

## Chapter 4

### Vietnamese Encounters with the Concept of Civil Society

*"If one is interested in human action -- its wellsprings and variant expressions across the landscape -- one must attend to the symbolic systems that accord it meaning... [There is an] indelible connection between meaning and context... Meaning systems are, at least in part, locally specific and frequently intrinsic to a particular place; they are both place-bound and place-making" (Herbert, 2000, p.556).*

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter we saw how civil society theory is transformed as it moves between the social and political spaces of political philosophy and international development theory and practice. Likewise, this chapter explores the further transformations of the concept as it moves through geographic space, from the West to Vietnam. These transformations are complex and messy, intimately tied to historical, political and linguistic processes too complicated to cover in detail in this dissertation; but at least some mention of these transformations is crucial to understanding the

varied (and often contradictory) voices of Vietnamese actors in the process of civil society formation now underway in Vietnam. The messy history of the term, the ambiguity of its meaning(s) in Western literature, and the politics of its introduction into Vietnam complicate an already difficult process of linguistic and theoretical translation. At the same time, these processes help to under-gird international development processes there.

Through the exploration of issues of linguistic antecedents, translations, and Marxist-Leninist state theory, I attempt in this chapter to situate this foreign concept in a regime of local knowledge. Understanding the precarious intellectual space the idea of civil society inhabits in local knowledge systems helps us to better grasp the political and legal problems encountered by the VNGOs that I studied. It also highlights the problem of “traveling theory,” that is, it never arrives in exactly the condition it left in. Local encounters and attempts to make the theory comprehensible change its nature

In order to better understand the ideological and legal limbo in which VNGOs find themselves, I will explore how the concept of “civil society” is perceived and talked about among Vietnamese. The short answer, as I have mentioned above, is that it is a rarely seen or used term, with almost no popular understanding outside of a narrow band of development agencies, VNGOs, state officials, and a very limited number of intellectuals. I have never encountered the term in the popular media, and other than the single entry I found in the 1994 academic *Dictionary of Sociology* (Tư

*Diễn Xã Hội Học*, Nguyễn Khắc Viện, et. al., 1994), it does not show up in standard Vietnamese dictionaries. Casual questions of various “people on the street” elicited blank looks and wild guesses. Writing in 1994, Nguyen Ngoc Giao noted, “One of the first observations that can be made about the expression ‘a civil society’ (*xã hội công dân* or *xã hội dân sự*) is that it is almost totally absent, as a term, in the media in Vietnam.” This is still the case today, more than 10 years later.<sup>25</sup>

I will begin by exploring the possible avenues by which the term entered into the Vietnamese language over the past 150 years. This historical background leads then to a discussion of how the term has been translated into Vietnamese and how the process of translation both causes and is caused by the lack of clarity of the concept itself. Finally I discuss a small number of Vietnamese writings on civil society and VNGOs written by Vietnamese authors attempting to define the term over the last 15 years. These few writings reveal a confusing intellectual landscape surrounding the term. Many are derivative of Western scholarly definitions and therefore just as contradictory as the Western scholarship.

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<sup>25</sup> As I write this chapter in early 2006, debates and news articles surrounding the new “Law on Associations” being considered by the Vietnamese National Assembly include the term “civil society” on occasion, though typically without discussion of either its theoretical meaning or practical application in Vietnam.

### **Vietnamese Historical Encounters with Civil Society**<sup>26</sup>

In Vietnam's charged political environment, where the Party maintains power in part through legitimacy claimed and maintained by rhetorical means, translating "civil society" has proved to be extremely difficult. This is in part due to the eclectic manner in which the term has entered Vietnam over the years. Though difficult to trace with any accuracy, I speculate that the term entered the Vietnamese language through four or five separate routes over a period of 150 years or so, each with its own political and political-economic ramifications.

The first entry into Vietnamese may well have been from the German by way of Japanese connections. According to Robert Pekkanen, expert on civil society in Japan, the term for "civil society" in Japanese (市民社会 – "shimin shakai,") seems to have come from German sources as a direct translation of the German term *Bürgergesellschaft* (personal communication, 2005). The Japanese characters have a direct correspondence to one of the two Vietnamese terms for civil society, *xã hội công dân*. (More on the Vietnamese terms, below.) The link between Vietnamese nationalist intellectuals, such as Pham Boi Chau, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries may have provided the conduit for this term to arrive in Vietnam through these sources. However, I have no etymological proof of this.

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<sup>26</sup> In this section is a largely speculative discussion of the possible origins of the Vietnamese terms for civil society. Unfortunately the scope of this research did not encompass a complete study of this etymology. However, I have found the exercise of speculation useful in opening up the issue of a very complicated set of historical processes involved in bringing this term and related concepts to Vietnam.

The second entry of the term was, perhaps, through the writings of Marx, likely in the 1920s and 1930s. (Vietnamese sociologist Nguyen Quang Vinh described this as the most likely scenario. Personal communication, 2003.) Marx wrote very little about civil society, mostly characterizing it as an arena of vested interests controlled by the bourgeoisie, and therefore an arena of class conflict. He also had a tendency to equate “civil society” with “non-state” society, i.e., what we would call simply “society.” As with most of Marx’s theoretical work, this kind of civil society is deeply intertwined with capitalism. Although the translated works of Marx are widely available in Vietnam, I was unable to find specific references to Vietnamese Marxist writings on civil society.

The third entry point for the term may have been through the American presence through the 1960s and early 1970s. Of course this influence would have been predominately – if not exclusively – in the southern part of the country. Certainly the term “civil” was in use there, as in the term “civil aviation” (*hàng không dân sự*), where *dân sự* (“civil,” “non-military”) is also part of one of the two translations of “civil society.” However, I was unable to uncover any specific references to “civil society” in this period.

The fourth entry point was likely through discussion of the fall of Eastern European communist regimes and the Tiananmen demonstration in the late 1980s and early 1990s. East European and Western scholars often credit civil society groups for forcing the Eastern European communist regimes to fail. The events in Tiananmen

Square in China were cast in the same light by Western analysts.<sup>27</sup> Although the communist regime in China retained power, it did so at a huge price in blood and in international prestige. The political fallout – the deep concern and even fear in Hanoi – caused by events in Eastern Europe and in Tiananmen Square cannot be underestimated<sup>28</sup> and consequently neither can the effects of these historical events on the Vietnamese perceptions of the term and concept of civil society.

Finally, one source that may pre-date all of these is the Vietnamese contact with French philosophy, society and administration as an inevitable consequence of French colonization of Vietnam (and Cambodia and Laos) in the mid 1800s. I have not seen any specific references to civil society from this period, though this study did not examine French sources. Wischermann (2004) indicates that finding specific, one-way influences may be difficult and ultimately misleading. In fact, he maintains, it is the “entangled histories” between cultures such as Vietnam and France, with ideas moving both directions (though perhaps not symmetrically) that are important to understanding how such ideas as civil society are transferred and modified.

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<sup>27</sup> There is a substantial body of scholarship on the question of whether Tiananmen Square was an example of civil society or if there are other explanations. Regardless of the outcome of these debates, Vietnamese scholars and Party theoreticians certainly heard the term civil society in connection with those events.

<sup>28</sup> I make this statement from personal experience. Visiting Hanoi in 1990, I felt a great deal of this concern, and witnessed a number of things that indicated large-scale power struggles within the Vietnamese regime between forces that wanted to continue with the *đổi mới* reforms, including the opening of the society to outsiders, and those forces that wanted to focus on stronger security measures, including restrictions on local people and on foreigners in Vietnam.

Finally, international development during the *đổi mới* period has arguably been the most influential– and certainly the most recent – point of entry for the term civil society. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, almost simultaneously with the fall of the Eastern European communist regimes, “civil society” became a foundational concept in international development theory and practice. Clearly it is through the linkage between development aid and through international donor insistence that the Vietnamese state has placed new priorities on understanding the concept and attempting to create a theoretical basis for its use in Vietnam.

Of course, in each of the above examples of the term entering the Vietnamese language, it does so with the sets of meanings particular to its historical and geographic source. With differing definitions of the same term, the VCP has limited rhetorical control over the associated concepts, a position they are not comfortable with. Consequently, the VCP would like to define the term “civil society” in a careful and responsible manner. To date they have been unable to do so, which explains why the term is almost never used in official state documents or in the media in Vietnam. My direct queries to Party and government officials about the term “civil society” elicited responses such as “it is still being researched,” or “it is not a term we use in official writings, due to the lack of a clear definition” or even, “Concentrating on the definition of that term is not useful – you should concentrate on policy/real issues/concrete activities” (various interviews with Vietnamese scholars, VCP cadre and government officials, 2003, 2004).

### **Vietnamese Translations of “Civil Society”**

Yet the word itself, coming in its latest incarnation from powerful international donors and entering into Vietnam from the English language, for the most part, is in fact very important. The pressure to use this term is great, placed on the Vietnamese state by the donor community, in part through the changed nature of development discourse in the 1990s favoring the fostering of civil society, and in part through the need to translate into Vietnamese donor documents that use the English term extensively. The Vietnamese state struggles with the vocabulary even as it studies how the concept of civil society can be integrated into state ideologies.

Translating from one language to another is fraught with problems. “To translate is to betray.”<sup>29</sup> But when the source term is poorly (or variously) defined, as the English term “civil society,” it would seem impossible to render it in another language with any accuracy or with any hope of conveying the desired meaning. Hudson (2003, quoted in Wischermann, 2005) maintains that in order to make use of the term “civil society,” it is necessary to “grasp the complexity and subtlety of the European usages ... [since] the term is used in multiple, conflicting and contradictory ways, many of them dependent upon a detailed understanding of the context and language in which they were originally used.” Based on this advice, translating the term “civil society” into Vietnamese would require a treatise.

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<sup>29</sup> I have seen this attributed to an old French saying, “*Traduire, c'est trahir*,” and to an old Italian saying, “*Traduttore, traditore*.”

An interesting and significant aspect of the English term “civil society,” besides its contested denotation, is the range of *connotations* it creates, in part through the multiple meanings of the word “civil.” English speakers draw many connections to the term “civil,” and these in turn are passed on to the phrase (and the concept) of “civil society.” Chief among these connections are the use of the word “civil” to mean:

- “civilian,” as in not belonging to the military (or the Church);
- of or pertaining to “citizens,” especially their legal rights, as in “civil law”;
- belonging to the state bureaucracy, as in “civil servant”;
- socially acceptable or polite, as in “to give a civil reply,” (sometimes extrapolated to mean “civilized” or even “non-violent”).

Significantly, these various connotations tend to be positive, describing social traits that are desirable. These connotations give the English term “civil society” tremendous malleability, allowing it to hold a number of essentially positive meanings simultaneously. The field of semiotics uses the term “floating signifier” to describe such terms, referring to signs (e.g., words) whose meanings are indeterminate and can therefore be made flexible.<sup>30</sup> The power of the floating signifier “civil society,” therefore, comes from its ability to derive contingent and flexible meanings from these positive associations without “committing” to any single definition.

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<sup>30</sup> “An ‘empty’ or ‘floating signifier’ is variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even any signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean” (Chandler, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02a.html>, accessed August 2006).

The multiplicity of meanings for the English word “civil” that provide varied and nuanced connotations deeply embedded within the term “civil society” therefore contribute to its conceptual “fuzziness. This multiplicity of meanings also makes it impossible to translate the term into other languages fully intact.<sup>31</sup> A translation of the term “civil society” will often, of necessity, concentrate on one (or a very limited number) of the many denoted or connoted aspects, losing both the malleability and much of the discursive power of the term. The translated word “ties down” the speaker in a way that the English term cannot. In essence, the user of the translated term is forced into a corner, committed to a certain aspect of the meaning of civil society, whereas the English speaker has rhetorical room to maneuver. We see this room to maneuver in the use of the term “civil society” by development agencies. It is often left undefined, or defined in a way that is particular to a given project or development approach. In other contexts the use of the term may change subtly or profoundly.

Vietnamese use two different phrases to translate “civil society,” *xã hội dân sự* and *xã hội công dân*. The exact etymology of these two terms is not clear, but it is certain that they are both imported. They are built of Sino-Vietnamese borrowed words, which is the norm for most administrative and theoretical words in Vietnamese. Both terms use the Sino-Vietnamese word for “society,” *xã hội* (社会). The Sino-Vietnamese word for “the people,” *dân* (民), is also present in both terms,

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<sup>31</sup> It may be argued that the term was, in fact, not translated into English intact from other languages such as German.

though as an element in each of two different translations of “civil.” Rough word-for-word translations for these two terms would be something like:

*xã hội công dân*: “citizen society”

*xã hội dân sự*: “civilian society”

As noted above, it is important to emphasize that neither formation of the Vietnamese term captures the breadth of meaning present in the English. Nor does my rough translation of the two terms above do full justice to their intrinsic meanings in Vietnamese. These facts lead to problems of translation and conceptual understanding, especially as the meaning of the English term shifts, refusing to be pinned down.<sup>32</sup>

The first term, *xã hội công dân* (“citizen society”), seems to have been preferred in official Vietnamese writings in the early 1990s when international donors began pressuring the Vietnamese to include civil society in their development plans. Two examples of the official use of this term are a short article entitled *Xã Hội Công Dân* appeared in the April 1994 issue of the primary Communist Party theoretical journal, *Tạp Chí Cộng Sản*, in the monthly “Clarification of Concepts” column (1994a, pp. 61-62),<sup>33</sup> and the entry in the *Dictionary of Sociology (Từ Điển Xã Hội*

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<sup>32</sup> Attempts to “pin down” the meaning of civil society often evoke the well-worn phrase, “like trying to nail jello to the wall.”

<sup>33</sup> The “Clarification of Concepts” column is a regular feature of TCCS. It is designed to inform Party cadre of the acceptable use of terminology and its underpinnings in Marxist-Leninist political theory. Interestingly, this article is singularly unhelpful in clarifying the concept of “civil society.” It discusses, at some length and with repetition, the need for citizens to follow the law and not harm society, clearly emphasizing public order over rights of assembly and association. I read this article as a somewhat

*Học*, Nguyễn Khắc Viện, et. al., 1994, pp. 326-328) that same year (mentioned above). The latter is the only Vietnamese dictionary entry I could locate for the term civil society. (I will discuss both of these writings in more detail below.)

In present-day Vietnam, however, it is the second term, *xã hội dân sự*, that is the one more favored, although there is no consensus – and more importantly in Vietnam, no Party decision – as to which translation is “correct.” The word *dân sự* (meaning “civilian”) has probably existed in Vietnamese for a long time as an antonym to “*quan sự*” (military). Why the first term (*xã hội công dân*) fell out of favor after the mid-1990s and the second (*xã hội dân sự*) became the preferred term is not clear to me. Mr. Cong, the VCP theorist mentioned in the previous chapter, told me that *dân sự* implies both individual *and* organizational activities, whereas *công dân* implies only individual activities (personal communication, March 2004). Other VCP officials and Vietnamese scholars who have written on this topic or with whom I spoke could offer no insight other than to give a typically vague Party line explanation that *xã hội dân sự* is “clearer” and “has a broader meaning” than *xã hội công dân* (Phan Dai Doan, 1996b, footnote, page 25, my translation; also various interviews, Hanoi, 2003-2004). One informant admonished me not to worry about the vocabulary, but rather focus on the policy; even though most official documents prefer *xã hội dân sự*, he said, many people in Vietnam do not know the difference between the two

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worried reaction to ideas of “civil society” influenced by the Eastern European and Tiananmen episodes a short few years earlier.

terms (name withheld, personal communication, March 2004). In fact it is extremely rare to see either term in any official document.

But the importance of vocabulary is underscored by the fact that, although there is a “preferred translation,” there is still no “official” term for civil society in Vietnamese. Party and government officials are clearly averse to using the term (which certainly marks it as important), except in speculative and experimental discussions of theory – never policy – such as in workshop papers exploring the idea,<sup>34</sup> or in “informal” (i.e., unofficial) conversations with foreign researchers such as myself. Most scholars, Party cadre, and governmental people I spoke with felt more comfortable discussing “concrete” issues, such as the legal registration of “associations” or “VNGOs.” (Ironically this latter term also is yet to have an official definition and is therefore considered “sensitive” as well.)

### **Vietnamese Writers on Civil Society**

The number of Vietnamese authors writing on the term and/or the concept of "civil society" is extremely small compared to the amount of writing done on the subject across the rest of the world in the last 15 years. This reflects two things: first, the importance of the fact that the idea is *imported* has made the topic less relevant to Vietnamese writers. Perhaps the fact that the concept did not clearly reflect

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<sup>34</sup> For example, the “Workshop on Updating the Scope of the Law on Associations” was held July 26-27, 2001 in Hanoi among a group of party officials and scholars. Several papers presented at this workshop explored the ideas of civil society and VNGOs in a speculative way or as a comparison with other countries.

Vietnamese social experience coupled with the problems it presented for Leninist governance made the topic less interesting for Vietnamese scholars and ideologues to pursue. The latest wave of importation, through the international development agencies (in the context, one cannot forget, of Eastern European political change in the late 1980's), has had a slightly broader impact, yielding a small number of writings, mostly by Vietnamese staff of or consultants to international agencies, written for those agencies in English. For instance, researchers from the Institute for Social and Policy Research, a VNGO that operates as a small policy think tank, wrote a paper called "Civil Society in Vietnam" (Le Bach Duong, et al., c2002) under contract to the Finnish Ministry of Finance, and Bach Tan Sinh (2001) wrote a similar paper for the Swedish Parliamentary Commission on Swedish Policy for Global Development to Vietnam. Interestingly, VNGOs themselves never use the term "civil society," unless they are responding – in English – to a donor query on the topic.

The second factor that has kept the number of Vietnamese authors on this topic small is the fact that the Vietnamese state, in particular, the Communist Party, has yet to reach a consensus on the meaning – and policy implications – of "civil society." With no official commitment to the term, Vietnamese writers are reluctant to make statements about the concept, avoiding the risk of being "wrong" in retrospect (once the Party makes such a commitment) and perhaps thereby jeopardizing reputations and careers. Vietnamese political and academic culture does not reward innovation outside of structured forums (one of which will be discussed below), so Vietnamese

academics and government researchers are usually content to be conservative and work on less "sensitive" topics.

In this section I will look at a limited number of writings by Vietnamese authors, in Vietnamese and in English, which at least touch on the idea of civil society. They come from a variety of sources, some academic though most not, and espouse different points of view. One item of note is the wide range of thought in such a paucity of writings. Because the small number of writers is not yet a critical mass, it is not possible to determine a general trend. The variety of viewpoints reflects the positionality of the various writers, and perhaps is symptomatic of a society (and polity) coming to grips with a concept thrust upon them from the outside, one that does not seem to fit their conception of social or political reality.

There are only a very few mentions of the term "civil society" in Vietnamese texts of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since the term "civil society" was bandied about by triumphalist Cold Warriors and international development agencies, the very paucity of the term in Vietnamese writings in this period is significant. Marr (1994) mentions three authors<sup>35</sup> that use the term. According to Marr, Hoang Chi Bao (1993) "refers to a civil society under the leadership of the VCP" focused on state building, the rule of law, and democracy. Le Minh Tam (1993) focuses on the rights of citizens to legally form their own "social organizations," provided they operate within the law.

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<sup>35</sup> I could not locate these works. Vietnamese texts are often produced in extremely small print runs and are often distributed in small geographic areas. It is not surprising that these very specialized works on politics and ideology are difficult to find, especially a decade after they were published.

Nguyen Duy Gia, et. al., (1994) add a quick sentence at the end of their edited volume that calls for democracy and the rights of citizens to be protected “in order to have a civil society serving society and the citizenry” (translations by Marr). It is also important to note, as Marr does, that none of these writings “shows much evidence of familiarity with the extensive foreign [i.e., non-Vietnamese] literature on civil society.”

At about this same time, Lu Phuong (1994),<sup>36</sup> a noted political dissident in Vietnam, wrote that civil society in Vietnam “throughout the course of history, has never been destroyed,” regardless of the type of regime in power, feudal, colonial, or communist. Lu Phuong uses the term “civil society” as a synonym for a public realm wherein “society” expresses its needs and wishes. He asserts that when the Vietnamese state sees itself as being co-terminus with society in general, a situation where, “in the name of the revolution, state and society are made identical,” civil society loses its public voice but not its character of resistance. It is driven underground, into a “secret world” where its voice is found in small acts of resistance. In economic life, that means black markets, smuggling and fence-breaking. In the realm of culture and thought, civil society exerts itself through religion, family activities, the spreading of jokes at the regime’s or Party’s expense, or the passing of

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<sup>36</sup> Lu Phuong wrote this paper for the 1994 gathering of the annual Vietnam Update Conference in Canberra, Australia. The Vietnamese authorities did not grant a visa to Mr. Phuong to attend the conference, but his paper was sent (smuggled out) to the conference organizers who translated it and read it at the conference. It is unpublished. Around the time of the conference, Mr. Phuong was arrested for his vocal opposition to the Vietnamese Communist Party and government.

newspapers and books hand-to-hand.<sup>37</sup> Although Lu Phuong does not use the classical description of civil society as the realm of *associational* life, he does use the classic formulation of contestation between civil society and an authoritarian, intrusive state. His notion of civil society is of a collective “will of the people,” at the current moment repressed by an all-powerful communist ideology and a violent state, yet resisting and ultimately transcendent. In this manner, he is in line with many writers on Eastern European civil society at that time. Certainly this is not a view of civil society that the Vietnamese state is eager to embrace.

The Vietnamese state was beginning to write on the subject of civil society at about the same time (October, 1994), two official definitions of civil society (discussed above) were published. The first was a short item in the April 1994 issue of the primary Communist Party theoretical journal, *Tạp Chí Công Sản* (pp. 61-62), emphasized the role of the state in maintaining law and order within civil society. The second was a 1994 entry in the *Dictionary of Sociology (Từ Điển Xã Hội Học*, Nguyễn Khắc Viện, et. al., 1994, pp. 326-328). Both of these two official definitions are very similar in their historical materialist conceptual framework, both distance themselves from the failed Eastern European states by labeling them as “totalitarian,” and both focus on the need for the state to impose law and order on civil society. These similarities indicate (as is common in official Vietnamese publishing) possible

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<sup>37</sup> Kerkvliet, a scholar and long-time Vietnam watcher, noted that it is hard to underestimate the role of the private photocopy shop in Vietnamese civil society. Often, when an article, book, song, or other text is forbidden or censored by the state in Vietnam, copies can be found for illicit purchase at photocopy shops.

coordination or even the same authorship. Although certainly published with permission from, and possibly under the direction of, the VCP (and are therefore “official”), they should not be considered the essence of a “Party line.” Rather, they were apparently to be a starting point in what promised to be a longer process of discussion and debate among political elite in formulating a position on the concept,<sup>38</sup> a debate that did not go forward publicly.

Phan Dai Doan’s (1996a and b) discussion of civil society marks an attempt to make the concept less foreign and more Vietnamese. In only a few short passages buried in his book “*Management of our Country’s Rural Society Today – Problems and Solutions*,” Doan notes the impact in southern Vietnam of the *đổi mới* policies that dismantled socialist style agricultural cooperatives and allowed family-based production once again:

After Contract 10, in southern Vietnam, foundational cooperatives disintegrated, in the north old cooperative were transformed, and households became the principle socio-economic units active under the market system. This is the basis for civil society (1996a, p. 25; my translation).

By starting here, Doan places civil society in the realm of capitalism, an artifact of market economies. By implication, civil society is a non-Socialist formation, one that did not exist under communist rule (or at least under the cooperative system), and

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<sup>38</sup> Within identified academic and research organs, muted theoretical and ideological debate is permitted and even, to a small degree encouraged, as expressed in this quote from the resolutions of the Sixth Plenum of the Vietnamese Communist Party (1999): “All individuals with opinions different from the majority should be given the right to express fully their views *within party organizations and certain suitable party theory institutions*” (emphasis added, <http://www.undp.org.vn/mlist/develvn/021999/post21.htm>, accessed December 8, 2005).

which required a return to a (family-based) capitalist production model in order to emerge.

If this were all Doan talks about, we could slot his writings in with other Marxist writers. But Doan wants to “localize” the concept, rooting Vietnamese civil society in what is generally recognized as the most important institution in Vietnamese society, the extended family or clan. In doing so, Doan undermines the entire liberal basis for the idea of civil society:

Western society places the individual at the center, an individual is an autonomous unit; whereas in Vietnam, especially in the rural areas, the individual is not a full-fledged unit, but an entity within all his different objective relationships, above all the clan-family<sup>39</sup> (1996a, p. 25, my translation).

This assertion calls into question the entire body of classical civil society literature, which places civil society as an intermediate level of organization between the individual or the nuclear family and the state. If, on the other hand, the Vietnamese fundamental unit of analysis is the larger, hyper-extended *clan-family*, and Vietnamese conceive of themselves only in terms of membership and relationships within this large entity, then the Western civil society model does not apply. It simply does not make sense to the average Vietnamese, who cannot, if Doan’s characterization is correct, conceive of him/herself as some separate unit, cast loose of all relationship

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<sup>39</sup> I have used the term “clan-family” as a somewhat artificial way of capturing the inclusive and widely extended nature of the Vietnamese term *gia đình gia tộc*. The word “family” in English cannot capture the broad nature of the Vietnamese term. In using the word “clan-family” in this context I refer to a much bigger unit than the nuclear family, and even larger than the commonly conceived “extended family.” A Vietnamese “clan-family” will number in the hundreds, encompassing blood relatives, relatives by marriage, and fictive kin.

ties, moving “out” of the family to participate in civil society. Rather, Doan’s is a counter-liberal – perhaps a communitarian – basis for social conception and analysis. Working from this assumption, civil society in Vietnam may need to be conceived very differently than has been done before.<sup>40</sup>

Although Vietnam historian David Marr is not a Vietnamese writer, his intriguing idea for exploring a Vietnamese conception of civil society and state-society relations (Marr, 1994) is based on fundamental Vietnamese concepts of social organization, and gives insight on how Vietnamese consider these ideas. Using Vietnamese terminology, Marr suggest we view Vietnamese civil society as working to expand the “public sphere,” a concept he says goes back centuries in Vietnam. The public sphere (*công*) represents “the space in which people conduct affairs beyond the family or private sector (*tư*), but not specifically under the jurisdiction of government officials (*quan*).” Marr continues by stating, “Unlike most conceptions of civil society, Vietnamese active in the public sphere do not generally see themselves as asserting civic power against state power.” Rather they engage in strategies to enlarge the possibilities of public action:

... they prefer to infiltrate the state, find informal allies, and build networks that may conceivably be seen as fulfilling state, public and private objectives simultaneously. Most of this is accomplished at a personal rather than institutional level, without legal guarantees, and thus subject to ambush from other such alliances. This way of operations is inherently elitist, although public sphere activists

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<sup>40</sup> Regrettably, the project of developing a communitarian-based concept of civil society is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

generally believe what they are doing is altruistic and good for their constituents (p. 14).

As we will see in later chapters, this is an apt description of VNGO work in Vietnam: taking on activities either abandoned by the state, or possibly wresting them from the state through joint projects, personal contacts within the state, etc.

Much more recently, after about the year 2000, there has been a quiet revival of writings about civil society in Vietnam. Most of these are still in English, indicating both their limited audience and the fact that writing for foreigners on “sensitive” topics can be less problematic for a Vietnamese author than writing publicly for other Vietnamese. One of the fascinating aspects of all of these writings in English is their double-edged nature. In part, these documents are opportunities for Vietnamese authors to study and write about this foreign and very powerful concept of civil society. Some explore civil society and the media (e.g., Hoang Thi Minh Hong, 2002). Others look at civil society in development practice (e.g., Bạch Tân Sinh, 2001; Le Bach Duong, et. al., c2002; Lê Thạc Cán, et. al., 2002) or how new forms of rural organization are beginning to constitute a new form of civil society in Vietnam (e.g., Phan Dai Doan, 1996a and b; Bạch Tân Sinh, 2002). Others look at historic forms of social organization as early forms of or as precursors to modern Vietnamese civil society (e.g., Duong Trung Quoc, 2001; Nguyen De, 2004).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For further references, please see my appendix, “Readings on Vietnamese NGOS and Civil Society in Vietnam.”

Among these writings, the master's thesis by Nguyen Hong Nang (2004) stands out as one of the rare attempts by a Vietnamese author to engage with the historical debates on civil society and apply them directly to the Vietnamese context. He asserts *ad hoc* applications of the concept of civil society, "without adaptation" (p. 6), leading to the misconceptions among foreign aid workers that strengthening civil society in Vietnam is at the very least "problematic" (as I heard during my fieldwork on several occasions) or the more dogmatic, there is "no civil society" in Vietnam (Nguyen Hong Nang, 2004, p. 7). Nang concludes that "... [A] critical application of the political interpretation of civil society [in Vietnam] is not adequately cared for. The fact is that ... normative values associated with civil society are over emphasized while some indigenous understanding of civil society is lacked [sic]" (p. 54). I am hopeful that this trend of critically engaging with the essentially foreign concept of civil society by Vietnamese authors<sup>42</sup> will continue, and that these are the forerunners of a more comprehensive discussion on civil society in Vietnam.

Taken together, these writings are a bridge across which the concept can travel mindfully into Vietnamese intellectual society. At the same time, however, and perhaps even more overtly, these writings allow Vietnamese authors to explain Vietnam to foreigners in terms of civil society, in a two-way dialogue. In doing so, the

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<sup>42</sup> A prior master's thesis by a Vietnamese student also undertook a similar strategy. It is not being quoted at the request of the author. It is very important to note that both of these masters degrees, as well as at least one other masters thesis and one doctoral dissertation on complementary topics, were written at universities outside of Vietnam. Vietnamese students are still not comfortable writing on this "sensitive" topic inside the country, and perhaps Vietnamese faculty would not be comfortable supervising such research.

Vietnamese authors adjust the theory by small increments to make its internal logic “work” in the Vietnamese context. These (mostly) English language writings on civil society also exhibit important strategies for making the concept of civil society palatable to the authorities who certainly have access to these papers and who probably monitor such writings. Whether or not the authorities read these papers, the writers write as if they will. Foucaultian self-discipline is clearly in effect in Vietnamese scholarship. The verbal, rhetorical and discursive practices and strategies used by these writers to incorporate the idea of civil society into the existing state ideology and specific Vietnamese conceptions of “democracy” (quite different from the liberal democracy under which the concept of civil society was born) in fact do a great deal of work. If civil society is to be an acceptable foundation for development practice in Vietnam in the future, it will be through these kinds of writings that the State will ultimately accept (some version of) the concept. In fact, by couching civil society concepts in certain ways, these writers are actually moving the theory in directions that are specific to the historical, social, and geographical conditions of Vietnam.

### **Conclusion: Traveling Theory, Vietnamese Voices**

This brief look at Vietnamese encounters with the term and the concept of civil society demonstrates that the theory is traveling and being transformed in the process. The idea of civil society comes to Vietnam in several simultaneous dimensions, traveling through historical and political space, through linguistic space, and through

the discursive space of international development. In each dimension, the encounter incrementally changes Vietnamese society and politics, but also changes the theory itself. International donors brought the idea to Vietnam, but the idea is being re-worked into a new form, both through the explicit work of VCP theorists wrestling with the concept, and through the slow but very real work of other Vietnamese who are beginning to experiment with the concept in their own writing. This process is ongoing and demands our attention as scholars. How is this theory being transformed as it travels? And what will the Vietnamese voices who use this idea have to say to us as they develop their own ideas of how the concept of civil society is meaningful to them?