an ethnic Dao community where he had once been in charge. He told me that he hadn’t been back there for more than a decade ever since being transferred to another office. Around 5 am in the morning, we drove motorbikes heading to Xuất Lệ commune in Cao Lộc district. Xuất Lệ commune is located in the northeast of Lạng Sơn. It is one of the most isolated highlands which is directly facing China. On the way to Xuất Lệ, we stopped by a market to buy food. Upon arriving in the commune, we went to visit the commune office to state our purpose and to gain clearance for our visit. The officer was suspicious about my identity but Thứ’s former career cleared the situation. When we finally arrived in the village, Thứ started looking for a guide, an ethnic Tày, who used to work with him. The Dao community is isolated from the lower lands. If we couldn’t find someone to guide us, we wouldn’t be able to reach the community. But, the person Thứ was

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22 Phúc told me that after Thứ’s relationship with the school teacher ended, he did not want to work in the mountain any more. After finding a position at a government office, Thứ never went back. So this trip, in Phúc’s explanation, could be reconciliation with Thứ’s past on the eve of his getting married.

23 Thứ suggested that people often suffered from lack of food in the highlands. When we visited we didn’t want to take their precious food reserves although they would be willing to share theirs to the guest.
looking for was gone. The villagers said he and his wife had gone to China to do day labor.

In the agricultural off-season, many ethnic minorities cross the border illegally to work at sugar cane farms. Local people take advantage of the fact that the cultivation season is different. On the Chinese side, farms suffer from a lack of laborers as many Chinese farmers have left for cities and industrial parks. By contrast, on the Vietnamese side, ethnic minorities face lack of job opportunities. As I learned, sometimes farm owners do not pay for undocumented Vietnamese workers. Yet, when they do pay, the payment can be, more than twice what they would make back home, There are brokers who supply wage labor from the Vietnamese side. They are usually ethnic Nùng-Tày since their ethnic communities reside on both sides and they know the ethnic languages.

The growing concern for the border villages in Lạng Sơn is that almost all the adult male population seasonally disappears from the villages. The day we went to visit, we kept trying to find a guide but only kids and women were at home. The local government is also concerned that the seasonal wage labor experienced by the ethnic minority farmers in China has changed their lifestyle and threatened the community bond. As local farmers compete for better wages and reliable employment in China, the circuit of information in a village, which is mostly manipulated by brokers, has been both distorted and disrupted. As the illegal border crossing is also risky, people generally
travel individually in order to avoid getting caught. It affects the traditional way of collectivism in the community. Since the seasonal and temporal wage labor prevails in border villages, some young people have left the villages to look for stable jobs in construction fields or industrial parks in cities or other provinces in the country. The emergent labor migration has made the border villages hollow and deteriorated the security of the border region.

We finally found a man just coming back from China who agreed to serve us our guide. At long last, we began to climb the mountain. On the way, the man said he had not been encountering Dao people recently as they hardly came down to the village. He added, the Dao these days just go to villages in China instead of descending the mountain to what are hollow villages in Vietnam.

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24 I finally met the Tày couple who went to China to work at the sugar cane farm the other day. The wife was back first as she had taken a shortcut while the husband arrived about three hours later as he had taken a detour. They told me that if they travel together, the risk of arrest gets higher. If caught, they would have to pay a fine which could exceed their earnings from China.
Figure 15: The dead end of the road at the drinking water well on the way to the Dao Village. From here to the Dao community it took three hours. The girl wearing the pink shirt was the daughter of the Tày couple who went illegally to China to work at a sugar cane farm. It would be dangerous for her to stay alone at home overnight. Thụ asked her to join our trip. (My photo on February 28, 2009)

Figure 16: A Dao family. The crack on the wall was made by the earthquake as the family explained. As some scholars in Vietnam assumed, the frequent earthquakes in northern Vietnam and Southern China could be another reason for the Dao migrating to the central highland. (My photo on February 28, 2009)
Figure 17: At the Dao house. The man wearing the hat is the head of the community. On the wall, the pictures of Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese national flags are decorated. The border defense army still policed the villages in the highland and provided the propaganda materials including the newspaper and journals which the ethnic minority people used as wall papers instead of reading material. (Photos by author on February 28, 2009)

Figure 18: The kitchen of the Dao family. (Picture by author on March 1, 2009)
Figure 19: The inside of a Tày family house. As Tày people live in the lowland, they are exposed more to consumerism and media. On the wall, there are pictures of Korean actors and actresses and the outdated schedule of the World Cup. We were waiting for the couple to come back from China. (Photo by author)

When I introduced myself to the head of the Dao community, he said, I was the first foreigner to visit his house other than Vietnamese, Chinese, and French soldiers. Thụ told me that, he had built the house with this man together almost 30 years ago. He barely spoke basic Vietnamese. His son, who had dropped out of primary school education, translated our conversation. The Dao settled down the mountain about three generations ago from the place between Yunnan and Guangxi province of China, the headman told us. Now about seven households lived closely together and they were all related genealogically.
When the Border War broke out, the family did not go anywhere but stayed in
the highland. Luckily there were no major battles happening in the area. The family
managed to avoid tragedy, but many others were terribly affected by the war. As the
socialist subsidy economy policy was ended by the Đổi Mới, there was a remarkable
internal migration of ethnic minorities occurring in Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng provinces
(B. Nguyễn 2003). Many ethnic migrants in Lạng Sơn migrated to the central provinces:
Tây Nguyên and Đắk Lắk. There were many reasons for this migration including what
was the significant political reason: the experience of the Border War. Many Nùng, Tày
and Dao people in Lạng Sơn experienced deep insecurity. With the tightened security on
the border area, they also lost freedom of movement. The frequent intervention of forest
inspectors [Kiểm lâm] was also a big concern for ethnic minorities, especially Dao
people who practiced “slash-and-burn” agriculture. Then, and until recently, the flow of
migration from Lạng Sơn to the central highland was considered a social problem since
the “free migrants” [Di dân tự do] were not organized by the Party-State, and they
occupied the land and forest without proper documents.

After the Border War ended, a group of Vietnamese soldiers came here. Among
them was Thụ. And, as they were about the same age, they became close friends.
Although both these men experienced a lot of hardship, those days seemed
unforgettable for both of them.
As the head showed us around the house and community, he told us that soldiers had been up recently and had installed a small generator with a watermill at the valley. With the electronic generator they could now watch DVDs and charge their cellular phones. The area was in fact a “no signal zone” for TV and radio but the head’s son found one spot which could receive mobile frequency. The way he used his phone was by hanging it on the wall at the spot where he’d located the mobile frequency. His phone bell sound was distinctive as it was the voice of Hồ Chí Minh reading the Declaration of the independence of Vietnam. As the boy told us, a soldier had provided him with that unique but patriotic phone bell.

Although the house was full of “free” propaganda materials to promote the Dao’s fidelity to Vietnam, the son said he usually went to a market in China not in Vietnam. Accessibility to the Chinese market was better, he explained, and here he could converse in the Dao language and meet his own ethnic people—neither of which he could do in Lang Son. “I feel really uncomfortable when Kinh people seem to look down on me…and the traffic policeman! They are really horrible [không tốt]!” he added. Although I knew that traffic police can be the public enemy in all countries, I couldn’t understand what specifically about the police in Lang Son he had problems with. Thự helped me out in the conversation. He explained how, because most ethnic minorities do not have driving license for motor bikes, they face getting stopped—and being harassed—by traffic police. Some are illiterate and others don’t even have birth
certificates. Yet these commune people in the lower lands need to drive motor bikes to get to Lạng Sơn as there is no public transportation service available. Actually, the son had an old Minsk\textsuperscript{25} parked behind the house. I was surprised as there wasn’t even a road up to the house. He said, however, that was no problem for him. When he needed to travel far away, for example to Lạng Sơn, he actually carried the motorbike down the mountain in order to use it. This Dao man’s obsession with the mobile phone and the motor bike symbolized the contemporary anxiety of our times over connectivity and mobility. Whatever cost a man on the isolated highland should pay, he simply could not give up his connectivity to the world and mobility to different places. The question is then how long he would be willing to afford the cost and the burden. This man, the head’s son, was in his early 20s at the time and newly exposed to such devices and equipment. After my first visit, he started calling and texting me at night. Unfortunately, our conversations could never last long as he had poor reception and the calls were often disconnected. His desire to be connected would continue to be a struggle as his place in the world was considered to be no man’s land at the eyes of planners and investors of building infrastructure. And, as he gets older, how long will he be able to carry his motorbike down the mountain to the lower lands?

\textsuperscript{25} A popular off-road motorbike among the highlanders designed by the Soviet Union. People in rural and highland areas like Minsk because it is easy to fix and lighter than other fancy motorbikes. Many deliverymen in smuggling business in Lạng Sơn also use this.
5. Borderscape Reconfigured

Vietnam, China
Joined by mountains, joined by rivers
Sharing the East Sea, Love and Friendship as early as the dawn

... The united front now increasing
Blocking shared enemies
Hungry or full, hard times, dangers
we share them together
On the road to fight we won’t leave each other

... Ah! Ah! Sharing an idea, sharing a heart!

... Ah! Ah! Our peoples will forever sing
Hồ Chí Minh! Mao Zedong!

- A Song, “Việt Nam-Trung Hoa [Vietnam China],”
  by Đỗ Nhuận (1955)¹

The Shadow of Bilateralism

In February, 2009, the streets of Lạng Sơn and the roads to the Friendship Border Gate [Cửa khẩu Hữu Nghị] were covered with red placards and billboards. Fluttering in the wind one could read the political slogans of the moment: “Hearty Celebration to the Completion of Demarcation and Installation of Markers on the Continuous Land between Vietnam and China,” “Neighborly Friendship [Láng giềng hữu nghị],”

¹ The song was a theme song of the day of the celebration played over and over again from the speakers in Lạng Sơn on February 23, 2009.
Comprehensive Cooperation [hợp tác toàn diện], Long-term Stability [ ổn định lâu dài], Looking toward the Future [hướng thời tương lai],””Good Neighbors [Làng giềng tốt], Good Friendship [Hữu nghị tốt], Good Comradeship [Đồ chí tốt], Good Partnership [Đối tác tốt].” The Kỳ Cùng Bridge, which was demolished during the Border War, was decorated with the national flags of Vietnam and China. It seemed to me at the end that the traces of the Border War thirty years ago (February, 1979) were covered by the decorations of a new era. The people in Lạng Sơn, however, were indifferent to the propagandistic ornaments on the streets. The apathy they exuded suggested that they were not yet ready to be excited by the fluttering signs of “fraternity” between Vietnam and China.

Figure 20: The Main Street of Lạng Sơn. The script of the banner says, “Vietnam - China maintain and prove the relationship of friendly neighborhood, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, moving forward to the future”; Author’s photo on Hùng Vương street to the Kỳ Cùng Bridge which is connected to the Friendship Border Gate. (February 23, 2009)
These street decorations were prepared for the scheduled official ceremony commemorating the completion of the demarcation and installation of border markers at the Friendship Border Gate on February 23, 2009.2 Although many of the people I spoke with told that the ceremony would be an event only for the Party-State of Vietnam and China, I “formally” asked the Department of External Affairs in the People’s Committee of Lạng Sơn in advance to allow me to attend the ceremony. Đồng, a staff member at the department in charge of my research activity in Lạng Sơn, told me that he could bring me with him to the ceremony. On the day before the ceremony, however, Đồng called me to his office. He said, “I am sorry to let you know that China will not allow us to invite any person from “a third country” [nuộc thứ ba] to the ceremony. Some foreign news agencies in Hà Nội also proposed covering the ceremony and our government wanted to invite them for helping them report on “the completion of the project” [hoàn thành công trình], but China replied no. “The other side” [bên kia; China] asserted that this event is a matter between the two countries. No need for any third party. Please “sympathize” [thông cảm] with the situation.”

According to Đồng, my intention to conduct participant observation at the ceremony was unexpectedly derailed by China. As a citizen of a third country, I could

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2 Công An Nhân Dân [The People’s Police] newspaper reported that Lạng Sơn used 400 gonfalons and pennons, about 300 banana-leaf-shape flags [cờ chuối], 4000-meter long flag strings, and 76 placards around the city and roads to the border gate (February 24, 2009). Although lavish decorations for political events is still common in Vietnam, these were quite excessive for a one-day celebration about which local people did not really care much.
not do anything but ask him for an interview after he attended the ceremony. The official ceremony was held at the International Friendship Border Gate [Cửa Khẩu Quốc Tế Hữu Nghị]. For the duration of the ceremony, the Vietnamese Government announced that the international border gate would be closed on both sides for the day.\(^3\)

A territorial dispute could be limited to a matter of an exclusive political negotiation between sovereign nation-states. The completion of the border demarcation could be interpreted through the lens of an international and multilateral affair. The International Court of Justice (ICJ), as a supraterritorial organization of jurisdiction, could directly intervene in a dispute on the basis of internationally recognized territorial borders. The World Trade Organization (WTO) could treat border demarcations as legal evidence for governing international trade. International cartographers and other organizations such as international traffic authorities could also be affected by the new spatial order of national sovereignties inscribed by border demarcations.

The alleged exclusion of people from “a third country” in the ceremony underscored the uninterruptible political fraternity between Vietnam and China. All other stakeholders were forbidden. Throughout this period, China continually asserted that other countries, particularly the U.S., were “out of hand” on various territorial issues—notably involving the South China Sea (the East Sea on the Vietnamese side)—

\(^3\) VNExpress (February 23, 2009). Last accessed on October, 2014.
between Vietnam China.\textsuperscript{4} It was China’s political desire to limit the territorial issue to a “bilateral” issue which China could handle dexterously. As Đức later told me, although the Vietnamese government was eager to invite international guests for witness [chứng kiến] and the People’s Committee of Lạng Sơn expected to use such a big ceremony to promote the province on the international mediascape, China strictly stipulated that the bilateral celebration should not involve others. The work of the border demarcation was to be a solely bilateral project.

In the realm of international politics, bilateralism is practiced as an exclusive form of a—specific, qualitative, reciprocal, and intimate—relation between two countries. While multilateralism is based on equality and “general obligations” under international law, bilateralism “allows the customization of rights and obligations to each individual member state” (Thompson and Verdier 2014:15). In the globalized order of the world, both bilateralism and multilateralism are commonly combined for establishing strategic relations. For instance, while the WTO is based on multilateralism, foreign direct investment (FDI) is conducted with and through bilateral agreements (ibid.).

The political ambivalence regarding bilateralism stems from a “customization” process influenced by existing “politics of asymmetry” (Womack 2006). Although the politics of asymmetry could be reciprocally beneficial for opening up the possibility of

\textsuperscript{4} Reuter (July 20, 2008) reported that “China warned Exxon Mobile Corp to pull out of an exploration deal with Vietnam, describing the project as a breach of Chinese sovereignty” based on unnamed sources referred on the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong.
enhancing/transforming one other, it often revives political hierarchies. Even in the expression of brotherhood, for instance, “anh em” [brothers] in Vietnamese is a combined word of anh [elder brother] and em [younger brother]. In Confucianism, em should obey anh as an ethical duty5. Bilateralism, which assumes a relation between singular sovereign subjects, ostensibly prevents a priori discrimination. Ruggie has argued that a systematic principle of bilateralism could in fact be traced back to the New Plan of the Nazis in 1934, notoriously designed by the German economist Hjalmar Schacht (1992: 568). In the principles of the plan, a bilateral scheme was intended to reciprocally benefit two parties, but the result of the bilateral agreements turned out to be a double dependency on Germany.

In the contemporary regime of global security, bilateral agreements such as the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea (1953) and the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan (1960) in Asia have been effective even while controversies erupted. While the bilateral agreement is generally assumed to be an archetype for political integrity, the economy of “-lateralism” is calculated in each case by effectiveness in a situation and reliability.

While a blend of bilateralism and multilateralism has been adopted as a form of capitalist political strategy, the Communist International was different, as history has

5 In Vietnam, “anh em” is also used for the relation between Kinh majority and other ethnic minorities. Việt, a common colloquial expression for Kinh, is frequently followed by the word, anh such as “Việt Anh.”
shown us; it was created as a completely different kind of multilateralism (Borkenau 1939). It attempted to establish an ideological alliance based on organizations and classes across the existing borders of political sovereignty. Bilateralism was not an ideologically legitimate form of strategic relations in the communist international as much as it was governed by the state of affairs between competing bourgeois states. It shut off the possibility of solidarity with people outside the border and alienated the political determination of people within the border. The international fraternity should be firmly based on the political demands of peoples through the ideological guidance of the communist parties. However, in reality, this communist imaginary of multilateralism was complicated by the political ambition of the communist parties and their appropriation of national belongings during the Cold War era. For Vietnam, the breakdown of what had been its socialist fraternity with China in the 1970s was a traumatic experience. While the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 paved a road to the end of the American War, Vietnam and China now collided with each other over their competing political ambitions regarding Southeast Asia. The deteriorating bilateral relationship between the two countries started with a territorial issue. In December 28, 1973, the DRV proposed the demarcation of the maritime border in the northern sea, the Paracel islands [Quần Đạo Hoàng Sa, 西沙群岛], for the exploration of natural resources in the sea with help from the Soviet Union. The DRV believed this natural exploration would help facilitate a fast recovery from the war (Sự Thật 1979a:68). But China’s
response was negative. Refusing the DRV proposal, it insisted that it could not “allow a third country [nước thứ ba] to enter the northern sea for exploration.” This refusal resulted in a direct military operation in the sea against the DRV in 1974 (ibid., 68-69).

The DRV’s ambition to diversify its relations with other countries faced serious challenges from its neighboring comrade. With its long-term dependency on the PRC, as discussed in Chapter 3, the complexities in the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and China were now resulting in war. Bilateralism, which “differentiates relations case-by-case based precisely on a priori particularistic grounds or situational exigencies” (Ruggie 1992:571), in a socialist form, produces its own risks when one country tries to govern the other’s relations.

The current bilateralism between Vietnam and China was reestablished by “situational exigencies” configured by the fall of the socialist bloc in 1991. For more than a decade, hostility reigned between the two countries following the Border War in 1979. In the post-Cold War era, Vietnam and the PRC faced growing uncertainty of the multilateral order of international politics. Because of this, the two countries hurriedly normalized their diplomatic relationship. Reopening the border to each other symbolized the reconstitution of socialist fraternity and bilateralism. Ever since then, the dynamics of this bilateral relation at the border (Womack 2000) has been driven by “a priori particularistic grounds” which, in practice, intermingles comrades with betrayers.
The official ceremony for the completion of the border demarcation at the Friendship Border Gate could be interpreted as an exhibition of graduated bilateralism in the post-Cold War era. However, in my view, the reluctance of China to grant attendance and outside observation of the ceremony suggests that this bilateral relation is still unstable. The political stances at work in these kind of political ceremonies are the recuperation of the commemorative history of the relationship intermingled with the political sentiments of hostility-indifference-hospitality.
**Legible effects of Border Markers**

“Vietnam is a single entity from Lạng Sơn to Cà Mau”

“Nước Việt Nam ta là một nước thống nhất từ Lạng Sơn đến Cà Mau.”

The first sentence in the Preamble of the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1959

In the evening of the official ceremony for the completion of the border demarcation held at the Friendship Border Gate, a local celebration was also organized in the central plaza of Lạng Sơn. The Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union [Đoàn Thanh niên Công sản Hồ Chí Minh] from all districts of Lạng Sơn province set up a hut for each district at the plaza with the banner: “Vietnam - China Friendship” [Hữu Nghị Việt-Trung]. Before the main celebration, the Youth Union held “cultural performance programs” [chuồng trình văn hóa văn nghệ], mostly games such as a tug-of-war between the unions, in celebration of “a significant political event” [sự kiện chính trị trọng đại]. The organizers and targeted participants attended the celebration. There was also an exhibition tent at the main gate of the plaza, which displayed pictures and videos

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* Although the huts were set up for displaying local people’s support for the friendship between Vietnam and China, they were served as camping sites. Some members of the youth union from remote provincial districts couldn’t return home after the celebration program. On the night, they had a camp fire after the celebration ended. Since they were mobilized by the local authority, the members of the youth union seemed indifferent to the political propaganda about the completion of the demarcation. A member of the youth union from Cao Lộc district told me that “it’s just for fun but it’s cold today.”
explaining the process of the border demarcation and the installation of border markers. Because, the state media had barely reported on the history of this process for nine years, many local people were indeed interested in the exhibition. Some people were eager to gain information about what once had been a controversial area such as that of the Friendship Border Gate. But, as usual, no “sensitive” [nhạy cảm] information was released to the public.

The celebration began with the singing of a historic song about fraternity, “Vietnam-China,” by the singer Đỗ Như An. No one from the Chinese delegation attended the event. The chairman of the People’s Committee of Lạng Sơn took the stage and delivered a 30 minute chronicle of the border demarcation. When he finally finished reading the script, the bored audiences clapped loudly. The “cultural performance programs” on the stage were filled with patriotic themes, although here was no performance recalling “the long history” of China and Vietnam’s fraternal relationship.

As I looked around and mingled with the crowd, I could sense that the public atmosphere at the celebration with China was, in fact, not very good. Anti-China sentiment in Vietnam had been escalating since September, 2008 when the “the Plan for invading Vietnam in 31 days” [kế hoạch tấn công Việt Nam trong 31 ngày] was posted on the Internet, where it quickly spread. Although “the Plan” hardly seemed to be an

7 Later, I learned that China also organized a celebration in Pingxiang, Quangxi province on the same day.
8 It was first reported in the South China Morning Post (September 5, 2008). According to “the plan” posted on a Chinese website, Sina.com, “Vietnam is a major threat to the safety of Chinese territories, and the biggest
authentic document of the PRC, Vietnamese people were critical of the fact that China, which usually imposed strict censorship over the Internet, did not do so in this case. Due to the political provocation incited by this news, celebrations for the border demarcation surged with patriotic and nationalist sentiments despite the ubiquitous presence of banners of “friendship” [Hữu Nghị] flapping in the wind. The celebration, which began with a song of fraternity, ended with a patriotic song, “As if Uncle Ho were here in the Joyous Day of Great Victory” [Như có bác Hồ trong ngày vui đại thắng] by Phạm Tuyên (1975) over and over again.⁹ The song was about the liberation of the South during the American War. The playing of this popular nationalist song seemed to suggest that the completion of the demarcation line would mean the final liberation of Vietnam from China.

In the celebration, there was a special dance performance about the border marker. A group of female dancers dressed in the garb of their ethnic minority kneeled down in reverence to the border marker all the while repeatedly waving their hands. According to the mutually agreed guidelines for the design of the marker, it should be “influential [bề thế], large-scale [hoành tráng], and represent the supreme sovereignty of obstacle to the peaceful emergence of China” and China should mobilize “310,000 troops sweeping into Vietnam from Yunna, Guangxi and the South China Sea” for conquering Vietnam in 31 days. Vietnamese people were extremely upset about the report. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam asked the Beijing authority to control “the harmful information” on the website.

⁹ Phạm Tuyên in an interview with Giao Thông Văn Tải newspaper said, he composed the song as soon as he heard the news about the bombing of Tân Sơn Nhất airport in Sài Gòn by the PAVN on April 29, 1975.
a state [mang tính chủ quyền cao của một quốc gia]” (Vũ 2010). As it turned out, the
design of the border marker was also shaped like a stone phallus. The choreography of
the female dancers looked like they were performing a phallic worship, the meaning of
which could be symbolically extended to the patriarchal state of Vietnam. The
performance was also similar to the totemic ritual of ethnic minorities, the very people
who lived in the border provinces. In fact, the new border demarcation portioned the
indigenous territory of the ethnic minorities in the border region. The choreography of
the dancers was politically motivated to promote the patriarchal nationalism of the
border regions’ ethnic minorities, all by worshipping the phallic border marker.

Figure 21: The local celebration to the completion of the demarcation and installation
of border markers on the territory between Vietnam and China. The replica of the
1116th border marker was installed in the Friendship Border Gate. The performances
on the state were prepared by the military art troupe in the Northern provinces and
The replica of the enlarged 1116th border marker was set up on the center of the stage. The 1116th border marker was originally located at the Friendship Border Gate, where the first major military conflict occurred before the Border War and when the nationally recognized hero of the border defense, Lê Đình Chính, was killed by the PLA on August 22, 1978. The enlarged border marker was thus engorged by the brutal warfare where it was rooted. The symbolic meaning of this particular border marker was doubly scripted: it symbolized both hospitality and hostility. Seen differently, dancing and singing around the marker was also a way by which the indigenous ethnic minorities of the border region prayed for the unsettled souls lingering at and haunted the borderland.

The border market was redesigned and installed as Vietnam and China signed the agreement of the territorial border demarcation on December 30, 1999. After nine years of continuing negotiation and placing of border markers, the two countries finally reached the bilateral declaration of the border’s completion on December 31, 2008. The official ceremony and local celebration were scheduled for the completion of the bilateral project. The first border issue between the two countries was raised by the DRV on November 2, 1957. The DRV asked the PRC to bilaterally respect and recognize the

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10 Lê Khả Phiêu, the general secretary of the CPVN at that time, signed the agreement and received enormous backlash from the members of the CPVN and the public. Many people criticized Lê Khả Phiêu for “selling the country [bán nước]” to China.”
border agreements between the French colonizer and the Qing court of China in 1887 and 1895. The PRC responded with its agreement on the request of the DRV in 1958.

Until 1974, when the PRC refused the DRV’s proposal to determine the maritime border, not a single significant border issue occurred between the two countries. Since the conflict in 1974, however, the border issue became an increasingly sensitive problem [vấn đề nhạy cảm]. The situation dramatically worsened after the Border War in 1979 when the PLA occupied some strategic mountains along the border, even after the war ended. Yet, the completion of the demarcation on the territorial border ended this conflict that had been simmering for 36 years even though the maritime border wasn’t included in this.\footnote{However, the controversies have continuously been arising over Bản Giốc Falls [Detian falls on Chinese side] in Cao Bằng province as the falls serve as a popular tourist destination.} It was a political incantation for the pacification of the land border.

The political complexity between Vietnam and China certainly delayed the settlement of the border. However, as they reached agreement in 1999 to begin negotiating for the demarcation and installation of the border marker, they faced the problem—for which they lacked sufficient information and knowledge—of navigating what was a complicated topography for the installation of border markers. Why was this the case? First, as Vietnam and China depended on colonial and imperial documents produced a century ago, the limited information contained in these documents posed a major technological obstacle. One official of the People’s Committee of Lạng Sơn told me
Vietnam did not have enough historical references to counter claims made by China.

Neither the Nguyễn court nor that of the French colonialists was able to govern the border area as effectively as the Qing court. The Kinh officials did not want to serve at the border and the French colonial government relied on local chiefs [Thổ Ty] (Poisson 2009: 20-22). Knowledge production of the border area was highly limited on the Vietnamese side. Moreover, under the influence of socialist internationalism, the DRV did not pay much attention to the territorial border shared with the PRC and relied on the historic agreement the French colonizers proposed to the PRC in 1957. Practically, knowledge production of the territorial border between Vietnam and China had stagnated for more than a century. In the meantime, the topography of the border region had extensively changed. Mountains and rocks had eroded. Streams and rivers had disappeared and newly emerged. Additionally, the amount of artillery power used during the 1970 Border War had reshaped the landscape dramatically.

The pre-existing border markers, which the French colonizers and the Qing court installed together, could be useful for the demarcation; however, many were either missing or had been moved to another place.¹² For instance, in the area of the Friendship Border Gate, one border marker previously recorded in the official documents of the French and the Qing was missing (Vũ 2010:263). The subject of this missing marker was

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¹² A local in Lạng Sơn told me that many local people, especially ethnic minorities, had competed for finding solid stones for constructing houses in the past. The new border markers were installed on hard concrete foundation with fences.

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hotly debated. Some people reportedly witnessed that, after the agreement in 1999, the borderline in the area had retreated. I have explored the area around the Friendship Border Gate since 2007. As I saw for myself, the borderline was significantly readjusted again in 2008 just as the demarcation was nearing completion. As I was repeatedly told, an old French photograph of the Friendship Border Gate, found on the wall of several cafes in Lang Son, showed a quite different landscape than the current one. Although the Vietnamese government made the excuse that the landscape had changed in the intervening years and the exact location in this photograph no longer existed, many people were suspicious about the possibility of a secret deal between the two countries. But under pressure of the proposed deadline for the demarcation, and the fact that detailed information concerning certain areas was missing on both sides, Vietnam and China made “a package deal [cả gói]” (ibid., 311). Although it would be difficult to know exactly how territory was getting negotiated in the Friendship Border Gate area, people generally doubted that Vietnam held any sway in negotiations with China.\footnote{According to \textit{Uti Possidetis}, Lang Son province in fact officially agreed to hand over a certain territory to China since Chinese people already occupied the land with 13 houses (Vũ, 2010).} On the edge of territories, the sovereignty of the state is often challenged by an external power. And when the instantiation of sovereignty appears weak, the border region becomes the terrain of a politics of ambivalence against state power and hostility against the external power.
Since the first border marker was installed in Móng Cái, Quảng Ninh province in December, 2001, there have been 1548 official border markers erected along the 1,449.556 km (approximately 901 miles) long border between Vietnam and China (Vũ 2010:322). Among them, Lạng Sơn province has 345 border markers along the 224.588 km (approximately 140 miles) long border (ibid., 401-402). Compared to the 314 pre-existing border markers between the French colonizer and the Qing Court along the entire border (ibid., 214), the number of newly installed official border markers is excessively high. One official who is in charge of the maintenance of the border markers made fun of the landscape of the borderline: “Lạng Sơn is often called “nơi địa đầu Tổ Quốc” [the beginning place of the Fatherland]. “Đầu” means something like “đau đầu” [headache]. Now we have hundreds of “mốc” [landmark] on mountains and valleys. It is like applying acupuncture [châm cứu] to the head and the neck.” Lạng Sơn is the beginning point of National Road No. 1, which ends at Cà Mầu farther south in the country. “Km 0”, where National Road No. 1 meets the Chinese road at the Friendship Border Gate, is commonly considered the beginning point. Before the huge 1116th border marker was installed, the small stone landmark of the “Km 0” under a tree symbolized the Friendship Border Gate.

The installation of the border markers along the mountains and valleys shifted the landscape. Timothy Michel (Mitchell 2002:17) has argued that “the double semiotic structure of landscape-its simultaneous articulation and disarticulation of the difference
between nature and convention-is thus the key element in the elaboration of its “history.” The border markers in this regard are stones embedded in nature as well as imagined as a mark of a lineal and seamless connection of the nation’s border. Each marker has been numbered and inscribed with the national emblem and script. It is also specially maintained by the Party-State. With such particular legibility and maintenance, the markers are not simply connected to each other in the raw but enclose “nature and convention” in fixed coordinates. While the special care they are given differentiates such landmarks from the landscape surrounding them, the legibility of border markers constitutes the magnetic spatialization of sovereignty in a coded landscape.
When I was back to Vietnam in April, 2010, Lạng Sơn province was spotlighted by the state media and became a center of national debates on the Internet. The issue concerned forest leased by foreign companies in the northern border districts of Lạng Sơn province. Only a year after the territorial border demarcation was completed, the borderland fell into a contested terrain of political debate. The symbolic pacification of the disputed border by the demarcation could not alleviate the anxiety of sovereignty at the edge of the nation’s territory. The border of the nation-state continues to be in contestation as a “zone of awkward engagement” (Tsing 2005). The nationalist sentiments embedded in the notion of the border keep haunting the region, while the border serves as a gateway for transnational connections.

The forest issue began to gain the public’s attention as two renowned elder revolutionaries, the former lieutenant-general Đồng Sĩ Nguyên and the former major general Nguyễn Trọng Vĩnh, who also served as an ambassador extraordinary and
plenipotentiary of Vietnam in China (1974-1989), wrote a petition to ask the government to strictly control the issuing of forest leases in the border provinces. The petition, “About the affairs of provinces that foreigners rented the land of riverheads, afforestation and raw materials for a long-term” (January 22, 2010), highlighted that foreign companies from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China had rented 264,000 hectares (approximately 652,358 acres) of forest in 10 provinces of the country; 87% of the rented forest was located in “important [xung yếu]” border provinces. The revolutionaries claimed that this forest leasing scheme could endanger [hiểm họa cực lớn] national security. They asserted that “if the government did not take effective measures, they (foreigners) could transform valuable forest, cultivate land and construct houses for 50 years,” which would be enough time to build “Taiwanese villages, Hong Kongese villages and Chinese villages.”

Many people initially considered the issue as an extensive territorial threat by China. They recalled the series of open letters written by General Võ Nguyên Giáp in 2009 to the prime minister and the Politburo opposing the development of bauxite mines in Tây Nguyên [Western Highlands] by the Chinese. As one of the most popular

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14 Nguyễn Trọng Vĩnh, becoming 99 years old in 2014, has been an active critic of Chinese policies on Vietnam since he served in Beijing during the most hostile period of the relationship between Vietnam and China.

revolutionaries in Vietnam, second only to Ho Chi Minh, General Giap’s letter\textsuperscript{16} actually reminded people of the history of the Cold War era in Vietnam. In the letter, he recalled that the possibility of the development of bauxite mines in Tây Nguyên was dismissed by the multinational investigation with experts from the Soviet Union and members of COMECON in 1980. With his own experience in the investigation, General Giáp asserted that the situation had not changed in the Western Highlands. “The multinational investigation” by which General Giáp legitimatized his argument stimulated the public memory of the extensive socialist friendship in the Cold War era. Since the investigation was conducted with “other” friends excluding China as it was right after the Border War, the letter of General Giáp emphasized that the developer of the Bauxite mine in the Tây Nguyên, the Chinese, could not be reliable as they did not have the reasonable knowledge about the region and the effects of the development.

Right after the Border War, Vietnam accused China of its greed with natural resources in Southeast Asian countries by drawing reference of Mao Zedong.

According to a publication of the CPVN (Sự Thật 1979a),\textsuperscript{17} Mao Zedong elaborated the

\textsuperscript{16} The first letter was sent to the Prime Minister, Nguyễn Tân Dũng, on January 5, 2009 as the Prime Minister issued the permission to develop the bauxite mines in Tây Nguyên by Chinese. The General Giáp also wrote another letter to the Politburo in May, asking to stop the plan. Giáp was at that time 98 years old. Many elderly revolutionaries began to support the General. The public sympathized with the old revolutionary’s concern over the nation-state. Without doubt, the current leadership of the CPVN was challenged by the growing public influence of the elder revolutionaries.

\textsuperscript{17} Nhà xuất bản Sự Thật [Truth Publishing House] is currently Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia - Sự Thật [National Political Publishing House] based in Hà Nội. This particular publishing house is a direct organ of the CPVN and under the Party secretariat.
political intention toward Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, at the meeting of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China in August, 1965:

“We should fight for Southeast Asia including all of South Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia and Singapore...Southeast Asian region is very affluent; there are many mines...deserving the expenses necessarily for exclusive possession [chiếm lấy]...After victory in Southeast Asia, we can strengthen our power in the region; in that time, we will have the power to confront the Soviet Union-East European bloc; the wind of the East will blow away the West…”
(My translation and emphasis; Sự Thật 1979a:19).

Citing the words of Mao Zedong, the CPVN insisted that the primary interest of China in Vietnam would not be a sincere way to build socialist friendship but rather only served to expand its political hegemony as well as to appropriate “affluent” natural resources in the region, through mining and other forms of extraction. Thirty years after the war, the controversial news about the Chinese gaining permission to develop the mines in the highlands recalled Vietnam’s past and it aroused Anti-China sentiments among many people.

The petition to the government extended the public’s concern about the use of forest land in the border provinces. Đồng Sĩ Nguyên, leading the petition and raising public awareness, used to be in charge of Program 327, which aimed to preserved and develop protected forest [rừng phòng hộ] and special forest [rừng đặc dụng]. Like

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18 Chương Trình 327 [the Program 327] was enacted in 1992. It lasted until 2004 as facing the complaints of the local people who participated in the program. For the detail of the Program 327, see Sikor (1995).
19 Rừng phòng hộ [protective forest] generally aims to prevent problems of deforestation such as
General Giáp, his past career buttressed the legibility of the argument in the public discourse.

The right of investment by foreign companies in forest resources was, however, enacted by the law. As Vietnam prepared to enter the WTO, the new investment law, which allowed a foreign company to invest in forest with 100% of its own funds, took effect in 2006. Under the new investment law and regulations, it was not the central government but the provincial People’s Committee which issued licenses to foreign investors. There were public concerns regarding the decentralization of the government control over foreign investment. People and some lawmakers generally expressed worry about prevailing corruption among the local officials in dealing directly with foreign investors. Nonetheless, by dissolving authority to local government, it was expected that the local governments would compete for attracting foreign investments based on local circumstances. While a deluge of foreign investment applications came into Vietnam, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development specifically pushed the local government to encourage and prioritize foreign investments in the forest of the highlands as the Ministry recognized a serious underdevelopment problem in the region. In the special promotion to attract foreign investment, forest land became a desertification, erosion and ecocide. The unauthorized human activities-for instances, logging, illegal settlement and excavation, were strictly banned.

Rừng đặc dụng [Special forest] consists of national parks, wildlife reserves and forest of culture-history-environment.
commodity to be sold by the local government. While its exchange value was determined by the market economy, the use value was undetermined and mostly reserved for foreign investors. In this regard, forest land had lost its symbolic and cultural values and their connection to people’s livelihoods. The commodified forest under the new development regime actually worked to alienate those people living in the highlands.

Although the Vietnamese government had long been promoting the Kinh majority to settle down in the highlands, most Kinh people hesitated to live in forest as it was considered the territory of ethnic minorities. The husband of my host family in Lang Sơn, a Kinh, once told me about his travel to the highlands in neighboring Cao Bằng province. He expressed his fear about the highland minorities and delivered a rumor that ethnic minority tended to poison Kinh guests with food and wine; according to him, they hated the Kinh people. He said he was advised to bring his own food and did not drink any wine with the local ethnic minority while he was with the highland ethnic minorities. As I expressed my suspicion about the story, he insisted repeatedly: “hard to believe? It is true! You should be careful! ... you know they at least now use a lot of chemicals from China without any knowledge of doing so.” The stereotypical story about ethnic minorities was clearly biased and was hard for me to believe, but his stubbornness provided me with a glimpse of the deeply rooted prejudices the Kinh

21 Protection forest and special forest are excluded from the market.
majority held toward ethnic minorities in the highlands. The world of forests has not yet become familiar to the Kinh.

People in Vietnam have long been categorized by a fundamental geographical and spatialized division: Người miền xuôi [the lowlander] and Người miền núi [the highlander]. The former generally indicates people living in the lowland, especially in the Red River Delta [Đồng bằng sông Hồng]. They are generally assumed to be Kinh people engaged in rice farming. The latter implies people living in mountainous regions, mostly ethnic minorities who practices foraging and slash-and-burn agriculture. They are stereotyped as backward and even uncivilized. Many local officials I have met in Lạng Sơn often told me that the government had made great efforts to help them but it turned out to fail due to the “conservatism” [bảo thủ] deeply rooted in the way of life in the highlanders.

As mentioned above, Program 327 offered incentives for individuals to participate in a national re-greening forest program. It encouraged highlanders to settle down in the lowlands as they turned over the forest land rights. Although the demographic landscape has been gradually shifting, the biased view about highlanders is still widespread. In the summer of 2010, while I was on a mini bus to Hà Nội from Lạng Sơn, I happened to eavesdrop on a conversation of two local teenage girls sitting in front of me. A girl talked about her on-line chatting experience with a boy in Hồ Chí
Minh city. As she introduced herself as living in Lạng Sơn province, the boy initially teased her about the highlands. As she retold what the boy said, “Oh, Lạng Sơn, the northern highland [miền núi phía bắc], right? So, do you ride a horse or a buffalo cart to school?” She seemed to be very offended by the boy’s joke. She almost shouted, “The lowlanders [người miền xuôi] still think we are backward and riding a horse or stupidly sitting on a buffalo. Like them, we are also taking a motorbike or a bus like this!” The on-line chatting experience could be a typical anecdote of teenagers. However, it also represents the reproduction of forms of geographical discrimination between the lowlands and the highlands in Vietnam.

According to a government report, about three-quarters of the territory of Vietnam is mountainous area, miền núi. As the elevation of most mountains is lower than 1000 meters (approximately 3280 feet), it actually makes clear that human activities in mountains and forests such as agriculture and reclamation are not difficult to practice.

In the view of environmentalists, the relatively easy accessibility to the highlands could cause deforestation, while the series of wars had already affected many parts of the

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22 On-line chatting on Yahoo messenger was popular as the Internet serve developed in Vietnam. But, since smart phones, affordable ones from China along with luxury phones like Iphone and Galaxy, propagated, Facebook has beaten the popularity of Yahoo in Vietnam. Although Facebook accessibility is often limited, allegedly by the government censorship, the recent report showed that “Vietnam has 10th-large number of Facebook users” in the world (English VietnamNet, November 11, 2014). Ethnic minorities in Lạng Sơn have established their own closed group, “Club Tày Nùng Xứ Lạng,” which has more than 21,000 members. Although people like me could join the club as a member, the on-line club has been serving as a new form of community of ethnic Tày Nùng, who are demographical majority in Lạng Sơn province.

23 “Một số thông tin về địa lý Việt Nam” (http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/NuocCHXHCNVietNam/ThongTinTongHop/dialy); Last accessed on November 12, 2014.
mountains and forests. A local I met in Đà Lạt, Lâm Đồng province in 2010 told me about extensive deforestation in the area as many Kinh people from the Central and Northern provinces migrated after the end of the American War to reclaim hills and forest for their traditional agriculture.

While Program 327 was a comprehensive attempt to re-greening barren forest and protect it from deforestation, at the same time it promoted forest as property of the nation-state by regulating human activities. Program 327 was followed by the Investment Attraction Policy which permitted the long-term lease of forest land by foreign companies as Vietnam joined the WTO. The fever of development in mountainous and forest regions, in which the local government took responsibility to attract foreign capital, aggravated the already existing system of geographical discrimination between the highlands and the lowlands since foreign companies took rights over forest with relatively low competition and little opposition.

As the government and media delved into the issue of the rented forest under the pressure of the public opinion spurred by the elder revolutionaries, it turned out that Lạng Sơn province had the most “Chinese companies” developing forest.24 By “Chinese companies” they included a Hong Kong based company and a Taiwanese company. Taiwanese investment in Vietnam dramatically increased as Vietnam prepared to enter the WTO. As Vietnam strategically needed Taiwanese capital, their complicated

24 Sài Gòn Giải Phóng (June 10, 2010), “Cho thuê đất rừng tran lan.”
relationship during the Cold War was rapidly normalized, even without diplomatic recognition which China opposed. In the period between 1988 and July, 2006, Taiwan finally emerged as the leader in foreign direct investment in Vietnam (H.T. Võ 2008).

As an official of the Department of External Affairs, the People’s Committee of Lạng Sơn province, explained to me: Taiwanese companies need to have countries to invest in and the Vietnamese people were yet uncomfortable with excessive direct investment from China. The advantage of Taiwanese companies is that they could utilize the capacity of ethnic Hoa people and the overseas Chinese network when they invested in Vietnam. In addition, they could also bring Chinese cheap labor to work for them because they already had investment experience in the southern part of China and the local Vietnamese would not be easy to differentiate Chinese from Taiwanese. While Taiwanese companies could take advantage of the situation, Vietnam also strategically expected that Taiwanese and Chinese capital could compete each other based on their historic antagonism. The staff official said, “In reality, no other countries except China might be interested in an investment in Lạng Sơn. But, our local government cannot allow China to control all development plans. If we did, the predatory Chinese businessmen would eat up everything. Also, the local people and the government are very cautious that China might use their investment for threatening us. We have already

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25 Editorial, “Taiwan-Vietnam ties are looking better than ever,” The China Post (November, 2006).
had enough harsh lessons with them. That’s why we prefer Taiwanese companies to come to our province.”

Figure 22: The Captured Web-page of Innov Green. Captured on November 9, 2014. While most sections of the web-page are left blank except some pictures on Gallery Section, the front image showed that a dark and rough skinned hand with unidentifiable ethnic minority custom shakes with a relatively white and soft hand with cuffed suits. The image symbolizes the cooperation between the local and the company but the local was mostly excluded from the company’s project.

In the middle of growing concern over forest land in the border provinces, the Hong Kong based but Taiwanese owned company, InnovGreen, became one of the

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26 The company is strangely owned by a famous Taiwanese American IT businessman, Steve Chang, who founded the cyber security firm, Trend Micro. The company later insisted by a press release that
most controversial foreign companies operating in Vietnam. The company was established and registered in Hong Kong as the founder cared for the legal protection of his business from China. The attempt to gain better legal protection in the globalized economy turned out to be difficult in practice. The favorable condition for capital flows in the then emergent world of globalized neoliberalism actually caused risks for the company. Although the company later strongly argued that the origin of the company not not Chinese but Taiwanese, the state media and people generally considered it a company of China.27 The local people focused on “the origin of the ethnic and business connection” to China rather than differentiating the two. The flexibility of multilateral “Chinese” relations in Vietnam was dramatically repressed as the historic anxiety over China was revitalized. The Taiwanese could not be trusted anymore than Chinese from the PRC. They were the ideological enemy during the Cold War era, long before the 1979 Border War in the history of the SRV.

InnovGreen is a social enterprise (English VietnamNet, February 9, 2011). Many people with whom I discussed the issue doubted the connection between the IT company and the forest investment firm. In fact, InnovGreen is not a non-profit organization but it is registered in Vietnam as a Limited Liability company which simply stated that the goal of the company as “a social enterprise” is “Green Our Earth, Better Our Life” (www.innovgreen.vn). Considering the company’s relation to Trend Micro, the official website of InnovGreen is almost abandoned without any information; Last accessed, November 9, 2014. 27 There were in fact two Korean companies which leased forest in 10 border provinces but their cases were not taken much attention while Taiwanese, Hong Kongese and Chinese companies were conflated as a single entity of the problem. In May, 2014, when the Vietnamese factory workers attacked “Chinese companies” in Đồng Nai province, the primary target, FORMOSA, was in fact a Taiwanese owned company which brought Chinese workers.
According to a comprehensive report by VnEconomy (December 21, 2010),\textsuperscript{28} InnovGreen was licensed to lease 274,848 hectares (approximately 679,164 acres) in 10 border provinces. The area of the rented forest was about 87\% of the total rented forest by all foreign companies. People were generally suspicious why the company particularly targeted [nhắm] forest so much in the border area. Another controversy was that the company could lease the forest land for less than 10 dollars per hectare for 50 years. People also raised the question that the relatively low price of the forest clearly implied that the “economic value” or “productivity” of forest land would not generally meet the interest of a foreign investor, if the price had not been excessively lowered by the local government in a corrupted deal with the company.

In Lạng Sơn province, InnovGreen had its own branch office as the company was able to license the largest area of forest in the province. According to a document submitted to the People’s Committee, InnovGreen acquired the license of afforestation and development of lumbers in 63,000 hectares (approximately 155,676 acres) of forest located in 49 communes of 7 districts in Lạng Sơn province on February 21, 2008.\textsuperscript{29} Among the 7 provincial districts, 4 districts directly face the border with China.

Trang Đình district, located in the northwest of Lạng Sơn, is known as one of the poorest mountainous districts in the province. The forest of 14 communes was leased to

\textsuperscript{28} “Khi InnovGreen xin trả lại đất “nhạy cảm”” VnEconomy, December 21, 2010.
\textsuperscript{29} Công ty TNHH Một Thành Viên InnovGreen Lạng Sơn, No. 1/CV-IGLAS, Lạng Sơn, January 23, 2013.
InnovGreen. The district is strategically important in a military defense point of view since it connects Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn province by National Road 4\(^{30}\) and is the beginning point of National Road 3 which is connected to Hà Nội through other major northern provinces. Despite its strategic location, the district has been one of the poorest districts in the province as it is mostly covered with mountains and forest. InnovGreen proposed its plan of afforestation and development of timber in 14 communes.

Although the company advertised its plan to make a social contribution and collaborate with the local people as a “social enterprise,” the local people in the communes had been suffering from the forest development project since the company began to work in 2008. As a local complained, the salary of labor in the company was far too low. Since the company brought Taiwanese and Chinese workers to work the forest, the chance for local participation was limited. The company planted eucalyptus and rubber trees. The trees could not be processed quickly enough to generate cash. The lumber market was unfortunately shifted already and China could produce lumber several times cheaper than Vietnam.\(^{31}\) The fluctuating market, as everyone knew it, could not guarantee a prosperous future for the local people nor for the forest itself. As a

\(^{30}\) National road 4 which connects the mountainous Cao Bằng through Lạng Sơn to the coast of Quảng Ninh province, is often called as the Historical Road [Đường lịch sử] since the ICP began to liberate villages along the road.

\(^{31}\) A Taiwanese company, Champion Logis, which was also licensed to develop forest in Lạng Sơn, did not actually initiate the project (Kienthuc.net.vn, March 1, 2010); “Chính quyền Lạng Sơn giải thích việc cho nước ngoài thuê rừng” (http://www.baomoi.com/Chinh-quyen-Lang-Son-giai-thich-viec-cho-nuoc-ngoai-thue-rung/45/3917566.epi); Last accessed on November 9, 2014.
local commune official criticized, as the forest would be reserved for unpredictable market for fifty years, no one could imagine how forest would be after such a long leasing period.

While the commune officials and local people grew skeptical about this foreign company, they also faced environmental disaster in the region. InnovGreen built new roads all the way to the top of mountains. Some of existing roads, which the local used to have for foraging and gathering in forest, were expanded for cars and trucks. The road construction greatly changed the landscape of the area. In addition to that, when it rained, soil erosion and landslides demolished villager’s farm and water resources. The local people complained that the situation in communes had grown worse than before the foreign company came in.

The privatization of forest land has also affected villagers’ life. As the company planted young trees and dug numerous holes with drilling machines, the villagers cannot put livestock such as oxes out to pasture around the forest and hill country. There had been several disputes between the company and locals over damaged property. The company finally closed all roads to protect their trees and property rights. Villagers could not access the mountains and forests without the company’s permission. Even the local officials could not know what was actually going on in the forest. In this regard, the villagers acutely felt the loss of their inherited territory on which their livelihoods depended. They raised questions about why the company stripped away
natural forest for uncertain profits, dug holes all over the hills for planting unfamiliar species of trees and made roads all around which resulted in an aesthetically ugly landscape. A commune official even told me he could not understand why the provincial government invited a foreign company to his commune.

In another border district, a foreign investment faced initial resistance from villagers. In Lộc Bình, a Chinese company, Phái Dương Sơn, also attempted to develop the forest. However, the local people rejected the proposal even though the Chinese company was associated with a Vietnamese company. The villagers claimed that they could not allow any foreign company to come in and make money off their commune. As a local claimed, a Chinese company notoriously brought their workers, technologies and equipment, which only alienated the local people from the project. Another local strongly expressed his anti-Chinese sentiment, claiming that his village could not allow “Tàu khấu” [filthy Chinese] to work in the forest.

The development of “cash forest” by the foreign investment in the border region was challenged. While the provincial government outsourced its responsibility to govern forests to foreign companies as a common practice of neoliberal governance, the forest land became the contested terrain of multiple intermingled frictions: property right values, economic fortunes and sustainable livelihoods. Although foreign capital is fetishized in the cult of the local development of underdeveloped forest and
mountainous borderland, in this one instance the villagers learned a lesson about the failure of neoliberal desire to bring prosperity.

As the phantasmatic effect of the foreign capital faded away, nationalist arguments about the logics of foreign investment in the border provinces came to dominate the public debate. Public suspicions about the intention of foreign investment grew and spread rapidly. Local villagers pointed out that the company actually occupied several of the highest mountains around the border and the communes. They saw the building of roads all over the mountains as an example of excessive and destructive development. Since a couple of the rented forests were only several hundred meters from Chinese territory, rumor and conspiracy theories flooded the region. As the low productivity and competitiveness in the forest of the border provinces were obvious, many felt foreign company needed to provide more persuasive reasons for their investment in the region. InnovGreen, a so-called “social enterprise,” failed to challenge the nationalist argument. Its own response to the public accusation was that they were willing to give up the license on the land of Nhạ cảm [the sensitive] and excuse themselves by transferring the responsibility to the local government. In an open letter by InnovGreen (VnEconomy December 21, 2010), the owner of the company insisted that the company did not choose the location of the investment. Rather, it was the local government that introduced the lands to the company for investment. The authority of brokering land deals between the local government and foreign capital
comes into question when the incapacity of neoliberal desire becomes legible, obvious to all.

James Scott (1998:22) once argued that “given the fragility of the simplified production forest, the massive outside intervention that was required to establish,” as he suggested, “the administrator’s forest.” He called it “the administrator’s forest” in order to differentiate it from nationalist forest. The Vietnamese word for forest, “Rừng,” also means wild and savage. While Kinh majority are distanced from “Rừng,” the ethnic Nùng, the demographical majority in Lạng Sơn, has long worshipped the forest [Lễ Cúng Rừng]. The Party-State has tried to “civilize” [văn minh] ethnic minorities living in the forest and relocate them in the lowlands so they could be more effectively governed. The uncivilized and untamed territory undermines the sovereignty of the nation-state. As Hồ Chí Minh emphasized the need to “bảo vệ” [protect] and “xây dựng” [develop] the forest, he also acknowledged the need for governance over the forest. The controversies over foreign investment border forests increased the political anxiety over “wild and savage” lands and pointed to a fundamental contradiction between government desires to both protect and development forest resources.

As the haunting memory of the Border War, which invariably keeps interpellating the physical geography of the borderland, the coexisting governances over the border area has been referenced for fortifying the national sovereignty. In the end, the Vietnamese National Assembly took seriously the issue of forest management in the
border provinces. The central government reclaimed authority over foreign investment in forests. The local government eventually suspended InnovGreen’s proposed projects in Lạng Sơn. A local official, who was in charge of supervising the border area in Trang Dinh district lamented, “Lạng Sơn is a mountainous provinces without any economically feasible mines. If we are not able to lure foreign capital into forest development, the forest will remain forever wild and savage.”
6. Heterotopia of Border Markets

Đồng Đăng có phố Kỳ Lừa
Có Nàng Tô Thị, có chùa Tam Thanh
Ai lên Xứ Lạng cùng anh
Tiệc cống bác mẹ sinh thành ra em.
Tay cầm bầu rượu năm nem
Mằng vui quên hết lời em dặn dò
- A famous Vietnamese folksong [ca dao] about Lạng Sơn

Marketization in the Borderland

The history of border trades in Lạng Sơn goes back to the feudal era when Vietnam had a tributary relationship with China. A distinctive region, “Xứ,” has been

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1 This Ca Dao, or folk song, is well known amongst Vietnamese. It has served as an archetype of the regional identity of Lạng Sơn. Nguyễn Quanh Hynh, a local historian and the former vice chairman of the Association of Literature and Arts, explained the Ca Dao to me. According to his research, this song was first recorded in the late seventeenth century. At that time, the place name of Đồng Đăng, although it now represents a town in the north of Lạng Sơn, was used for the area including Lạng Sơn and other northern provincial districts. In 1831, Lạng Sơn was established as a province and a town. Today, Kỳ Lừa street, the rock of Nàng Tô Thị [Lady Tô Thị] and Tam Thanh temple are located in Lạng Sơn city, not in Đồng Đăng town. Some recent publications have modified the original Ca Dao as “Lạng Sơn có phố Kỳ Lừa...” reflecting these changes. Since the folk song is witty and the rhyming beautifully crafted in the Vietnamese language, many Vietnamese frequently mention it. In the movie, Thị xã trong Tầm tay [A town within an arm’s reach], discussed in Chapter 3, this Ca Dao was used at the beginning. (author’s translation).
defined by its geopolitical location as the last town in Vietnam on the way to Beijing from Hà Nội and the complexity of ethnic diversity compared to other remote, northern parts of Vietnam. The Ca Dao, a form of traditional folk song, describes the “liminality” of the region as a hedonistic trade site. As in the folk song, many men/husbands did not return home as they enjoyed the festivity of affluence and started a new home with an ethnic minority woman. Many local people, especially male Kinh, in Lạng Sơn often recalled such a mythical past of the region by referring to this folk song and affirmed that Lạng Sơn is the historic home of merchants and traders in Vietnam.

The geopolitical importance of the region, however, made it a frequent battlefield. Blood stains on the land have hardly dried up. During the feudal era, the Ming court of China launched invasions by going through this region. During the historic Sino-French war, when French colonialists attempted to expand their rule over the northern part of Vietnam [Tonkin; Bắc Kỳ], they captured Lang Sơn from the Qing court of China. And in 1940, the Japanese Imperial Army attacked Lạng Sơn against the French colonial forces. Its strategic importance has made the region vulnerable to external forces and inscribed instabilities into its social landscape.

The success of the socialist revolution in Vietnam and China brought a relatively peaceful time to the region. In 1965, the historic border pass, Ải Nam Quan [the Zhennan Pass; 鎮南關], was renamed Friendship Pass [Hữu nghị quan; 友谊关] as U.S. aircrafts began to bomb North Vietnam. But, because the U.S. imposed a buffer-zone
restricting its air-strikes from a 25 nautical mile\textsuperscript{2} buffer zone from the border of China, Lạng Sơn and other northern towns became part of a “sanctuary” during the war (Momyer 1978:183). As many local elderly people in Lạng Sơn recalled, life was relatively “bình thường” [normal] during this period compared to other regions, although trains and trucks were busy transporting Chinese aid and young soldiers to the South.\textsuperscript{3} People, in fact, called Lạng Sơn “Nơi cảng” [inner territorial port] since it served as a gateway for aid from China. The territorial connectivity to China made the province as busy and crowded as ever, because many evacuees from other regions came up to Lạng Sơn.

As the flow of commodities from the international aid of the socialist bloc intensified over the border and from the continued production from businesses and special economic zones in the province, people often called Kỳ Lừa street, the traditional business district of Lạng Sơn, “Hong Kong Market” [Thị trường Hồng Không] (Bộ Văn

\textsuperscript{2} It is approximately 46.3km, which is equivalent to 28.8 miles. Lạng Sơn is located only about 18 km (approximately 11 miles) from the border.

\textsuperscript{3} The official historiography of the communist party of Lạng Sơn province (Ban Chấp Hành Đảng Bộ Tỉnh Lạng Sơn, 1996) recorded that there had been several air-strikes over Lạng Sơn and border districts occasionally and, only in the first half of 1965, “about 2000 ethnic minorities joined army in 1965” (87). However, Lạng Sơn served as the sanctuary for important organizations of the Party-State since the U.S. intensified air-strikes over Hà Nội and other northern provinces in 1966. The historiographical record states that: “Lạng Sơn received, one after another the central trust-company [xí nghiệp liên hiệp], the warehouse of the Ministry of Health, the Nam Định textile company, the Bác Sơn cigarette company, the University of Polytechnics [Trường đại học Bách khoa], the University of Civil Engineering [Trường đại học Xây dựng, the School for Southern Students [Trường học sinh miền nam], the general warehouse of the head office of army ordinance (the Ministry of Defense), the School for Military Culture…in safe places in Văn Lạng, Tràng Định, Văn Quan, Bình Gia, Bác Sơn and Lộc Bình districts” (ibid., 107-108). As this historiographical record implies, Lạng Sơn might have been the safest place during the U.S. bombing campaign against North Vietnam.
Hóa 1974:69). The burgeoning of a commodity market in Lang Son, however, was considered problematic when the U.S. air campaign stopped in 1973. Since North Vietnam began to recover its nearly demolished socio-economic structure and re-initiated its socialist path, the outgrown opportunist market desire for what were now a limited base of commodities became a major political challenge for the Party-State. In addition, banal social disorder in the form of stealing, robbery, gambling, alcoholism, deception and unregistered residency (ibid., 70) threatened the security of the province, which was in turn repressed by the reinforcement of the party cells and the police apparatuses.

The Border War against China in 1979 brought an almost complete rupture in the socio-economic structure of Lang Son province. The border was closed and maximum security measures were enacted in the region. Land mines were installed along the border and frequent artillery duels occurred in the mountains around the border. Beginning in late 1984, military conflict began to subside. Then, illegal border-crossings started up. As locals recalled, those border-crossing activities were often fatal, as many smugglers had to go through fields ridden with land mines over the mountains at night. Many people were actually killed as mines blew out. The local people, however, were willing to take this risk as Lang Son province, especially the districts facing the border, had been suffering from extreme poverty since the Border War. Agriculture and forestry were also constrained by the increase in military activities around the region. People
across the country were losing their patience at the failures of the subsidy socialist economy. The border province entirely relied on the central government since the Border War. Nevertheless, the Hà Nội government could not deal with the situation effectively and pushed Stalinist socialism onto the people. While many residents, especially those living on the seashore, attempted to escape to a third country, the border-crossing activities in Lạng Sơn were about smuggling, not exodus. The traumatic memory of the Border War prevented people from even considering going to China for asylum. With residents deeply frustrated by the Party-State, however, cross-border smuggling extended even to “cadres, members of the CPVN, state enterprises and offices and the military” (M.H.Nguyễn 2001: 178). The local government authorities could not handle the situation. So, as the desire to burst open the closed border increased, along with that for a commodity economy, the 6th National Congress of the CPVN enacted the policy of “Đổi Mới” [the Reform policy] in 1986. The Đổi Mới policy included the suspension of the subsidy economy and the adoption of marketization. The 6th National Congress of the CPVN also declared that Vietnam was ready to negotiate with China to resolve the problems between the two countries, normalize its relationship and recover fraternity between the two countries (ibid, 109-109).

There was no wall, but mines and military guard posts crowded the border. While post-socialist China had vigorously adopted a capitalist market economy, Vietnam followed the outdated Stalinist path of socialism. But the border at Lang Sơn
was getting challenged by a rash of smuggling activities, signaling what was now
unavoidable—policy change of the CPVN. People crossing the border would return with
basic necessities that the Party-State could not provide under its socialist subsidy
economy. This spelled out not simply the failure of policy but a breakdown of the
ideological state, as the ethics of the local officials and the party members were
compromised.

With the adoption of the Đội Mói policy, Vietnam initiated “normalizing” the
border provinces. The border defense army which was stationed at the border gradually
retreated and by May, 1987, the main force-unit was completely withdrawn. Right after
such a historical move, the Minister of Transportation visited Beijing and discussed the
possibility of building an international railway connecting the two countries. Vietnam’s
willingness to build a transnational infrastructure with China was a symbolic political
gesture to show its readiness to normalize their relationship.

Prominent changes in the political landscape between Vietnam and China were
made in 1988. Vietnam proposed to China that neither side engage in propaganda or
mutual slander anymore. It even decided to revise the critical phrase it had used about
China being “hegemonist [bá quyền], expansionist [bành trướng] and aggressive [xâm
lược]” in the 1980 Constitution of the SRV, and China reappeared in the state media as
“socialist” since the National Day of the PRC on October 1, 1988 (M.T.Nguyễn 2001:110).
Since there had been no official resolution between the SRV and the PRC concerning the
Border War, these significant revisions in the political rhetoric toward China reflected a serious political and economic urgency on the part of the SRV; indeed, its economy was almost bankrupt and its dependence on the Soviet-led socialist bloc was apparently shaky. While such rash revisions were criticized as displaying a submissive attitude of the CPVN towards the CPC, Vietnam insisted that once Deng Xiaoping, who Vietnam primarily condemned for the Border War, stepped down from office in 1987, the new political leadership of China would be different.

Under these dramatic shifts in the political landscape, the Secretariat of the CPVN Central Committee issued Direction No.118/TB on November 19, 1988, which allowed people living in communes bordering Vietnam and China to visit intimate acquaintances on both sides and to exchange commodities considered necessities. This order meant not only the end of the closed border, but also the legalization of the prevailing cross-border smuggling, although it set limits for people living in border communes. By this regulation, people who had greatly suffered as a result of living in a direct military conflict since the Border War could now have the privilege of visiting China. Considering the demographic composition of border communes, the majority of the residents were ethnic minorities; for example, according to census data of Văn Lãng, a border district in Lạng Sơn province, in 1979, the population of ethnic Nùng was 67 percent, while the Kinh population was only 3.3 percent of the district population (Viện Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam and UBND Huyện Văn Làng 1990:82).
In addition, people who had “intimate acquaintances” on the other side of the border could now have business transactions as trades were generally based on informal barter or a credit system. In many cases, people who fled to China before the Border War now attempted to recover close relationships with the local villagers in Vietnam. As the situation in the border began to normalize, the Hoa people, who evacuated before the Border War, also began returning to their previous homes.4

Opening the border under limited circumstances brought a serious political problem to Vietnam. According to Direction (No. 04-VKS/CT, May 6, 1989) by the Supreme People’s Procuracy of Vietnam [Viện Kiểm sát Nhân dân Tối cáo], since the government issued permission—for limited travel, travel, and exchange—to people living in communes on both sides of the border, the situation became “very complicated” [rất phức tạp] and “very chaotic” [rất hỗn loạn] in the borderland. As it pointed out, many people who did not live in the communes also went across the border. This included several officials of government offices who visited deeper into China including cities and other Chinese provinces of China that fell outside the boundary allowed for commune residents. Chinese visitors also violated the set

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4 The Lụu family, in Chapter 4, was also returning in this period. In the border provinces, the returnees caused serious communal disputes over property rights as they reclaimed land and houses that had been occupied by other residences after the Border War. As the People’s Committee of Cao Bằng province urgently requested the government to provide directions on how to resolve these problems in September 28, 1988 (No. 285-UB/NC), the Prime Minister responded by the Direction (No. 15-CT, January 23, 1989), “Resolutions for residence and houses of the Hoa in the northern border provinces,” suggesting guidelines. The Direction (No. 15-CT, January 23, 1989) actually limited the conditions for reclaiming the property and residence rights of the Hoa. See more detailed discussion in Chapter 4.
boundary and traveled to southern cities and provinces of Vietnam which might threaten the safety and sovereignty of Vietnam. The directive also pointed out that restricted “strategic goods” [hàng chiến lược] of Vietnam such as rice, oxen [trâu bò], oils, valuables [liệu quý], cooper, aluminum, iron were getting smuggled out to China\(^5\) in exchange for wines, beads, cigarettes, and fire-crackers.\(^6\) The repressed desire of consumerism was emerging as the frozen border was melting down. This seriously undermined the governance of the Party-State.

The fever of trade in the northern borderlands developed greatly nationwide since international trade with the socialist bloc, COMECON, dramatically decreased beginning in the 1980s.\(^7\) While Vietnam suffered from the failure of the socialist economy, international trade with its major trading partners in COMECON plummeted as well. In fact, the only reliable source for the alleviation of the economic woes the country faced was turning a blind-eye to illegal trading activities in the northern border provinces. As a local businessman recalled, “in those days, people from the delta, người xuôi, even from the southern Mekong delta region, Hồ Chí Minh City, came up to Lạng Sơn.”

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\(^{5}\) The biggest problem caused by the smuggling of metal to China by Vietnamese was the fact that this destroyed the infrastructure (for communication and social interchange) of telephones, electric cables, and machinery in the state-owned companies. As many people in Lạng Sơn I interviewed told me, they were busy after school because they went around collecting metal to exchange for Chinese goods.

\(^{6}\) The excessive import and smuggling of fire-crackers [pháo] from China was one of the biggest challenges confronting the Vietnamese government since these crackers are central in all traditional rituals and celebrations. Finally, in 1994, the government made consumption of this product illegal at any occasion.

\(^{7}\) The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 forced Vietnam to acknowledge the undeniable danger of international isolation. As a local official in Lạng Sơn recalled, political insurgency in China, including the Tiananmen Square protest in 1989, constituted a political urgency shared in both countries about how to protect the Communist Party.
Sơn to buy goods.” While the implementation of the de-collectivization and
marketization of the national economy, enacted by the Đổi Mới policy, was staggering
nationwide, the northern borderlands could serve as the primary experimental site of
marketization. Lạng Sơn served as the center of the nationwide distribution ring since
local businessmen in the province almost monopolized [độc quyền] imports from China.

The marketization of the economy in Vietnam was propelled by the people, not
the Party-State. When governance over the borderland became lenient, people in Lạng
Sơn took advantage of the situation. Many families suddenly became rich. Particularly,
the ethnic Hoa businessmen who collaborated with the Chinese rapidly recovered their
economic status and their economic success generally exceeded that of the Kinh majority
(Chau 2000).

The transitional period of the northern borderlands in Vietnam began to end as
Vietnam and China signed the normalization of their relationship in 1991. As a
supplement to the normalization, the two countries agreed to establish markets in the
border towns (M.H.Nguyễn 2001). The construction of border markets by the two
countries signaled a new era for the border province. The governments on both sides of
the border have collaborated in governing and policing the borderland together. This
has affected what once was the “free trade” over the border, practiced by local people.
The planned border markets, put in place by government regulations and transnational
agreements, allow for cross-border trading activities that blur the distinction between legality and illegality.

Figure 23: “The Landscape of Trading Goods through Tân Thanh border gate in Lạng Sơn, 1990.” Although the picture shows an orderly border-crossing of a woman carrying a sack, right above this is a woman carrying goods by “gánh” [a pole on a shoulder] on the left corner) which was taken while she was avoiding supervision. The Tân Thanh border gate in Văn Lãng district has been transformed into a major border market in Lạng Sơn. Photo taken by author at the Border Defense Museum [Bảo Tàng Biên Phòng] on July, 30, 2007.
Smuggling Dystopia or Shopping Paradise?

“Buying holds friends, Selling holds groups.”

“Buôn có bạn, Bán có phường.”

- A Vietnamese proverb about business

Since the normalization of the relationship between Vietnam and China in 1991, political concerns over the border have been focused on the flow of commodities. Persistent smuggling activities at the border raise anxieties within the government. The matter of unaccountability of the national economy could harm the sovereignty of the Party-State. The overflow of Chinese goods could affect the development of national production and circulation. As the volume of smuggled goods is excessively high, it could hinder the enumeration of commodity consumption. In order to curb this situation, Vietnam introduced “tariffs on certain imported goods, and more importantly tightened control in the border areas” in 1993 (Amer 2004:336). Although various government measures have been introduced, the smuggling across the porous terrestrial border has not been effectively controlled.

For local people, the anti-smuggling campaign by the government has generally been understood as a threat to their livelihood. When I attended an offline meeting of
the local on-line community, LangSon.name, in 2009, I shared my experience on the way to Hà Nội from Lạng Sơn a week ago. When I caught a minibus on the street bound for Hà Nội, the bus driver, as usual, drove around streets throughout the city for an hour as an assistant took endless phone calls from customers. No customers on board knew when the bus would finally head onto National Road 1 for Hà Nội. The bus kept moving around and “catching customers” [Bắt Khách]. On that day, the bus stopped at a house and picked up boxes. Due to the excessive amount of boxes, I could not even put my legs down but the assistant said, “no problem” [không sao]. Fully packed with customers and boxes of goods, the bus was finally ready to head out for Hà Nội. But after less than a half an hour of being on National Road 1, the bus drove back to Lạng Sơn. The police—not the traffic police but the “economy police” [cảnh sát kinh tế]—had stopped the bus. After inspecting the bus thoroughly, they made it turn back to the local office of the economy police. When the bus arrived there, the owners of the goods stored in the bus anxiously welcomed us in front of the gate. All the passengers had to get out and wait for the confiscation of the goods and the documentation of the violation.

Since I joined the forum and attended its first year anniversary meeting, I have been an active “foreign” member of the community. The forum was developed by two local teachers in Lạng Sơn. It had served as the largest internet community of the people of Lạng Sơn. In 2014, due to the overwhelming popularity of Facebook among users of smartphones and frequent government censorship of sensitive posts, administrators decided to suspend the website and archive the posts. The forum has also moved to Facebook but the activities of members dramatically subsided. One of the administrators told me that the rapid individualization in using the Internet could not be caught by the traditional online forum format and young members felt irritated by censorship of their postings.
reports. If goods lack proper papers [không có hóa đơn hay giấy tờ] this generally means they are smuggled goods; such goods are often confiscated on National Road No.1 or the train from Lạng Sơn to Hà Nội. As I shared the story with young local members of the community, they had a strong reaction. Although I originally intended to express my unfortunate experience about missing a dinner appointment in Hà Nội due to the travel delay, several members condemned the inspection and the police. While they assumed that the police had surely asked for bribes from the owners of the goods, they also said the harsh crackdown on smuggling did not respect the livelihood of people in Lạng Sơn. A young female student said, “In Lạng Sơn, I swear that every family is related to the smuggling business. Differences can only be found with the scale of smuggling. My mother does it for my family. Who could blame people like my mother? Lạng Sơn does not have enough rice fields like in the delta provinces. People in Lạng Sơn are traditionally practicing business with Chinese on the other side of the border. Who could prevent it then? It’s absurd. While the policemen and custom officials should be keeping their eyes focused on the big smugglers from the delta region, they frequently harass our people.” She strongly criticized the corruption of the local authorities, but at the same time advocated for small scale smuggling as a means of subsistence.

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9 I actually have had several experiences like this while traveling to Hà Nội.
The ethical dilemma posed by smuggling has been extended now to a matter of livelihood in Lạng Sơn. The government measures regulating the market have also been modernized and made more sophisticated as Vietnam prepared to join the WTO. Vietnam submitted its application to the WTO in 1995, which was followed by “a memorandum on the foreign trade regime, covering all aspects of its trade and legal regime” according to the WTO regulation. Since the WTO practically scrutinizes “all aspects” of the political economy of Vietnam, the Vietnamese government needs to sanitize and modify its socio-economic structure in response to the WTO. The establishment of “free market” in the world by the WTO has in fact brought ambivalent effects regarding smuggling. As the WTO ultimately attempts to remove any tariffs on imported goods, it actually minimizes the price difference between the legally imported goods and smuggled goods. The advantage of smuggled goods is weakened as commodities with reduced/removed tariffs became competitive with smuggled ones.

WTO regulations require a generalized market condition for all foreign trade regimes. It promotes multilateral trade, which prevents government intervention of any market such as allowing anything that will privilege the commodities of a specific country. These aspects of the WTO regime have forcefully transformed the situation in the border provinces. As the benefit of smuggled goods now decreases in terms of price

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10 “How to become a member of the WTO” (http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/acces_e.htm); Last accessed on November 15, 2014.
competition, the cheaper goods available for smugglers become fake, low-quality, or uninspected goods. In addition, the generalized market condition throughout the country usurps what once were the privileges of location of the border market. The northern border region is no longer the gateway for imported commodities from other countries. When the border market in Tân Thanh was first established, the two countries agreed to designate this area a “tax-free” zone. But recently a “duty-free” shop, although it is mostly closed, was built in the area as the market lost its tariff privilege on imported goods. Due to such changes in the market, the smuggling business has tended to move onto more profitable commodities such as drugs, firearms, counterfeit and uninspected goods, and agricultural products, the prices of which fluctuate by season and weather changes. In fact, the WTO’s free-market policy encourages smuggling as people widely practice arbitrage. The WTO regulates the market but does not concern itself over actual transactions. The difference in export and import price on the same product is not something they are concerned with. For instance, Vietnamese lychees can be exported from China at a much lower price than they cost in Vietnam; so, they were smuggled to Vietnam and sold in Lạng Sơn. In this neoliberalization of the market in Vietnam, even small scale smugglers have been demonized as a “social evil” because items that are profitable commodities for smugglers are mostly banned for importation and circulation.

11 Tiếng Phòng (June, 29, 2014), “Quả vải Trung Quốc xuất hiện ở Việt Nam.”
When I returned to Lạng Sơn in 2010, there was a nationwide debate over the smuggling activities in Lạng Sơn province. In the border provinces, smuggling activities seasonally skyrocket before the Lunar New Year Festival. As Trần Thế Dũng, a reporter at the *Workers* newspaper [*Người Lao Động*]¹², tried to cover scenes of smuggling live poultry¹³ across the border, he was attacked by a group of smugglers in Đồng Đăng town, Cao Lộc district, Lạng Sơn province, on January 6, 2010.¹⁴ He was in fact familiar with the region and an experienced reporter of poultry smuggling activities in Lạng Sơn province. When the global fear of bird flu and swine flu pandemic peaked in 2009, Vietnam imposed a strict control over the traffic of livestock, especially from China.¹⁵ Lạng Sơn province, the closest border province to the capital city, was an exemplary site of control and was seen as the preemptive place of prevention of the pandemic by the

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¹² *Người Lao Động* [Workers] newspaper belongs to the labor union of Hồ Chí Minh city. The newspaper was one of the new newspapers published in Hồ Chí Minh city (1975) right after the liberation of the south.

¹³ The primary type of poultry smuggled from China are chickens (Gà Trống Thiến; castrated cocks). As a local vendor in Đồng Đăng told me, the price of a live chicken on the other side of border [bên kia; China] is about half that in Vietnam. Live chickens are culturally popular in Vietnam, and their consumption skyrockets before and after the Lunar New Year Festival. In Lạng Sơn, “duck feet” fries and “chicken feet” BBQ restaurants are also popular and inexpensive. An owner of a restaurant told me that those products in bulk are smuggled from China.

¹⁴ The initial report about the incident appeared on *Người Lao Động* (January 7, 2010).

¹⁵ Natalie Porter (2013a, 2013b) pioneered an anthropological approach to the competition between global health interests and the Party-State regime over the control of avian and swine flu in Vietnam. She, however, did not take into account the flooding of the market by smuggled poultry while Vietnamese government focused its efforts on controlling the domestic poultry farms. The most recent report about smuggling in Lạng Sơn province revealed that the local authorities had found 13,400 smuggled chickens and ducks in only a half month (Nông Nghiệp Việt Nam, July 24, 2014, “Lạng Sơn: Giới gà lậu “ngủ đông”!”). The numbers excluded the successful distribution of the smuggled chickens and ducks, which could be actually many times larger than the seized stock of poultry in a commune of border districts in Lạng Sơn province.

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Party-State. The reporter investigated the issue closely and he wrote about the failure of stopping the poultry smuggling business in the province.\textsuperscript{16}

The incident happened while the reporter attempted to follow up on the situation of smuggling. After he took several pictures of smuggling activities at night, he was severely beaten by a group of smugglers, to the point of unconsciousness. Adding to the insult, he claimed, he was brought to the local police station by one of the primary attackers. The attacker handed him over to the local police station, asking them to inspect his camera. At the police station, the seriously wounded reporter was transferred to a provincial hospital.

When the incident was reported, the Vietnamese Journalist Association [Hội Nhà Báo Việt Nam] appealed to local authorities to investigate the case. Public opinion also vehemently condemned the incident as a gag upon freedom of speech about a corruption practice which the Party-State frequently attempted to hide from the public. The case stimulated public anger as the local authorities handled it in a strange way. The investigation report concluded that the case did not need to be prosecuted since the injury of the reporter suffered did not hurt more than 11 percent of his entire body.\textsuperscript{17} In fact, the investigation by the local authorities did not happen until two months after the incident itself occurred, with local authorities announcing that they would not take any

\textsuperscript{16} Trần Thế Dũng, “Gà lậu lại tràn qua biên giới” (Người Lao Động, June 5, 2009).
\textsuperscript{17} The civil law of Vietnam actually states that if more than 11 percent of a person’s body is injured, the assailant should be prosecuted. The reporter was diagnosed as having only 2 percent of his body injured by the assailant.
legal action over the incident. A wave of public anger erupted after the announcement. The public strongly insisted that the group of the smugglers and the local authorities must have collaborated in beating up the reporter. Some even claimed that everyone in Lạng Sơn must be connected through smuggling. A nationwide petition to revoke the decision of the local authorities ensued, and it was finally re-investigated by the central government and the assailant was prosecuted in the end.

The local response to the case was ambivalent. While many people agreed that smuggling livestock from China could threaten public health in Vietnam, they showed that they were uncomfortable about the role of the mediascape in Lạng Sơn province. The prevalence of smuggling activities has symbolized the image of the province through the coverage of the state media. Many people self-mockingly asked, “is there anything good about this province these days?” As a local businessman complained, since any car with the plate number beginning 12—the provincial identifier number—is frequently stopped by the police on the national roads, many people try to register their cars in Hà Nội by paying the extra cost for a broker. The national imagination of Lạng Sơn province has become a “heterotopia” (Foucault 1986) of the nation-state, which distorts the utopian desire about it. In this view, the heterotopic border province could harm and destroy the entire nation-state. Thus, it is policed closely and the central government intervenes in it. The borderland as a deviant and chaotic space, however, renews the utopian imagination of the nation-state.
Lang Sơn, as known to Vietnamese people, had also been “Thiên Dương Mua Sắm” [Shopping Paradise]. The availability of various imported commodities with cheap prices had been celebrated by the public desire of consumerism in Vietnam. Chợ Kỳ Lừa [The Kỳ Lừa market] and relatively new Chợ Đông Kinh [the Đông Kinh market] were popular destinations for shoppers from all over the country. However, since those markets were located in the center of the city, local authorities occasionally targeted them in the campaign of “anti-smuggling” [chống buôn lậu] and “imposing taxation” [nộp thuế]. As shop owners in the two markets complained, if they strictly followed the government policy, there would be no way to offer a competitive price to shoppers.

After the Tân Thanh border market was built as part of the bilateral border economic zone, shoppers preferred to go there instead of to the traditional markets in Lạng Sơn. In Tân Thanh market, however, the shop owners are mostly Chinese and Vietnamese from the delta region. As an official in charge of managing the market said, about 70 percent of shop owners are not local residents. In summer, 2010, when I wanted to buy a wall clock of Hồ Chí Minh for a present in the market, the shop owner was busy closing his business even though it was only around 3 pm. He was actually Chinese, so he had to go back to his home before the border gate was closed.\(^{18}\) I was surprised, since his Vietnamese was near native. As I asked about the different design of the Hồ Chí Minh

\(^{18}\) Vietnam and China have a one-hour time difference. The border gate closes according to one’s business hour. The gate practically opens and closes according to China standard time.
clock, he said he would order it and that it could be ready the next day. The Hồ Chí Minh clock was in fact produced in China, brought to Vietnam by Chinese and sold by a Chinese shop owner in the border market.

Although some organized shopping travelers visited Tân Thanh, Kỳ Lừa and Đồng Kinh markets on weekends or before the Lunar New Year Festival, the number of visitors has been dramatically reduced since 2007—when Vietnam joined the WTO. Shoppers coming to Lạng Sơn bought blankets, dishes or other low-priced daily necessaries. “No one these days wants to buy any electronics without warranty in Vietnam,” a shop owner in Đồng Kinh market said. The consumer culture in Vietnam does not always prefer to buy cheap goods without taking the risk of deception or disorder. Lạng Sơn used to be a shopping Mecca of new electronics but now the franchised phone and electronics shops in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh city have opened branches. A new modern shopping center was built in Phú Lộc, Lạng Sơn as part of the new urban planning. The shopping center, “Chợ Lạng Sơn,” was closed in 2009 only after less than a year of operation. The shop owners of the Đồng Kinh market went on strike in 2011 as the new managing company attempted to raise the rent and fees for management. An owner of a kiosk told me that no one could afford the rent as few shoppers came to Lạng Sơn anymore. The Tân Thanh market has almost closed as many shop owners gave up their business and went back to their hometowns.
The decline of the border markets does not mean the border trade between Vietnam and China has been reduced. In fact, the flow of commodities over the border has continuously increased year by year. The line of containers awaiting customs inspection at the Tân Thanh market is often longer than several kilometers. But the shifting borderscape has seen the disappearance of shopping fever. The neoliberalization of the market in Vietnam has flattened the geography of markets in other provinces. The border markets have lost their characteristics of being suppliers of particular products, as all markets should be equally governed according to WTO regulations.

The introduction of neoliberalism has also reconstituted consumer culture throughout Vietnam. Buying and selling was traditionally considered a way of building and expanding relationships in the community. Even the local smuggling business was not an exception as smugglers took advantage of kinship or communal relationships. However, the buying and selling commodities is a form of contract. Transactions are not about people but are only about commodity itself. The smuggling business in the area has also been transformed. An owner of a clothing shop in Kỳ Lụa market said she placed an order in advance over the Internet and went to China to bring it back by giving it to a group of smugglers, who are usually ethnic minorities living in the border communes.19 She said, “Everything has changed in Lạng Sơn. It will continue to change.

19 A local shop owner in 2012 told me that one day he received a huge box written in Chinese. It was accidently misdelivered to him by a motorbike rider of an ethnic minority. The owner asked the man what’s inside and who sent the box to him but he could not answer the questions and just said he was ordered by
The only certain thing is that any business in Lạng Sơn will face more difficulties and people will get poorer. That’s for sure.”

**Figure 24: At the Tân Thanh Border Gate. Photograph by author, January 4, 2009.**

his boss to deliver it to the shop. The delivery man left quickly and the shop owner could not help accepting the box. He was afraid of the box since it could cause a big problem with the original recipient and the local authority. He decided to post a picture of the box on the Internet (Facebook) and then someone who could read Chinese on the box replied that the box would be full of anti-biotic pills from China. The shop owner said, “I wanted to find the original recipient. But I should remove the post immediately after I was warned by others that Facebook would be monitored by the authorities. I had to throw the box away secretly.”
Figure 25: Smuggling at the Tân Thanh Border Gate. Ethnic minorities usually carry light commodities such as toilet paper and disposable toothbrushes from China; custom officers and inspectors usually close their eyes to this small scale smuggling carried out by local ethnic minorities since the carrier work is the only available job for the minorities. Photograph by author, June 9, 2010.
7. Epilogue

Lang Son 2014

In the middle of the conflict over the East Sea (the South China Sea), about 500 workers in the Vietnam-Singapore Industrial Park in Thuận An town, Bình Dương province gathered with national flags and banners around 4pm on May 12, 2014 to protest China’s violation of Vietnam’s sovereignty. News of the protest spread rapidly to other workers in the industrial park as the protest was held around the time that workers usually went home. The next morning, protest against China was organized throughout the area. About 19,000 workers joined the protest and became violent, attacking and attempting to destroy companies with ownership based in Taiwan, China, Korea, Japan and other countries. Protests were also organized in Hà Tĩnh province in central Vietnam. On the wall of a factory in Bình Dương, a worker wrote with red color paint spray: “Protect Jobs, Protect Paracel and Spratly Island.”

Chinese workers at Formosa, a Taiwanese company, in Hà Tĩnh province were attacked by Vietnamese protesters. Two workers were killed and 140 workers were injured. China responded to the situation seriously. As proposed during the ethnic Hoa

1 VnEconomy (May 14, 2014), “Bình Dương trấn an nhà đầu tư sau “sự kiện 13/5.”
crisis in 1978, China sent a ship to Vietnam in order to rescue its workers and bring them back to the country on May 19, 2014.

As the Chinese ship entered Vietnamese waters, rumors circulated over the Internet that PLA had concentrated troops in Pingxiang, Guangxi, China in preparation for war against Vietnam, and that the Friendship Border Pass in Lạng Sơn had already been closed by China. This was shocking news. Hearing it, I started contacting all the people I knew from Lạng Sơn. But my friends replied that they were fine and nothing was happening there. One of my closest “brothers,” the local correspondent for Tiền Phong newspaper, reported on May 21 that military training sessions had actually taken place on both sides of the Friendship Border Gate on May 19 but around 2,000 people had travelled through the gate as usual. The rumors of Chinese take-over were not true. Yet, Vietnamese people around the country, were reminded of the Border War against China 35 years ago and looked anxiously at the Friendship Border Gate in Lạng Sơn.

About a month before the workers’ riot, Tân Thành Border Gate was clogged by hundreds of containers filled with watermelons from the central provinces of Vietnam. In recent years, from late March to April, containers of watermelons are rushed to Lạng Sơn for export to one of the biggest buyers of Vietnam’s agricultural products, China. China often slows down the inspection process, however. Then, watermelons rot in their containers and trucks or get abandoned on the street. Lạng Sơn people call this annual event at the border gate the “season of watermelon [mùa dưa hấu]” when local people,
who do not grow watermelons, can eat them for free. But, in the last couple of years, the number of containers has been increasing too dramatically. The smell of rotten watermelons fills the border markets and gates. Environmental concerns have grown seasonally.

A local official said in 2012, “Farmers in the central provinces don't know how the market works. When they learned that they could sell watermelons for a better price at the border, they hired containers and trucks to transport their watermelons there. But they are still too naïve. When China slows down or closes the border at their side for importing, the farmers lose everything. Exporting to China should not be a game of gambling. The farmers need to learn market strategies [chiến lược thị trường]. You know, Vietnamese don’t even have a card to play with the Chinese. We just have watermelons.”

In November, 2014, the police in Lạng Sơn initiated its annual end-of-the-year anti-smuggling campaign in the communes of the border region. The police found 65 motorbikes which were they assumed were being used for smuggling over the mountains. Most of them were “Minsk,” one of the most popular motorbike models for highlanders and smugglers, and also a representative good of the Soviet Union. The police also found tricycles used for carrying smuggled goods in towns. Riding tricycles on the streets is, in fact, banned by traffic laws, and tricycles themselves are generally

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2 Tiện Phong (November 24, 2014), “Kinh hoàng 'hung thần xa lổ' nơi biên giới”
smuggled into Vietnam from China. However, an official of market management in Đồng Đăng said to Tiền Phong, the tricycles on the streets are a “delicate matter [nhạy cảm].” He added, “The drivers are usually middle-aged, disabled veterans.” In fact, there are no jobs available for them except delivering smuggled goods on smuggled tricycles.

The landscape of the borderland today is interwoven with memories of the Border War against China thirty five years ago and with the everydayness of negotiating one’s livelihood in a market economy increasingly dependent on China. People in the borderland deal with this all the time. For they live in a zone where the Friendship Border Gate is still a gate of suspicion, that opens a flow—to/from the other side—that remains laden with distrust, inequity, threat. Factory workers in Lang Son, for example, feel that their job security is endangered by Chinese workers: a sign of economic precarity as much as that of the violation of national sovereignty by the Chinese government. Meanwhile, farmers’ dreams of economic fortune get rotten with watermelons at the border all the while smuggling in the borderlands persists, and persists to be morally “sensitive [nhạy cảm].” These dynamics are complex and will continue to affect peoples’ lives at the border and be contested and negotiated in the process.

“Politics is the continuation of war by other means (Foucault 2003: 48).”
Appendix A: Maps

Source: “Map of Administrative Divisions” (Central Intelligence Agency 2001).
Source: “Map of Lạng Sơn” (http://investinvietnam.vn/data/image/LangSon.jpg)
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