

Introduction on Special Topic

Negotiating Globalization and its Aftermath in Vietnam and ASEAN: Theory, Practice, Representation, and Identity

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The four papers in this special topic were first presented at the 12th “Engaging With Vietnam” conference, August 24 – 28, 2021. “Engaging With Vietnam” is an annual conference organized by Senior Professor Phan Le Ha and Associate Professor Liam C. Kelley, both from Universiti Brunei Darussalam. The conference deals with issues relating to “Vietnam” in the broadest sense. In keeping with this spirit, in 2021, the theme of the conference was “Engaging with Vietnam and ASEAN: Mobilities and Identities in an Age of Global Transformation.” Conference participants were encouraged to think beyond the boundaries of the country of Vietnam and to examine issues relating to Vietnam and its neighbors from global and transnational perspectives.

While there were over 100 presentations at the conference, the four papers in this special topic are emblematic of the diverse ways in which conference participants engaged with the conference theme. The “age of global transformation” that we find ourselves in is, of course, an age that is deeply influenced by processes of globalization. These papers all deal with that phenomenon.

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However, rather than simply examining globalization, we see these papers as demonstrating how people have been “negotiating” with that process and even starting to think beyond it.

This is understandable because the notion that market-led transformations of economies in Vietnam and other countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will inevitably lead them to follow a Western-dominated “globalization” is in early 2023 unequivocally false. Big “G” Globalization—a Western-dominated phenomenon marked by a borderless market economy, supported by representative democracy and propelled with such force as to inevitably transform all corners of the world in its image—has famously not come to pass (Friedman 2005; Fukuyama 1992). Instead, a more dynamic and interesting set of globalizations has emerged, with multiple, conflicting origins of power having only a provisional impact on peoples and places at any one time.

Astonishing for those observing matters of globalization from the “New Yorks” and “Londons” of the world, but unsurprising from those of us on this side of the planet (and readers of this journal) come Asian societies’ transformative impulses. What may be most confusing from leaders in traditional sites of power are the difficulties generating logical patterns of seemingly antithetical causes and effects: how can politically authoritarian nations like China and Vietnam economically outperform late-capitalist democracies? Why has the COVID-19 virus flattened countries with the resources to support the health of its people like the United States and the United Kingdom while those “developing” nations (particularly in Southeast Asia) have enjoyed minimal crashes to their public health sector and done a compelling job of protecting its citizens? Though the term “globalization” continues to be seductive because it captures patterns and processes that bring disparate populations into worldly communities, the papers in this special issue anticipate novel globalizations (small “g” and plural) and even a world of deglobalization.

Spanning a range of contemporary questions in, of, and beyond Vietnam, this special topic puts the global political economies of Southeast Asia on full display. Seemingly contradictory

movements depict the extraordinary dimensions of the region. We see the rhythms of Vietnam's leadership in Asia being critically reassessed under the specter of deglobalization while at the same time the public face of its economy (tourism) remains a lodestar. Chinese "Belt and Road" influence in Southeast Asia has many detractors while Chinese identities underpin every corner of ASEAN, including Brunei. This collection is thus a timely reminder of Southeast Asia's ability to reformulate globalization in the twenty-first century and a recognition of the contradictions of region that make it a spectacular and beguiling site of scholarly critique.

The central conceit of globalization—that it is an inevitable, all-consuming force homogenizing the world according to the principles of late capitalism—is a seductive if flawed interpretation of a vastly more interesting concept. In "Vietnam and the Spectre of Deglobalization," John C. Walsh provides an overview of some of the theoretical issues which globalization raises as well as the reasons for deglobalization. While Walsh opens up a number of fascinating lines of inquiry into what Vietnam could be if it sought to deglobalize, the key takeaway in his essay is that toeing the line between full-throated globalization and protectionist, insulating measures associated with deglobalization require Vietnam's leaders to be careful yet quietly ambitious as they attempt to carve out an identity in ASEAN, with China, and globally. A piece for anyone interested in big picture thinking, Walsh's article helpfully grounds (de)globalization in a set of opportunities and challenges for Vietnam.

In "Vietnam's Response to the Digital Silk Road in Southeast Asia and Implications for Regional Cooperation," Nguyen Dang Dao brings readers up to speed on the ways in which Vietnam's digital sovereignty clashes with ASEAN and China, and the delicate ways in which its policy-makers maneuver into and out of diplomatic relationships with them, given that Vietnam is a glaring outlier in the "Digital Silk Road" initiative. Nguyen also examines how China-ASEAN-Vietnam coordination is transforming Southeast Asia's technological infrastructure alongside the better known and studied "Belt and Road" physical infrastructure initiatives.

In “‘Say Hello to Vietnam!’: A Multimodal Analysis of British Travel Blogs,” Thuy Thi Hieu Tran undertakes a forensic, multidimensional analysis of British travel bloggers’ experiences in Vietnam to capture the present dimensions of the Western gaze on Vietnamese society. Her research is a *tour de force*, a meticulous product that heralds the best of mixed- methods research coupled with a strong theoretical edifice. Moreover, and set within the world wide web/internet repository of information in which it is immersed, Tran persuasively illustrates how Vietnam’s identity is as much a dialogue between “Self” and “Other,” as between Vietnamese hosts and their tourists, and as it is produced from within Vietnam’s borders itself.

Finally, in “Reframing Loss: Chinese Diaspora Identity in Brunei Darussalam,” Hannah Ming Yit Ho analyzes the fictional writing of K.H. (Kok Hing) Lim; the author’s *Written in Black* (2014) depicts a young diasporic Chinese family living in Brunei shattered by the abandonment of their mother to examine the concept of “supermobility.” Itself a generalizable concept that frames much of the current migration literature, Ho’s paper moves “supermobility” forward by illustrating the embodied ambiguities of loss, recovery, resetting, and belonging that make migration a unique experience for every family that crisscrosses the world in search of a better life.

Taken together, these four articles correspond to the four concepts in the subtitle of this special topic: “theory, practice, representation, and identity.” Walsh examines the theories of (de)globalization and considers possible futures for Vietnam. Nguyen considers how the global imperatives of China’s “Digital Silk Road” initiative struggle in practice to gain traction in Vietnam. Tran, meanwhile, demonstrates how Vietnam is to some extent beholden to global tourist representations. Finally, in this complex world of global interactions, human beings still seek to find an identity, even as they partake in lives of “supermobility,” as Ho illustrates. Together, these four works reveal how people and governments are “negotiating globalization and its aftermath in Vietnam and ASEAN”.

References

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