What Underlying Factors Influence the Political Mobilization of Southern Vietnamese Civilians during the Vietnam War?

Examining the impact of historical legacy, class, and culture on civilians’ political attitudes

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I. INTRODUCTION
Foreword and Acknowledgements

My major in political science in conjunction with my Vietnamese-American identity have inspired me to research the Vietnam War, a phenomenon two scores ago that remains one of our most troubled and confusing passages in history. My research examines the factors that influenced the political allegiance of civilians, in particular, Southern Vietnamese, during the Vietnam War. The key method for this research project was interviewing the Vietnamese civilians who have experienced the Vietnam War and stayed in Vietnam rather than immigrating to the United States. As repercussions of the Vietnam War still echo today in politics and the lives of those whom it affected, I find it vital to help construct a more comprehensive understanding of the war.

Before I go further on, I would like to acknowledge Sewanee for giving me the opportunity to return to my homeland and retrace the historical and political forces that have altered my life and the lives of millions. In addition, I would like to thank the political science faculty at Sewanee, Mila Dragojevic and Amy Patterson, who both have helped me brainstorm and solidify this project. Dr. Dragojevic, my department advisor, has given me not only advice but also motivation with her own political science research involving interviews with civilians in her homeland, the former Yugoslavia. Dr. Patterson has guided me in refining my project proposal and methodology. Last but equally indispensable, I am forever indebted to the Vietnamese people who have helped me execute this project. Without the participants', relatives, acquaintances, and kind strangers, this project would have remained an insatiable dream of an immigrant child wishing to understand her history. Their participation has me enabled me to
distinguish between facts, truths, and realities. I realized that approaching such historical and political truth is like approaching the limit of a infinity-one can approximate but never get to it. Privileged to have heard these personal narratives, I hope that, as an interpreter and researcher, I will be able to utilize these personal responses to help us understand of politics of the “others” and to let these quiet voices amplify the realities behind the Vietnam War.

*Historical Context: French colonialism & American Intervention*

Despite its historical timeline from, 1955 to 1975, the Vietnam War does not have a definite beginning nor ending. Like many other wars, it was the product of the antecedent military conflicts. To understand the Vietnam War, also known as the American War and the Second Indochina War, it is important to briefly go over French colonialism of Vietnam. During the late 1880s, France ruled over “Indochina” which consisted of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. Over six decades, the colonized Vietnamese people become overwhelming aware of the oppression caused by the French imperialism and its economic exploitation. In 1945, one prominent leader, Ho Chi Minh, spearheaded the French Resistant communist army the *Viet Minh* to fight for independence. This was called the Anti-French Resistant War or the First Indochina War. After almost a decade of fighting from, the International conference at Geneva in April 1954, divided Vietnam into two zones: Communist North and pro-Western democratic South Vietnam. The Geneva Peace Accords provided that elections in 1956 will determine the fate of Vietnam.

However, the unity of Vietnam did not happen as a result of preemptive measures by both sides and the conflict between North and South quickly escalated into military combats involving the international community. The United States (President Eisenhower and Secretary
of State John Foster) exploited this opening and sponsored Ngo Dinh. Diem as the president of South Vietnam. The onset of Cold War made self determination secondary to resistance against communism and Vietnam was a key area of Southeast Asian that was viewed as under immediate threat (Hunt 2010). The US and other countries joined the Republic of South Vietnam in combating against the communist forces of North Vietnam who were aided by China and the Soviet Union. What happened afterward is a series of bloody insurgencies between the forces of North and South Vietnamese government and their allies. Eventually, the US withdrew their troops in 1973 and the war officially ended with the North’s victory on April 1975. As a result of the war, more than three millions lives were killed and many civilians were displaced, including a million Vietnamese who now are immigrants of the United States.

*Overview of the Research Question*

One of the most striking features of the Vietnam War is that civilians were highly mobilized. Many scholars on the Vietnam War agree that “Influence over the population and support from it is what such a war is all about” (Thayer 1985, 137). The number of civilians fighting in the war were so high that the guerilla force took place over 10,0000 different hamlets, 260 districts, and 44 provinces (Thayer 1985). This massive number in civilians mobilized for war among the two polarized governments during the Vietnam War raises the question: What factors influenced the political allegiance of Vietnamese civilians during the Vietnam War? While there is an expanding archive on the Vietnam War, there is a lack of literature and research that explicitly examines the conditions and individual motivations that influenced the political alignment of the Vietnamese civilians during this period.
For this project, I focus on interviewing those who lived in the South during the war because the Northern Vietnamese civilians had already been mobilized by the communist forces, the Viet Minh and the North Vietnamese Army during the earlier period of fighting against French rule. This left Southerners as the new targets for political mobilization by the North and South regimes during the Vietnam War. From background research and literature review, I have selected three main variables to investigate: historical-political ideologies, socio-economics, and cultures. Thus, the overarching question is parsed into more these specific area of questions which were formed from the literature review.

1) Political legacy: How has historical legacy affected the way Southern Vietnamese perceive the political ideologies of the two regimes? In other words, how have symbolic politics from the Anti-French Resistant shaped the way Southern Vietnam politically align themselves during the Vietnam War?

2) Social class: In what ways does one’s class played in political support: such as the majority of peasants from the working class supporting the North while those of upper class supporting the South?

3) Culture: Education, religion, tradition: Did the more permissive and liberal culture in the South impact how Southerners aligned themselves politically? In addition, what role did religion, education, and tradition play in determining who the Southerners supported?

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to provide interview-based insights on how these factors have influenced the civilians’ political support during the war, aside from the fact that
many people were forced by the government to enlist in the army. By incorporating personal perspectives and theoretical work, I endeavor to help construct a better understanding on the Vietnam War from the Vietnamese people’s perspectives and on a larger scale, I hope to contribute groundwork for factors that influenced the mobilization of civilians during civil war of countries that have been colonized.

II. Methodology

Conducting the Interviews

This is a qualitative research project in which I conducted semi-structured interviews with civilians living in South Vietnam. There were open-ended questions that enabled in-depth descriptions and closed-ended questions that provided details such as location, education, occupation, and religious affiliation. As the interviewer, I facilitated the conversation by asking questions but refrained myself from displaying judgments or emotional reactions to their responses. Recruiting the participants was largely due to the networking of my mother and my relatives in Vietnam. In the cities, the participants were those in which my mother have reached out from a popular online Vietnamese community (huongxua.org) which consists of mostly of writers, poets, and literary critics from Southern Vietnam. In the countryside, I relied on my relatives to connect me with the elderly folks in the village for interviews. Additionally, those whom I interviewed often introduced me to another person who experienced the Vietnam War, enabling me to recruit more participants. Although my activities in Vietnam varied on a daily basis, my main duties consisted of recruiting, conducting the interviews, and engaging with my
environment such as talking with the residents, going to outside markets, and walking around the village. Because conducting the interviews were often stressful, I usually took time to journal, reflecting on my work and personal development in Vietnam.

**Interview Questions**

Below is a series of questions that I used for my interviews. Before each interview, I asked the participants to sign a written consent form. This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender:</th>
<th>Date of Interview:</th>
<th>City</th>
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<td>Current Occupation</td>
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1. How old were you when the Vietnam War first began (in 1954)?
2. What area(s) were you living in during the war?
3. What was your occupation at that time?
4. During the First Indochina War (Anti-French Resistance War) were you and your family supporting the Viet Minh or the French forces?
5. How did the First Indochina War shape the way you view the political situation of the Vietnam War?
6. During the Vietnam War, which side did you or your family support?
7. What was the main reasons why you sided with that regime?
8. How would you describe the socio-economic situation of your family during the French rule?
10. How would you describe the socio-economics of your family during the Vietnam War began?

12. Growing up what impact did French colonialism have on the culture of South Vietnam? Did you observe its influence in as education, infrastructure, tradition, or philosophy?

13. Were you or your family religious during the war? If yes, what religion did you practice?

14. Was religion or culture an important aspect that shaped your political ideology?

15. Would you like to further explain your previous answer (s) or change them or do you have any other comments that you want to add to this interview?

**Challenges and Successes**

The success of my project was dependent on my ability to adapt, persevere, and confident. While in Vietnam, I was often overwhelmed and frustrated from being criticized as “being Americanized” and having a broken Vietnamese. Yet, I remained positive and tried to improve my Vietnamese language so I can communicate with others better. My commitment towards reconnecting with my roots made others around become more comfortable my presence and made me more approachable. Another difficulty was obtaining written consent from the participants to be interviewed since the Vietnam War is still a highly sensitive and controversial topic. Some people were hesitant to participate because some thought that I was secretly working for the American government and/or that they and I will be under scrutiny by the Vietnamese police forces. To resolve this, I explained, in a sincere manner, that the purpose of my research is for academics and that their responses will be anonymous by choice. My ability to remain calm
and respectful while being assertive and confident helped make the participants less suspicious and made them feel honored to have me listen to untold stories. Interestingly, after the interviews, the participants would invite me to their home to enjoy a meal with them and, switching the roles around, they would interview me about “what it’s like in America.” Another challenge that I faced was traveling alone by buses which can range from 6 hours to 38 hours, depending on my destination. In addition to the fear of being robbed, my other concern was sexual harassment, a grave issue Vietnam. To protect myself from attention and possible harassment when traveling, I wore baggy men clothing and tried to befriend and stick with elderly people. These tactics and my vigilant consciousness were helpful in keeping me safe throughout my time there. Although there were moments of frustration and resignation, I was determined to complete this project. Those interviews fueled my burning desire to understand history and politics and reinforces the importance of my research as it was a once in a lifetime opportunity. As the language translator and political science interpreter, I hope to incorporate these personal living memories into academia without generalizing or alternating their experiences.

III. FINDINGS

First Location: Ho Chi Minh City

I began my research project in Ho Chi Minh City (HCM), a city filled with brilliant lights and a bustling nightlife that makes a weary traveler suddenly feel awake and captivated. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam’s most populous area, is formerly called Saigon, a name used by many
Southern Vietnamese rather than calling the city after the revolutionary president Ho Chi Minh. HCM City was an important location to conduct research because it was the capital of the South Vietnam before the war ended. Additionally, during French colonialism, Saigon was the capital of Cochinchina, a French territory of Indochina. Back then, Saigon was the source of much economic wealth of Vietnam as it was most exposed to direct French influence (Duiker 1983, 124). Thus, French cultural fusion was pervasive in language, literature, film, and music as well as restaurants and entertainments. Scholars believe that among the South Vietnamese government leaders, there was genuine support for some measure of liberalism which stood in contrast of the society the communist regime established in the North (Stewart 236-237). I selected Ho Chi Minh City with the intention of exploring how culture and social class of those in the city affected their political support. The first two days consisted of visiting historical sites, including the Vietnam War Remnants Museum and architectural buildings such as the Saigon Cathedral- Notre-Dame Basilica- and the Central Post Office. Visiting the Vietnam War Remnants Museum, I noticed that the war was framed with the perspective of the winning regime and it was far from being apolitical. Thus, many of the artifacts and slogans were highlight the collective action of the people mobilizing to fight and the catastrophic effects that the Americans had done to the civilians- including Agent Orange. Both the Saigon Cathedral and the Central Post Office were built by the French colonists and these buildings served as remnants of the French influence in Vietnam-which now serve as sightseeing spots for tourism.

Much of my interviewees were current professors, former professors, poets, and writers who lived in or nearby Ho Chi Minh City during the war. The interviews confirmed that the
middle-class consisted predominantly of the student population during the Vietnam War. As a result, those who I interviewed in Saigon were not soldiers or directly involved in the war because they were highschool and college students. However, most of them did supported the South Vietnamese government and were resentful towards the North, even those who wanted peace.

When asked about their perception of French influences in the South during colonialism, many of interviewees said that “the impacts were monumental from building hospitals to churches, to reinventing the Vietnamese alphabet.” One participant, a current English professor, acknowledged the strong influences of the French and mentioned the bac sy Alexandre Yersin, a bacteriologist who worked in Indochina and whom many Vietnamese still revered. As for the effects of French culture in education, the participants said that that humanities improved and expanded due to infusion of French philosophy which brought greater freedom and innovation in scholarly thinking. Their support of the French influence in Vietnam also lessen their hostility for Americans and some strongly supported the South/ US because they were open to the propagandized notion freedom and liberty.

Testing the impact of historical legacy, I asked questions concerning with the Indochina/French Resistance War and how that have impacted their political ideology towards the Vietnam War. For those supporting the South, this two wars were not as so intrinsically linked. Many were quick to differentiate between the two wars- and even challenged why I brought this up when my research is on the Vietnam War. When asked to describe the differences, most pointed out that the first one war against imperialist domination while the latter
was a civil war due to opposing political system ideals: communism in the North and democracy in the South. A poet that I interviewed said that during the French Resistance War acknowledged that many fought for independence because of “voi long yeu nuoc” which means as for the love of the country, while the second war-both sides were merely “puppets” of the international powers. However, while historical legacy affected their understanding of the war, it was not a mobilization factor for the younger middle class in the city because most of them were high school students.

Those with strong opposition to the government are predominantly from middle and upper class before the war. Some had grandfathers and fathers who worked for the French and the US government. Their attitudes of the government today reflects their support for the old Southern regime. These people single out the communist government as a monstrous villain; parasitic in society and ruthless those who opposes the system. Some provide depressing accounts of the mistreatment they underwent during “re-education camp” while others dismiss Vietnamese politicians as worthless because their powers they are limited and well indoctrinated by communist thinking. Many Southerners who I spoke often lamented about the loss of Saigon and often talked about the city before the Fall of 1975. From the interviews, the formerly bourgeois class of the South are now outcasts of the current government as they are influenced and captivated by foreign ideas and counterrevolutionary ideologies. Because of their historical and political connection with the South, after the war, they were denied access to things that they once have much power over such as education, proper jobs, housing, land and resources. Taking
account of their upper socio-economics, perhaps society was perceived as better because they were the receivers of the luxurious city under French and American presence.

Second Location: Ba Ria, Vung Tau

From Ho Chi Minh City, I took the bus to Ba Ria, Vung Tau, the next location for my interviews. Although Vung Tau-is now an industrialized a major port city and a popular tourist place, one of its district, Ba Ria, remains relatively rural and underdeveloped. My participants, which were few, are from the working class who are farmers and market vendors. My conversations with the people here reaffirmed the strength of nationalism in Vietnamese people, especially due to the fact that Vietnam has been through many cycles of foreign invasion. There is a powerful pride in Vietnamese people of their ability to have drive off foreigners such as the Chinese, Japanese, and French. Thus the war against the US for them represent another group that the civilians have fight for autonomy. It appears that Ba Ria is one of the resettlement areas of the New Economic Zone program. This was economic strategy by the government after the war to reclaim land laid waste that resulted in about one million Southerners being displaced from their homes to largely uninhabited mountainous forested areas. Thus, my interviewees often digress into issues regarding land rights, complaints about the inequality postwa, and corruption of the government exploiting the poor.

Third Location: Quy Nhon
My next destination was Quy Nhon, another city in the South that is a also tourist destination and also home of the student-population during the Vietnam War. Like HCM, city most of the participants are well-educated. The majority of respondents were writers, poets, teachers, and literary critics. While their support for the South government were similar to those from HCM city, in terms of culture, education, and values, many expressed the harsh economic situations back then and their desire for peace during the war.

*Fourth Location: Phu My, My Trinh*

The countryside of Phu My, My Trinh provided me quintessential information on mobilization of the civilians during the Vietnam War. Recruiting the participants was relatively easy due to the fact that this is my hometown in Vietnam and I had relatives living here who helped introduce me to the community. I interviewed people who were above 80 years old who experienced the times of French colonialism, the Anti-French Resistant War, the invasion of the Japanese, and also the “American War.” Particularly, besides interviewing men who were Viet Cong (VC), those who worked for the North, I was able to interview three women who were VC. My interviews with these people, who were predominantly from the peasant-working class, show that historical legacy of French colonialism played an influential role in their political support for the North. Many told me the harsh times of the French rule and its exploitable of people’s labor and the excessive taxation. As a result anti-foreigners developed and during the
Vietnam War, many volunteered to fight for the Viet Cong Army because “nuoc bi xam luoc” which means their reaction to “their country was being invaded.” The majority of the men also fought for the VietMinh during the Anti-French Resistant War. In fact, one interviewee told me that Phu My was one of the sites of the Viet Minh. In terms of the influence French culture, many were not able to comment much, besides from the fact that they were forced to learn French in school. However, most of them did not finish school due to the war. While their attitudes towards Americans varied, most of the participants had a negative perspective towards the French and the Japanese.

Fifth Location: Hue

Hue was the imperial capital of Vietnam until 1945 when the communist government established Hanoi as the new government. Located in central Vietnam, during the Vietnam War, the city's location between the North and South border put it in a vulnerable position. While in Hue, I went to visit another close by province, Khe Sanh, Quang tri, specifically the Khe Sanh Museum. Located 18 miles below the demarcation line, Khe Sanh was also a strategic base for US army. In both of these two locations, the American army were defeated by the communist forces in 1968.

In Hue, some of participants I interviewed were Vietnamese soldiers who were enlisted and fought for the South (American) side. While their responses did not answer my questions in
term of mobilization, it was informative regarding the treatment of prisoners by the communist government—which is interesting when juxtaposed against the VC women who also described their experiences in jail. Many of those whom I interviewed were not resentful but appreciative of the French influence—from renovations of hospitals to water purification system to the arts.

Analysis and Other Findings

In total, I interviewed about than 35 participants from five distinct locations who vary in age, gender, professions, social class, religious beliefs, education level, and political perspective. Reflecting the ambitious objectives of my project, I have covered a variety of factors on the Vietnam War. Seeking to paint a broad analytical perspective on civilian mobilization, my research highlights the determinant and interdependent effect of social class, historical legacy, and the culture of the environment on civilians’ political support. It is important to note that my research only explored the opportunities that allowed mobilization to occur. For this project, I did not explicit study strategies of propaganda or the social psychology of collective identities.

Social class played a major role in the political mobilization because those who were part of the middle class and upper class were less likely to be recruited as Vietcong. Most of them were students, kommerical merchants, soldiers, or government and army officers for the South. In addition, the culture of those in the city such as Saigon (HCM) were different from the countryside as people from the cities were more tolerant and supportive of French culture fusion. In contrast, majority of the population were peasants suffered and grieved during colonial times and they developed a hostile and suspicious view towards foreigners. Thus, the working
class, who were uneducated and unskilled were likely to be mobilized by communist leaders to fight for the North. The culture in the countryside is isolated from Western ideology and more concentrated with ancient traditions and historical beliefs of defending the land. My interviews addressed the relationship between social class and how historical legacy influence political ideology. Those who benefited from the French and American, tend to support the South while others who see its was exploitative would support the North.

Perhaps more importantly, although not investigated, is that my interviews exposed me the appalling truths about the war and its consequences for people in the Vietnam-regardless of the government they support. For those who formerly support the South government, the current government represent shame, skepticism, and disappointment. In contrast to news reporters, for Southern Vietnamese, 40 years since the war ended haven’t brought about much changes in the economy, modernization, and progress. They see that everything is censured and consumed by the government. The main message I kept on getting was “society was better in the past before 1975.” Many tried to explain to me the patronage, clientelistic, and suppressive workings of the current government. On the other side but equally as heartbreaking, for those in the countryside, the Vietnam War brings unforgettable memories- especially deaths of relatives and family members. They told be impoverished me lifestyle that they underwent under colonialism and how brutality of the American and Republican soldiers. Yet, their responses, often implicitly more than explicitly, revealed that they too suffered from the communist government as it fail to deliver its promises to the poor or upward social mobility to the working class.
Last, the most important but hardest to transfer into political concepts are the raw stories of those whom I interviewed, from a soldier being captive in jail for 11 years to a woman that spying for the communist government. Interviewing people from opposite end of the spectrum helped me develop a more neutral approach to war. I myself come to a full realization that war corrupts people can both side and “the self” is no different from the “other” as we are all human beings being shaped by our circumstances. Hayslip demonstrates that “the enemy” is not those on opposite ends of the war but rather the evils of the war itself.

Conclusion, Current and Ongoing work

The diverse and contrasting perspectives helped me realize that the Vietnam War is more than the oversimplified dichotomy of communism vs democracy. It is a culture war, a class war, a revolution, a civil war and so on. Yet, regardless of these different factors and interpretations, the War Vietnam had profoundly consumed the lives of many older Vietnamese to the extent that it is impossible to separate the war from their own personal history and identity.

The Biehl Fellowship research project was impactful in numerous ways. First, it allowed me to construct a comprehensive understanding of the war by incorporating the oral narratives from those who are marginalized in the Vietnamese and American society. This experience have given me affirmation on my abilities not only as a political scientist but an anthropologist and a humanist. I look forward to present my research findings in academia and to share with others the greatest lesson that I have learned from this project, which is to understand historical and political events from a critical multicultural approach.
In addition, this project was a crucial and prerequisite linkage to my other research at Stanford University in the summer of 2015 which focuses on the representation of Vietnam War in comparative literature. Analyzing personal memoirs of the Vietnam War from perspectives of American and Vietnamese-American authors, my research focuses on how each side represent the "other" i.e "the enemy" and the cultural and political justifications behind such representation. The comparison of works between American and Vietnamese-exiles voices enabled me to explore the possible spaces of misrepresentation and to further the demand for inclusion of Vietnamese-American authors in the Vietnam War literary canon as it continue to affect the public and the succeeding generation.

Furthermore, the Biehl experience is preliminary work toward future research my in postcolonial conflicts in Southeast Asia. In the near future, I look forward to conducting more interview-based research projects to shed unwritten truths behind historical and political phenomena of the colonization of Indochina and its impact on civil wars and immigration.

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