

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

The tasks of locating, observing and recording everyday expressions of civil society requires careful attention to methodology. This chapter outlines how I went about these tasks, how I approached my time in the field to try to capture these elusive, if mundane acts of civil society among Vietnamese NGOs. I will start with an overview of my initial research questions. Following that I give an overview of my research methods. Because I relied on participant observation and semi-structured interviews to try to “see” the meanings within the mundane activities of VNGOs, the next section discusses several issues in ethnographic fieldwork, including my own place as a researcher. The following section covers the particular problems I encountered as an American researcher pursuing a politically sensitive topic in a country with an authoritarian regime. These problems undermined my intention to

write this dissertation as an ethnography, mostly due to my concerns about my informants' confidentiality. Finally, at the end of this chapter, I note the strictures I placed on the scope of this research, i.e., the things I did not look at.

### **Research Questions**

My research was driven by three formal research questions, formulated to overlap and reinforce each other. These questions provided me with the ability to triangulate from different empirical perspectives, while simultaneously building spaces for discovery. I endeavored to use these questions as anchors for the research project, counting on my Vietnamese informants and colleagues to move me off center, to take me in unanticipated directions. I was not disappointed; many of my conclusions have come from insights offered by my Vietnamese contacts, conclusions that I would never have come to if I remained rigidly on the course I set for myself. These are the questions that framed my research:

- a. *How are concepts of civil society being contested and reworked in Vietnam through discursive and material practices of VNGOs, international development agencies, Vietnamese and Western scholars, and the Vietnamese State?***

The evidence that the concept of civil society is, in fact, being reworked is clear from Vietnamese writings on the subject and foreign donors attempts to influence the formation of VNGOs and VNGO-like organizations. In my study, I ask Vietnamese officials and international donors for their perspectives on VNGO formation, and look at their responses in light of media reports, donor reports, and

other texts to reveal background discourse (most probably competing discourses) on civil society formation.

***b. What does the formation of VNGOs reveal about the on-going negotiations over State-society relations in Vietnam, particularly in light of the *đổi mới* economic renovations?***

A fundamental question that arises from the *đổi mới* reforms is what, exactly is the role of the Vietnamese State *vis-à-vis* society, and in particular in the context of this study, *vis-à-vis* development and Vietnamese NGOs? Are VNGOs (and other forms of civil society) necessary in a Communist country with a market economy? Vietnamese official State reaction to VNGOs – and the various forms of VNGO-State interactions – can provide a window on broader themes in the changing social structures in Vietnam. In particular this dissertation will look at how VNGO-State relations can be interpreted as setting the scene for a form of civil society that is new since the advent of the reforms. This new form of civil society is negotiated and contested, as I discuss in Chapter 7.

***c. What do the discourses that underpin VNGO and Vietnamese State conceptions of development reveal about the (hesitant) formation of civil society in Vietnam?***

In classic Vietnamese Marxist conceptions of development, State-led industrial manufacturing was to drive the country into the modern (socialist) era. The change to a market economy (*đổi mới*) and the presence of hundreds of international development agencies in Vietnam has worked to undermine the purist communist approach, but many elements of that form of developmentalism remain. And yet, under the influence of powerful development actors (such as the World Bank), the

Vietnamese State is facing increasing pressure to accept civil society as a crucial element in development.

### **Overview of My Research**

To address my research questions I required prolonged interaction with a variety of actors. Consequently, I spent 13 months in Vietnam from June 2003 until July 2004, mostly in Ho Chi Minh City with research visits to Hanoi, and conducted active research for about 10 of those months. My methodology had a two-tiered approach. First, my research was based on participant observation of three different Vietnamese-run NGOs in Ho Chi Minh City: two VNGOs and one INGO in Ho Chi Minh City. The VNGOs were established in different ways, one by ex-staff of an INGO (greatly influenced by the political economy of the international donor community), and the other by high-level working officials of the Ho Chi Minh City government. The INGO was established by a European organization with the intention that it be transformed into a VNGO. This organization, run by 100% Vietnamese staff, is also a product of the donor-state political economy. Each of these organizations reveals several aspects of VNGOs and “development” in Vietnam and the status of “civil society.”

My role as a participant observer was one filled with an inherent tension between “participating” and “observing.” In each of these three organizations I reached an agreement with the director whereby I would volunteer my time to work on tasks important to the organization. I translated documents, advised on personnel

issues, assisted with grant proposals, conducted background research, constructed web sites, and fulfilled other tasks as assigned. At the same time, I was given complete freedom within these organizations to speak with whomever I wanted about the work of the organization and related topics. My research was always overt, and I took great pains to ensure that both my informants and I knew when we were “on the record,” or when a given discussion was not to be attributed to a particular source, or when it could not be used in my research at all. These precautions, far from inhibiting my work, allowed me to build a considerable amount of trust and confidence with my informants, giving me access to rich detail about their work.

The second tier of my research is based on interviews among powerful players in the political economy of VNGOs. These interviews were with two different groups. The first were Vietnamese government and Communist Party officials, of whom I explicitly asked about the meaning of “VNGO” and “civil society” in today’s Vietnam. I probed into the official State ideology on these issues, including Marxist-Leninist theoretical challenges that these ideas pose and in the related legal challenges the government is facing in drafting new laws to govern this burgeoning “third sector” that the State perceives is quickly growing too large to be manageable under existing legal frameworks.

The second group of interviews I conducted was with international donors interested in promoting “civil society” in Vietnam. Many donors, such as UNDP, the World Bank, and USAID (whom I did not interview) are actively promoting the idea

of civil society and are pressuring the Vietnamese government to actively promote VNGOs as an important expression of civil society. These international donors constitute a force that wishes to expand the range of activities undertaken by VNGOs from simple provision of social services into advocacy and lobbying, contesting the State's restriction of the sector. Donors are also interested in promoting more radical forms of civil society to pressure the Vietnamese State into "democratic" reforms.

My prolonged engagement with my informants yielded rich data and a number of insights I could have had in no other way. In the next sections I will discuss how my choice to use ethnographic field techniques affected the types and the quality of information I was – and was not – able to gather.

### **Ethnographic Field Techniques**

I chose to use ethnographic field techniques, and especially participant observation, to explore my research questions because of their usefulness in uncovering the importance of everyday activities. Ethnography is about making sense of people's making sense of events and opportunities that confront them in everyday life (Ley, 1998, quoted in Herbert 2000, p. 551). The participant-observer, as an outsider who is looking from the inside, has opportunities to foreground the taken-for-granted and reveal connections and relationships not seen before. In part, this is done through comparing what is done with what is said, a methodological advantage of participant observation.

The research questions I have posed for myself are not ones that lend themselves to quick and precisely measured answers. Instead, they require a familiarity with *context* and *subjects*, a familiarity that comes from sustained interaction. Crang (2002) tells us that among researchers using qualitative methods in the discipline of Geography, interviewing is far more prevalent than “immersive techniques,” such as participant observation. In designing my study, it seemed to me that these forms of inquiry are certainly not mutually exclusive and a combination of the two would be very powerful. I therefore settled on an ethnographic approach that combines participant observation and semi-structured interviews to construct a series of multi-sited, “polymorphous”<sup>5</sup> engagements that allowed me to understand my topic in a richer way. Lurking below the surface of each of my research questions is the issue of how meanings – about civil society, about state-society relations, and about development – are made by international donors, the Vietnamese state, and VNGOs. Participant observation is a good tool for relating everyday activity – what Herbert calls “process” – with the socially encoded meanings it enacts and/or creates (2000, p. 550). My experience bore this out, and I came away from my field work much richer and much more knowledgeable about VNGOs and civil society in Vietnam. In the following section I will discuss the methods I used to approach my research questions as well as some of the problems these methods presented.

I approached my participant observation work in VNGOs from the standpoint that ethnography as a technique is about making sense of people's making sense of

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<sup>5</sup> A term used by Gusterson, quoted in Markowitz (2001).

events and opportunities that confront them in everyday life (Herbert, 2000, p. 550). Although some of what we, as humans, do in our everyday routines consciously engages with larger social process and structures, much of it is not conscious but no less engaged. "Ethnographers unearth what the group takes for granted, and thereby reveal the knowledge and meaning structures that provide the blueprint for social action" (Herbert, 2000, p. 551). As an outsider who is looking from the inside, the participant observer has opportunities for foregrounding the taken-for-granted and revealing connections and relationships not seen before. In one of the few institutional ethnographies of Third World NGOs I could locate, Markowitz (2001) explains that understanding the development visions of local NGOs means carefully observing mundane tasks:

Thus, the ethnographic staples of watching people as they work and asking them about what they do afford a starting point for seeing the ways development visions and policies are expressed in such mundane tasks as assisting people with microcredit applications, demonstrating the proper dosage of an antibiotic, or preparing a training workshop (p. 45).

Therefore, starting from observations of people's daily activities, the ethnographer attempts to understand the "*processes and meanings that undergird sociospatial life*" (Herbert 2000, p. 550).

Our observations, then, become ethnographic data, which we use to challenge, demonstrate, or create theory. "Ultimately the methodology of participant observation aims to generate practical and theoretical truths about human life grounded in the realities of human existence" (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 14). Proponents of Grounded



Theory approaches contend that the researcher should never “begin a project with a preconceived theory in his mind”; rather, theory should be “derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process” (Strauss, 1998, p. 12). Geertz reminds us, however, that the ethnographer’s stock in trade is his/her own interpretation of what he/she observes: “what we call our data are really *our own constructions* of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (1973, p. 9, emphasis added). Even though, as Herbert writes, “...order should emerge *from* the field rather than be imposed *on* the field” (2000, p. 552), in the end it is the ethnographer who synthesizes the observations in a given way, into a particular story.

It is this “self-conscious reliance on interpretation” (Herbert, 2000, p. 553) and the process of “inscribing” these interpretations (Geertz, 1973, p. 15) that gives ethnography extraordinary explanatory power. In writing down the observations the ethnographer transforms a “passing event, which exists only in its moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscription” (Geertz, 1973, p. 15). The acts of interpreting and of writing cannot be separated, and the ethnographer’s subjectivity permeates the process:

In short, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot...They are thus "fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are "something made," something fashioned" ... not that they are false, unfactual, or merely "as if" thought experiments (Geertz, 1973, p. 15).

The fact that my work is multi-sited and multi-local allows for an additional level of interpretation. Local phenomena, studied so assiduously through participant observation, are linked to larger, global processes through the semi-structured interviews I conducted with Vietnamese officials and representatives of international development agencies. By asking about the roles and potential of VNGOs I learned about the normative place they hold in donor and state discourses, i.e., the “meaning” of VNGOs to these actors. These interviews allowed me to make the vertical linkages so crucial to understanding the situation of VNGOs in a national and global context of development. The study can thereby move beyond the locally specific case, illustrating both global/local interactions and larger theoretical ideas (Markowitz, 2001; Watts, 2001).

### ***Problems in Ethnographic Fieldwork***

There are many critiques and criticisms of participant observation as a research method, and in my research I was aware of these on a daily basis. My only tool to counteract them was, in fact, my own awareness and a clear focus on the safety and comfort of my informants. That said, I will briefly discuss three of the most important ethnographic issues I encountered.

**Preconceived theories and ideas:** In the quote in the above section, Strauss states that a researcher should enter the field without any preconceived notions of theory, allowing the data to drive the theoretical process. While I believe in having an open mind, it does not seem possible to me to enter the field as a “*tabula rasa*”; we all

bring our own knowledge and experience to bear on our research. This constitutes an inherent bias, manifested in the kinds of questions we ask and in the way we react (respond, interpret, etc.) to the answers. I would paraphrase Herbert and say that we cannot avoid imposing order *on* the field, yet we can commit ourselves to a) trying to understand and articulate the nature and sources of those impositions, and b) allowing local voices and circumstances emerge *from* the field to drive our analysis.

**Confidentiality:** Because the organizations I worked with and observed existed in a state legal vulnerability – because the state in Vietnam has an ambivalent understanding of VNGOs – I was/am ethically bound to maintaining strict confidentiality of my informants and their organizations. This proved increasingly difficult, as the number of organizations in Vietnam is so very small and their characteristics are so specific. The ideas and theoretical points I wanted to make often required the use of details that could easily identify the organization and the people involved. It is often the specific and the mundane that explains the larger point, so I found the conflict between gathering the level of detail to make my points and the need for informant confidentiality in common conflict. Some of this I was able to overcome by using pseudonyms, composites, and other techniques of disguise. In other cases I had to decide not to use the data, in deference to the safety and comfort of my informants.

It was precisely this problem of maintaining informant confidentiality in a context where my informants are so easily identifiable that prevented me from writing

this dissertation as an ethnography. The very attention to rich detail and Geertz's "deep description" that makes ethnography such a powerful tool also makes my informants vulnerable to identification. Because VNGOs occupy a legal and political space that is ill-defined in Vietnam, they are potentially subject to harassment or sanction from state offices or officers. ( I discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter 5.) Therefore I chose to write this dissertation to minimize the possibilities for compromising my informants' confidentiality. Hence this dissertation is not the ethnography I had planned.

**Presence of the researcher:** The researcher will always be an actor in the research process. The simple fact is that people act differently when they are being observed. Jorgensen (1989) writes that the participant observer must therefore "fade back," so as to reduce his impact. "[E]very effort must be made to minimize the extent to which the researcher disrupts or intrudes as an alien, or non-participant, in the situations studied." This appears to be good advice, however there are some practical limitations. In one VNGO, I was tasked with another foreign volunteer to create a website for the organization. This meant long hours in a separate room, with another "alien." I was "participating," but very little "observation" was being done. I had "faded back" too far. In order to gather information I had to get involved with other staff members' work, imposing myself and my non-native Vietnamese language. It was virtually impossible to be a fly on the wall, nor would such a perspective give me the kinds of insights that I desired.

Since he cannot remove himself to an invisible point of observation, the researcher needs to acknowledge to himself that he is *inevitably* a presence and a force, affecting the environment in which the observations are taking place and therefore the data that is being collected. This was driven home to me by an incident at one of the NGOs where I conducted research. Having missed a staff meeting the day before, I asked another foreign volunteer, a young woman, to fill me in. She told me how the director had spent a great deal of time roundly criticizing the work of two staff members who had missed an important deadline. The director had become abusive and insulting, and the two staff members were near tears after being berated publicly. On hearing this, I expressed my great surprise. Every staff meeting I had attended to date, though long and boring, had been conducted with great civility and professionalism. I had never seen the director act in such a manner before. “That is because you were *there* at those meetings,” my foreign colleague explained with strained patience. “When you are not around he acts *completely* differently.”

I have no reason to doubt my colleague about the conduct of the meeting. As a middle-aged male academic, I had observed that I was treated differently by the director (also a middle-aged male academic) than were the other, mostly young, foreign volunteers at the organization – certainly differently than the young women who were often given tasks below their abilities and generally not considered as fellow professionals. However, the dramatic difference between the staff meetings I had observed and the report of the one I had missed truly shocked me and drove home the

effect my presence was having on the conduct of the organization and therefore on my own data.

Understanding that my presence influenced my data, it is important to briefly outline certain points about who I am as a researcher. – my positionality. As a researcher of Vietnam, I come from a rather peculiar background which strongly influenced my own understanding of and interpretation of the information I gathered during my fieldwork. Perhaps even more fundamentally, my positionality as a researcher has compelled me to approach my fieldwork in ways that other researchers would not. Therefore, in this section I will discuss some of the aspects of my own background and approach that had a great deal of influence on the outcomes of my research.

My involvement with Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans started in about 1976 and has lasted all my adult life. I worked with Vietnamese refugees in the US and volunteered in a refugee camp in Southeast Asia. I studied US-Vietnamese relations in the 1980s. I married a Vietnamese American woman and thereby acquired several hundred Vietnamese relatives on both sides of the ocean. We are raising our children bilingually, and are committed to taking frequent trips to Vietnam to expose them to that part of their heritage. My wife and I spent nearly 5 years of the ten years between 1993 and 2003 living and working in Vietnam. As my advisor termed it, Vietnam is a part of my biography.

This deep and long-term involvement inevitably colored my approach to my fieldwork for this dissertation and my interpretation of the information I collected. In general, I approached my work as a “sympathetic listener,” that is, I tried to understand deeply the context from which my various informants were speaking. I also placed the information within my own understanding of Vietnamese social and political circumstances and history.

At no time was I ever truly an “insider” in Vietnamese culture or society. On the other hand, my language and cultural competency (although still leaving much to be desired), placed perhaps *more* inside than many Western researchers. My status as a “son-in-law of Vietnam” (by virtue of being married to a Vietnamese woman) with my Vietnamese language elicited friendly greetings and some limited access. My understanding of and adherence to proper bureaucratic procedures put officials somewhat at their ease. My ability to address people with correct forms of deference helped put people at their ease, and opened doors and loosened tongues. My expressed understanding of the “sensitivity” of the topic and my concern for confidentiality helped build trust and confidence, allowing my informants to more completely express themselves (even though I could not use much of the confidential information that I was given).

Being an outsider who could wriggle partially inside at times gave me distinct advantages. For instance, one VNGO manager trusted me enough to ask my advice on some very sensitive personnel issues in her organization, which gave me great insight

into the logic of VNGO professionalism. On the other hand, my “sympathetic” approach sometimes led me astray. For example, after an interview with a Party official, my research assistant and translator told me that I had been rather “timid” in my questions. I realized that my own preconception about what was “appropriate” to talk about had prevented lines of questioning that could have been very fruitful.

### **Research Constraints: An American Researcher, A Sensitive Topic**

Being a foreign, Western researcher – and particularly an American – in Vietnam is extremely rewarding and simultaneously fraught with complications.<sup>6</sup> There are two main issues that confront foreign researchers in Vietnam. The first is a fundamental difference in the way in which (and the purposes for which) research is conducted in Vietnam. Vietnamese scholarship is closely tied to state ideology and the state apparatus. In this context, policy recommendations are the major outputs of most (if not all) Vietnamese research efforts. The second issue is the continued environment of suspicion about foreign motives in Vietnam, and especially American motives. The Vietnamese security apparatus still considers the United States a possible threat. They are particularly concerned about covert activities of American intelligence agencies and hostile overseas Vietnamese groups. Consequently, Vietnamese bureaucrats and others who interact with American researchers feel a great need for caution and circumspection. These two issues, difference in approaches to research and suspicion of foreign researchers, are further complicated when the topic of the research is

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<sup>6</sup> My experiences researching in Vietnam are certainly not unique. Discussions with dozens of Western and Asian researchers in Vietnam have revealed very similar problems. Scott, et. al. (2006) talk about many of the issues foreign researchers face there.



considered “sensitive.” In this section I will discuss the idea of “sensitive topics,” then look at the two main problems Western/American researchers must deal with when working in Vietnam.

When I discussed my topic of civil society formation and Vietnamese NGOs with foreign scholars and international aid workers familiar with Vietnam before starting my research, most if not all counseled caution, as I was proposing to look into a topic considered “extremely sensitive” by the Vietnamese government and Communist Party. The term “sensitive” in this context is an example of the kind of coded speech used by foreigners and English speaking Vietnamese when discussing issues that are considered out-of-bounds for Western researchers. Or, more accurately, in discussing these topics, many or most Vietnamese will feel uncomfortable and even vulnerable to official reprimand or worse. The researcher might even risk expulsion. An example of such a topic that was approached but eventually abandoned by an Australian Ph.D. researcher while I was in Vietnam was the then-disputed Vietnam-China border. Historical topics that challenge state historiography also may fall into this category, a category that is generically labeled as “sensitive.”

A “sensitive” topic may still be discussed in Vietnam, but a foreign researcher must take care that he is not *perceived* as promoting an agenda that is contrary to the state’s policy. As a Vietnamese colleague involved with civil society issues admonished me, one must “work mindfully” so as not to bring on official sanction. In particular, foreign researchers have an ethical imperative to take great pains in

Vietnam to reassure his counterparts and the regulating bureaucracies that he is not engaged in research that could be considered subversive.<sup>7</sup>

As I mentioned above, several people advised me that the issues of Vietnamese NGOs and civil society in Vietnam were both considered to be “sensitive.” To my surprise, I found government and Party officials in Hanoi to be extremely forthcoming and engaged with these ideas and the surrounding issues. However, for both Vietnamese and foreign interviewees, the more geographically or bureaucratically remote they were from decision-makers, the more concerned they were about the topics’ “sensitivity.” Among foreigners this manifested itself as spoken advice for caution in my work; among Vietnamese there was circumspection in speech, frequent references to official policy, or indications that they would rather not speak about certain things or use certain terminology.

I see two main sources for the “sensitivity” ascribed to the topic of civil society in Vietnam. The first is civil society’s association with the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and its association with the demonstration and the subsequent bloody massacre in Tiananmen Square. These events shocked the Vietnamese government into an internal crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s, increasing the power of the hardliners and security agencies who were concerned about covert political interference from outside and about continued economic and social discontent

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<sup>7</sup> I will discuss the idea of “politics” and “sensitivity” in Vietnam again in Chapter 4. Also see Chapter 7 for an in depth analysis of the concept of “non-political” engagement by Vietnamese NGOs.

among its citizenry. Consequently, references by foreigners to “civil society” still cause concern in certain quarters of Vietnamese officialdom.

The second reason for the labeling of civil society as a “sensitive topic” is that, at this time, there is no “Party line” or coherent policy on the meaning of this politically charged term, nor is there any agreement on the translated Vietnamese equivalent.<sup>8</sup> In an atmosphere of uncertainty over the meaning of the term, and with a level of hostility to the term and the concept among the security apparatus and some other government officials, most Vietnamese are understandably hesitant to make use of this term or explore its possible meanings. Because such efforts might be construed as “doing political work” (i.e., engaged in subversion), Vietnamese who are not secure in their position, those geographically and bureaucratically distant from decision makers, avoid using the term “civil society” as being “too sensitive.”

The perceived sensitivity of any given research topic is compounded by the difference in method and even purpose that research plays for Vietnamese and Western researchers. Scott, et. al., (2006) frame this in three ways. First they note the still dominant influence of soviet-style research, particularly among an older generation of social scientists trained in the former Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. Secondly, they note that there is a general suspicion of social science in Vietnam, as such studies often engage with social and political issues, issues that the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) claims as its province. Thirdly they

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<sup>8</sup> Please see Chapter 4 for a discussion of the translation issue.

strongly imply (and I have seen as well) that there is pressure on Vietnamese researchers and others to uncritically support the current model of economic development. Consequently, whatever empirical social research is conducted by Vietnamese researchers is often framed in very ‘politically neutral’ ways. As such,

there is a tendency for the positivist paradigm to dominate quite strongly in research design and practice, as reflected in the bias towards so-called ‘apolitical’ quantitative methods” Scott, et. al., (2006, p. 31).

I would argue that these constraints on social science – at least “constraints” as far as Western researchers are concerned – add up to a much more significant epistemological difference, and even, it may be argued, to a significantly different ontology of research. The very nature and purpose of research for most Vietnamese academics, at least those who have not been trained in Western universities, are very much applied. Vietnamese social scientists often, in my experience, see themselves as engaged in a quest for better policy recommendations. These recommendations rarely embody criticism of the underlying principles of the Party line, but rather reinforce it by expounding upon its successes or by proposing small, incremental change. Before *đổi mới*, according to Scott, et. al. (2006), “Vietnamese scholars generally aimed to confirm policy decisions or document success stories...” There is still an observable “tendency to dismiss instances of marginality and difference as unrepresentative...” that drives social science in the direction of looking only at the *status quo*. In this intellectual environment, critical approaches to research (such as this study’s Critical Development Studies approach) are poorly understood and looked at with intellectual as well as political suspicion.

This research environment is, like most research environments, a place of intense negotiation, a place where differing discourses – of academia, politics, ethnicity and gender – play out in diverse and confusing ways. As a middle-aged white man with a wife and children, my social position in Vietnam gave me a marked edge over Dr. Scott and the two Geography Ph.D. students who co-wrote an article on this topic – three younger, unmarried female researchers. I was able to avoid many of the issues they confronted, in part because of who I am, and in part because I chose to study in an urban area rather than in the countryside. However, the fact that I am an American cannot be dismissed.

On numerous occasions I was reminded by both foreign colleagues who have substantial experience in Vietnam and by Vietnamese colleagues that my nationality brought with it an extra level of scrutiny from academic and security agencies. These reminders were occasionally blatant, as when a long-time American NGO worker in Hanoi, discussing the sensitivity of my topic and the need for me to move slowly and carefully, finished up by saying, “And don’t ever forget that you are an American.”<sup>9</sup> On another occasion, when I was explaining an initially guarded reception I received from a local NGO, a Vietnamese researcher listened to my list of possible reasons, then added, “*And* you are an American. There is still a little uncertainty about how to deal with Americans.”<sup>10</sup> On still another occasion a mid-level Party official failed to keep her appointment with me. A Vietnamese research consultant to whom I told the

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<sup>9</sup> Personal interview. Name withheld by request (Hanoi, November 2003). Requests for anonymity and to keep certain comments “off-the-record” were common during my research. In addition, the nature of this work meant I was ethically bound to maintain confidentiality.

<sup>10</sup> Personal interview. Name withheld by request (Ho Chi Minh City, January 2004).

story said she was not surprised that someone in that position would be reluctant to meet with an American and discuss such a potentially political issue as civil society.<sup>11</sup>

One Vietnamese-American colleague reminded me that the “concern about Americans” that I ran into took place at low administrative levels, and that they all took place in the context of the American invasion in Afghanistan and Iraq, with all the consequences those events had for international relations between the US and Vietnam. According to the official Vietnamese line, the invasion of Iraq both verified and vindicated the VCP’s position that the “American War” in Vietnam (what Americans refer to as the “Vietnam War”) was indeed a war aggression, that the United States is imperialist, and that the American government cannot be trusted. It was therefore concomitant *on me* to assure all involved that I was in no way a representative, overt or covert, of the American government or American policy.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the issues I faced as an American researcher studying a “sensitive” topic were greatly mitigated by my comfort with Vietnamese language and culture (including bureaucratic and political culture) and by my formal academic ties to the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH) in Ho Chi Minh City. Because of the relationship research in Vietnam has with the state, and because of the concerns over foreign academics, all research must obtain official permission before being initiated. The USSH sponsored my visa and provided many official letters of

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<sup>11</sup> Personal interview. Name withheld by request (Hanoi, April 2004). I relate the story about this missed interview in Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication, Hoàng Thị Diệu Hiền, (December 2003)

introduction, giving me legitimacy and a legal basis for my presence and my work in Vietnam. Americans can conduct “sensitive” research in Vietnam if we tread lightly.

### **Scope of Research: What I Didn’t Do**

Civil society is a very broad topic, related to several fields and utilized in a number of different discourses by many different actors, each with specific agendas.<sup>13</sup> Because of this unwieldy breadth, I designed this research project with specific (if somewhat arbitrary) boundaries, accepting the impossibility of studying *all* civil society in Vietnam. Instead I chose to focus on Vietnamese non-governmental organizations as a window into a certain form of civil society formation – a form most often promoted by international development actors as key to making “development” (variously defined) a reality. As discussed above, there is no consensus on whether NGOs should be considered “real” civil society organizations. However, NGOs are central to development discourses on civil society, and therefore I made VNGOs central to this study.

I placed other specific limits on my study as well: I chose to study only *urban* organizations (though many urban-based VNGOs have operations in rural areas), which accomplished several practical things for me as a researcher. It made locating and contacting the VNGOs easier. It also greatly reduced my impact on and contact with the State security apparatus (that is much more suspicious of foreign researchers working in rural areas); This fact allowed me much greater freedom of movement and

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<sup>13</sup> I will cover some of this multifaceted use of the term and concept of civil society in the next chapter.

meant I had far fewer administrative formalities to attend to and a greatly reduced risk of unpleasant encounters with local police and other authorities. Concentrating in urban areas also ensured I was working with organizations that had at least a minimum amount of contact with the international development community. Besides these factors, it also allowed me to live and house my family in an urban environment – an important consideration for my two young children.

My choice of study site – Ho Chi Minh City – was also made for a combination of reasons, some driven by personal and family concerns, others by theoretical and academic issues. In terms of academics, Ho Chi Minh City and southern Vietnam remains less studied by foreign researchers than does Hanoi and the northern part of the country. This is due to recent historical and institutional reasons and a lingering concern among Vietnamese security agencies about undue foreign influences among the less-trusted southern population. Besides, Ho Chi Minh City is also more familiar to me, and I am more comfortable with the local way of life there than I am in the north. In other words, access is far easier for me in Ho Chi Minh City, due to my personal experience there, an important consideration because of the need to build trust-based relationships through sustained “immersive” encounters and when discussing “sensitive” topics.

Studying civil society in Vietnam, I constantly ran the risk of letting the research project expand out of practical limits. Among the international donor community, civil society is frequently conflated with a recent legal reform touted as



ensuring local participation in the political process – a reform embodied in an instrument dubbed the “decree on grassroots democracy.” This decree and associated reforms, strongly supported by international donors, were in part prompted by a number of rural protests about local government practices, and hence has some resonance (to the international community, anyway) with “democratization.” This brings to mind – if only in Western embassies and aid agencies – the far larger-scale demonstrations that resulted in the collapse of communist governments in Eastern Europe. Hence civil society and “grassroots democracy” often share rhetorical space in Vietnam’s international development circles.<sup>14</sup> In part because of the extremely political nature of the issue of “grassroots democracy” and in part because of its rural dimension, I did not include that in the scope of this study.

Similarly, the topic of civil society is also often related to the topic of human rights in development discourse in Vietnam (and elsewhere), and is also associated with political dissidence. Human rights and political dissidence are *extremely* problematic topics in Vietnam both theoretically and politically. Such a study would quickly become a minefield for a foreign researcher, with the potential of bringing security personnel to one’s door or of getting one’s research visa revoked. Therefore I consciously opted to avoid both of these topics.

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, the “Civil Society Working Group,” set up by UNDP in Hanoi as a forum for discussing issues related to civil society, originally had two main thrusts: Vietnamese NGOs and “grassroots democracy.” This group has since changed its name to the “People’s Participatory Working Group” in response to concerns by the Vietnamese government about the use of the term “civil society.”

I also decided to focus only on those organizations that call themselves “Vietnamese NGOs.” By limiting myself in this way, I did not look at the various mass organizations (such as the Farmers’ Association or the Women’s Union) or their many spin-off associations, organizations and “centers” (such as the Women’s Charity Association, under the Vietnam Women’s Union office in HCMC). There is an argument to be made that the mass organizations themselves, particularly at the more local levels of administration (districts and villages), and particularly under the *đổi mới* reforms, have taken on more and more civil society functions as time goes on. Their spin-off organizations also have many characteristics of the local NGOs that this study focuses on. They are well worth in-depth study. However, the mass organizations and their child organizations still retain significant ties to the state, and are often organized and managed very much like state offices. For this reason I chose not to include them in my research.

As I mentioned above, I focused only on urban-based VNGOs. I did not look at the large and rapidly growing number of rural organizations now forming in Vietnam. Farmers’ marketing associations, water user groups, and other rural organizations may arguably be the incubation sites of an indigenous style of civil society, more grassroots in its formation and arguably more robust than urban-based, mostly foreign-funded VNGOs. Some work has already been done on these kinds of groups (Bach Tan Sinh, 2001; Bach Tan Sinh, 2002; and Fforde and Huan, 2001 among others), but much remains to be done. This study does not address this important part of the civil society debate in Vietnam.

## **Conclusion**

The nature of the tasks I set for myself, embodied in my research questions, necessitated a form of data gathering that was extended in time and that enabled me to garner the confidence of my VNGO informants. No other technique offered me the kind of engagement that I desired than did participant observation. In my thirteen months in Vietnam, I worked as a volunteer in two VNGOs and in an INGO that was 100% staffed by Vietnamese nationals. These three experiences allowed me to see how the mundane operations of VNGOs worked to define and reinforce their place in a local form of civil society, couched in “everyday expressions” of civil society, than would be very easy to overlook using other data gathering techniques. By expanding my data gathering methods to include semi-structured interviews with actors in the Vietnamese government, the Vietnamese Communist Party, and the international donor community, I was able to get a rich understanding of the political and legal environment and the political-economy in which these VNGOs operate.

My role as a researcher was heavily colored by the fact that I am an American (which somewhat limited my ability to gather data). My concern about my informants’ confidentiality has greatly limited what I can write about them and the level of detail I can go into in describing their work and their world. And yet I believe that these constraints have not prevented me from making my case in this dissertation that every day expressions of civil society are crucial indicators of the civil society roles these VNGOs play.

In later chapters (Chapters 6 and 7) I will describe more of what I observed and some of the conclusions I have formed from these observations. In Chapters 4 and 5 I will lay out much of the Vietnamese context in which I studied the issues of civil society and VNGOs. In the next chapter (Chapter 3), I outline the theoretical history of the issue of civil society and introduce a new approach to civil society theory that allows us to more readily capture the “everyday expressions” of civil society.