

Chapter 8

Concluding Remarks

This dissertation attempts to explain how Vietnamese NGOs, working in the context of an authoritarian, Marxist-Leninist regime and a political-economy dominated by international development actors, can be understood to be civil society organizations. This research is preliminary and certainly presents an incomplete picture of civil society in Vietnam and of VNGOs. But this research also offers a new theoretical foundation from which to explore these phenomena. In this final chapter, I will first recap my argument for a process approach to civil society theory as a way to capture and understand “every day expressions” of civil society that may be easily overlooked using more conventional approaches. I will then briefly look at the major contributions that this dissertation makes. Finally I will touch on additional avenues of research I would like to undertake to contribute to a more complete understanding of civil society in Vietnam.

Recap: Civil Society and Vietnamese NGOs

In Vietnam today, civil society is a difficult thing to “see.” It does not express itself – or at least is very rarely expressed – in dramatic events like the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Tiananmen Square protests, or even the picketing of a government office in Hanoi by a bus load of farmers with a grievance. Rather, civil society in Vietnam works through personal alliances between state and non-state actors in quiet, daily working relationships, examples of what Alagappa (2004) terms “every day expressions” of civil society. This dissertation has explored the ways in which local, non-profit, non-government development organizations, Vietnamese NGOs, are a thriving part of this kind of everyday civil society.

These mundane forms of civil society do not, from my field observations, conform to models presented in conventional approaches to civil society, which often focus on the kinds of autonomous associations that Tocqueville was writing about 170 years ago. In response to the inability of structural, Tocquevillian definitions of civil society to explain my empirical observations, I have tried in this dissertation to argue for a more nuanced and less restrictive understanding of civil society based on the *activities and roles* of different actors in society rather than on the kinds of institutions those actors represent. Consequently, civil society actions and roles – what I call civil society “process” – can be found in a greater number of circumstances in the Vietnamese context than we might suspect, including within organizations like

VNGOs, “quasi-NGOs” and even within the state-controlled media. (See Chapters 2 and 6.)

The early chapters of this dissertation examine the historical and intellectual history of civil society as a concept, identifying a number of threads that have run through its various manifestations. In particular, I am interested in how the concept was picked up by the international donor community as an important aspect of international development theory starting in the 1980s and 1990s. I also look at the specific historical, political and legal environment in post-*đổi mới* Vietnam, into which the concept has been introduced by the development community and where the state is struggling to incorporate the idea into its own political-economy and Marxist-Leninist ideology (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5). Much weight is given by international development organizations, particularly large donors, to Tocquevillian concepts of intermediate associations, particularly NGOs. In these models of civil society, autonomy from the state is a crucial criterion for a civil society organization. For several reasons I argue that autonomy is a chimera, in part because the “divide” between state and society in a place like Vietnam is very difficult to define and extremely porous. I agree with Heng (2004) in his assertion that close connection to the state can allow for certain effective forms of influence on state behavior and policy (see Chapter 6).

Therefore, in examining civil society as process, it is not useful to include or exclude particular institutions, associations or organizations because of their level of

autonomy from state control. Rather, we need only focus on the roles and activities that those groups assume in society.

This new, more inclusive definition of civil society better explains how VNGOs, with their close ties to the Vietnamese state, can work for changes in state behavior and even in state policy, even while not enjoying full autonomy. VNGO projects dedicated to improving conditions for poor and marginalized groups through work with “secondary beneficiaries” (government offices) for better programs, etc., are the norm. While this form of “civil society action” has its limitations, I find it effective in explaining civil society in the Vietnamese context. Using this approach, we avoid missing a potentially vibrant civil society that does not manifest itself as autonomous associations and organizations that Western theory (and international development discourse) has preconditioned us to see.

Adopting an approach to civil society that looks at processes and activities does not solve all our theoretical problems, however. For instance, the bias-laden questions such as “which kinds of organizations are part of civil society?” merely get transformed into other bias-laden questions such as “which kinds of activities do we consider a part of civil society processes?” Yet the “civil society as process” approach *does* let us examine civil society experiences, activities, and outcomes that are undertaken by groups and organizations that might be defined *out* using a structural approach to identifying civil society.

Using the expanded view of civil society based on activities rather than on institutional structure, we can begin to see that VNGOs, even with their various ties to the Vietnamese state, are influential civil society actors. An important aspect of the state-VNGO relationship is the notion of professionalism. VNGO workers internalize the ideals of professionalism as a critical part of their own identity. This sense of professionalism allows VNGO staff to interact in an effective manner with both their Vietnamese state and international donor counterparts. It assures respectability and assurance to their work. An important part of this ideal of professionalism in Vietnam is the concept of VNGO work as being “non-political.” In essence, even though Western scholars have long argued that development can never be anything but political (e.g., Watts, 1993, 1995; Crush, 1995; Ferguson, 1995; Escobar, 1995; Hart, 2002; Jenkins, 1002, 2002; etc.), this means that VNGO workers do not undertake activities that are contrary to Vietnamese state ideology or policy; they are not “contrarily political” (see Chapter 7).

International donors, who support VNGOs financially and through training, have their own interests in expanding the role of VNGOs as civil society actors. By using a continuum of possible civil society activities and roles, I demonstrate how international donors put pressure on VNGOs to expand their roles while simultaneously the Vietnamese state is committed (at least at this time) to restricting those roles to service provision (see Chapter 7). This heuristic continuum reveals the contested nature of the VNGO-society relations, even when the VNGOs themselves are less interested in expanding their own roles.

Reformulating our ideas on what to include in civil society allows us to see every day expressions of civil society that may be otherwise obscured. This approach does not discount “dramatic moments” of civil society – they have their place on the far left of my continuum diagram (see chapters 2 and 7) – but neither does it privilege them. Likewise, this approach does not preclude autonomous organizations as being part of civil society, but neither does my definition of civil society *require* autonomy from the state. This approach also undermines, if only partially, Eurocentric bias inherent in many forms of civil society theory, making it more useful in studies of non-Western societies.

Contributions of this Dissertation

In many respects, the importance of this study lies in the particularities of the cases. Its year-long empirical study has yielded important insights into method, theory, and circumstance. Some of these contributions are listed below.

Contribution 1: Civil Society Theory

In essence, this dissertation is an attempt to reconcile theories of civil society in current Western scholarship with empirical research conducted in Vietnam. Through this process, I came to the conclusion that structural approaches to defining and identifying civil society were not adequate for explaining what I saw in my fieldwork. I therefore have adopted and expanded upon work done by a small number of scholars who suggest we look at civil society as activities and processes, rather than

as institutional forms (e.g., Cheek, 1998; Uphoff and Krishna, 2004; Fowler, 1996; and Wischermann 2004). My continuum of civil society roles and activities is a useful heuristic in moving this form of analysis forward.

Contribution 2: Methodology

A second contribution, a derivative of the first, is my use of a “process approach” to identifying civil society “on the ground” in Vietnam through roles and activities. Rather than looking for all the autonomous organizations, a researcher might look for *all* actors who are engaging in a certain form of civil society behavior. The use of a “process approach” to civil society thus has the potential to reveal to researchers issues, institutions, and activities that a more classical approach to civil society would miss.

My methodological approach of “polymorphic engagement” – that is participant observation in VNGOs and semi-structured interviews with state and donor actors – allowed me to see how civil society roles and activities were undertaken, even where conditions such as autonomy from the state were less than ideal. Long-term and multi-sited qualitative approaches are useful in revealing various civil society processes and the unexpected actors who are involved in them.

Contribution 3: Eurocentric Nature of the Concept of Civil Society

This dissertation also contributes to the already numerous and growing academic voices claiming that civil society is a deeply Euro-centric concept in its

commonly used forms. Uncritical application of civil society ideas often leads to claims of Asian (or African) exceptionalism, claims that area sometimes framed as “there is no civil society here,” or “civil society is nascent in this context.” Often what is going on is that the researcher does not see the kind of Euro-American civil society he has defined as “real” civil society. This dissertation adds my voice to those asking the question, “How can we be aware of and avoid some of this Euro-centrism when looking for civil society in non-Euro-American contexts?” The process approach to defining civil society offers one way forward.

Contribution 4: Empirical Knowledge of VNGOs

Finally, this dissertation also contributes additional empirical knowledge about Vietnamese NGOs and the issues of NGOs, non-profits, and philanthropy in Vietnam, and by extension, in other Marxist-Leninist countries. Institutional ethnographies of civil society organizations in communist countries are uncommon, and many of the comparative studies of civil society in transitional states are done in European former communist states. This study is a rare examination of NGOs in an Asian Marxist country. As the topic of civil society and VNGOs is receiving more and more attention among Vietnam Studies scholars, and this dissertation will, I hope, contribute to these ongoing discussions.

Future Study

No successful academic study fails to raise more questions than it answers, and this dissertation is certainly not an exception to that axiom. During my fieldwork and through the writing process I was under constant temptation to expand my study, to take it in different directions that suggested themselves. It was only with a certain amount of regret at missed opportunities that I was largely able to keep myself “on the straight and narrow,” focused on the limited tasks I set for myself in this dissertation. In this section I would like to briefly comment on three (of *many*) very interesting branches in the trail – roads not taken but could/should be. The first is explorations of the different functions civil society might perform under different conceptualizations of democracy. The second is similar: if we consider Vietnam a predominantly communitarian society, then what roles does civil society have to play there? And third, I want to return to the idea of a “process-oriented” definition of civil society and reconsider if structure doesn’t have some place in the concept after all.

Civil Society and Different “Democracies”

There are a fair number of recent writings on civil society in China Studies. Many make the case for a kind of “Asian exceptionalism,” saying that Asian civil societies, formed under Asian governmental and social forms, must necessarily be much different than Euro-American forms of civil society (e.g., Ding, 1994; Cheek,

1998; Pye, 1999; Metzger, 1998).¹¹² Of these arguments, I am particularly intrigued by Metzger's (1998) analysis of the idea of democracy in China. He explains that the idea of democracy as understood in the West, which is "ultimately dependent on the interplay of free, fallible individuals" interacting through a set of "morally neutral" rules, held in check by "organizational efforts of free but fallible citizens forming a civil society with which to monitor an incorrigible political center," is not how democracy is understood in China. Rather, Chinese political thinkers believe in a utopian form of democracy ruled by "a morally and intellectually enlightened elite working with a corrigible political center morally to transform society" (p. 30).

I have a strong suspicion that Vietnamese conceptions of democracy may be directly informed by this "utopian" idea of democracy. If so, it would explain, in part, why Western discourses of democracy are supplanted so easily by other political ideas using the same term (*chủ nghĩa dân chủ* in Vietnamese). So a further avenue of study would be to explore the undoubtedly varied and interwoven ideas of democracy in Vietnam as an additional avenue for understanding how the idea of civil society is understood, resisted, and/or transformed.

Civil Society and Communitarianism

The idea of civil society is based on a conception of society that comes from the European Enlightenment. It assumes a society in which individuals (historically meaning male property owners) are heads of nuclear families in their private lives, and

¹¹² I have some sympathy for this approach, but there is danger that a form of "orientalism" and essentialism can creep into the arguments, undermining their credibility and utility.

interact with the state and market in their public lives. In other words, civil society is constructed on the concept of liberalism.

But an argument can be made that Vietnam is only recently beginning to adopt some of the trappings of liberalism, and can be more correctly described as a *communitarian* society, with the extended family as the basic unit. To repeat a quotation from Chapter 4 of this dissertation:

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-family¹¹³ (Phan Dai Doan, 1996a, p. 25; my translation).

Further research on the role and position of civil society in a communitarian society (given that a case can be made to describe Vietnam in that way) could result in a number of insights into how civil society functions in non-Western societies around the world.

Civil Society Process vs. Structure: It's 'Both/And'

Finally, I would like to return to the idea of looking at civil society “process” as being a useful one for conceiving of the idea and for doing empirical work in non-Western societies. This dissertation takes an “either/or” approach to this topic,

¹¹³ 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.

promoting the “process approach” over the “structures” approach. In future research I would like to take a “both/and” approach, looking at the structures and institutions of civil society *and* the processes and activities that characterize civil society.

It is true that I *implicitly* look at both structural and process dimensions in this dissertation when I discuss the institutional and legal constraints VNGOs’ face, such as registration procedures. However future work should be more explicit in using both of these dimensions (structure and process) for explaining civil society organizations and activities.

In fact, Fowler (1996) attempts to combine civil society activities and institutions as part of his project for looking at civil society in transitional societies. In this article he uses a two-axis continuum describing what he calls “degrees and directions of freedom.

(See figure 11.) His vertical axis, showing “Reform – Service” as the extremes of civil society “purpose” looks remarkably like my continuum of civil society “roles.” (See

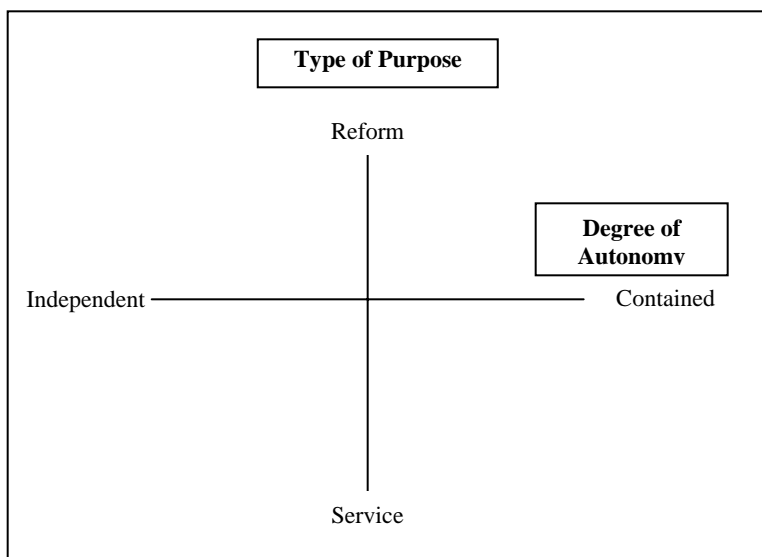


Figure 11: Fowler’s “Civil Freedoms” (redrawn from Fowler, 1996)

figure 3.)¹¹⁴ His second axis is labeled “Degree of Autonomy” and indicates the degree to which a civil society actor is “Independent” from or “Contained” within the state. Though I can certainly see a number of problems with this model, the idea that *both* social structures *and* social processes are important makes for an interesting place from which to continue this research.

The incidents and themes that I have chosen to write about in this dissertation show the tiniest part of the complex and ever changing situation of VNGOs in Vietnam. Even while I finish drafting this concluding chapter, the Vietnam National Assembly (the highest legislative body of the government) has accepted a final draft of the Law on Associations from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA), to be voted on in the coming weeks. The debate over this law became (by Vietnamese political standard) rather vociferous. One outspoken government body, the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA) introduced an alternative draft for consideration – the first time a competing draft law has ever been submitted to the National Assembly.¹¹⁵ Even the word “civil society” is beginning to be seen in news accounts of these debates

Meanwhile, VNGOs are continuing to write grant proposals and undertake projects, working for their beneficiaries to make life in Vietnam better. This dissertation only begins to describe their daily work and their aspirations for the future. But their dedication to improving their society, both through direct

¹¹⁴ I read Fowler’s work after returning from fieldwork and after devising my continuum.

¹¹⁵ Personal communication with Dr. Mark Sidel, who performed a legal analysis of the MoHA draft for VUSTA, 2006.

development assistance to the poor and marginalized of society and through active engagement with their government counterparts, is undisputed.

Through all of this research and the writing of this dissertation, I have tried to keep the voices and ideas of my Vietnamese colleagues, informants and friends at the forefront. I have tried to put their ideas and concerns into Western academic guise, to make them accessible in the format of this dissertation, and at the same time to protect the confidentiality of all concerned. It has been these ideas and concerns of the many dedicated Vietnamese working to improve their society that have been foremost in my own mind to perhaps infuse this dissertation with some of the spirit and vitality that they all, without exception, brought to our discussions. If civil society exists anywhere, it does so because of people like these, who care enough to make a place where their contributions and their hard work can constructively engage the state and promote the rights and interests of their constituencies. Their everyday expressions of civil society life in Vietnam are truly inspirational.