ABSTRACTS

Political Review: Vietnam in 2017

Carlyle A. Thayer, The University of New South Wales Canberra

This presentation considers major political events in Vietnam at national and local level during 2017 with a focus on Vietnam's main political institutions: the Vietnam Communist Party, the Government and the National Assembly.

The Political Review is divided into six parts. Part 1 discusses the outcome of the fifth plenum of the Vietnam Communist Party's Central Committee held in early May, including the dismissal of Dinh La Thang from the Politburo and the ensuing leadership reshuffle. Part 2 focuses on the role of the Prime Minister and Cabinet during the year, including the handling of the Formosa toxic fish case. Part 3 reviews the decisions of the National Assembly Standing Committee and the legislative outcomes of the National Assembly's third session (May 22-June 21). Part 4 appraises the Anti-Corruption Campaign involving officials from PetroVietnam, Ocean Bank and Sacombank including the extraordinary kidnapping of PetroVietnam subsidiary executive Trinh Xuan Thanh from Germany. Part 5 reviews the crackdown on bloggers and human rights/pro-democracy activists. Part 6 addresses the theme of this year's update, the Politics of Life, by critically evaluating four contending schools of thought that attempt to explain how Vietnam's one-party system functions: elite power struggle (Zachary Abuza), contending policy currents (Alexander Vuving), paper Leviathan (Adam Fforde and Lada Homutova) and sectoral representation (Carl Thayer).

Vietnam's Economy in 2017 and Beyond

Vu Thanh Tu Anh, Fulbright School of Public Policy and Management, Vietnam

The new government took office in April (and again in July) with serious unresolved legacy, including very high non-performing loans in the banking sector, inefficient state-owned enterprises, unsustainable fiscal deficit, and soaring public debts. Externally, the death of TPP, the delay of EV-FTA, and China's growing assertiveness in regional maritime conflicts impose further constraints on Vietnam growth. This paper will review these internal and external difficulties and their implications for the government's economic strategy. It then presents the government economic priorities in the short and medium terms. The paper also analyzes the politics behind some of Vietnam's grand challenges, including natural and man-made environmental problems, conflicts over land ownership, increasingly more open society, and high-level corruption. Finally, the paper provides a perspective on the medium- and long-term future of Vietnam's economy looking forward.

On the Political Economy of Rice Policy in Vietnam

Hoa-Thi-Minh Nguyen and Do Lien Huong, Australian National University (Paper co-authored with Adrian Kay, Tran Cong Thang and Nguyen Thi Cam Nhung)

Rice is important in the global food security agenda. The success of this agenda is highly vulnerable to volatility in the world rice market, which is the thinnest among world key cereal markets and often distorted by government interventions. Existing literature suggests that these interventions are damaging and not economically efficient. This paper goes one step further, asking not which policies were adopted and whether they were efficient, but rather why they were adopted. This question aims to explain the behaviour of a government by unfolding the objectives revealed in its policies and the process that leads to those policies. To answer this question our paper relies on insights from Vietnam as a case study. This case was chosen not only because Vietnam is a key rice exporter, having a sizeable impact on the world rice market, but also because of its unique success in overcoming the inherent tension between socialist and market-based objectives during its transition from a socialist to a market-based economy with a socialist orientation. Using a political economy approach, we find that the rice sector in Vietnam has not been reformed to fully follow market rules despite Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization.

This is due to the interaction of economic liberalisation processes and the ruling Communist Party's political survival strategy. In this context, seeming economic disequilibria are shown to be stable, enduring policy settings. In open economy politics, the case reveals how economically sub-optimal policies may be successful politically even in the face of what appear to be severe domestic political constraints on reform and external economic pressures.

The Dynamics of Inequality in Vietnam

Nguyen Tran Lam (Oxfam, Vietnam), Nguyen Viet Cuong (Mekong Development Research Institute) and Hoang Xuan Thanh (Ageless Consultants, Vietnam)

Vietnam has a strong record of poverty reduction but today increasing inequality is threatening decades of progress. Economic inequality is rapidly growing. In 2014, Vietnam's 210 super-rich individuals (each with more than $30 million) together earn more than enough in one year to lift 3.2 million people out of poverty. In some provinces income disparity between the 20% richest households and 20% poorest households is 21 times.
Adding to the economic inequality is the complementary nature of inequality of voice and opportunities along gender, ethnic and geographic lines. Voice inequality interacts and intersects with overt discrimination and neglect of disadvantaged groups in policy design, and more often, policy implementation. The result is inequality of opportunity, social exclusion and limited social mobility. Millions of ethnic minorities, small-scale farmers, migrant workers and women are more likely to be poor, excluded from services and political decision-making, and to face the most discrimination.

Based on findings of our most recent studies on inequality and related themes we argue that the rising inequality in Vietnam is structured around five main drivers: governance, tax system, socialisation of public services, waging and civic participation. Accordingly, the analysis will include both the poor and the rich, focusing on five themes: education, health care, income, connection, and social mobility. Some comparisons with other countries in South East Asia will be described.

Micro-politics of Contemporary Land Disputes in Vietnam

Andrew Wells-Dang, Oxfam in Vietnam

Disputes over land tenure, use, and conversion form an increasing majority of local conflicts over development in Vietnam, making up as many as 90% of reported complaints and denunciations both before and after passage of the 2013 Land Law. Previous research on land disputes has examined the political economy, causes, and legality of land, as well as in-depth analyses of specific cases. Less emphasized to date have been the identities, interests and networking among Vietnamese citizens in the politics of land. This paper seeks to understand the ground-level realities faced (and created) by local citizens, activists, and NGO workers who have interests in resolving disputes.

The theoretical basis for the paper comes from literature on contentious politics (including 'rightful resistance'), social networks, and land governance. The discussion takes an actor-centred approach, describing land disputes from the perspectives of participants in multiple land disputes in Vietnam over the past five years. Views of government agencies (at multiple levels) and private (or SOE) investors are also considered, mainly in how they interact with and respond to citizens. Data sources include interviews; the author's experience with civil society-led coalitions; and media, academic, and government reports and documentation.

The paper concludes with assessments about the current situation of land disputants and their actions, and the potential for change in the near future. As land disputes are a microcosm of the 'politics of life', the paper also sheds light on collective action on other topics of high public concern in contemporary Vietnam.

ABSTRACTS

Environment and Conservation: People, State and Civic Space in Vietnam

Hiep Duc Nguyen, Ton Duc Thang University, Ho Chi Minh City

This paper discusses the evolution and expansion of civic space in Vietnam and contests between people/civil organisations and the government over the issue of environment and conservation. Such an issue is seen to be less politically charged than other topics, and therefore provides an umbrella for activists and citizens to air their grievances on the environment and other governance issues. By examining some case studies, this paper also attempts to answer the question of whether the problem of environmental degradation is the result of a lack of enforcement and regulation, as viewed from the government's perspective, or stems from deep-seated institutional structures which need overhauling, as suggested by many activists.

The case studies, which are examined in detail here, are the Vedan water pollution scandal in Thi Vai river, the bauxite mining development in the Central Highlands, the proposed dams in Cat Tien National Park (Dong Nai province), the power plants in Binh Thuan province, the Ha Tinh Formosa marine pollution along the coast of Central Vietnam and the conservation of colonial heritage buildings in Ho Chi Minh City. Even though each of these cases is different with regards to their nature, scale of citizen involvement and end results, they share a common theme, which is the active involvement of the public, the press and the government in the printed media and more importantly in cyberspace and social media networks. Various web sites and Facebook group pages were created by activists as the results of these environmental events and most of them are still active today.

In the course of debates and petitions, laws on the environment and heritage conservation and the process of assessing development impacts were invoked by the public and authorities to sway the outcome. Evidence emerged that environmental laws are not consistently applied or followed during development stages, but instead development and potential impacts are decided at the government and party levels. However, the response of authorities to civic discontent usually is not to bring governance into alignment with existing laws but rather their handling of the issues depends on the scale of pressure or damage to the authorities' image brought about by civic activism.

I just want Cam Thanh to be Beautiful like Cam Thanh: Organic Farming as Life

Ashley Carruthers, Australian National University, and Dang Huong Giang, Action for the City

This paper focuses on the discontents of modernity in the realm of food and agriculture. Our research site is Cam Thanh, a commune close to Hoi An town where we observe a movement for the adoption of organic agriculture by local households. The drivers for this include fears about food safety and poisoning, and unease at alienation from traditional farming practices and the lengthening of food commodity chains. In Cam Thanh, a number of factors come together to make organic farming viable: a market for organic produce in Hoi An and and surrounds; the presence of LNGO Action for the City; and a supportive People's Committee.

Like other Vietnamese farming communities, Cam Thanh faces many challenges. Commune residents we spent time with feel dwarfed by the scale of the casino-state vision of modernity being lowered onto their doorstep across the Thu Bon river. Some even speak out publicly about it in the community and on social media. When Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc recently stated 'I want Hanoi to be beautiful like Paris,' one local wag replied via Facebook, 'I just want Cam Thanh to be beautiful like Cam Thanh.'

Organic farming, a small-scale and local response to this behemoth of modernity, promotes life by boosting the value farmers receive for their crops, and creates additional income-generating activities such as farmstay tourism. While there is no escaping the reality of the state's vision of modernity for this area, the organic farmers' more critical vision in the realm of food, farming, tourism and the amenity of everyday life in the countryside is also real, true and powerful within its own, profoundly different ontology. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which life in Cam Thanh is being reconstituted within this more hopeful ontology, asking at the same time how it is articulated to versions of life and modernity so powerfully defined within the state's own ontology.

Migration as Survival Strategy in a Multi-ethnic Village of the Mekong Delta since 1975

Hisashi Shimojo, Kyoto University

This paper examines migration as a survival strategy since 1975 in a multi-ethnic community in Soc Trang province, in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. P. village is home to many ethnic Khmers who live together and intermarry with ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese. Since its army occupied Cambodia in the late 1970s, Vietnam experienced exclusion from international society, while stagnation and disorder stemming from socialist economic policies produced large numbers of refugees for a decade. Many people from P. village not only fled Vietnam by ship but also moved to Cambodia and Thailand by land as refugees and labourers. The number of residents taking part in illegal migration of this kind increased in the early 1990s, just after the end of the Cold War, because of social dislocation and poverty in P. village, and because of the economic boom in Phnom Penh under the United Nations. Since the late 1990s, a new phenomenon has emerged as industries growing around Ho Chi Minh City absorb the Mekong Delta's rural population, while the number of migrants from these areas working in Phnom Penh has been decreasing. Some people from P. village who moved to Cambodia have returned to Vietnam, and others circulate between both countries due to the improving social and economic situation. In this paper, I consider how migration trends have changed since 1975, and how people and the state have negotiated over migration in this multi-ethnic village. By considering this question, I reveal that the survival strategies of people who have moved beyond the Vietnamese state are affected by state policies and in turn affect state governance.

Illicit and Important: State, Industry and Local Livelihoods in the Mekong Cross Border Timber Trade

Phuc Xuan To and Sango Mahanty, Australian National University

In May 2017, the UK's Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) revealed that large volumes of timber were being illicitly traded from Cambodia to Vietnam. Their report, and broader civil society and donor discourse, questions the will of the Vietnamese government to secure the legality of timber products coming from Vietnam. Much of this discourse, however, treats government and industry as unitary entities without a clear understanding of the internal and local dynamics in play. In contrast, our paper will argue that the state and private sector scene is far more internally conflicted than is commonly understood. The illicit timber economy is important (in different ways) to the lives and power of local wood processors, provincial and national state actors, and exporters, but also creates significant tensions.

The paper will first examine the dynamics of the illicit timber trade and efforts to reduce it. Next we consider the role of the state as a major facilitator, as well as the internal tensions raised by the transfer of control over timber import quotas to local authorities. We then discuss the mechanisms through which timber imports enable local state elites and traders to accumulate wealth. Finally, we explore internal tensions within the timber industry, which is often cast as a homogenous entity. While some well-connected traders can corrupt state regulation, other industry players worry about the associated reputational, market and regulatory risks.

ABSTRACTS

Biopower with Socialist Characteristics: Poverty and Welfare in Post-Transition Vietnam

Martha Lincoln, San Francisco State University

The persistence of poverty in newly middle-income Vietnam points up the contradictions of a political economic order that has variously been called late socialism, neoliberalism, and market Leninism. Where market reforms have facilitated the rapid accumulation of wealth in some sectors, the lived experience of poverty reveals contradictions inherent to a market economy with 'socialist orientation.' In particular, these contradictions emerge in the post-reform nation's approach to the provision of social protection and in the lived experience of poverty.

In this presentation, I discuss the shifting significance of poverty in post-reform Vietnam, suggesting that the nation's hybrid political economy has given rise to a late-socialist form of biopower: Poor populations remain entangled with the governmentality of the socialist state – even as social protections dwindle-while simultaneously becoming increasingly subject to the discipline of a capitalist market. I also suggest that as a result of these transformations, representations of poverty have shifted in tenor. Where poverty during the socialist period was widespread and publicly interpreted as an effect of the feudal past or foreign aggression, poverty in the post-reform period is now imagined to index deviance on the part of the poor themselves. As my ethnographic case studies demonstrate, low-income families experiencing these economic and cultural pressures may participate in formal and informal work while seeking state assistance. Poor households thus practice survival strategies that shore up the deficiencies in the political economy, pursuing life and a living in ways that are at once creative and precarious, agentive and constrained.

Overload: The Crisis of Overcrowding in Vietnam's Leading Hospitals

Maria Stalford, Harvard University

Vietnam has joined the ranks of middle-income nations, and ever-growing numbers of its people can see the promise of middle-class stability and comfort as within their reach. The nation has long been renowned on the international stage for its robust public health infrastructure and its historic successes in improving population health. Its leading hospitals offer impressive treatment capabilities and expertise. And yet everyday conditions in these hospitals do not entirely conform to this narrative of progress. In particular, perhaps no word is used more often to describe Vietnam's leading tertiary hospitals than 'overloaded (quá tai),' as in an overloaded vehicle or electrical fuse. In most of Vietnam's major hospitals, this is an overloading not just of bed space or corridors or grounds, but also of every possible capacity: human, material, technological, financial. Amidst the suffering, worry, and fear of seemingly endless multitudes of patients, this overload can also be moral and emotional in nature, for patients and family members as well as for hospital staff. This paper draws on analysis of Vietnamese media sources as well as observation and interviews in major hospitals to characterize the causes, effects, and stakes of hospital overcrowding in Vietnam. Focusing in particular on the predicament of rural-dwelling cancer patients, I argue that efforts to reduce overcrowding must take full account of the fundamental role of leading urban tertiary hospitals as guarantors of health, social welfare, and peace of mind, not just in major cities but throughout the country, for the sick and the well alike.

Elderly Women's Buddhist 'Work' as Continuity of Care and the Enchantment of Old Age in Contemporary Urban Vietnam

Le Hoang Anh Thu, Hoa Sen University

This paper focuses on the Buddhist practice of elderly women in Ho Chí Minh City, and their conceptualisation of this practice as work they perform to safeguard the wellbeing of themselves and their families. The paper shows that religious practice is conceptualised by laywomen as similar to household-management tasks that they performed earlier in their lives. Through religious engagement, women work for spiritual income, set aside sufficient spiritual savings for the family, meet household needs for spiritual blessings, care for the wellbeing of both living and deceased members, and assure the continuity of the lineage. Extending from the previous literature that portrays women's religious engagement as an extension of domestic care beyond their own kin network, this research explores the dynamic of care that is enacted through Buddhist practice in laywomen's old age. This research finds that Buddhist work is not only to give care to others within or beyond kin network, but also a care of self. Inspired by Mahmood's (2012) discussion on subjectivation and agency formation through pious performance, this paper argues that, by defining their religious practice as a continuity of care, women maintain their sense of self as caregivers and competent members in their families, and cultivate a sense of control over the uncertainties of old age. Drawing on Weber's discussions of enchantment and disenchantment, this paper sheds light onto how the enmeshment and iteration of daily routine, duties and social relations in Buddhist rituals and belief enable Vietnamese laywomen to negotiate their social roles, redefine the meaning of life, and construct their sense of self as the elderly in modern Vietnamese society.

The Troubled Generation: Urban Youth, Vietnamese Buddhism, and the Biopolitics of Precarious Mindfulness

Dat Nguyen, Boston University

In the last decade, there has been an acute increase in public attention to the rise of the number of people who are experiencing stress, depression, and anxiety disorder all across Vietnam. National media has attributed the epidemic of these illnesses to rapid socio-economic changes, to technological advances, and to the pressure of the market economy. Youth, particularly university students, have emerged as the most likely victims of these psychological conditions. Thus, life-skill courses and psychological counseling services that offer young people the necessary skills to cope with different psychological conditions have become noticeably popular in many urban centres. Within the context of this 'psychological boom' (Huang 2014), many urban Buddhist institutions have taken keen interest in crafting a Buddhism that helps alleviate youth's psychological and emotional concerns. Based on 12 months of ethnographic research at Buddhist retreats and community-building activities at different Buddhist temples and Buddhist groups in Ho Chi Minh City, this paper investigates the biopolitics of Buddhist psychological and emotional education for urban youth. It examines how urban Buddhist educators have adapted various forms of mindfulness practices, particularly those of Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Villages, to help youth address their emotional concerns, and how the youth themselves respond to these practices. In doing so, I draw attention to how youth, an oft-neglected population in the study of Vietnamese Buddhism, and their wellbeing are figured prominently not only in the configuration of contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism, but also in national concerns over the politics of life.

ABSTRACTS

Hoa Hao Herbal Medicine and the Production of Merit

Vo Duy Thanh, Australian National University

Hoa Hao Buddhists, whose doctrine combines elements from millenarian Buddhism, Confucianism, humanism and patriotism, address present social problems through their ethical action by providing a whole variety of free social services to the poor. They believe that by repaying existential debts through charitable action, one can purify one's own moral condition and achieve salvation. This is the context for the recent flourishing of Hoa Hao charity in Southwest of Vietnam. This paper explores the free supply of herbal medicine which is manufactured in a large-scale and complex supply chain with many contributors and inputs coming together in a coordinated fashion. However, the analysis discerns that Hoa Hao Buddhists do more than produce and dispense medicine. With its multiple nodes and intensive demands on contributors' time and labour, the herbal medicine supply chain provides many opportunities for Hoa Hao Buddhists to make merit and practice self-cultivation.

The Hoa Hao herbal medicine supply chain might be taken as evidence of the robust survival of a traditional religious mindset amidst the Mekong delta's rapid modernization. It also can be seen as an adaptive and complementary practice that fills gaps in state services in deprived rural areas. Yet it materializes a very specific theory of what sustains life and wellbeing that is quite distinct from the official emphases on technical development, material accumulation, and individual, household or national enrichment. With a strong belief that helping the needy acquits their own existential debts and generates religious benefits for individuals and society, Hoa Hao laymen structure their whole life around producing and disseminating free herbal medicine to the poor. As such, this case illustrates Hoa Hao charitable practice as a vernacular approach to rural development.

Mediated Intimacy: Fandom as a Way of Life

Ha Hoang, Western Sydney University

This paper explores fandom as a way that Vietnamese youngsters make meanings of their lives and deal with personal insecurities. While existing Vietnamese studies confirm socialist propaganda as a crucial factor in constructing the every-day life of the young people before the Reform, some recent studies look at popular culture to make sense of the vibrant changes in the life of the people since the Reform. Drawing on part of the data from fieldwork in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in early 2017, this paper investigates the Vietnamese fan community of the Korean group Big Bang in order to explain the popular enthusiasm between these fans that has developed for over a decade since the Korean popular music started to penetrate into Vietnamese market in the early 2000s, following domestic socio-economic deregulations. This investigation of fandom is particularly involved with how social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram mediate fans' intimacy with the Korean idols, and their engagement in the fan community. While Vietnamese fandom is barely touched by Vietnamese studies, the story of Big Bang's fan community as part of the so-called Korean Wave in Vietnam reflects how transnational cultural flows influence transformations in domains of the local life.

Floating Academy: The Precarious Lives of Foreign Academics at an International University in Vietnam

Jodie-Lee Trembath, Australian National University

Although there is a rich history of research on academic institutions in Vietnam, foreigners to the country have been largely absent in these reports. This paper examines the lifeworlds of foreign academics working at the International-Vietnamese University, or IVU, in Ho Chi Minh City. Through an ethnographic analysis of the highly multicultural IVU campus, this paper explores manifestations of globalisation in higher education and the precarities and changes this phenomenon engenders.

The academics at IVU embody numerous precarities. Foreign staff often do not stay beyond a single employment contract before moving on, taking both pre-existing and newly acquired knowledge with them when they go. During this two-year stint, they must manage the 'invisible work' of adjusting to this new and unusual organisational environment, as well as learning to enmesh themselves within local society to whatever extent they can or are willing. Naturally, this is in addition to carrying out the substantive work of being an academic. Adjustment in this context may take many forms: from learning to navigate (and sometimes circumnavigate) Vietnamese bureaucracy; to finding ways to effectively engage with Vietnamese culture and society; to learning the ins and outs of life at IVU, with its own culture into which new academics must be initiated. The reasons given by many staff for not renewing their contract are the stresses of managing these numerous and often unexpected labour demands.

With this in mind, this paper focuses on the experiences of foreign academics at IVU as they adapt to their new institution and lived environment, within the context of Vietnam's ongoing adjustments to globalisation and change. It argues that when universities and nations pursue internationalisation agendas without an adequate understanding of the difficult work of academic expatriation, they engender precarities that are harmful not only for their own interests, but also for the globalized academy and the people who circulate within it.

Policing Vietnam: An Ethnography of Police Culture, Norms and Practices in Transition

Melissa Jardine, University of New South Wales Law School

In Vietnam, rapidly changing social, economic and legal environments require police to adapt in novel ways. Although Vietnam is generally regarded as a safe country in terms of violent crime and public order, some methods used to prevent or investigate crime serve as a trade-off for the public who are increasingly demanding greater accountability and transparency from public institutions. The study explored the nature of policing through investigating recruitment and training, socialisation, policies and perceptions relating to women in policing, interpretations of policing as a 'profession', and strategies to increase police legitimacy. The theoretical framework draws on Chan's (1997, 2003) interactive model of police culture which takes into account the structural environment, individual cognitions and officer agency with regard to how police culture and practice is shaped, changed, transmitted or reproduced. Approximately 40 police students and officers were interviewed and observation undertaken mainly at the People's Police Academy, Hanoi, over six months in 2016. Ethics approval was granted in Australia and Vietnam. Ministerial level and Police Academy approval was also obtained. Research themes were limited due to political sensitivities. Police expressed pride in their occupation and insisted they were admired by the public despite being ranked as the most corrupt institution according to Transparency International. In terms of community relations, police emphasised flexibility and in many cases viewed enforcing the law as a last resort. Social norms regarding 'appreciation money', primacy of relationships, deference to authority and its subsequent impact on leadership capacity offer fertile ground for theorising regarding perceptions of what constitutes corruption, internal procedural justice and police leadership styles in Vietnam.