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Nhi Hoang Thuc Nguyen

Trinity University, nhinguyen5996@gmail.com

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Nhi Hoang Thuc Nguyen

Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Contemporary Vietnam: Constructing Nationalism, New Democracy, and the Use of “the Other”

The South China Sea (SCS) territories are disputed between seven countries: Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. This has long been a significant geopolitical flashpoint in contemporary international relations and politics. Located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the SCS occupies a strategic position; it serves as a maritime corridor through which passes one-third of global maritime trade, worth over \$5 trillion, of which \$1.2 trillion goes to or from the United States each year (Ratner 2017). Furthermore, the SCS is replete with oil, gas reserves, and vast fishing grounds. Its fisheries produce 12 percent of the world’s annual catch, and it provides energy and food for Southeast Asia’s 620 million people. As a result, the SCS is a desirable gem over which Southeast Asian countries and China have been fighting at the risk of blighting economic partnerships. China—as a rising global economy, with growing military strength, a greater sense of its global role, and a more robust sense of nationalism since the Western financial crisis in 2008—has claimed most of the territory of the SCS. Its “nine-dash line,” designating the territory it claims for itself, would ostensibly grant China sovereignty over 80-90% of the SCS (Yahuda 2013). Moreover, the Chinese navy’s aggressive moves in international waters, including damaging and sinking foreign vessels, also heighten the enmity between itself and its territorial rivals. Despite the fact that the seven nations’ claims overlap, in general the struggle is conceived as principally between an aggressively expansive China versus the other six claimants.

Vietnamese people and politicians have expressed strong opposition to China's expansive power and aggressive acts on the East Sea (the Vietnamese name for the SCS), especially the Spratly and Paracel Islands. In the summer of 2014, when Vietnamese newspapers announced that China's Haiyang Shiyou 981 drilling platform was illegally moving into waters near the disputed Paracel Islands and within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), many Vietnamese people, from north to south, flooded into the streets to protest China's illegitimate actions (Panda 2014). People held banners and shouted out slogans to express their discontent with the Communist Party of China (CCP)'s move, and to pressure the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) to implement more decisive action in the East Sea. Starting out as peaceful street protests, the campaign later degenerated into violence. A 67-year-old woman burned herself in front of the Reunification Palace in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) on May 23rd (C. Nguyen 2014). Her paraphernalia bore slogans such as "Demand unity to smash the Chinese invasion plot" and "Support Vietnamese coastguards and fishermen" (Associated Press in Hanoi 2014). Later, mobs of Vietnamese workers in Chinese factories attacked their Chinese peers and managers and looted goods and property (Kaiman and Hodal 2014). Similar violent outbursts severely damaged the infrastructure of those companies and created fear among not only Chinese-affiliated companies, but also those from Singapore and Taiwan who could be mistaken as Chinese in Vietnam (*BBC News* 2014). There were at least 15 foreign-owned factories set on fire and hundreds of casualties in the upheaval.

On July 12, 2016, a fiery upheaval broke out on Vietnamese social media when an international tribunal in The Hague ruled against China and in favor of the Philippines, declaring that Beijing violated codes of conduct governing international waters in the SCS (Perlez 2016,

Tong 2016). Despite the fact that the Filipino and Vietnamese claims overlapped, it seemed like no Vietnamese really paid attention to this detail. Instead, many Vietnamese cheered and fervidly congratulated the Philippines on its victory against China (Bùi-Tín 2016). This event also triggered many Vietnamese to recall their resistance to the CCP's expansive power and aggressive acts on the East Sea. On Facebook, many users changed their profile avatars to a picture of a pair of scissors cutting the “*đường lưỡi bò*,” the “cow-tongue shape,” of the Chinese nine-dash line territory claim. This image represented Vietnamese people's rejection of the CCP's territorial claim on the East Sea. In addition, the Vietnamese netizens recalled the past incidents of Chinese naval troops attacking Vietnamese boats in the waters near the Paracel and Spratly Islands. They also initiated their own anti-Chinese media campaign by using pejorative language to censure Chinese citizens and celebrities' complicity in supporting their government's aggression (Tong 2016). For instance, Thanh Loc Nguyen—a well-known Vietnamese actor and celebrity—called for a boycott of Chinese culture and entertainment, rebuking renowned Chinese celebrities who supported the CCP's political acts (2016). Another famous celebrity and TV host, Tùng Leo, commented on Loc's status, “I used to study abroad in China but I will definitely never speak Chinese. I just want to be Vietnamese.” Following Tùng, an ordinary netizen commented, “I used to have three books of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*¹ (*Tam Quốc Diễn Nghĩa*), but now forget about reading them.”

In the mainstream media, many Vietnamese channels announced that they would stop making Vietnamese subtitles for Chinese movies to protest Chinese celebrities who “use[d] their influences to promote political propaganda.” Binh Thuan channel halted its broadcast of a

¹ *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written by Luo Guanzhong, is a renowned 14th-century Chinese historical novel and a popular piece of literature in Vietnam.

Chinese movie named *Tân Bến Thượng Hải* because the actors and actresses in the movie objected to the results of the Hague case (Dang 2016). The situation seemed to get more intense when Tung Tran, a member of Microwave, a famous Vietnamese rock group, published a long post on his Facebook wall to demand that a war be waged against China (2016). To him, a war was a concrete act to prove the strong will and active resistance of contemporary Vietnamese people against the aggressive moves endorsed by Beijing. In his caustic tone, he felt that the VCP had not acted strongly enough to oppose China. He pointed out that it was an appropriate time to show Vietnamese patriotic spirit, to call for the revival of traditional Vietnamese values of heroism, and to establish a resistance to China to counter its coercive and ignoble maneuvers in the East Sea.

In Vietnam, besides the contemporary East Sea dispute, the most common answer for the root of anti-Chinese sentiment is the long-term inimical history between Vietnam and China. Sinophobia—the antipathy to Chinese people and cultural influences—is framed as not a recent phenomenon but a recurring pattern, an essentialist historic sentiment which many Vietnamese construct their identity upon. Anti-Chinese sentiment reminds Vietnamese of their heroic tradition, glorious past, and indomitable ancestors who could repeatedly defeat the powerful Northern enemy and push back their territorial and cultural invasion. Therefore, anti-Chinese sentiment is commonly accepted as a natural consequence of the past tension and present lingering political conflicts between the two countries.

In this essay, I attempt to explain the inflammation of anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam beyond the historical explanation reconfigured by the VCP. While propagandistic materials introduced by the VCP indeed play a central role in invoking modern Sinophobia, I suggest that

the popularization of social media and new actors are also indispensable vehicles for intensifying the anti-Chinese sentiment in contemporary Vietnam. These emerging new actors force us to rethink conventional nationalism models, where the state monopolizes national sentiment. The popularization of internet, social media, and high-tech devices brings about new discursive spaces for people to participate and create their own knowledge content. As technology restructures the power relationship between state and internet users, it enables unauthorized, uncensored content to gain certain legitimacy and become popular. Albeit opposing each other, both official and unofficial actors deploy the anti-Chinese discourse, perpetuating and amplifying the Sinophobic sentiment to serve their own political purposes. The consequence, however, is the elevation of ethnic tension, cultural derision, stereotypic labeling, and even small-scale clashes in the contemporary Vietnam.

I have identified new elements which participate in the re-production of anti-Chinese sentiment besides the VCP in contemporary Vietnam: the proliferation of social media and new actors. From here, my paper focuses on deconstructing the block of anti-Chinese sentiment, which is usually portrayed as a natural consequence of an ingroup/outgroup tension, a phenomenon with a documented genealogy, a repeated historical sentiment, or a product of conventional nationalism maneuvered by a “totalitarian” Communist party. In contrast, the rapidly rising anti-Chinese sentiment in contemporary Vietnam is a recent phenomenon, whose scale and intensity are unprecedented, whose reproduction and amplification cannot be explained by a unidirectional model of either traditional nationalism, or the hypodermic needle effect² of

² According to Turow (2014:33), hypodermic needle approach is an idea that media messages “persuade all people powerfully and directly (as if they were hit by a bullet or injected by a needle) without the people having any control over the way react.”

media and political propaganda on its purportedly “docile” population. I argue that the anti-Chinese sentiment in contemporary Vietnam is a socio-political product triggered by the official actors and amplified by the unofficial actors and is an instrument deployed to serve different actors’ social and political goals.

METHOD

Dr. Alfred Montoya and I conducted two-months of fieldwork and archival research in HCMC and Nha Trang (Khánh Hoà province), Vietnam. We interviewed 20 young, college-educated and Kinh-ethnic people from the age of 22-28, mainly in HCMC. We found the interviewees through the snowball method, a sampling technique where our respondents introduced us to their friends or colleagues for more interviewees. We selectively chose this sample group because young, college-educated, middle-class Vietnamese are more likely to get access to social media. Furthermore, we also interviewed a four middle-aged and older ethnic Chinese people to learn about their lives under both the Republic of Vietnam and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. We had informal conversations with local residents in HCMC and Nha Trang to get a sense of the prevailing local attitudes toward China (the government and nation-state) and mainland Chinese people.

We spent more time in HCMC, the largest economic and financial hub in Vietnam, and did most of the in-depth interviews there. Because HCMC is a cosmopolitan place where people come from many parts of Vietnam, we hoped to gather more diverse opinions here. Another city, Nha Trang, famous for its coastal tourism, drew our attention for two main reasons. First, there were popular complaints in HCMC about the concentration of Chinese tourists in Nha Trang, which invoked both discomfort and insecurity about Vietnam’s sovereignty. In the words of

some of our informants, the influx of Chinese tourists to the popular resort destination represented an “invasion” of Vietnam by China. We traveled to Nha Trang to interview local Vietnamese merchants and service-industry workers about their thoughts about the mainland Chinese. We wished to verify for ourselves whether or not Chinese tourists acted like how the media and our HCMC informants reported. Second, both the Paracel Islands and Nha Trang belong to the Khánh Hoà province, where there were many museums which helped us begin to understand the VCP’s military activities and propaganda in a place supposedly inundated with Chinese tourists.

Since discussing domestic politics in public is sensitive in Vietnam, many of my interviewees refused to be recorded. Therefore, I mainly took hand notes to document the informants’ responses. I specifically paid attention to my informants’ language choice and how that reflected their perspectives and emotions. I then translated their answers to English scripts. In addition to fieldwork and interviews, I did archival works on Vietnamese journalistic publication in the past 10 years. I also collected and interpreted PEW data to corroborate my central argument with quantitative data.

CHARACTERIZING THE ANTI-CHINESE SENTIMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Vietnam and China are two out of the five remaining countries led by a Communist party. Despite the expected communist fraternalism, the two polities in fact have a problematic diplomatic relationship. According to data of Pew Research Center in early 2017, compared to people from other surveyed countries, Vietnamese had the least favorable view for China (88%) (Wike 2017). Similar data appears in an Asian Barometer (2016)’s survey on the regional

perception of China in 2015: Vietnam was one of the Asian countries whose people were the least positive about China's influence. Many Vietnamese officials acknowledge the extreme animosity against the Chinese in the 21st century. Duong Quoc Trung, a member of Vietnam's National Assembly and editor of the magazine *Past & Present*, comments, "[Anti]-Chinese sentiment among ordinary Vietnamese continues to grow" (Sullivan 2015). The British BBC journalist Bill Hayton also documents this widespread enmity for Chinese on an everyday scale in the book *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* (2010). He illustrates the disharmony by how commonly Vietnamese use the pejorative term "chink" ("*ba tau*") to refer to the Chinese (188).

Before exploring how this sentiment developed, I want to explain the differences between what I refer to as "anti-*China*" and "anti-*Chinese*" sentiment. The former is characterized by animosity against a nation-state, a political or economic system, and/or its leaders that proceeds from political or economic discontent or real or perceived unfair arrangements or aggression. The latter refers to a set of negative characteristics, linked to nationalism, ethnicity, and race, that results from distorting, labelling, and normalizing pejorative stereotypes of Chinese people and culture. Although there is a clear distinction between these two forms of animosity, Vietnamese usually treat anti-Chinese and anti-China sentiment as interchangeable subjects. Therefore, although I opt to use "anti-Chinese sentiment" in this paper to emphasize the hatred targeting Chinese people and culture, it is essential to keep in mind that many Vietnamese see them as equivalent. In the contemporary Vietnam, the anti-Chinese sentiment appears to have two main characteristics: (1) repulsion against Chinese "incivility," and (2) apprehension for China government's aggression and purported invasion.

(1) Vietnamese Repulsion against the Perceived Chinese "Incivility"

In my conversations with many Vietnamese people, one of the most mentioned reasons why people did not like Chinese was due to the notoriety of Chinese goods in Vietnam. The informants used terms such as “cheap” (“*rẻ tiền*”), “shoddy” (“*dỏm*”), “counterfeit” (“*hàng nhái*”), “junky” (“*không có giá trị*”), and “toxic” (“*độc hại*”) to describe Chinese merchandise. In stores, the Vietnamese traders avoid mentioning China when advertising and selling their products. Even in the case when the goods are actually from China, the sellers still prefer to fabricate a different country of origin for the products, mostly Vietnam, to avoid condemnations (Nguyễn Nga 2017). In October 2017, after being revealed to use “fake [silk] made in China” to make the products, the renowned Vietnamese garment brand Khaisilk faced vehement backlash and boycotting from the Vietnamese people, and eventually was forced to shut down (Anh Minh 2017). With a similar attitude, my informants disparaged Chinese commodities (e.g. electronics, apparels, furniture, etc.) for their low quality and short lifetime. They reprimanded that the food poisoning epidemic in Vietnam was wrought by foods from China. The contempt for made-in-China products is a prominent characteristic of the contemporary anti-Chinese sentiment.

“Food from China are toxic. Chinese fake products penetrate into Vietnam. It is easy to generalize that anything related to Chinese is bad.” (Huệ, personal interview, May 2017)

“I also do not like China’s fake goods and its counterfeit products. I always avoid made-in-China food, even though I like the taste of Chinese food in Chợ Lớn [HCMC Chinatown]” (Cordelia, personal interview, May 2017)

Apart from the aversion to Chinese products, my interviews also mentioned how they did not like Chinese tourists’ behaviors and characteristics in Vietnam. In *Luxury and Rubble: Civility and Dispossession in the New Saigon*, Harms (2016) interviews the burgeoning middle-class Vietnamese residents in a higher-income suburban area called “Phú Mỹ Hưng” to

understand their interpretation of “civility.” His interviewees suggest that civility means “order[liness]” and possession of a “higher consciousness” (70-72). Likewise, my informants—the majority of whom are new middle class—also characterized the Chinese tourists as “uncivilized” because they were “obnoxiously loud” (“*ồn ào*”), messy (“*lộn xộn*”), “disorganized” (“*mất trật tự*”), “rude” (“*bất lịch sự*” or “*vô văn hóa*”), “condescending” (“*trịch thượng*”), “backward” (“*lạc hậu*”), and “fogyish” (“*cổ hủ*”). They usually contrasted the “incivility” of the Chinese tourists to the “civility” of the Westerner tourists in Vietnam.

“Chinese tourists think this [Vietnam] is their land, so they are very condescending and rude to our [Vietnamese] people. In restaurants, the more we are silent, the louder they are. That is the way Chinese are. They eat and go in groups and are loud and disorderly. They can do whatever they want in their country, but they should know it is rude to do that in our country.” (Mai, personal interview, May 2017)

“When I traveled, if I saw Chinese [people], I would feel strange (“*kì kì*”). They spoke very loud and behaved very impolitely (“*vô văn hoá*”). Chinese flooded to Vietnam to reside. Meanwhile, Western people are very gentle and nice.” (Huê, personal interview, May 2017)

The informants also had negative views of Chinese enterprises or investors in Vietnam. They evaluated Chinese businesses as untrustworthy trade partners, thinking that they exploited Vietnamese workers, procrastinated their assigned projects, created low-quality infrastructure, disrupted Vietnam’s economy, violated Vietnamese environmental law, and contaminated the Vietnamese ecology.

“Chinese enterprises did not follow the environmental regulations. Because of profits, they exploited the law loopholes and destroyed Vietnamese ecology. The consequence from their violation which killed fish and shrimp is small. The larger effect is that these poison would penetrate to the sea, intoxicating our water and food sources, and affecting Vietnamese race and gene” (Kelley, personal interview, May 2017)

“There are a few reasons why I do not like China and Chinese. Here I want to emphasize that I do not talk about Hoa people [ethnic Chinese Vietnamese]. As regards what I see on media, I see that Chinese factories in Vietnam brutally coerced Vietnamese workers. Chinese traders defrauded Vietnamese farmers by ordering the products without taking them or paying them later. Concerning my personal experience, Chinese tourists in Vietnam are very loud and lousy. When I work in my

company, Chinese clients are really condescending, as if I have to serve them unconditionally once I receive their money.” (Ngọc, personal interview, May 2017)

“My hatred for China led to my dislike for Chinese people...The Vietnamese government could not see the disadvantages of allowing Chinese investors to be in Vietnam. They did not utilize Vietnamese workers, but their own unqualified, low-skilled laborers. They did not create jobs for Vietnamese people. Then they married Vietnamese girls, bearing Chinese children to assimilate the younger generation.” (Tu, personal interview, May 2017)

In addition to Chinese products, tourists, and businesses, my interviewees denigrated Chinese traditions and cultures. They took Chinese androcentric values and their expansionist mindset as examples for the perceived Chinese traditions of backwardness and regression. To the interviewees, even though Vietnamese traditions had some overlapping values, these were “bad” influences adopted from the Chinese during the colonial time. In other words, they blamed China for having invaded Vietnam, imposing a Chinese cultural model, and tainting what had been previously viewed as pure, noble, and “civilized” proto-Vietnamese traditions.

“In terms of culture and history, I do not like Chinese for their androcentric values and their habits to invade Vietnam.” (Ngọc, personal interview, May 2017)

“I dislike both China and Chinese people. I do not want to consume Chinese culture...I do not like Chinese androcentric values. I do not want China to be in contact with Vietnam. I do not like China’s aggressive territorial expansion. I think Chinese are inferior and cowardly (*hèn hèn*). I prefer Western ideology.” (Cordelia, personal interview, May 2017)

(2) Vietnamese Apprehension of the CCP’s Aggression

Besides the revulsion against the Chinese “backwardness” and “incivility,” my respondents also displayed strong fear for the CCP’s aggressive moves on territorial dispute and economic neocolonialism. They construed that China’s control of the East Sea and its ownership of major investment in Vietnam were its first steps to usurp Vietnam. Some insisted on the eventual Chinese invasion of Vietnam because the CCP had significant power over the VCP. They also recalled certain events to elucidate the perceived China’s nascent engulfment of Vietnam. One

was the notoriety of Chinese food scandals in Vietnam. My interviewees saw the influx of Chinese counterfeit and low-quality foods in Vietnam as a CCP's conspiracy to debilitate Vietnamese health and destroy Vietnam "from the inside." For another instance, my interviewees discerned the large number of Chinese investors, products, language, and tourists as a sign of budding annexation through economic neocolonialism.

"China has strategically penetrated its people and culture to Vietnam to assimilate ('*đồng hoá*') Vietnamese people" (Phong, personal interview, June 2017).

The interviewees abhorred the widespread presence of Chinese tourists or Chinese products in Vietnam based on a potential future loss of Vietnamese language, culture, traditions, and consequently national identity. To the informants, the proliferation of Chinese elements suggested a present manifestation of the historical trope of *mất nước* ("losing the country"). It means that Vietnamese would (again) fall at the hand of Chinese imperialists and be assimilated to Chinese culture and ways of thought.

Đồng hoá means the way Vietnamese think and behave will be like Chinese. When we are "assimilated," we will have the same mindsets and behaviors like Chinese. We would think Vietnam is a part of [China's] territory. Our behaviors would be as morose as the Chinese, like how the news talks about Chinese husbands physically attacking their wives. Our past tradition was already assimilated, such as androcentric values. We could no longer cut [its past influence] from our tradition. However, we need to preserve our remaining national essence ('*giữ gìn bản sắc dân tộc*')."

The public memory about a long history of being assimilated to Chinese culture was brought up as a central influence of the ways my informants interpreted their concerns for the presence of the Chinese elements in Vietnam. To the respondents, accepting Chinese language, culture, and people was a step to allow Chinese government to invade Vietnam and subject Vietnamese to their rulings. Therefore, the necessity to protect national identity was on par with the complete rejection of Chinese influences.

“I did not like to study Chinese. I felt like they were *đồng hoá* us.” (Cordelia, personal interview, May 2017)

“Now the demand to study abroad and work in foreign companies is popular. Since China[’s economy] is developing, those who want to work in Chinese environment has to study its language. Those who do not care about China-Vietnam politics will see such study normal. Those who care about politics will know this is not a good thing. We have to always remember that China has always been invading us. [Requiring us to study Chinese] may be a way which China uses to assimilate us. In the past when they invaded us, they tried to assimilate us by forcing us to learn their language.” (Phong, personal interview, June 2017)

CONVENTIONAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE ANTI-CHINESE SENTIMENT

As I briefly introduced earlier, most Vietnamese see the large-scale antagonism of Vietnamese people toward Chinese people as an inevitable continuation of “a-thousand-year conflict” with China. The battles of Vietnamese heroes and heroines³ who opposed the Chinese rules are standard lessons in the Vietnamese history textbooks for elementary, middle- and high-school students. Considering how these historical stories about Vietnam-China conflict during dynasty times have prevailed since the 1950s, it is not surprising to see how it is also mostly cited to explain the current anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam. In addition, the Third Indochina War between China and Vietnam in 1979-1989 is commonly perceived as a key reason for the contemporary anti-Chinese sentiment (Sullivan 2015). During the French and early U.S. colonial era, former cooperation between the VCP and the CCP frayed as internationalism and communist fraternalism gave way to national interests (Ungar 1987,

³ For instance, Hai Bà Trưng, meaning “the two Trưng Sisters” (Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị) referred to the martyred heroines who launched the first (ultimately unsuccessful) resistance movement against the Han invaders of the Nam Việt (Nanyue) kingdom in 40 A.D; Ngô Quyền was an ancient hero who freed Vietnam from Chinese rule in the renowned battle of Bạch Đằng; Lý Thường Kiệt led troops against the Song dynasty and wrote what is considered the first Vietnamese declaration of independence titled *Mountains and Rivers of the Southern Country* (“*Nam Quốc Sơn Hà*”); Lê Lợi was the Vietnamese emperor who defeated the Ming forces in 1428; and Nguyễn Huệ the emperor who likewise defeated the Qing force in 1789.

Womack 2006). Between 1952 and 1975, the CCP sent money, weapons and advisors to the VCP. Vietnamese leaders compared Vietnam's comradeship with China "as close as lips and teeth" ("*gắn bó như môi với răng*") (Womack 2006:163). In spite of the cordial veneer of the relationship, budding discontent later engendered uncontrollable conflict and violence (*Nhà Xuất Bản Sự Thật* 1979). The VCP officials felt frustrated at the perceived paternalism of their Chinese advisors, as well as China's growing relationship with the U.S., the Vietnamese enemy. Moreover, Vietnam's partnership with the Soviet Union and its intervention in Cambodian affairs in 1978 provoked military action against its northern border by China, escalating insecurity and tension. The 1979 upheaval deeply ruptured the relationship between the two countries, whose historical lesson created a centric reason for Vietnamese leaders to degenerate the image of China.

In the 21st century, the contention over the East Sea with the CCP is the main explanation for the contemporary anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam. This political flashpoint sustains and provides "evidence" for a long-standing historical conflict between the two polities. Here, it is important to reiterate that the historical conflict is a narrative crafted by the VCP for the purposes of restoring national solidarity. The manufactured history provides a lens through which these contemporary events are understood in. In other words, despite the VCP's questionable narrative of ancient anti-Chinese sentiment,⁴ these events support the narrative and are seen as a continuation of it in the present day. In 2011, the Chinese patrol vessels cut the cables of a Vietnamese ship which was exploring for oil and gas (Ratner 2017). In 2014, the

⁴ Neither Vietnam as a political nation-state nor Vietnamese citizen-identity was yet formed during the proposed "origins" of this conflict. Therefore, although there was sporadic conflict between the people who occupied the territories which we now refer to as "Vietnam" and "China" state, it was not defined as a binary conflict between two cohesive nations or "citizens."

Chinese state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation moved its oil rig into Vietnamese-claimed territory Spratly Islands (Panda 2014). Since the early 21st century, the Chinese government has built artificial islands on the East Sea to claim territory and later “transform[ed] them into advanced military bases, equipped with airfields, runways, ports, and anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems” (Ratner 2017). These provocative, spontaneous and not-yet-negotiated acts upset many Vietnamese who have long seen the Spratly Islands as Vietnam’s property, and the acts only reaffirm their assumed negative views on the Chinese.

“Trường Sa and Hoàng Sa (meaning Spratly and Paracel Islands respectively) belong to Vietnam. We have enough evidence since French colonial times, but when we showed them, China said it was fabricated. When countries want to deal with territorial dispute, negotiation should be the way, but the 981 oil rig incident showed that China did not want to solve the problem in this rational way. When the Philippines won the case against China, Chinese online users said that the world banded together to attack China. They said that they would never go to the court because the world was bullying their country” (Chung, personal interview, May 2017).

“When I was a child, I did not have a bad impression of China. But when I grew up and knew more truth, I had more of a bad impression for it. Firstly, the mindsets of Chinese leaders, through centuries, have coveted to invade other countries and our country. Secondly, they illegitimately claimed the lands on Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa as if they were their own. For example, on Chinese-made globes they marked Biển Đông (the East Sea) as their property. The map on China’s passport encapsulated our whole claimed maritime region. They built cities and sent people to live on Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa. Besides, they also agitated our government, which went against the past motto “*Anh em 16 chữ vàng*,”⁵ “*Môi hở răng lạnh*”⁶ (Ngọc, personal interview, May 2017).

It is commonly accepted among Vietnamese historians and scholars to correlate the long-standing political dispute between Vietnam and China with anti-Chinese sentiment in

⁵ The interviewee referred to the Vietnam-China’s diplomatic slogan of “*changqi wending, mianxiang weilai, mulin youhao, quanmian hezuo*” (“long-term stability, future orientation, good neighborliness and friendship, and hollistic cooperation”). These 16 words indicate the fraternal relationship and bilateral affinity between Vietnam and China. Here, the interviewee was mocking this pronouncement because CCP’s aggressive acts toward Vietnam did not perform the diplomatic initiatives.

⁶ According to Hayton (2010:188), in the early 1970s Vietnamese schoolchildren were taught a song about Vietnam-China comradeship, with the lyrics: “Vietnam and China are connected by rivers and mountains...they are like lips and teeth...when the lips are parted the teeth feel the cold.” Again, the interviewee used this phrase to mock the CCP’s foul acts towards Vietnam’s territory.

Vietnam as a consistent phenomenon throughout its history, on a so-called national scale. However, such view is quite simplistic. I suggest that the revision of long-term antagonism against the Chinese “citizens” and culture is rather a recent narrative, originating in the development and instrumentalization of Vietnamese nationalistic sentiment against French settler colonialism beginning in the 19th century. The next section will look into the anti-Chinese events and narratives in different historical periods, and illustrate how the contemporary sentiment’s structure and manifestation is unprecedentedly complex.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MODERN ANTI-CHINESE SENTIMENT: A SURVEY FROM DYNASTIC HISTORY TO NOW

Throughout different historical periods, there is little proof of a consistent or extreme Vietnamese hatred for Chinese culture. The public memory of past animosity and resistance to Chinese culture, dating back to the Hung Kings’ reigns, was reconstructed by the VCP officials and scholars, through collective acts of selecting and curating specific historical accounts to fit the new historical narrative.

Despite the sporadic clashes between the empires who inhabited the domains we now refer to as Vietnam and China during the dynastic era, more recent scholarship on this specific time frame suggests that there was no homogeneously defiant Vietnamese mindset against China’s cultural influences. In fact, ancient Vietnamese elites demonstrated strong favor for the Chinese language, literary images and forms. In *Beyond the Bronze Pillars*, Kelley examines poems composed by Southern Kingdom (the kingdom that was located in what is today northern and central Vietnam) envoys on their official trips to China (Kelley 2005). Kelley’s work reveals no such hostility on the part of these Vietnamese officials against the Chinese empire, nor does

he find any mainstream Vietnamese notions of themselves as distinct from the “Central Efflorescence,” the ancient bureaucratic/poetic title for the seat of the Chinese empire (2005: 23). Instead, these poems indicated a generally receptive mindset among Southern Kingdom leaders to Chinese culture and rule, “depicting a wholehearted affirmation of the world order the tributary relationship was based on and of Vietnam’s secondary position in that world” (23). These poems, which were viewed as an “authentic presentation of a historical experience in premodern East Asia,” repudiated the quite recently constructed trope of a long-standing deeply-held animosity and resistance against Chinese influence (39). Furthermore, in precolonial times, Vietnamese elites equated historical literacy with a knowledge of specific Chinese texts: the *Five Classics*, the *Four Books*, and chronicles of Han, Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Chinese language and cultural traditions were the language of civilization itself (Pelley 2002:19). This imagined superiority of the Chinese language is also seen in one of Ho Chi Minh’s most famous poems, *Vọng Nguyệt*, which recites the history of Vietnam from its origins in 2879 B.C.E. to the revolutionary present, was written in classical Chinese in 1948 (130). This scholarship insinuates a lack of evidence of a popular conceptual or practical resistance to China, and indicates, rather, a preference for Chinese cultural and political forms.

Even though it is undeniable that there were intermittent conflicts between Vietnamese and Chinese dynasty due to territorial or power struggles, the trope of a small country consistently repelling the China’s cultural force is a recent, postcolonial, mid-20th-century construction (143). Beginning in 1956, during the anti-colonial struggles against the French and the United States of the 1950s and 1960s, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)⁷ began

⁷ Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was the country of North Vietnam, established when Vietnam was split at the 17th parallel as a result of the First Indochina War.

the nation-state construction by reconstructing history. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1983) explains how nationalism is not a natural inevitable phenomenon, but rather something that must be created or “imagined.” Individuals within the newly drawn boundaries of a state do not normally experience unbidden solidarity with other individuals within that territory. Elites and those in authority utilize communications technologies and print media to create shared experience and feelings of solidarity between these people by publishing the same knowledge in the same language.

Likewise, in order for the DRV to legitimize its leadership of the people, as well as to gain their support to revolt against France and the U.S., they embarked on the creation of a homogenous national identity and national consciousness among people from North to South (Womack 181). During the anti-colonial struggles against the French and the United States of the 1950s and 1960s, in order to emphasize a robust home-grown nationalism, Vietnamese scholars from the Institute of History and foreign scholars steeped in postcolonialism attempted to “desinicize the [Vietnamese] past,” emphasizing Vietnam as a long-standing, autonomous, distinctive civilization (Pelley 2002: 31). They began to re-read ancient artifacts (both those long held and those newly unearthed, such as the Đổng Sơn bronze drums) as distinctive technological innovations of early Vietnam in order to characterize Vietnamese as *inventors rather than imitators* of Chinese civilization (Pelley 1998:375). In the public domain, the VCP and revolutionary writers coupled the new historical, national-territorial vision with an ethnic identification based on a narrative of the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) people as unceasingly resistant to foreign encroachment. From 1956 onward, the “ancient Chinese invasion” trope was used in some propaganda campaigns against American influence in the South (Ungar 1987:602,

Pelley 2002:145). The demands of anti-colonial resistance movements (which depend on instilling nationalist solidarity), and postcolonial academic constructions of Sino-Vietnamese dynastic history produced a vision of an ancient, continuous, ethnically-grounded and even “traditional” conflict with China, and set the groundwork for potential mass anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam.

The VCP re-narrated Vietnamese history, emphasizing elements of a heroic past that fostered national pride. It also increased patriotic content in press and textbooks. For examples, heroic stories, mainly those featuring Communist heroes, accounted for more than half of the content of First Grade Reader textbooks (Vu 2014). Major Vietnamese newspaper reports were dominated by party-related events, highlighting activities which demonstrated the success of Vietnam’s socialist society (Thomas 2003). Since the mid-1950s the state has shaped the Vietnamese “imagined community” through both hard- and soft-power. In the 21st century, the supposed “1000-year-conflict” with China is an indispensable “truth” in history textbooks to construct the Vietnamese nationality.

After the Resistance War against the United States Aggression (or commonly known as the Second Indochina War), the VCP was at conflict with the CCP beginning in the 1970s. In the context of strong support from an ascendant USSR and Vietnamese confidence in the run-up to its dual-front war against Cambodia and China, the VCP publicly declared sovereignty over the China-claimed Paracel and Spratly Islands on Dec 30, 1978. After more than a century of nearly continuous warfare against global superpowers such as France, Imperial Japan, and the U.S., the VCP now felt insecure about its own “brother,” the CCP (Womack 2006). The China-Vietnam tacit conflict later degenerated into violence, leading to the 1979 war at the two countries’

border, namely the Third Indochina War. The VCP prompted the 1979 border war by publishing books and articles in major newspapers purporting to reveal the misdeeds of their former allies the Chinese. A few examples of books include *The Truth about the Vietnam-China Relationship During the Last 30 Years* (“*Sự Thật Về Quan Hệ Việt Nam - Trung Quốc Trong 30 Năm Qua*”) by the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Criticism of the Expansionism of Beijing Elite Traitors* (“*Phê Phán Chủ Nghĩa Bành Trướng và Bá Quyền Nước Lớn Của Giới Cầm Quyền Phản Động Bắc Kinh*”) by the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, *The Borderland Problem between Vietnam and China* (“*Vấn Đề Biên Giới Giữa Việt Nam và Trung Quốc*”) by the state-controlled Truth Publisher (or Nhà Xuất Bản Sự Thật).

This open conflict marked the onset of modern Vietnam-China tension, paving the way for the anti-Chinese feeling in Vietnam to spark and run amok. One of the first large-scale repressive activities against the ethnic Chinese was initiated by the VCP during this period of time. The 1979 border conflict with China resulted in “the most systemic governmental attempt to destroy or expel an entrepreneurial minority [or the ethnic Chinese]..., as relations between Beijing and Ha Noi broke down” (Chirot and Reid 1997:61). Earlier, after the reunification of the country under a socialist one-party state in 1975, the Communist Party of Vietnam had pursued an aggressive policy targeted the Hoa people through confiscating Hoa’s properties, based on claims that these citizens represented an incorrigible exploitative comprador class. However, the 1978-79 political conflict with the CCP added more tension on the class conflict, causing the VCP to suspect the Hoa people loyalty to the Party. The ethnic Chinese had to face “the double prejudice against them as potential fifth columnists and as bourgeois” (61). As a result of this deprivation of livelihoods, millions of Hoa people, mostly in Southern Vietnam, felt

pressured to leave Vietnam and became boat people. The number of Hoa people both in Northern and Southern Vietnam dramatically decreased during this period of time. These events signaled the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in contemporary Vietnam, although the latter is characterized more by the enmity of mainland Chinese, not ethnic Chinese.

The 21st-century anti-China sentiment in the contemporary is mostly organized around the East Sea dispute. With different tactics, the VCP has played a significant role in propagandizing the idea of Vietnamese sovereignty over these remote, tiny atolls and spits of land, as well as generating the idea that protecting the islands is tantamount to protecting Vietnamese society itself. Awareness of Vietnam's sovereignty over the East Sea is also generated through imaging and messaging in public billboards, and in institutional "hidden curricula" (e.g. textbooks, maps of Vietnam which entail and title the islands). When Dr. Montoya and I visited Institute of Oceanography in Nha Trang, we saw that the institute spent its front section and another large room to exhibit pictures, maps, and artifacts that evinced Vietnam's long-standing ownership of and affiliation with the islands. The institute displayed maps of Vietnam dating from the Nguyen Dynasty which demarcated the islands as Vietnamese territory, and exhibits devoted to French colonial scientific maritime expeditions. These materials suggested long-term serious academic research by the Vietnamese (though the exhibit mainly emphasized an early 20th century French research expedition) on the region (even before the establishment of the People's Republic of China 1947). The museum's curators utilized the language of science, as well as historical academic research interests (rather than military or economic interest) in the islands, to emphasize Vietnam's claim to the Paracel and Spratly Islands.

The VCP's propagandistic activities are also prominent in the official media arena. Censored and controlled by the VCP Ministry of Information, the official media play an important role in perpetuating the anti-China and anti-Chinese narrative. They propose that the VCP takes a strong stand against China's aggressive expansion on the East Sea. They admonish Chinese government for promoting of false information regarding the islands. For example, an article on *Vietnamnet's* website (2016)—titled “Chinese tourists distorted Vietnamese history” (“*Hướng Dẫn Viên Du Lịch Trung Quốc Xuyên Tạc Lịch Sử Việt Nam*”)—devotes to exposing China's fabrication of history and violation of political facts (from the Vietnamese perspectives). Similar news stories in other official media pages render China as an antagonist acting against the Vietnamese interests.

Besides steering public sentiment by writing critical articles against the CCP's aggression on the East Sea, official Vietnamese journalism also fulfills it through publishing the anti-Chinese triggering stories. Entering the keyword “Trung Quoc” (China, or Chinese) in the top media outlet, it is not difficult to come across articles which disparage imported Chinese foodstuffs, the behavior of Chinese tourists, and the quality of Chinese products. These cannot but help make it into popular discourse. When I searched the key term “Chinese” on famous news sites in Vietnam such as *Tuoi Tre News* or *Thanh Nien News* (the two most popular journalistic outlets in Vietnam), or other national news media, the majority of stories about Chinese people or enterprises contained negative tones. The abundant headlines of popular articles that invoke these sentiments relentless popped up: “Petrified By Pork Intestines Contaminated By Chinese Chemicals” (“*Ghê Rợn Lòng Heo Tẩm Chất Tẩy Rửa Công Nghiệp Trung Quốc*”) by Nguyễn Tú on *Thanh Nien News* (2016), “Chinese People Took Advantage

Loopholes to Possess Land in Da Nang” (“*Người Trung Quốc Lợi Dụng Kẻ Hờ, Sở Hữu Đất Tại Đà Nẵng*”) by Hữu Khả on *Tuổi Trẻ News* (2016), “Expose the Plots that Chinese Clinics Used to Swindle Money from [Vietnamese] Patients” (“*Lật Tẩy Kịch Bản Các Phòng Khám Trung Quốc Dùng Để Mọi Tiền Bệnh Nhân*”) by Duy Tính on *Thanh Niên News* (2017), “Chinese Workers Hit and Broke [Vietnamese Workers]’ Legs ” (“*Bị Công Nhân Trung Quốc Đánh Gãy Chân*”) by HH from *Báo Mới* (2012), “[Vietnamese] Farmers Wept Again Because of The Old Trick Used By Chinese Traders” (“*Nông Dân Lại Khóc Vì Chiêu Lừa Cũ Của Thương Lái Trung Quốc*”) by Trang Ngọc from *Phụ Nữ Online* (2016), “Appalled By The Scene Chinese Tourists Vying For Buffet Food in Nha Trang” (“*Hoảng Hồn Cảnh Du Khách Trung Quốc Tranh Nhau Ăn Buffet ở Nha Trang*”) by Hồng Nam from *Vietnam Net* (2016). These stories depict an unappealing image of Chinese-related people, suggesting that they are harmful and incongruous with Vietnamese values, Vietnamese ecological sanity, physical safety, and social order. Hence, besides history, textbooks, public exhibitions and propaganda, official media outlets play key roles in creating stereotypic tropes and inciting anti-Chinese sentiment.

THE RISE OF UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

It is conventional to think that the government is the only producer and manipulator of national fear and hate. Western media, news, and scholarship have, for a long time, portrayed the Vietnamese government and the VCP as authoritarian, single-unified, and monolithic. This specific impression was drawn from the decade-long period when Vietnam was under a subsidy system and centrally planned economy. During 1975-1986, the state cornered the production and distribution of all products and heavily controlled all cultural and social activities (Elliott 2014). Today, despite implementing a free-market economy, the VCP still undeniably maintains control

over much of the media and news outlets, engages in political messaging typically considered propaganda, and plays an oversized role in the general educational system (Hayton 2010). Its past and enduring heavy influences in many aspects of Vietnamese life easily makes Western media identify the government's centrality in promoting and manipulating messages. The spread of messages, information, and sentiments (specifically targeting hatred at an outgroup to restore nationalism) is misconceived as a top-down model from the government to the people, and people would unconditionally accept these messages. This paper attempts to challenge this popular unidirectional model of messages and refute the conventional notion that the Vietnamese government is the only generator and disseminator of anti-Chinese sentiment. I argue that the appearance of new interests (e.g. demand for speech democracy and increasing civil participation) and new unofficial actors (e.g. media users, bloggers) also take roles in amplifying anti-Chinese hatred in contemporary Vietnam.

It is possible that the top-down model of information could apply to the period of 1975 to 1986, the period prior to the economic renovation (“*đổi mới*”) in the mid-1980s. During this time, Vietnam was still a closed country with a centrally-planned economy. Media not sanctioned by the Party were not available in public, and citizens were restricted from public participation in political discourse and overt activism.⁸ The VCP monopolized the media, press, and all sorts of public communication; thus, official media was the only form of public communication, whose mission was to report events following the Party line. As the centrally planned economy and subsidy system began to fail in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1986 decided to shift to a

⁸ This information was provided by Mr. Nguyen Cong Khe, the founder and the former editor-in-chief of *Thanh Nien News*, which is one of the most popular newspaper in Vietnam.

“socialist-oriented market economy.” The government abandoned its command economy. Vietnam’s new open door “market-oriented” policy allowed free trade and foreign investment coming to the country (Elliot 2012). This drastic economic transformation also resulted in many social alterations that limited the Party’s voice and standing in certain socio-political matters, reducing the VCP’s centrality on communications and disseminations of information and messages in the contemporary Vietnam.

First of the many social changes, the booming economy that offered more economic resources and employment opportunities gave rise to a new middle class who were less dependent on the Party. Their access to jobs and resources without joining the Party increased the independence of certain social groups within Vietnam from the government (Vu 2013). There has been a sharp decline in the number of young people joining the VCP since the 1990s (Thayer 2003). The VCP has more recently encountered challenges in mobilizing the new generation as their interests have grown apart from those of the state. Nguyen (2004) reports that Ha Noi young people were uninterested in the official pronouncements nor did they feel their impacts on their daily lives. Instead, these people cared more about matters that were related to their individual lives, such as finding a ‘good’ job, earning money, and achieving success in both their professional and private lives in a market-oriented society. The new economy enabled Vietnamese exchanges and interdependency with foreign governments, businesses, and persons, generating new social formations, solidarities and interests. Because of the decreasing dependency on the Party for economic opportunities, Vietnamese people also became less interested in the Party’s pronouncements and propaganda (Nguyen 2006).

Second, the turn of the 21st century marked the commercialization and growth of internet and social media in Vietnam. In the last 15 years, the number of Internet users in Vietnam has skyrocketed. According to the current Vietnamese deputy prime minister Vu Duc Dam, in late 2017, nearly 70% of Vietnamese population are Internet users (Thuy and Minh 2017). Most of these Internet users are young, urban, educated and middle class (T. Bui 2016). Even though the VCP made some attempts to control the content that was available online (i.e. the VCP once attempted to erect a smaller version of the so-called Chinese “Great Firewall”), these attempts proved futile (Hayton 2010). The Vietnamese government could not enforce its stringent control of information on the online fora. Due to their impossibility to be controlled, the internet and social media have changed Vietnam in many significant ways. Now, everyday people can get access to the same online content as most people around the world. Perhaps more importantly, these platforms offer new venues for production and dissemination of knowledge, news, opinions and whole publics themselves. Internet users are not only passive audience, but active creators who can generate their own content (i.e. opinions, blog posts, news) and disseminate them in increasingly dense, organized and accessible networks.

The increasing exposure and public scrutiny, however, have created new conflicts between the people and the government. The new quasi-democratic atmosphere makes state censorship and the opacity of official media more obvious and intolerable. News media consumers become more easily agitated and frequently frustrated by what they perceive as inadequate and slow responses or information from the authorities. The lack of thorough writing subjects in official media also makes people prone to unofficial media, whose news comes out much faster and proposes topics that audience demands for information. The official media, to a certain extent,

seems to lose their upper hand in disseminating the information to the unofficial media (K. Nguyen 2014).⁹

Many interviewees discerned that official media, controlled by the government, is biased and less reliable; thus, they have to read unofficial news to make up for the shortfall of information. In my interview with Mr. Nguyen Cong Khe, the founder and the former editor-in-chief of *Thanh Nien News*, he explained the failure of official media in the context of digitization:

“There are two main ways official news is failing. First, official news usually publishes (sensitive) news more slowly than unofficial ones. The former has to wait for a tedious process of censorship and instructions from upper-level government. Meanwhile, readers have strong demand for sensitive news, specifically political topics, which take longer time to issue the instructions. This problem accidentally gives more “advantages” for alternative news [or unofficial media]. Newspaper needs to be precise and fast! Second, the content is dry and rigid (‘khô cứng’). For example, in the *Đồng Tâm* scandal, journalists hesitate to talk about the officials getting involved because there is a matter of power. Journalism needs to be objective. It needs to talk from both the perspectives of ordinary people and officials. However, due to the sensitivity in real life relationships, journalists cannot deliver the whole story (‘nói không hết’). This hinders the readers from understanding things and discomforts them” (Nguyen Cong Khe, personal interview, Jul 2017)

T. Bui (2016) suggests that the ability to freely exchange information on the Internet and social media increases citizens’ participation in public and political concerns. Media helps everyday Vietnamese, but more specifically activists and organizers, push the boundaries of accepted speech. T. Bui cites that usage of terms such as “transparency,” “accountability,” “advocacy,” and the practice of “civil society,” which were once restricted, are now becoming acceptable (90). One example for the increasing civil participation is the usage of social media as

⁹ As Mitchel et al. (2018)’s survey data suggest, vast majority of Vietnamese satisfied with local news media. Up to 85 percent of Vietnamese thought that local news outlets do a good job of covering the most significant issues. The reason why I suggest the official media is losing its power is because my informants thought that reading official news itself is not sufficient. They wanted to read other unofficial sources to back up the parts official media refuse to address.

a place to call for and organize offline protests. For example, during 2014-2015, when protests against China's aggressive acts in the East Sea spilled into increasing public admonition of the government, anti-VCP messages began to spread on Facebook. The website becomes a "de facto forum for the country's growing number of dissenting voices, [playing] a key role in mass protests against the state's handling of an environmental disaster last year" (Wallace 2017). The online platform has been a convenient venue for many Vietnamese to join and participate in social and political conversations.

Vietnam is well-known for its past defiant spirits which could defeat powerful imperialist forces such as France, Japan, and the United States. Nationalist movements during colonial times originated from youth anger and protests against the foreign imperialists. However, nationalism in Vietnam has been changing since then. In the current context, local opposition is now targeted at the national government and elites for reasons such as corruption, suppression of anti-China rallies, evasive responses on Formosa's environmental scandal, economic partnerships with China and its Belts and Roads Initiative (Vu 2013). The growing distrust of opaque official media and the government (or media manipulators) resulted in a demand for democracy, freedom of speech, and so-called "untold" information from the government. With social media's free-of-charge communicative platforms, unofficial media (leftist newspaper/ "*báo lẻ trái*" / "*tin ngoài luồng*") seized these opportunities. Here, I define "unofficial media" as sources delivering news, information, or knowledge that are not censored by the Vietnamese government. By contrast, official media sources are required to have a state license provided by the VCP, and conform to the VCP's information agenda (Hayton 2010). The prominent unofficial media writers are usually official journalists who cannot express their stances and ideas in official

media (information provided by Nguyen Cong Khe in a personal interview), former VCP members who disagree with the initiatives of current leaders, lawyers, artists, Viet Kieus (Vietnamese overseas), or any citizens who discontent with the governmental actions (Vu 2014). A few unofficial media websites include Việt Tân, Dân Làm Báo VN, Nhật Ký Yêu Nước, *BBC Vietnamese*, *VoA Tiếng Viet*, Cafe Kubua (T. Bui 2016). A few popular unofficial writers are An Hoàng Trung Tướng, Phương Thơ, Lê Công Định, Trương Huy San, Lê Nguyễn Hương Trà, or religious leaders such as Khai Phùng and Chung Nguyễn. On personal blogs or Facebook pages, they usually voice concerns over or objections to VCP's policy, reveal dark, secret political backstage stories, propose petitions, and discredit the VCP officials (Vu 2014, T. Bui 2016).

Many of these actors disapprove with VCP's governance, seeing it as autocratic, non-transparent, and corruptive. Vu (2014) uses the term "new nationalism" to refer to the type of nationalism which is not spearheaded by the government or the party leaders against a foreign force, but by the people who oppose their own government and favor democracy. In a context where digitalization of information provides free, convenient, and unrestrained platform for publishing information and knowledge, this "new nationalism" takes advantage of these platforms to launch and spread their voice (Vu 2014). The internet serves as a discursive space largely outside of government influence, allowing uncensored writers to create their own content and fill the information gaps of official media. The rise of unofficial media is rapid, whose popularity spiked after a short period of time and captivated a massive number of internet and social media users. In 2017, the government's Facebook website (Thông Tin Chính Phủ) has much fewer followers than other unofficial media Facebook (e.g. Việt Tân, Nhật Ký Yêu Nước,

Dân Luận). The Vietnamese preference to read news on social media¹⁰ also allows unofficial media to exhibit their content to a mass audience and garner more influence compared to official media.

THE ROLE OF ANTI-CHINESE SENTIMENT IN SERVING OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL ACTORS' INTERESTS

I have introduced the rise of unofficial media as an opposition to the VCP and official media. This section will look into different ways unofficial and official media use anti-Chinese tropes to serve their own political goals and interests.

N. Bui (2016) investigates 570 Vietnamese newspaper titles in 2014 to explore how the VCP managed anti-Chinese sentiment. Her findings show that the Vietnamese government mainly used Vietnam's conflict with China on the East Sea as a tactic to gather and ignite nationalism. However, the Party carefully avoided inciting the public's anger to a point which could negatively affect the diplomatic relationship between China and Vietnam. My paper extends N. Bui's findings and details by uncovering the unexpected challenges the VCP had to face as a consequence of this political maneuvering.

Despite the VCP's historical conflict with the CCP, Vietnamese officials are still obliged to maintain a diplomatic relationship with the Chinese government. Since Vietnam is a burgeoning economy and one of a few communist countries left in the world, the VCP needs a powerful economy and political state like China to invest and bolster Vietnam. Moreover, after Vietnam's acceptance to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007, Vietnamese officials are required to stay fluid and flexible in the constantly shifting global economic and political landscape,

¹⁰ PEW Research Center suggests that Vietnam ranks fourth in a survey of 38 countries in terms of the percentage number of people who get the news from social media (Mitchel et al. 2018).

prioritizing economic opportunities over past historical or fleeting contemporary political conflicts. The necessity to attract foreign trade partners and economic deals, especially with Chinese businesses, mandates the VCP to periodically soften the Sinophobic temperament. As a result, depending on the present economic and political relationship between the VCP and the CCP, the former adjusts its prejudiced tone against China to manipulate public sentiment. Aligning with N. Bui (2016)'s suggestions, I propose that the Vietnamese government is not interested in inciting extreme Sinophobia, nor degenerate it into real ethnic clash, or make violence run amok. Instead, the VCP's main goal when deploying the anti-Chinese sentiment is to arouse and maintain nationalism, to ensure the citizens' confidence in the Party, and to restore national solidarity, especially at moments when the VCP begins to lose the Vietnamese people's trust.

The VCP's shifting of the national discourse on China and the Chinese people—from an irrefutable Vietnamese enemy during the nation-state construction period and after the Third Indochina War to an essential but unpredictable “brother” in the present—has been a rough attempt. The Vietnamese government's graceless efforts to mediate between the Chinese as “enemy” and “necessity” has put the Party in a controversial position. On one hand, the Vietnamese government took the leading role in reconfiguring the public memory of the Vietnamese-Chinese relationship in the past, constructing China/ the Chinese people as the “bad” enemy, and initiating the anti-China sentiment as a direct result of the Third Indochina War. On the other hand, the VCP cements a close tie and cultivates a trading partnership with the CCP. Here, the VCP officials struggle to fit a past, fundamental, and even essentialist antagonistic view of China/Chinese into the modern, fluid context where China is both an economic partner

and a political enemy. To an ordinary citizen who does not ruminate on the complicated, ambiguous nature of international relations, in which the boundary between “friend” and “enemy” separating countries can be unclear, the ambivalent relationship between the Vietnamese government and the Chinese government bewilders them. My informants were skeptical of the VCP’s loyalty to the people, because its diplomacy with the CCP does not match the state’s rigid depiction of China as a “bad older brother” and a national enemy. The interviewees shared that they could not fathom the “actual” relationship between Vietnam and China, which made them suspect that the Vietnamese officials are traitors who betray Vietnamese citizens and work in favor of the CCP. Their skepticism for the VCP also adversely impacted their evaluations of the official media’s credibility.

Talking about the official media, my respondents shared that the sporadic changes in the way the official media portray China baffled them about the true nature between China and Vietnam. Specifically, while official media overtly criticize China’s aggressive move on East Sea, as well as the unavoidable presence of Chinese tourists, enterprises, and products, the Vietnamese government still cements its relationship with China. This hedging diplomacy tactic, while comprehensible to the international relations world, confounds a normal citizen. These knots of confusion, however, are never answered or fully addressed by the official media, leaving loopholes for unofficial media to occupy and attack the government.

As I mentioned earlier, the unofficial media actors are usually the “new nationalists” who contest and object the VCP’s ruling, and who urge for a new democracy for Vietnam. In order to delegitimize the VCP’s ruling, unofficial media exploited the loopholes in official media to prove the government’s incompetency. Unofficial writers used the same nationalist and

anti-Chinese narrative, which was created by the VCP's founders, to contradict the Party's present activities. For example, on May 12, 2017, *Nhật Ký Yêu Nước*—a popular anti-VCP news outlet on Facebook—published a post to mock the president of Vietnam Trần Đại Quang's visit to Beijing, China. The author pointed out that one day before Mr. Tran's trip to Beijing to talk about the cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative, the CCP's military had put Chinese flags to mark their territories on the Spratly Islands. They ridiculed the VCP for having staunchly pronounced their resistant stance against the Chinese aggression on the East Sea, but concurrently being lenient to the Chinese military acts on the East Sea and cementing economic partnership with the CCP. By exposing the inconsistency in what the VCP had claimed and what they actually practiced in the international relations, *Nhật Ký Yêu Nước* made the Vietnamese government look disloyal and unreliable. In addition, many unofficial sources highlighted similar historical events to tarnish the VCP. For instance, *Dân Làm Báo*, a popular unofficial media page, cites Vietnamese former prime minister Pham Van Dong's acknowledgement of China's territorial claim on the East Sea in 1958 as a piece of evidence for the VCP's disloyalty to the nation in the past (Tran 2012).

Besides evoking political and historical events to fuel Vietnamese resentment of China, the unofficial media also publish articles that denigrate Chinese tourists and Chinese products in a similar tone to (or sometimes harsher than) the official media. Writers on *Viet Tan* page or *Dân Làm Báo* are not shy about publicly using derogatory terms such as “*tàu*” or “*tàu khựa*” (meaning “chinks”) to refer to either the CCP or the mainland Chinese people. By relegating Chinese culture and people as a backward and aggressive force, the unofficial media reinforce the idea that Vietnamese should stay away from the Chinese leaders, people, and products. From

there, they suggest that the VCP's intimate, diplomatic contact with the CCP is a wrongful, unpatriotic, and even reactionary act. By deploying the anti-Chinese sentiment, the unofficial media's main goal is not to declare a physical war or direct tension with China, but rather repudiate the VCP's legitimacy to rule and call for a new Vietnamese democracy.

As I have elaborated, both official and unofficial media use the anti-Chinese sentiment as a tool to manipulate the public sentiment and serve their own social and political interests. On one hand, the official media attack the Chinese to arouse national solidarity and sustain the Party's credibility. On the other hand, the unofficial media instrumentalize anti-Chinese sentiment to promote an anti-Communist agenda, criticize and delegitimize the VCP's ruling, and rally grassroots campaigns and movements (e.g. the protests against the 2016 Vietnam marine life disaster). Despite having different purposes, the two forces—the official media and the unofficial media—intentionally adopted the anti-Chinese narratives, and inflamed the anti-Chinese sentiment on an everyday level. Their discourse permeates into daily relationships, ways of thinking, and conversations. It influences the subjectivity of Vietnamese people, who generally in-part construct their identity based upon the antagonism and subordination of “the other” —the “barbaric,” “uncivilized,” and “aggressive” Chinese. Thus, the contest of the two political forces—using the discourse of “democracy” to justify their existence, activities and to denounce the other party—fulfill their duties based on a technique: the construction and generalization of the imagined people and things in China's territory into a category of “the bad other.” This action, committed by both official and unofficial actors, reifies anti-Chinese sentiments into real fear, dread, prejudice, and even physical violence against the Chinese (and those who are read as Chinese) in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the complex social production of anti-Chinese sentiment. It complicates the simplistic top-down model of hate production, challenging the belief that the Vietnamese government is the only force which manipulates "its people" against China through historical accounts and political propaganda. Instead, unofficial media, with a pro-democracy agenda, also play significant roles in perpetuating and inflaming anti-Chinese sentiment for their own different social and political purposes. Specifically, due to the limitations of censorship, official media fails to thoroughly or responsively address sensational topics, creating gaps and holes where the unofficial media occupy, create content, and gain popularity. In order to delegitimize the VCP and official media, unofficial media writers use China and the Chinese as strawmen to question the Vietnamese government's loyalty and capability. Unlike the VCP which utilizes anti-Chinese sentiment as an instrument to gather national solidarity, the unofficial media instrumentalize it as a way to repudiate the VCP's ruling, and call for democracy and "new nationalism." However, the consequence of this power struggle and media manipulation is a surge of anxiety about the Chinese, leading to concrete social tension, everyday ethnic prejudice, and the practice of stereotypic labelling in contemporary Vietnam.

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