

Introduction: An Overture to New Ethnographic Research on Connection and Disconnection in Vietnam

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Connections are the source of life in Vietnam. The tangible and intangible ties that bind Vietnamese people to their families and compatriots are characteristically rich and are constitutive of self, community, and nation. In traditional Vietnam, the person was enmeshed in relations (*quan hệ*) of hierarchy and reciprocity that structured family life and the thicket of mutual exchanges that typified the traditional village. The Vietnamese polity has long drawn metaphorically on relations of this kind, as rulers have utilised idioms of kinship and debt to secure legitimacy, command loyalty, and promote social cohesion. History has been made by people who were able to inspire a following and call on the resources of their entourage to repel an enemy or found new settlements and alliances. Vietnamese from all walks of life have long cultivated social relationships to deal with the authorities, form martial unions, make a living, and gain promotion. As social certitudes have dissolved and been recast by the experience of revolution, war, and market-based global integration, one constant has been the role played by such relationships. As the nation has changed, connections have remained central to what it means to be Vietnamese.

Although it remains true to speak of the ubiquity of connections, it is important not to overlook the diversity and dynamism of social relationships in Vietnam. Ethnographic research reveals that the mode and intensity of social connections available to contemporary Vietnamese vary according to class, region, gender, and ethnicity.

Seen as 'social capital', connections are often viewed as a resource to be augmented for the benefit of self and society, however, it should be recalled that not all connections are equally efficacious or desirable, and some may come at a steep cost to the individual and society. Social disconnection, too, is a recurrent theme in Vietnamese life, be it in the form of death, demotion or exile, or disavowal of one's personal ties and background. Vietnamese frequently have sought social reclusion in pursuit of ends as varied as moral integrity, ritual potency, tranquillity, and status. When existing relations are severed deliberately or unavoidably in times of life transition or social upheaval, people find themselves drawn by circumstances into new connections and in that moment new social intimacies and identities are born.

The theme of disconnection has been central in Vietnamese history. Repeatedly, Vietnamese have found themselves divided or uprooted in times of war, political separation, or societal crisis. The very idea of what it has meant to be Vietnamese has been repeatedly reset in moments of historical rupture: when the indigenous peoples of the Red River plain came under Chinese rule around two millennia ago; when Vietnamese formed their own polity after living for 10 centuries as Chinese imperial subjects; when peoples from disparate cultural and historical traditions were incorporated into Vietnamese social space; and when the nation was reborn successively in encounters with colonial, neo-colonial, socialist, and market-based orders. The historian Keith Taylor has proposed that Vietnamese identity be regarded as fundamentally discontinuous: comprised of numerous distinct orientations that have arisen at different conjunctures in time and space (K. Taylor 1998, 2013). Portrayals such as this have been drawn in rebuttal of a nationalist past that assigns Vietnam with a singular, unified, and continuous history. Yet Vietnamese historians also have emphasised discontinuity, for instance by downplaying the country's debts to China or stressing division, conflict or contradiction as themes in the country's history.

Perhaps the most commonly debated instance of disconnection in contemporary Vietnam is the situation of Vietnam's numerous 'national minorities' (*dân tộc thiểu số*), many of whom are said to have had, until recently, at best tenuous connections to the lowland state. These peoples are often characterised as suffering disproportionately from poverty, isolation, social exclusion, and cultural deprivation,

while at the same time being subject to the intrusive and paternalist development policies of the ethnic majority–dominated central state. However, relatively little is known about whether those deemed as minorities regard themselves as marginal, or how they might turn participation in the nation-state to their own advantage. More research is required to determine to what extent the intensive state-building activities in the periphery have their origins in the national capital or arise out of the desires and relations of residents of the periphery themselves. Also in need of further investigation is whether nation-building initiatives integrate, or alternatively parochialise, their intended beneficiaries, and what vernacular development paths have been forged by the people inhabiting Vietnam’s multifaceted and continuously re-imagined internal frontiers.

This volume offers a series of ethnographic explorations into the themes of connection and disconnection in contemporary Vietnam. The essays provide detailed accounts of connecting and disconnecting that put these processes into context, show how they are experienced by social actors and reveal their consequences and meanings. The cases demonstrate that the nature and significance of social connections are diverse with regards to region, class, gender, and ethnicity. The approach adopted is practice-oriented in that it does not assume these relations are governed by universal rationality or inalterable cultural templates, but that they are imbued with explicit and tacit meanings made consequential through action and in context. The accounts emphasise agency and dynamism in showing how connections are forged and broken by actors, without implying that all people enjoy equal capacity in this regard or that connections are a panacea that can enable the individual to overcome the constraints of circumstance. The essays investigate the diverse attempts by state authorities to prescribe and regulate the ways citizens connect and disconnect; however, they also show that state intentions are not always realised. To understand how and why Vietnamese citizens connect with each other, and the world around them, requires close investigation of local and personal histories, conditions, and meanings.

This opening essay frames the contributions with a review of research on the numerous realms of life in Vietnam that have been shaped by connection and disconnection. It then broaches the themes addressed in the first four chapters in this volume, which investigate disparity and disconnection in the lives of contemporary Vietnamese of the

lowlands. Moving next to the relationship of ethnic minorities to the Vietnamese national project, it outlines the research agenda taken up by four of the contributors who explore agency and diversity in the ways minority populations engage the state. In a concluding section, which reflects on the volume's final two chapters, it examines the profound realignments in people's orientation to heritage, history, and place that are consequent on Vietnam's integration into the international order.

Into a Vietnamese Landscape of Social Connection

Both connection and disconnection have been prominent topics in the study of Vietnamese society and history. Nevertheless, rarely has the attempt been made to trace in a systematic manner how such processes interact in diverse arenas of life in Vietnam. This review of the scholarship in select disciplines examines the significance of connections and their absence in a variety of contexts, endeavours, and events. I commence by exploring the interplay of connection and disconnection in the formation of modern Vietnam's social and political landscape.

The density of the social networks that characterise the nucleated villages of northern Vietnam is well documented (Gourou 1936; Toan Ánh 1968; Nguyen Tu Chi 1980; Jamieson 1995:28–36). Several scholars consider the cohesion fostered by this mode of social organisation to have been a resource enabling the flourishing of the Vietnamese people. For instance, cooperation in rice production and collective defence was a factor in the Vietnamese polity's demographic strength and its ability to expand into new lands at the expense of more loosely structured Southeast Asian neighbours (Gourou 1936:133; Lieberman 2003:393). At the same time, the relative autonomy of villages — in relation to the court and to each other — is said to have given the Vietnamese social system resilience in times of crisis (McAlister and Mus 1970; Woodside 1976). As Hy Van Luong has observed, indigenous models of social relatedness offered formidable resources in dealing with the power inequalities of colonialism and capitalism. Political leaders were able to draw on the gender and age hierarchies and the insider/outsider distinction characteristic of Red River Delta

villages to mobilise the population against enemies, while sentiments of trust and mutual obligation of the kind generated in village gift exchanges helped cement cooperation in arduous struggles. Such cultural resources were crucial to the mobilisation of villages in revolutionary action in the French colonial period and again in anti-corruption protests in the 1990s. Since the *đổi mới* reforms of the 1980s, kin connections have been used as a resource for accumulating economic resources (Luong 2003, 2005, 2010).

Nevertheless, the very tightness of these social relationships and their hierarchical and autarchic nature also posed threats to the construction of a national society founded on socialist egalitarian principles. Much of the work of socialist nation-building under the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1954–76) was dedicated to undermining traditional modes of relatedness and reattaching individuals to the nation and ideals of modern socialist citizenship. State cultural authorities intervened in social and ritual life in northern Vietnam to simplify life cycle rituals; curtail extravagance in feasting and gift exchanges; undercut deference to local landlords and village elites; and prescribe appropriately modern, civilised, and cultured modes of living (Kleinen 1999; Malarney 2002; Luong 2010). In tandem, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam state promoted egalitarian gender roles and marriage practices while also criticising romantic and individualist ideals of personhood that had become prevalent among the urban middle class since the late colonial period (Pham Van Bich 1999; Ninh 2002; Werner and Bélanger 2002; Phinney 2008). Intriguingly, the receding of the socialist state from many aspects of social life since the late 1980s has been accompanied by the revival of traditional life cycle rituals, marriage practices, gift exchanges, patrilineages, and village festivals. However, the simplified, modest, and egalitarian aspects of these revived practices show that the period of socialist reforms did leave some mark on northern Vietnamese cultural life (Luong 2003; Malarney 2003).

The fabric of society in southern Vietnam, by contrast, is renowned for being more loosely woven, with a higher preponderance of what the sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) calls ‘weak ties’, as well as being more open, mobile, urbanised, and globally interconnected (Hickey 1964; Rambo 1973; P. Taylor 2001; Biggs 2010; Luong 2010; Harms 2011). From early in the history of Vietnamese colonisation, this new frontier was associated with a regionally distinctive social

structure and governance style that was personalistic, egalitarian, and informal (Sơn Nam 1997; Li 1998; K. Taylor 1998; Choi Byung Wook 2004; Dutton 2006). In the French colonial period, this looseness, openness, and mobility was associated with the rapid development of high levels of land concentration, social inequality, itinerancy, and social banditry (Brocheux 1995; Engelbert 2007; Biggs 2010:23–125). Cultural and societal changes in the colonial and postcolonial periods were also highly sensitive to global currents and trends (Ho Tai 1992; Brocheux 1995; Jamieson 1995; Do Thien 2003; Peycam 2012). With the dismantling of socialist command and control policies in the late 1980s, the south quickly gained national predominance in commodity production, trade, and business, and it continues to be associated with high levels of cultural innovation, social differentiation, and mobility.

However, southern Vietnam is also home to several important folk movements that have reorganised society along communitarian lines. Markedly localist and religious in inspiration, and coalescing around charismatic authorities, these movements have been seen as a compensatory response to the anomie and chaos of the southern frontier and the inequalities engendered under colonialism (Wolf 1969; McAlister and Mus 1970). Each of these particularist groupings forged a unique response to the challenges of frontier society. The Hòa Hảo Buddhists (who are also inspired by Confucianism) emphasised charity over ritual ostentation; their prophet mocked people's reliance on the spirits for patronage, and promoted a conception of the person as indebted for his or her existence to the ancestors, nation, Buddha, and humanity (Ho Tai 1983). The Cao Đài synthesised numerous strands of religious and philosophical learning into a grand and eclectic canon, and assembled a formal pantheon of spirit teachers to whom believers had access via their mediums (Hoskins 2015). The Cham Muslims reorganised life around mosques that served as hubs for a markedly cosmopolitan community, in which local authority and prestige stemmed from prowess in long-distance trade and religious travel (P. Taylor 2007a). Khmer society in parts of the Mekong Delta assumed the form of a Khmer cultural archipelago in a broader Vietnamese milieu, with each Buddhist temple operating as a civilising centre and miniature polity unto itself and offering its affiliated lay community a great variety of services (P. Taylor 2014).

The communist-led revolution represented a different response to the challenge of colonialism, one in which the theme of disconnection is clearly evident. Historians of the revolution trace its inception to the assault on tradition and the embrace of the new that characterised Vietnam's nationalist ferment in the first decades of the twentieth century (Marr 1981; McHale 2004). Some scholars have drawn attention to the extraordinary youth of the leaders of the revolution whose social radicalism was more in tune with global modernist currents than with the hierarchical and conservative mores of their parents. This radical orientation was in turn replaced by an expectation that revolutionaries conform to the discipline of a party whose policies were aligned with strategic shifts in the international communist movement (Ho Tai 1992, 2010). However, the unity on display in the proclamation of independence from France in 1945 was superficial, for the party itself was divided, and struggles within the party over the correct revolutionary path persisted over subsequent decades (Brocheux 1995; Marr 1997, 2013). More significantly, the party's rise to power alienated a plethora of non-communist nationalist groups and hardened the resolve of many Vietnamese to fight against it (Guillemot 2010; Chapman 2013).

Although fought in the name of national unity, Vietnam's wars were a time of grievous division between Vietnamese of different backgrounds and political allegiances. The character of the wars as a civil conflict was already evident in the First Indochinese War (1945–54), which pitted people of different political, ethnic, religious, social, and regional affiliations against each other (Le Failler 2011; Lentz 2011; Keith 2012:213–241; Chapman 2013; McHale 2013). Two Vietnamese states — the north and the south — emerged out of this war, with different social and political systems, and alliances to rival international power blocs (Fall 1967; Jamieson 1995). Divisions internal to each of these states also were on display during the long war they fought with each other from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s. Such contestation was particularly tumultuous in the south of the country, where the 'Vietnam War' exacerbated, and in turn was shaped by, numerous conflicts based on religious, ethnic, class, generational, regional, and urban–rural divisions (Hickey 1993; Topmiller 2006; Hunt 2008; Miller 2013). Sadly, the curse of conflict continued to afflict Vietnam as it was drawn almost immediately into another decade-long war with

neighbouring Cambodia and China, countries with which Vietnam's socialist leaders previously had entertained warm and supportive fraternal relations (Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong 1992; Goscha 2006).

Nevertheless, social connections featured prominently in Vietnam's wars. The trust, loyalty, and cohesion born out of shared suffering and confinement in colonial prisons and long residence in remote guerrilla bases were decisive to the ability of Vietnam's communist leaders to survive and coordinate a nationwide resistance in a context of intense surveillance and repression (Zinoman 2001; Nguyen T. Lien-Hang 2012:17–47). Việt Minh agents cultivated a network of civilian supporters in the cities who supplied the rural-based resistance with goods and information (Goscha 2013). The communists' major opponent in the south, President Ngô Đình Diệm, was often accused of being inflexible and non-accommodating towards the religious, ethnic, and localist affiliations that structured society in this region. Nevertheless, he put siblings and other family members in key government positions and made use of his Catholic connections to mobilise support and advance his political interests (Miller 2013:41–53). At the grassroots level, Heonik Kwon describes how in Central Vietnam there was more to the experience of war than that of being helpless victims caught in an arbitrary clash between impersonal and alien forces. Even in the region that witnessed some of the Vietnam War's most brutal battles, war was waged and its disastrous effects were mitigated against by virtue of peoples' membership of a fine meshwork of numerous small interlocking social networks (Kwon 2008:69–71).

Many of the policy shifts that occurred in the post-war period were made possible owing to social connections. For instance, the liberal market reforms announced in the mid-1980s have been analysed as a response to a combination of economic crisis, ideological conversion/confusion, and bottom-up resistance (Fforde and de Vylder 1996; P. Taylor 2001; Kerkvliet 2005). However, several scholars also emphasise the role played by senior party leaders with long-standing ties to local areas and authorities who encouraged and protected a variety of 'spontaneous' economic activities that contravened official policy. These leaders' ties to local authorities and other party leaders at the national level were instrumental in getting these local initiatives endorsed as formal policy (Dang Phong 2004; Rama and Vo Van Kiet 2008). Connections also facilitated reform in the field of cultural policy. In a vivid illustration of networking politics in Vietnam, Thaveeporn

Vasavakul shows how networking between state officials, researchers, popular organisations, mediums, and local followers was critical to the official rehabilitation of the mediumistic cult of the Holy Mothers in the 1990s and early 2000s in northern Vietnam (Vasavakul 2003:35–42).

In his provocative analysis of Vietnam's political system, Martin Gainsborough sheds light on the centrality of social connections to state power and policy. Senior state officials stand at the apex of patronage networks. Individuals who win high office are put upon to channel the spoils of office such as licences, contracts, exemptions, and investment to their network members, to the exclusion of others, and are reciprocated with loyalty, money, and shares, among other gifts (Gainsborough 2010:146–147). Gainsborough acutely observes that patronage shapes the major political event in Vietnam: the five-yearly party congress. The significant policy shifts that are often announced in these closely followed events are less the outcome of experimental policy development, ideological struggles between factions, or the rise and fall of sectoral, regional or generational interests, but rather are centrally the result of struggles between the influential members of patronage networks. The formulation of policy at such events consists less of adherence to ideology or principles than the jockeying for position among individuals who, if successful, will be able to share the spoils of office with his or her network of clients (Gainsborough 2010:135–155).

In an era of market socialism, connections nourish economic life. Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong provides a cogent ethnographic analysis of post-socialist business practices, which she describes arrestingly as the 'hooking economy'. In an economy characterised by uncertainty, the privileging of state enterprises, informational deficits and regulational laxity, private entrepreneurs gain resources and contracts by establishing personal relations of patronage with state and quasi-state economic managers. Many deals are struck in entertainment venues, including those that offer a variety of prostitution services. The sex industry thus features both as a metaphor and the context for the practices of 'hooking', which are integral to post-socialist business (Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong 2008:3–24).¹ Gainsborough too has reported on the links between Hồ Chí Minh City entrepreneurs and local

1 Kimberly Hoang illustrated similar processes in her ethnographic study of Hồ Chí Minh City's night life (2015).

administrative authorities. By establishing bonds with highly placed officials, with whom the proceeds of business are shared, companies can negotiate opaque and treacherous legal terrain with reduced risk of political or legal repercussions, while making life difficult for their competitors, who the authorities might move against (Gainsborough 2010:38–39).²

Although connections mitigate risk, they may also in themselves pose a threat to security and social cohesion. In the early 2000s, exposure of the octopus-like network built by the gang boss Năm Cam brought to light the collusive relationships that existed between criminal syndicates and highly placed officials and powerful departments such as the police (Gainsborough 2010:48–49). Researchers have exposed the corrupt relationships between timber traders and state authorities that facilitate the illegal timber trade across the Lao–Vietnam border (To Xuan Phuc et al. 2014). Special interest groups (*nhóm lợi ích*) linked to powerful officials also highlight disparities between rich and poor. As Bill Hayton observes, businesses and individuals strive to put themselves under the umbrella (*ô dù*) of protection provided by connections to high-ranking state and party leaders. The cultivation of such relationships can confer immunity from prosecution and leeway in a complex and competitive business landscape, along with specific benefits such as jobs, promotions, and scholarships. Meanwhile, people without an umbrella are extremely vulnerable to harassment and prosecution. These patronage practices have fostered a small and privileged elite who owe their fortune to birth, marriage, and fortuitous connections. Their wealth and privilege in a country where substantive poverty is still widespread jars uncomfortably with the socialist rhetoric coming from the country's leaders who stand at the apex of the elite (Hayton 2010:22–25).

2 In their study of land investment in rural Vietnam, Thomas Markussen and Finn Tarp infer that people who have relatives in the government are able to draw upon those kin links to secure tenure over land and avoid the expropriation of their land by the state. Having such favourable connections to the authorities, they contend, gives people the confidence needed to make investments in their land (Markussen and Tarp 2014).

The Dynamics of Disconnection and Reconnection

Ethnographic studies of connection from below show that social relationships provide a means by which Vietnamese people can moderate the excesses and iniquities of market-driven development. In his study of community environmental regulation, Dara O'Rourke shows that linkages within local communities and between community activists and the authorities are beneficial in changing the behaviour of serious environmental polluters (O'Rourke 2004:68). Linkages to extra-local actors such as the media enable community demands to reach higher level authorities.³ Social ties between a firm and its workers, consumers, suppliers, or neighbours influence the way it responds to complaints about pollution. Social relationships are also at the heart of regulation, and agencies with strong linkages to the community are successful in implementing state policies. Nevertheless, O'Rourke warns that social relationships between factory managers and authorities, or between individuals in state agencies, can also enable environmental polluters and decrease the responsiveness of authorities to community demands (O'Rourke 2004:224–227).

People in socially precarious circumstances may intensify relations of mutuality to reduce the risks of market-based society and fill the gaps left by the shrinkage of the once omnipresent state. In her research in rural Hà Tĩnh, Pam McElwee observed that poor farmers experienced hardship and uncertainty as a result of their production of rice and other goods for global markets. In response, they partook of a moral economy which was similar to that described by James Scott (1977) in his study of Mekong Delta peasants under French colonialism (McElwee 2007). People at the margins of subsistence in Hà Tĩnh spread risk by exchange relations with each other and with wealthier community members, upon whom they exerted moral pressure to distribute their wealth, effectively enforcing a social price on private accumulation. The farmers also criticised the heartlessness and lack of social responsiveness of officials who made their lives,

3 Andrew Wells-Dang's study of networked civil society politics in Vietnam similarly reveals that relationships between environmental activists, the press, scientists, retired officials, local residents, and the authorities have been key to efficacy in environmental activism (Wells-Dang 2012).

and that of their families, difficult with overbearing enforcement of regulations. In protesting against official indifference and malpractice, poor farmers in the 1990s and 2000s were influenced by norms of fairness and sufficiency (McElwee 2007). Nguyen Van Suu (2007), Ben Kerkvliet (2014) and John Gillespie (2014) similarly have noted that protests against corruption and land confiscations frequently have been motivated by these kinds of moral economy concerns.

Faced by the inadequacy of officially prescribed social and cultural relationships, numerous communities in Vietnam make recourse to a variety of vernacular translocal connections. Such decentred networks are particularly evident among members of ethnic minority groups whose integration into the national community has not always been equitable and harmonious. The transnational networks of minority actors include commodity chain networks maintained by Hmong people in the northwest of the country with China (Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015), transnational business and cultural associations of the ethnic Chinese in urban areas (Yu 2006), and the cross-border networks mobilised by Cham Muslims in Vietnam's southwest for work and religious travel in Malaysia (Tran 2016). Other translocal linkages are controversial or divisive, such as the mass conversion to evangelical Christianity of minority groups like the Hmong (Ngo 2015), the rejection among some groups of official ethnic labels (Nguyen Van Thang 2007), or the appeals made by diasporic actors for ethno-nationalist solidarity among Central Highlanders (Salemink 2006:39–42). As discussed by Oscar Salemink in his chapter in this book, these decentred forms of ethnic reconnection create dilemmas for the government which, in order to reassert authority over its minority citizens, has begun to backtrack on its modernist reform agenda and rehabilitate identities and practices that were once criticised as backward, elitist, and autarchic.

In Vietnam, social relationships are never merely received or static but are dynamic and constantly being actively managed. For the women who dominate Vietnam's marketing sector, success in livelihoods comes from proficiency in the arts of self-representation. Ann Marie Leshkowich shows that much of the work done by traders in Bến Thành market, as they represent themselves to customers, their peers, and market regulators, consists of the agentive enactment of social identities. Market women often essentialise themselves, claiming to be — as women — naturally adept at their trade; construing

themselves as struggling working class; distancing themselves from the state; or claiming ties of kinship with their customers and paid workers. However, rather than treat this self-essentialism as simply a strategy to grasp advantage as opportunities arise, Leshkovich regards it as a form of historically constituted political and economic subjectivity. She shows that their profession or trade has been alternatively stigmatised, romanticised, dismissed, and celebrated in shifting state policies that have created uncertainty, anxiety, and risk. By essentialising themselves as women, as traditional, as kin, or as workers, the traders of Bến Thành make themselves legible within the discourses employed in the regulation of their behaviour. Through such enactments, they are able to experience control, predictability, and meaning in their profession and lives (Leshkovich 2014).

The practices of performative sociality exemplified by market traders are among the variety of practices by which Vietnamese have been shown to mould and shift their social relationships. Anthropologists and linguists have demonstrated how Vietnamese gender and age hierarchies, along with relations of parity and sameness, are reproduced and situationally modified through modes of address and self-reference, as well as in discipline and at play (Luong 1990; Rydstrom 2003; Sidnell and Shoet 2013). In his ethnography of culinary practices in the town of Hội An, Nir Avieli shows how dishes consumed at a variety of meals communicate subtle messages about the character and significance of social relationships. Intriguingly, his study reveals that commensality may not only create kinship and generate bonds, it may also divide and distinguish (Avieli 2012). Vu Hong Phong demonstrates how, through alcohol consumption, men in a multiethnic frontier context bond with their male peers (Vu Hong Phong 2008:148–149). Analysing relations between hostesses and their clients in the bars of Hồ Chí Minh City's sex industry, Kimberly Hoang describes how performances of masculinity and femininity in such sites affirm and contest global racial and class hierarchies (Hoang 2015). Markus Schlecker shows how, by returning to their home villages to take part in feasts and festive occasions, people in Hà Nội materialise a new post-socialist orientation to the 'ancestral village' as a place of traditional relatedness and belonging (Schlecker 2005).

Several studies explore the active limiting of one's sphere of relatedness. In the context of middle-class Hà Nội, Alexander Soucy (2014) describes the management and pruning of social relations that takes place during

the issuing of wedding invitations. Catherine Earl shows how, through work, leisure, consumption, and marriage choices, women in Hò Chí Minh City secure urban middle-class membership and distinguish themselves from their lower-status compatriots (Earl 2014).⁴ Erik Harms examines the socially destructive urban redevelopment practices that demolish and scatter existing residential communities, and replace them with exclusive, high-class enclaves that promise to separate their new residents from the undistinguished urban masses (Harms 2012, 2014). Perhaps the most disturbing practices of social truncation take place in reproductive health clinics, where technologies such as ultrasound are routinely used to detect foetal abnormalities and unwanted female gender in foetuses. Subsequently, abortions are commonly prescribed and undertaken, sometimes illicitly, to secure desired reproductive outcomes and interdict the formation of socially undesirable persons and relationships (Bélanger and Khuat Thi Hai Oanh 2009; Gammeltoft 2014).⁵

The dynamics of social disconnection and reconnection are especially pronounced in the experience of migration. Vietnamese have been subject to many varieties of coerced migration, be they conflict-induced refugee movements, de-urbanisation campaigns, official programs to open new economic zones in remote border areas, or environmental refugee flows (Hardy 2003). Migrants who have moved voluntarily or under compulsion have often found themselves transplanted into an unfamiliar or unpleasant social setting where they experience tense and brittle relations with their new neighbours (McElwee 2008; Hansen 2009). In other cases, they may feel socially isolated and excluded from the opportunities for connection or advancement in their new social environment (Huong 2004; Nguyen Minh 2015). In such cases, social connections play a key role in enabling movement and re-emplacement. Research on migration in Vietnam has demonstrated the value of family and homeland networks in facilitating chain migration to new economic frontiers and urban spaces (Carruthers and Dang 2012; Winkels 2012), nurturing children who have been left behind (Locke et al. 2012), and gaining empowerment in the cities (Karis 2013).

4 For a collection of insightful essays on practices of middle-class distinction in contemporary Vietnam, see Van-Nguyen Marshall, Drummond and Bélanger (2011).

5 A detailed account of sex-selective abortion is provided in Tran Thi Minh Hang (2011).

The work of reconnection is a key theme in the Vietnamese diaspora's relationship with the homeland. Formed largely out of processes of disconnection and rupture, the large community of Vietnam-origin people who live overseas has been visiting home and sending remittances for at least three decades (Small 2012; Schwenkel 2014). Transnational flows of cultural and entertainment content, via DVDs, television, internet, and social media, connect the diaspora with the old country, although in both contexts the reception of these influences is met with controversy and surveillance (Carruthers 2008; Valverde 2012). Return gifts of money express obligation and relatedness; however, the gifts also create social distance within transnational families (Nguyen-Akbar 2014). Such gifts court the risk of being seen as insufficient or, alternatively, excessive, having the capacity to humiliate and wound both the recipient and giver alike (Thai 2014). The inflow of foreign currency also can express counter-cultural forms of non-official relatedness that transcend nation-state boundaries and the borders between the living and the dead. Allison Truitt shows how remittances in US dollars express the debt of overseas Vietnamese to their relatives in Vietnam and how in turn the living repay their debt to the ancestors through counterfeit versions of the same currency (Truitt 2013:83–103).

Connections to the spirit world are enacted in dynamic and multiform ways, and occupy a prominent place in Vietnam's post-revolutionary social landscape (Malarney 2003; P. Taylor 2007b). Through their offerings to the ancestors and the potent spirits of the land, Vietnamese repay their debts to the proximate yet otherworldly beings who guarantee security, enforce morality, and make life possible (P. Taylor 2004; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009; Jellema 2007). The sanctified gifts that worshippers bring back home from pagodas and shrines spiritually nourish their families and materialise the relations of mutual care that bind the spirits to the living (Endres 2011; Soucy 2012). By being inducted as a spirit medium, people who are marginalised, ill, socially anomalous, or dogged by misfortune may secure healing and social reintegration as the follower of a master or a child of the spirits (Fjelstad and Hien 2006; Norton 2009; Salemink 2010). The links maintained with the spirit world are multilateral and mutually generative: with offerings, worshippers might rehabilitate a ghost as an ancestor and thereby transform their own social identity (Kwon 2008; Marouda 2014); via afflictions visited upon their kin, a war martyr might

signal their need to be recovered from the oblivion of national history (Malarney 2001; Gustafsson 2009). The ties between spirits and their earthly Vietnamese adepts today span the globe, with both mediums and the religions that institutionalise interactions with the spirits found in the many locations around the world where Vietnamese people have made a home (Fjelstad and Hien 2011; Hoskins 2015).

A final illustration of the generative power of connections highlights the role of social networks in assembling the knowledge that Vietnamese have about themselves and their own society. Many of Vietnam's leading intellectuals and academics belong to lineages of intellectuals. Despite the socialist emphasis on mass education and the production of expertise, both kinship and kin-like relationships have been essential in nurturing intellectual capacities and dispositions in the face of criticisms about elitism and the levelling tendencies of socialist academic culture (Bayly 2007). In contemporary Vietnam, Eren Zink found that the academic field is constituted out of connections. Institutes and departments can be filled with people from the same kinship network or birthplace, and a tangle of personal relationships cross-cut institutional and national boundaries. People in one's network positioned in departments and ministries can enable an institute to secure project funding or access sensitive information that gives cogency to an analysis (Zink 2013:157–171). Scholars who lack or fail to nurture such ties may find their careers thwarted, irrespective of their talent and hard work. The work of scientific production relies crucially on the cultivation of relationships, and the history of the emergence of a new idea is very much the story of the connections activated and the debts incurred in the process of its assembly and articulation as new knowledge.

Making Connections and Disconnections

This review of scholarship demonstrates that connections are a pervasive and influential dimension of Vietnamese life. Important insights into Vietnamese politics, society, and culture come from research that has carefully traced the social linkages and disconnects that have shaped events in these domains. The essays in this volume take these findings as a point of departure as they explore issues that call out for more rigorous scholarly treatment, and uncover new stories about connection and disconnection.

One of the most fundamental questions about social connections is the degree to which these resources are equally available and useful to people from different social backgrounds. Hy Van Luong observes in his contribution that Vietnamese from all walks of life consider social connections to be a reliable way to resolve all manner of daily problems, ranging from medical care for a family member to credit for business expansion. However, he also shows that the extent to which contemporary rural Vietnamese have recourse to social capital varies considerably in relation to their economic status and their regional location. His study sheds light on the inequitable distribution of a set of social resources whose subtlety and significance have previously not been adequately described by researchers attempting to measure inequality in Vietnam. While it may be true that gifts have the power to bind people together, Luong reminds us that not everyone has the same capacity to give gifts.

Hy Van Luong's chapter draws upon fieldwork data from two villages — one located in the Red River Delta and the other in the Mekong Delta — which was collected in 2005–06 and 2012–14. It shows that the social relationships upon which people rely are sustained and strengthened by meals, drinks, gifts, and favour exchanges. As incomes rise, many households and individuals spend more on these gifts and exchanges to sustain and expand their social capital. However, he finds that the poor are much less capable of doing so than the rich and the powerful, especially considering that the monetary value of 'standard' gifts has increased significantly at life cycle ceremonies. He also identifies variation between the two rural regions. Northern Vietnamese villagers have strengthened various forms of associational ties, complete with their life cycle ceremony gift obligations, to a greater extent than their southern counterparts. The rich evidence marshalled in this chapter demonstrates that although social connections may matter to all Vietnamese, the quantity and quality of connections to which people have access, the benefits they bring, and the costs imposed in the effort to maintain them, are not evenly distributed. Paradoxically, Vietnamese of different regions and classes are divided by social connections in a way that is both shaped by and continues to shape profound differences in their social circumstances and cultural identities.

The capacity of gifts to sustain relationships between people who have been separated spatially and by class is the focus of the chapter by Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh. It focuses on the case of a successful business migrant who returned to her Red River Delta village from the south of Vietnam after a long absence. Like many Vietnamese return migrants, her initial intention was to make bequests to her family and ancestors, however, her giving soon also extended to non-kin, such as the village poor, and sponsoring communal feasts and the refurbishment of communal buildings. Her actions earned her accolades from the villagers for her generosity of spirit, and this adulation exerted moral pressure upon her to give more and more. The extraordinary and unexpected dynamics that led her to accelerate her rate of giving not only drained her financially, they also aroused intense debates about her motives and background. Assessments of her character ranged from views of her blessed fate and Buddha-like qualities to dismissive and disparaging comments about her capability, personality, and family morality. Ultimately, the tensions and ill feelings unleashed by her charitable actions caused this return migrant to rethink her plans to re-establish herself in her native village.

This story of a failed return offers a timely treatment of the dislocating experiences of migration. Told from the perspective of a returned migrant, it shows how nostalgia for the homeland arising out of the disappointments of migration can precipitate the desire to return and reconnect. When acted upon, however, such sentiments can lead to disenchantment, serving instead to underline the change in subjectivities brought about in the experience of migration, as well as the gulf in moral expectations between rural and urban localities. Seen from the perspective of the villagers who hosted her return, this case illustrates the value of migrants to marginal rural communities both as a link to new worlds and opportunities, and as a source of remittances and models for social reinvigoration. At the same time, it reveals how the joyful anticipation of attending a homecoming may easily deteriorate into dissension and mutual mistrust, showing how the gap in status and experience that divides migrants and their home villages is not easily bridged by acts of good will or by sentiments of belonging to a common ancestral homeland.

The chapter by Nguyen Khanh Linh provides a graphic illustration of how divisive social connections can be. She studied a rural locality near Hải Phòng City that is distinctive for its very high rate of transnational

marriages. Women from the fishing commune of Hải Thành enter into more marriages with foreigners than any other locality in Vietnam, many of them marrying men from wealthier rural localities in China and Korea. At the same time, a great number of the women who marry into Hải Thành come from other generally poorer rural localities in Vietnam, in a sense ‘replacing’ the local women who have married out. Significant realignments in social status and subjectivity are occurring among the women of Hải Thành owing to their involvement in these very different marital alliance networks which connect them to East Asia and elsewhere in Vietnam.

As Nguyen Khanh Linh’s chapter reveals, the flows of female marriage migrants into and out of Hải Thành make it a remarkable node in a vast hypergamous chain that links numerous far-flung rural localities in Vietnam and overseas. However, just as the passage of women into and out of Hải Thành makes visible stark differences between rich and poor rural localities, it also brings about yawning gaps between the women themselves. The study examines the marked difference in class and status between the out-marrying and in-marrying women. These distinctions are marked on the bodies of the two classes of women and are interpreted in local discourses as innate differences of race, ethnicity, and morality. The sharpening and essentialising of distinctions between women and between ruralities that occurs as a result of these translocal marital alliances offers a sobering example of how connections can accentuate inequalities in extreme and diverse ways.

Yen Le’s chapter ventures into the little-known world of leprosy sufferers in Vietnam, where it uncovers valuable insights into the power of disconnection. Drawing on the author’s ethnographic fieldwork in Quy Hòa, a segregated village for leprosy-afflicted people in South Central Vietnam, the chapter tells the villagers’ stories about social exile and reintegration. It traces the cases of elderly villagers who contracted leprosy between the 1940s and the 1980s, showing how the stigma provoked by a leprosy diagnosis and the disability caused by the disease brought about a form of social death and induced them to seek refuge in this isolated settlement for leprosy sufferers. Shifting to the ethnographic present of 2011, it elucidates why ‘sameness’ is such a salient discourse in the village and how, as a defining characteristic of the community, it has reconfigured the villagers’ lived reality of leprosy. The notion of ‘sameness’ determines boundaries between

leprosy-affected residents and ‘healthy’ people, and between ‘inside here’ and ‘out in life’. It reveals a strong sense of connection shared among community members based on perceived commonality and equality on the one hand, and, on the other, disconnection from the outside world engendered by persistent leprosy stigma and sufferers’ self-stigmatisation.

Through examining the ontologies of leprosy sufferers’ connections and disconnections, Yen Le sheds light on the construct of leprosy and the lived reality of people affected by the disease in contemporary Vietnam. In doing so, her chapter also seeks to answer why exclusive communities for people with leprosy still exist long after leprosy has been declared medically curable, and when outpatient treatment has replaced segregated institutional care as the preferred public health approach to treatment. Her chapter shows that while the medical rationale for segregation no longer exists, the existential problems leprosy sufferers continue to endure provide justification for their continuing attachment to segregated communities such as Quy Hòa.

Debating Disconnection in Vietnam’s Minority Worlds

As noted in the preceding discussion, the ultimate symbols of disconnection in present-day Vietnam are the minority nationalities. Much of the international development literature on Vietnam focuses on the socioeconomic gap between the majority Kinh and ethnic minority groups. Studies seek out the drivers of the ‘ethnic gap’, which are believed to include factors such as remoteness, lack of connectivity, poor land and water quality, low schooling, weak market access, and poor governance (Imai and Gaiha 2007; Baulch et al. 2010). The attention of policymakers is fixed on the cultural traits, language deficits, and customary practices and beliefs that are said to keep people poor and hold them back. Stereotypes proliferate in popular discourses about minority people’s backwardness and insularity, and their lack of awareness of what it takes to prosper in the modern world. The incapable and needful minority other is very much the central figure of the present-day era of high development in the national periphery. Such a figure not only functions as a pretext for development but may indeed have been produced by it.

In marked contrast, many anthropologists hold to the view that Vietnam's minority others suffer from an excess of connection to the state project. It is not difficult to find critiques of the harm done by state development policies, which are deemed to be utopian, arbitrary, inflexible, paternalist, and all-encompassing. Scholars who adhere to the view that redemptive agency comes from below, or from the periphery, find signs of resilience in activities that are resistant, evasive, transcendent, or resourcefully recombinant; in short, inspired by a logic of disconnection from the state.⁶ In the terms coined by James Scott, such tactics consist of 'the art of not being governed' (Scott 2009). A logical implication of this perspective is that the only scope available to ethnicised actors to remain true to themselves exists beyond the realms of what the state has set in train for them as its subjects (for a critical discussion, see Salemink 2015). Such an interpretation would disqualify the state itself as an arena in which minority actors might exert authentic agency. This may be a major oversight given that the state is such a significant presence in the lives of its minority citizens and has shaped the agenda for continuity and change in their traditional homelands for well over a half century in most localities.

Four essays in this volume show how the state may serve as a vehicle for minority self-assertion, each in unique ways. The chapter by Nguyen Thu Huong examines the dynamics of political disconnection among the minority peoples of Vietnam's Central Highlands. Her research reveals that the Bahnar, among other groups in Kon Tum Province, are under-represented in state employment and service provision positions. Relative to the Kinh, most of whom are migrants, the indigenous people of this highlands province appear to suffer from a low level of inclusion in state structures and lack influence in political decision-making. In part, such inequalities reflect discrepancies in social and cultural capital. They also give expression to disparities in political capital, which are rooted in differential war experiences. However, Nguyen Thu Huong proposes that an alternative explanation for this situation is that the highlanders may be disinclined to take office. She illustrates this proposition with comments by Bahnar

6 Jean Michaud's notion of 'Hmong infrapolitics' forcefully articulates this perspective (Michaud 2012). These themes also are apparent in many of the essays in the book edited by Philip Taylor, *Minorities at Large*, as well as in an article by the same on vernacular rural development (P. Taylor 2011, 2007c).

individuals that show how they discount themselves from responsible office and state-orchestrated rituals on the grounds that such pursuits are incompatible with their own distinct morality and identity as minority peoples.

Such an approach resonates with James Scott's analysis of upland lifeways in historical Southeast Asia as structured around purposive avoidance of the lowland state's embrace. However, Nguyen Thu Huong's analysis is more nuanced than this in showing that such orientations are not universal among the peoples of the Central Highlands, but rather are contingent upon the complex historical relations that groups and individuals have had with state-building initiatives in this locality. She also avoids homogenising state-ethnic relations by showing within one select group the markedly gendered nature of their practices of state evasion. Moreover, in a way that appears to fundamentally depart from the state evasion paradigm, she discovers that acts of selective withdrawal are linked to projects of cultural exceptionalism, moral purification, and gender differentiation, which themselves draw upon discourses employed by the state to mobilise and govern its ethnic minority subjects. Hence, far from being an entity that minority peoples must artfully avoid in order to obtain authentic self-realisation, the state itself provides the stage and the script through which people may enact their ethnic difference.

In studied contrast with the tactical retreats staged by the Bahnar, the Hmong and Nùng residents of the northwest commune of Vĩnh Thủy actively engage the state by assertively deploying its categories and programs. When Peter Chaudhry conducted his fieldwork in this mountainous commune in Lào Cai Province, he found that the majority of its residents were categorised as poor and had long been reliant on state handouts. One possible interpretation for commune residents' entrenched poverty status would be to link it to their marginality and lack of opportunities to better themselves. An alternative approach would be to view it as a sign of local people's subjugation to the state's upland development project. However, Chaudhry soon came to observe that to be designated as poor had obvious value to local residents themselves, and was a status that locals actively strove for and contested. Far from being an index of disconnection or disempowerment, locals assertively manipulate and milk for maximum benefit this category of disadvantage assigned by the central state.

Vĩnh Thủy is thus a prime exemplar of what Peter Chaudhry refers to in his chapter as an ‘agentive periphery’. However, what he has uncovered in this border commune is not a pure and resilient modality of local power that flourishes at the limits of the modern state’s reach, for it is the central state that furnishes the resources for peripheral actors to act in such an autonomous manner. Nevertheless, poverty is a resolutely local project, as evidenced by the local relational categories, moral economy considerations, and status and schisms at stake in the designation of households as poor. Local officials build patronage and create legitimacy in local eyes by exercising discerning judgement in the allocation of poverty alleviation resources. Householders are strategically ingenious in pressurising officials to decide in their favour and presenting themselves as eligible for the handouts. Poverty is a hybridised category of subjectivity that proliferates at the interface between local and central state criteria and needs. Chaudhry describes this as an example of political *metis*, whereby modern state biopower is reworked through local circuits of meaning and relatedness into a biopolitical project with strikingly local characteristics.

What degree of autonomy is open to ethnic minority actors under a state known for its centralising efficacy and assimilatory bent? Surprising answers to that question can be found by examining the case of Thai elites in northwest Vietnam. In his research among high-ranking Thai state cadres in a Thai-dominated province of the northwest, Ha Viet Quan found that a number had formed around them an elaborate entourage of clients, subordinates, partners, and allies. Exploring these political networks through participant observation, he found them to be personalistic, hierarchical, flexible, and assimilatory, and held together by performance and mutual obligation. Moreover, these social formations were politically significant. The Thai cadres exercised power through their personalistic networks: implementing state programs and initiatives; securing appointments, promotions, and contracts; and fending off assaults on the prestige of the leader from the leader of rival networks. In sum, the mode of power embodied by these senior Thai cadres very much resembles the traditional model of entourage politics characteristic of the Tai culture area in the era before the rise of centralised bureaucratic states. Remarkably, Ha Viet Quan found it thriving openly among the political class in a region that, for over 60 years, has been under the rule of a socialist state.

Ha Viet Quan concludes from his evidence that the mode by which the state exerts power in Vietnam is not as uniform as is often assumed by scholarly observers, or, indeed, is evident in the state's own rhetoric. Rather, the case of the Thai northwest suggests that the state is amenable to heterogeneous modes of authority and indeed is comprised by such heterogeneity. An additional implication is that this mode of personalistic rule is not threatening to the projection of state power in the uplands but is precisely the means through which the state prosecutes its agenda in such regions. The central state is reliant on powerful Thai elites to effect its writ, and the elites in turn reproduce their power through their favourable connections to central authority. Another revelatory implication of this study is that the incorporation of culturally and politically distinct groups into the Vietnamese national project does not necessarily come at the expense of those groups' identity and authority; to the contrary, those unique qualities may be enhanced in the process of political integration. Minority autonomy is thus obtainable without eroding the authority of the state project; in fact, to the contrary, the state's prestige is burnished as its power is exercised through such means.

Although participating in state structures enables minority actors to advance their own interests, when the government prescribes how they may do so, the results can be unpredictable. The chapter by Philip Taylor focuses on the efforts by the Vietnamese government to control the educational mobility options available to the Khmer monastic population in Vietnam. Khmers in Vietnam have a highly developed vernacular education network based in their Buddhist monasteries. The socialist government not only permits the operation of this religious-based education network, it recently has supported the development of a Buddhist institute in Vietnam as the peak educational destination for Vietnamese Khmers. Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, this intervention in monastic education was designed to consolidate national identifications among local Buddhists. However, the effort was far from successful, as Khmer monks continued to travel to centres of monastic learning outside of Vietnam. The state-prescribed option has been bypassed by Khmer monastics, who are determined to pursue far more expansive educational alternatives.

The determination of Khmers in Vietnam to chart their own monastic education routes illustrates the tensions between the territorialising nation-state and the decentred itineraries of citizens who are inspired

by their own spatial imaginaries. Having historically migrated to monastic centres in Cambodia to pursue higher education, Khmers in the Mekong Delta found their traditional avenue of social mobility blocked by the rise to power of socialist states in both Vietnam and Cambodia. In time, the Vietnamese government developed its own Khmer vernacular higher education system, modelled on the Buddhist university system found in Theravada countries. However, the option failed to satisfy Khmer people's desire for cosmopolitan self-realisation and experiential immersion in a Khmer-language educational milieu. Resisting parochialisation within Vietnam, Khmers trod other paths, including educational migration to Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and post-socialist Cambodia. Their sometimes illicit journeys illustrate the challenges posed to states by the demotic aspirations for connection unleashed by globalisation. The official response, which has been to actively police educational returns, exemplifies the pitfalls minority citizens face in an era of aspirational transnational travel.

Disconnected and Reconnected in History and Space

Much hope for social betterment is invested in Vietnam's global integration, yet with it has come a sense of anxiety about the threats that powerful international processes and actors pose to Vietnam's very identity. One of the ways the state has responded to this sense of threat has been to confer on certain cultural practices and objects the status of being part of a Vietnamese cultural canon. Similarly, the contemporary concern to register and protect strategically significant places, such as national parks, borderlands, and historical sites, responds to official apprehension about unregulated change and threats from without. However, these efforts to fix the meanings of items and practices as iconic heritage run counter to dynamic popular processes of modification and re-signification, and may serve to undermine or obscure their value to local populations. Equally, the rush to secure certain sites for the benefit of the Vietnamese nation risks removing them from the realm of everyday use and ironically may render them less accessible to local people. These contradictory processes of securing and losing control over culturally significant practices and sites are topics explored by the final two essays in this volume.

As Oscar Salemink observes in his chapter, Vietnam is experiencing a rapid heritagisation of its cultural legacy. Numerous cultural and ritual sites, objects, and practices have been formally recognised as national heritage by the state in line with UNESCO criteria. Taking place in tandem with these developments is the transformation of heritage into spectacle, as state authorities and tourist companies stage festivals that celebrate a variety of local practices as ancient and distinctive, thereby securing possession of them as icons of Vietnamese national identity. However, as Salemink shows in his chapter, this ritualised connection with the nation paradoxically comes at a price of local disconnection from the cultural site, object, or practice that is officially labelled cultural heritage. He contends that, especially for religious sites, objects and practices, heritage recognition casts a secular gaze on cultural life. Among other things, it effectively disenfranchises attempts by locals to modify and reinterpret their ritual practices and cultural identifications in meaningful alignment with the profoundly altered conditions they experience as subjects of marketisation and global integration. In other words, when sites, objects and practices are inscribed as heritage, the dynamic values invested in them by various constituent communities risk being obscured and discounted.

Focusing on the transformation of the cultural traditions of Vietnam's Central Highlanders into heritage displays, Oscar Salemink's chapter shows these processes at work. The use of ceremonial gongs was once widespread in the Central Highlands, and traditionally was embedded in the ritual and social lives of numerous highland peoples. Powerful forces have rapidly marginalised these practices, ranging from social and ritual reform in the socialist period to the major economic and social changes occurring under conditions of capitalist commoditisation. Highlanders have responded to these ruptures by embracing Christianity as an autonomous form of vernacular modernism, while their diasporic representatives have promoted alternative identifications for highlanders as members of a collectively oppressed people. In an attempt to counter these new identifications, state cultural authorities have moved to endorse fading practices such as gong use as authentic, and stage cultural festivals that celebrate their status as cultural heritage. Oscar Salemink argues that, through this process of secularisation, local communities' own cultural responses to their contemporary predicament are effectively disqualified, while outside players — cultural experts, state agencies, tourist companies — effectively take over the management and staging of highland heritage for their own benefit.

The final chapter, by Edyta Roszko, looks through the lens of a dispute between Vietnam and its large neighbour China to examine the territorial and historical recentring of a once marginal island off the Central Vietnamese coast. China's expanding political and military influence in the South China Sea to secure the supply of natural resources has recently led to numerous maritime confrontations with Vietnamese sea users. Its attempt to enclose virtually the entire sea has been a focus within Vietnam of public anger and political contestation. One location where we can see some local consequences of this contestation is Lý Sơn Island, which is considered as a historic and contemporary stepping stone to the Paracel island chain and a border zone in Vietnam. China's seizure of Vietnamese vessels, and the arrest and months-long detention of Lý Sơn fishermen have been widely covered in Vietnam's mass media, adding fuel to a heated debate about disputed areas in the South China/Eastern Sea, and stirring new imaginings about the role of the sea and its islands in the nation's history.

Against the backdrop of the South China Sea dispute, Edyta Roszko analyses how the small and marginalised coastal location of Lý Sơn has become central to the state's sociocultural project of redefining Vietnam from a rice-growing culture to a maritime nation. Responding to media discourses, Vietnamese people have come to see the contested waters and islands as inalienable national territory and, through their practices of patriotic tourism to Lý Sơn Island, they demonstrate a new identity as citizens of the sea. While such attention brings new status and economic opportunities to a once peripheral place, it also has required from Lý Sơn people a shift in subjectivities in response to the state's re-territorialising project. Moreover, the growing national interest in the island's historical and cultural heritage comes at the cost of obscuring from consciousness islanders' cosmopolitan legacies of travel and trade, including, indeed, their relations with China. In the context of conflict and contestation, islanders have been disconnected from key aspects of their identity and history as they simultaneously have been recentred as heroic subjects of a new maritime nationalism. Offering lessons that reach far beyond the study of Vietnam, the dilemmas confronted by Lý Sơn Islanders highlight the global stakes entailed in local experiences of connection and disconnection in even the most obscure lives and places.

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