The Scholarship of Vietnameseness:
The dialectic of “national identity” between self and society in Vietnamese education
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Abstract:
This study explores how college aged youth from various regional time and space identities access “national identity” in Vietnam. The study uses a theoretical framework as follows (1) Benedict Anderson’s theory that “nation” is in an “imagined” community (2) Keith Taylor’s theory of how surface orientations of linear time and space do not accurately characterize history. (3) Subaltern Studies: a field of Postcolonial Criticism that considers the alternative historical narratives of subalterns (non-elites, and for our purposes the nationally marginalized). Using this theoretical framework, I then explore how the youth access this “national imagination.” How is it that students connect to a sense of “Vietnameseness” if the historical narratives are unauthentic, and nation is merely imagined? This study is based on 40 student interviews spanning 5 universities, 7 majors, 3 regions, and the 2 major urban centers of Vietnam (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City). This paper then presents the findings of “national imagination” conception amongst these students in order to show how education functions as a medium for nationality discourse. The study asserts that “nationness” is created in education through four main forces (1) historical linearization (2) fostering of cultural shapes (3) regional reductionism an binaries and (4) institutions. Ultimately this paper explores the implications of this national imagination in postcolonial Vietnam as an example of national identity imagination implications in all postcolonial “nations.”

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“I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”—Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism

**Introduction:**

I remember the first time I held an American flag. I remember being seven years old and feeling the intensity of some great cosmological order culminating on my selection to carry the flag for our second grade march. Even at such a young age I identified with the incredibly addicting feeling of belonging to a social unit with a long history that preceded me and that which would continue after me. Later, when I was in high school, I found myself amongst the buildings of Washington DC and again I felt the comforting feeling: that comforting feeling that I participated in a nationalism that existed absolutely and resolutely outside of me. This is why I could understand as the Masters of Economics student in Hanoi sat across from me, sipping authentic “Vietnamese” coffee, explained in true proud fashion, “Culture is an idea. People who are Vietnamese identity themselves as Vietnamese and always know they are Vietnamese. And as things change, the fact that they know they are Vietnamese- this will never change.” I did not have the heart to ask him, “How is it that you and I came upon such an imagination?”

The criticism of “nation” and “nationness” is a new field of social and historical criticism. The spectrum of this criticism is wide ranging from complete abandonment of the nation altogether, to just a more thorough redefinition of ‘nation’ in order to better assimilate with the rapidly changing world of globalization. Theorists such Arjun Appadurai suggest, for example, that due to both the empirical realities of transnational growth (both economically and

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1 Quote from Arjun Appadurai’s 1993 essay *Patriotism and its futures*; as referenced by Partha Chatterjee in *Beyond the Nation? Or Within?*
politically), as well as the “moral political demands of authority and legitimacy, the nation state is in crisis,” (Chatterjee, 1998, p. 57). Again and again we hear such catch phrases as the “nation is on the decline,” and essays pointing toward cosmopolitan futures claim “we need to think of ourselves beyond the nation” and into our transnational and porous boundaries of a thoroughly multicultural ‘international’ world. Cosmopolitan theorists such as Martha Nussbaum suggest a reorienting in citizenship allegiance away from nation, and instead toward “global citizenship” based on a “Kantian moral responsibility to humanity:” shifting toward more cosmopolitan education based on these more progressive political ethics. In Africa, often studies of national identity concern a better orientation toward multiculturalism in order to compensate for the inherent pluralism of the continent. It is clear that the legitimacy of the “nation,” in this fundamentally “internationally” growing world, begs for reflectivity. However, the rhetoric of this reflectivity has been largely misplaced when concerning suggestions to abandon the nation on the basis of ethics, new empirical realities, or the fact that nation is just not relevant any longer. For as indicated, the illegitimacy of “nation” in these arguments is often discussed on the basis of “internationality” or “Trans-nationality.” The illegitimacy of singular cultures are discussed on the basis of new “Multiculturalism.” These arguments themselves cannot escape the predetermined political rhetoric of “nation.”

The true enlightenment lies in understanding of the “nation” as a fundamentally imagined political community, that which has always been imagined and that which we have come to define so much of our social self consciousness upon- therefore making our “national identity” an imagined extension tied to narratives of common history, and creation of cultural artifacts. I would like to orient the discussion toward a field of scholars questioning the linear extension of the “nation” as a true epistemological unit, and the linearization of history as a legitimate philosophy altogether. The importance of such a project becomes particularly relevant in the field of Postcolonial Criticism, for to not understand “nation” as a fundamentally imagined

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3 See Chatterjee’s overview of Appadurai’s essay Patriotism and Its Futures other cosmopolitan theory also see Kai Neelsen’s Cosmopolitanism and Martha Nussbaum’s Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism
4 As Nussbaum sates in her essay Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism “The idea of the world citizen is in this way the ancestor and source of Kant’s idea the “kingdom of ends,” and has a similar function in inspiring and regulating moral and political conduct.” (Nussbaum, 1994 )
concept, today and before, is to not understand the fundamentally Eurocentric world system that the globe’s cultures- and ‘multicultures’ are susceptible to. This is why my research centers on one country of focus in particular, a country where the “postcolonial national unification” is still in its birth and the rapid effects of the creation of a national imagination are tangible and observable: Vietnam.

The Theoretical Framework

To frame the discussion I would like to refer to two scholars in particular, and to a field of Postcolonial Criticism which I hope this work may contribute to: Subaltern Studies. Firstly I take this idea of the “imagination” of national community from Benedict Anderson in his work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson suggests (as seen in the quote introducing this essay) that the nation is fundamentally a political community that is imagined. It is imagined on the basis that even though the supposed members of the community will never be face to face with most of the other members, and have no actual metaphysical simultaneous space occupation, they extend an idea of common identity of nation to this community. It is important to note however, that Anderson in taking this view does not share a view of national community fabrication being somehow unique, such as Ernest Gellner who claims that “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self consciousness: but it invents nations where they do not exist.”

Gellner “masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates ‘invention’ to ‘fabrication’ and ‘falsity’ rather than to ‘imagining and creation,’” (Anderson, 1983, p.6) The characteristic of “imagined” common identity with persons moving through space simultaneously is characteristic of all community imaginations. As Anderson states, “In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face to face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined (Anderson, 1983, p.25).” Anderson shows this through a diagram illustration of four actors A, B, C, D, who by circumstantial connection imagine themselves as a unit moving horizontally through time, even though they never actually meet and

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6 Quote from p.6 of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism*: Anderson references Gellner as an example for those theorists which believe that fabrication in the national imagination is somehow more fabricated than other community imaginations.

7 Quote from Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism* p. 6: shows the distinction between “Imagination and Fabrication” which I will take to be very important in this essay. Imaginations does not merely imply falsity, imagination is more related to the philosophically creative organization of information related to cultural identity and community formation.
indeed do not move through the same space as tied to time. The actors conjure an imagined horizontally moving sociological organism based on their experiences and social associations. And as Anderson states, “The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time, is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history” (Anderson, 1983, p. 25). The interest in nation as an imagined community, in not the just the fact that nation is imagined, but it is the fact that the majority of the current world does not recognize this imagination. What is unique about the national imagination is the dogmatic quality we have assigned to such a political community, how strongly individuals seem to identify with it, how it literally shapes our entire cultural self consciousness, and that we extend current concepts of national boundaries to antiquity: that there is such a thing as a “Vietnamese History” which extends to thousands of years prior, for example. It is these associations that allows for such strong patriotic sensibilities, thousands feeling proud to die for their country, and a Eurocentric world system where the “nation” is generally accepted as the inherently highest form of political structural order. However, the nation is a political system that arose during the Enlightenment, according to Anderson, in order compensate in a secular fashion for a cosmological void following the downfall of religious and dynastic empires. The extension of nation to the entire world system, and to historical self consciousness, thereby orients political organization and History with a capital H toward the West (we will return to this later).

This understanding leads to our second historian: Keith Taylor whose work in Vietnam points to an alternative poststructuralist interpretation of Vietnamese history. I would argue that the most powerful asset of national imagination (and any community imagination for that matter) lies in the assumption of common history: a history which is long, linear, and shared by all current members of the sociological organism. The interesting factor of “national history” however, is that even though “nation-state” in its current conception is only a couple of centuries old, and Postcolonial states’ current boundaries much younger—for example in Vietnam the static

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8 See Anderson, pps. 25-26 for diagram, explanation of ABCD illustration of four actors and quote.
9 As Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote “‘history’ as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university— is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe.”” See p. 1483 of Prakash, G. (1994) Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism, “The American Historical Review Vol. 99
quality of the current “S” shape boundaries\textsuperscript{10} are only roughly fifty years old, national history is taken to extend over thousands of year. The process of extending current geographical and sociopolitical structures over the orientation of thousands of years of history conveys a fabricated ideal of antiquity that portrays the themes the elite wish for the subordinates to believe of their ‘nation.’ “Vietnamese History” for example, as has become generally accepted, has a very “long history” of struggles against aggressors, and oppressive feudal regimes.\textsuperscript{11}

However, the problem of such extension is that history is fundamentally non-linear. Therefore, by extending such a reductionist “branch” shape over a “tree” of narratives, these narratives then are bound to be exclusive, revisionist, and telling only of an elite interpretation of a “region’s ” (for lack of a better word) history. It is history’s problematic surface orientations of territory and time (time and space) that presents these linear interpretations.\textsuperscript{12} This paper will examine some of these revisions presented by Taylor, and by Patricia Pelley in Postcolonial Vietnam, as corresponding to Vietnamese interpretations later on. For example surface orientations within the limited linear constructs of space and time lead to revised narratives based on binaries (such as North and South, China and Vietnam, East and West) and to exclusive narratives which in order to be framed linearly must correspondingly exclude ‘periphery’ narratives that do not serve the purpose of the “message” of a nation’s history (for example the necessity of a narrative of traditional Vietnamese culture spreading from North to South during the Nguyen dynasty).\textsuperscript{13} Therefore, Keith Taylor suggests a sort of reorientation of history toward a surface of here and now, as we shall examine later for the future of Vietnamese youth.

Ultimately, these exclusive, dogmatic imaginations of “nation,” absent of critical awareness of their creative narratives and imagined associations, become very important for understanding the state of our postcolonial world. Some may claim that the “nation is on the decline” but as Anderson suggests, “Almost every year the United Nations admits new members.

\textsuperscript{10} The “S” shape of Vietnam, as will be discussed later, is one of the most commonly presented ‘cultural shapes’ of Vietnam. By suggesting that this shape in its current form is roughly 50 years old, I mean static boundaries free from war and threat. In reality, static “national” boundaries of Vietnam are only 30 years old if we consider them only valid after 1975 in the “reunification” of Vietnam.


\textsuperscript{12} As Taylor states in his introduction of his framework “At least three problems immediately arise. First, in an orientation toward the surface of time, how can we avoid timeless categories implied in regional stereotypes attached to place name and instead sustain the historical specify of stereotyped expressions?” (Taylor, p.950).

And many ‘old nations; once thought fully consolidated find themselves challenged by sub nationalisms within their borders-nationalisms which, naturally, dream of shedding this subness one happy day. The reality is quite plain: the ‘end of the era of nationalism’ so long prophesied is not remotely in sight. In deed nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time,” (Anderson, 1983, p.3). “Nation” has become the generally accepted most outward form of “local identity”-and this European derived political experiment has come to define current global politics, economics, and history. We live in an inter-national world. Naturally it follows then that as these new regions broke free of the colonial controls of previous periods, nation-state is the form they adopted. In efforts then to be acceptable to the world system, and to Western competition, and also because “nation” had become generally hailed as a positive form of “autonomous” cultural politicization, postcolonial “states” were born. “Nations” such as America colored nation as synonymous with liberty and autonomy. And therefore, it seemed only natural that as territories such as Vietnam were liberated, they would adopt this similar cultural self-consciousness. Vietnamese history, Vietnamese culture, and Vietnamese imaginations- these are the natural consequences of such an adoption: essentially Vietnameseness.

Postcolonial Criticism takes many forms, often in the form of anti-West, anti-Colonial, anti-bourgeoisie, Marxist or Liberal arguments. However, the theorists that are centering postcolonial criticism on a critical analysis of historical narratives, in my mind, are coming to the best conclusions. Such as Duara (as we will discuss later) who points to the question of if history as a practice, and its linear periodization, as “Antithoretical?” A group of nine scholars dedicated to asking the questions of “nation” and “history linearization” in Postcolonial and specifically South Asian studies have formed a group termed “Subaltern Studies.” These subaltern studies practices wish to depart from mere poststructuralist and Marxist anti-Eurocentricism, for these interpretations still find themselves prey to the framework of nation or not nation. But instead, in analyzing the imaginations of national history and alternative

narratives (narratives of the subaltern) subaltern studies aims to move history and the sociopolitical world system away from eurocentricism, through critical analysis. This is ultimately where this study will take us. In analyzing the “imagination” of nation, and the rewriting of historical narratives in education of Vietnam, I will be asking how national imagination may be fostering a new eurocentricism of “Developed and Developing” nations. And how more self critical awareness of this “imagined” national framework may better aid the subalterns of Vietnam, as well as the elite students of Vietnam, whose future is rapidly changing and begging for accurate interpretation and authenticity apart from the typical Eurocentric nation state framework.

The Research

This leads to an overview of my research, and my thesis concerning the dialectic of “nation imagination” and Vietnameseness in education. Given the above theoretical framework of Anderson, Taylor, and Subaltern Studies theorists, I assert that nation is an imagined community based on a political construct that maps the self consciousness of cultures and has reoriented recently toward a new euro-centering system of “developed” and “developing” nations. I assert that “nation” is adopted universally usually for two primary purposes, as this study will show. (1) controlling the cultural consciousness: essentially as an effective tool for political unification and (2) making sense of cultural consciousness, as a means to grapple with social identity as it relates to temporality and community relations. I also will be agreeing with Anderson and the theorists of subaltern studies that the nation is a construct of the European enlightenment period, used as a means of secularizing a cosmological sympathy of consciousness by providing a platform of belief for the individual as an autonomous agent that is a member of a higher cultural order. And therefore, as postcolonial “states” adopt nationhood, they are subjecting themselves to exclusive fabricated histories, a loss of self critical authentication, and a new Eurocentric system.

How the “nation” accomplishes this solidification of “nationness” is through the creation of a discourse. As Hegel and Foucault have observed, history cannot be created outside of discourse, and neither nation nor civil society can lie outside of it. This is also one of the

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17 See Prakash’s overview of the “subaltern” experience (‘subaltern’ being an idea of Antonio Gramsci), from Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism
fundamental principles of subaltern studies. Therefore, I set out to observe “discourse” creation in Vietnam through a specific medium: education. By observing the narratives and cultural shapes that constitute the discourse of “nation” in Vietnamese education, I observed how elite nationalism is being fostered, and how the discourse is being characterized for the future generations of Vietnam.

I interviewed over 40 students, spanning 7 majors, 5 universities, 2 metropolises, and both the Northern and Southern regions of Vietnam. I also interviewed a number of Vietnamese educators and historians in both regions as well as institutional leaders of such organizations as the “Ho Chi Minh Youth Union” and the “Director of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology.” The students I interviewed came from both majority and minority groups, socially oriented and technically oriented majors, and the northern, middle, and southern regions. Through a series of qualitative questions concerning the cultural shapes and historical narrative that these students believe constitute their national identity, as well as an investigative study of the narratives and cultural aspects taught in all three levels of Vietnamese education, I have come to a conclusion of how the “nation discourse” is being communicated, at least in Vietnam. Vietnam creates this discourse in education through four main cultural patterns.

1. historical linearization, periodization, and time mapping
2. fostering of cultural shapes: traditions, memories, practices
3. definition of tangible binaries and regional reductionism
4. institutionalization: educational consistencies and institutions

Therefore, the rest of this paper will present my research, by tracing these four educational patterns as conveyed to me by students and educators from all over Vietnam. Ultimately my study is that of mere qualitative observation of what constitutes the “national imagination” of a modern Vietnamese university student, and how these cultural beliefs will orient these students’ future, and the future of Vietnam as a whole.

As I have suggested before, “imagining” a nation is not unique to Vietnam, and to be prey to the cultural formations of national identity is not a unique feature of these students (for as I have indicated I am also susceptible to these formations in my own culture). Rather, I aim to seek these narratives in order to hopefully add to a more post-structurally critical understanding of

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18 See Hegel’s and Foucault’s relevance of the field of Subaltern Studies (and to this study): Hegel in suggesting alternative means of processing history and Foucault in suggesting there is no autonomy outside discourse. See pps 1480-1483 of Prakash’s *Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism*
authentic Vietnamese history, and the Vietnamese experience, in order to avoid a eurocentrically oriented system absent of analytical self conscious awareness. The conclusion of this study only presents the narratives and the cultural shapes I have found, and the suggestion that these things although imagined, are very important to these students. My conclusion is that these students ultimately are very dynamic and merely deserve the authenticity of the surface of here and now.

Part 1: The Discourse of Nation in Education

Is History Antitheoretical? The Historical Narratives from North to South

When I asked the brightest, top International Relations graduates of Hanoi about their “Vietnamese History,” I was answered with a well articulated, well crafted, and highly expected response. I listened intently as one student drew me an “S” shaped map of Vietnam in order to trace the explanations. “Basically there was an enlargement of the Vietnamese territory around the 1st century, a very long time ago. The Vietnamese people firstly settled in the North in Vietnam somewhere around here.” He circled the northern territory for me. “In the 6th century it was the first time the Vietnamese people defeated the Chinese emperor and established a nation. And then the nation was enlarged by years until 938 the second time the Vietnamese beat the emperor of China. It was a very proud moment because before this Vietnam had been dominated by China totally. Then in the 10th century up till nearly 1802, the territory of Vietnam was enlarged toward the South, and then in 1802 Vietnam gained its shape like today, and this when we have the name Vietnam. You see in Vietnam’s long history, the first thing you see is high nationalism, very high nationalism.” 19

This well articulated response portrays perfectly the characteristic and consistent narrative of “Vietnamese” history that I received from students in both the Northern and Southern regions. When piecing through my interviews, the three most consistent narrative markers of all 35-40 students were as follows:

19 Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
A Very Long History. This was the phrase fed to me over and over in interviews and conference rooms when I questioned about history, culture, or personal identity. Always answers were framed with the phrase, “Vietnam’s Long History.” It is no coincidence then that the most characteristic work, assigned reading in school, and well known “history of Vietnam” is a work of Nguyen Khac Vien: *Vietnam A Long History*. The organization of *Vietnam A Long History* speaks for itself. Firstly the book is divided in to 2 parts: “Part 1 Traditional Vietnam” which includes the stone age up through the “cultural development of the 17th to 19th centuries,” and “Part 2: Contemporary Vietnam” (tracing the years 1858-1975). Some of the chapter titles include: *The Long March to Independence* (1st century-10th century AD), *The Centralized Feudal State*: including the Ly and Tran dynasties, and *Cultural Development* (supposedly linked to the 17th-19th centuries). As exhibited, *Vietnam A Long History* is essentially linear, extending the current “Vietnam” back to the stone age up through current economic development-linking these beginning and ending points in linear fashion covering thousands and thousands of years “Vietnamese national history.” About 75 percent of students interviewed expressed this long history in the quantity of “4000” years, although a couple students in Ho Chi Minh City suggested its magnitude to be 2000 years. Some typical trends expressed include struggles against foreign invaders and dominance, feudal regimes, and the spread of “traditional Vietnamese culture” from the Northern to the Southern regions. A discussion of the validity of these events and some alternative revisions as expressed by Taylor and Pelley will be discussed later. However, it is safe to say that the average university student of Vietnam feels proud to be linked to an ancient history that is deep and thick, extending over thousands of years. This understanding is the starting point for education’s expression of history. Contained within this linear portrayal are essential events and themes, which ultimately portray a “long history” of high nationalism, as the student above suggested? The consistent themes are as follows.

(2) The spread of traditional Vietnamese culture from North to South. It is generally accepted that the culture of the Viet people originated in the North, and then spread south as the

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21 Information drawn from: (A) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm ; (B) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 ; (C) Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006
“Vietnamese” people invaded southern territory. This understanding of historical trend is expressed in different fashions, but often emphasized as the “march from North to South” as articulated by some economics majors at Vietnam National University in Hanoi. This source of traditional culture growing from the North is inherent to a cultural understanding of (a) the influence of Chinese culture from North to South and (b) the characteristics of the North, Middle and Southern regions.

All students characterized the “1000 year long Chinese domination” as highly influential on the current culture and national identity- both in terms of affecting the Northern regions’ evolution toward such trends as Confucianism and Feudal regimes, as well as in terms of Vietnam’s first step toward independence. The Chinese influence on the dynasties of the North (including the Le through Nguyen- according to one student at VNU in Hanoi), suggests a high influence on all Vietnamese culture since traditional culture’s “source is in the North,” stated the student.

This spread of culture and power from North to South is very important for understanding regions, as one International Relations graduate explained. “The North people at first came to the south to discover new land,” she said “So that’s why those working people became more open when they came to the South. A new land with no rules, so had to set own rules. They had to get used to the new environment so their minds had to be more open.” This understanding of Southern territory as the most recent discovered, and Southern people as much more “open” was expressed in every interview held. (which should be noted is a radical change in the last 20 or so years- to even consider the southern region as valid to Vietnamese history or to suggest a positive connotation to this “new land no rules” environment.) Where before the South was viewed as immoral and less culturally oriented due its placement and orientation toward more capitalist means, in the ‘Doi Moi age’ the South is becoming “reinscripted” to be praised for its individualistic society and global capitalist modernity. Students in Hanoi spoke positively

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22 Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006
23 Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006
25 Philip Taylor discusses this doi moi age of “reinscriptions of the past” of the Southern society, as well as shifting genealogies in politics, see Bradley’s review of Fragments of the Present
(often on basis of reputation and not actual traveling) of Ho Chi Minh City almost in a yearning light toward less rules and a more open “modern” environment. However, both these old “negative” and current “positive” portrayals of Vietnam’s southern region characteristics centers on a historical narrative of Northern to Southern cultural evolution. Hanoi is supposedly the “cultural” center, and the South the “economic” center. The South was the “undiscovered” territory. (As I will discuss later, historians such as Keith Taylor and Li Tana suggest the South was in no way undiscovered.) This influential narrative, along with a foundation of long history, is fundamental to history classes and student interpretations of cultural and regional national identity throughout the education system.

(3) The last narrative marker is that of struggles for independence against foreign invasion. As a foreign trade student in Ho Chi Minh City expressed, “Our country has a very long history. Not a history for the winner because we have fought so many wars. The history is of Vietnam is a history of war.”26 A calendrical27 portrayal of Vietnam’s many wars, dating back to struggles against the Chinese invaders to the recent Indochina wars of the last century is essential to the discourse of the current Vietnamese nation. These struggles, to Vietnamese students, represent their cultures’ characteristics consistent through time of “strength, high nationalism, hardship, hard work, and struggles for independence.”28 If Vietnamese historical education has one main theme it is this last characteristic: a long history of a struggle for independence: Struggle against “Chinese domination, colonial domination, Japanese domination, and “of course the final straw against the Americans” as one Information Technology student expressed in Ho Chi Minh City.29 Therefore, when students from North to South were asked what they believed the most important historical events in Vietnamese history are universally the three events most expressed were: the defeat of the Chinese, the August revolution of 1945, and the “reunification” of Vietnam in 1975.

These are the three primary narrative mapping characteristics presented to me by university students. Of course there are many other themes, however the three expressed above

26 Interview with Foreign Trade 3rd year undergraduate, Foreign Trade University group interview, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm
27 An Anderson term, Anderson uses “calendrical” to articulate any horizontal linear portrayal of history sequence in national imagination (see pps 25-26 of Imagined Communities)
28 Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
29 Interview with Information Technology 3rd year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm
(“a very long history”, “spread from North to South” and struggles against “foreign invasion”) were expressed to me by every single student I interviewed. It is no wonder then, as the International Relations graduate student in Hanoi suggested, that these three elements function to serve a “high nationalism” understanding of Vietnamese history. Other themes expressed were a harkening back to the first state of Vietnam, “Dai Viet,” discussions of Confucianism and Buddhism throughout the ages (often in the North to South progression) and the history of agriculture in Vietnam (for as many students, and professors, expressed, the “agricultural identity” of Vietnam is the most characteristic of national identity\(^{30}\) --we will return to this later).

With these narrative themes presented, it is possible to analyze what is correct/incorrect and also to understand how these narratives function to “map” national interpretations of history and identity in education. These narratives shape cultural interpretation by (a) periodization and (b) presentation of national characteristics.

(a) **Periodization**, as discussed by Duara in *Why is History Antitheoretical?* is a strategic mapping of history backed by philosophical agendas of interpretation? As Duara states, “If the object of inquiry is constituted as a linear entity, this object is organized by strategies of periodization…. Thus, Hegelian and Marxist periodization schemes privilege principles whose philosophical foundation is evident.”\(^{31}\) Periodization of history is a fundamental tool of Vietnamese education used to validate national territory, national characteristics, and linear causation history. Dr. Thuy Anh, a professor in the Faculty of Tourism at the University of Social Sciences in Hanoi, articulated to me a particular activity conducted in her classes during the first year: an activity designed for tourism majors to conceptualize Vietnamese culture and history. Dr. Thuy Anh teaches two classes for first year students in tourism (1) Basics of Vietnamese Culture and (2) Basics of Tourism. At the end of each series the students are required to draw diagrams of the culture of Vietnam. These diagrams/maps/patents (as she articulated it) essentially map features of culture to timelines throughout history. Each “map” contains 2 features: (1) a timeline (2) the main features of that period. There are 4 common diagrams (1) Ancient Vietnamese culture (2) the Fight Against Chinese invaders (3) Dai Viet

\(^{30}\) Interview with Dr. Tran Thuy Anh at the Faculty of Tourism of The University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 9:30am

\(^{31}\) Duara questions periodization as a means of linear revisionism, and also as a problem of causation history where “strategies of periodization may validate territory….conception of causation reduces historical happenings to a certain space of the present, how different conceptions and valuations of time are hierarchized in history.” (Duara, p.112) See Duara, *Why is History Antitheoretical?*
culture and (4) Modern Society (notice how these four fit perfectly with the linear history conception I have discussed before). Dr. Thuy Anh explained that tourism is not a history department, but history is very important to understanding the basics of Vietnamese culture, and this is very important for students who wish to become tour guides. Therefore in the first class students discuss theory of culture, and also in comparison with other cultures (Southeast Asia, India, China, and even Western Culture) in order to be able to exchange culture- the function of tourism.32 “This activity [“periodization” as I am terming it] conveys the long history that students should understand, and the theme of “agricultural identity” that is the most fundamental aspect of national identity.”33 This diagramming feature is very effective in mapping students’ “philosophical” understanding of history for as Duara states, “Every division of time into a period implies a philosophy of history behind it,” (Duara, 1998, p.112)34 It should also be noted that Dr. Thuy Anh’s father was one of the most famous cultural historians of Vietnam, and Dr. Thuy Anh is following in his footsteps. As students shared with me her classes are some of the favorites in this department.35

Before presenting the (b) function of historical narrative presentations (the “national characteristics”)—for this is the ultimate purpose in national history linearization—I would like to refer to Taylor and Pelley in a discussion of history revisionism for understanding how some of these narratives may be fabricated, or at least reductionally problematic.

Keith Taylor, in Surface Orientations in Vietnam: beyond histories of nation and region, suggests that the typical surface orientations of Vietnamese history should be questioned and regionalized and re-regionalized. For “the surface of fluid human experience in time and terrain which softens and fables the coherencies of historicized regions and nations,” (Taylor, 1998, p. 952).36 In his research, he sets out to present a series of alternative Vietnamese histories often not presented. He does this by selecting five surface orientations of time and five surface orientations of place, and then finally suggests that even these are configured, artificial, and

32 Interview with Dr. Tran Thuy Anh at the Faculty of Tourism of The University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 9:30am
33 Interview with Dr. Tran Thuy Anh at the Faculty of Tourism of The University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 9:30am
34 See Duara, Why is History Antitheoretical? p. 112
35 Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
The Scholarship of Vietnameseness

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hermeneutical—only serving a frame of discussion in order to ultimately present fluid narratives those themselves may be questioned. He counters common Vietnamese historical events by choosing six military conflicts (which choice we may assume corresponds to Vietnamese history being a “history of war”) and discussing alternative viewpoints surrounding these conflicts and surface orientations. I would like to take one of these alternative interpretations for the purpose of our discussion: the assumed spread of traditional culture from North to South.

Taylor’s fifth “military conflict” of discussion is that of the conquests of Nguyen Anh Gia Long and a spatial orientation of Nam Bo (namely the “south” and present day Mekong Delta). As he states, Nam Bo is often seen as less Vietnamese in discourses, national origins, and authenticity and tradition. Nguyen Anh’s power center was in Nam Bo, and he conquered northward from this spatial orientation. Nguyen Anh’s ascendancy, as a human experience of Nam Bo Vietnameseness, shifted centers from Bangkok, to Sai Gon, to all over. Nguyen Anh actually used a tool of “entourage politics” in which multiple foreign aids were used in his conquest of “Vietnamese territory” to the north. Nguyen Anh essentially went north to conquer lands inhabited by Vietnamese speakers assembling a kingdom of 19th century and taking a royal style of Gia Long (southern influence). It was Nguyen Anh of Gia Long who decided to move the capital back to Hue, and Nguyen Anh that unified enough territory to establish the kingdom. This “kingdom” became the renowned “Nguyen Dynasty,” often considered the final frontier of North to South expansion and unification toward a Vietnamese state, since the following Nguyen successors often came from Northern territory and the seat of the kingdom was in Hue. However, Nguyen Anh was from the south, from Nam Bo. Taylor’s research suggests there is reason to believe that the “Nguyen Dynasty’s” unification came from a largely southern source. And furthermore, from a south which he suggests was not solidified in terrain, but fluid and influenced by many ethnic groups and foreign sources. Li, Tana, a fellow Vietnamese historian, also supports this premise suggesting a reorientation of all of Vietnamese history on this one basic reversion: a reversion of the North to South march to a South to North

37 See pps. 965-969 of Taylor, K. W. Surface Orientations in Vietnam for an overview of the Nguyen Anh Gia Long and discussion of Nam Bo as a space surface
38 See p. 967 of Taylor, K.W. Surface Orientations in Vietnam
39 See 3rd paragraph of p. 967 of Taylor, K., Surface Orientations in Vietnam for overview of “entourage politics”
40 See p. 969 of Taylor, K. W. Surface Orientations in Vietnam
41 See pps. 967-969 of Taylor, K.W. Surface Orientations in Vietnam
The implications of such a reversion are massive in terms of Vietnamese national conceptualization, and do not correspond to the agendas of a governmental and national imagination: an imagination that requires a cultural center in the north, and a progressive takeover of a centralized state oriented in the red river delta. A North to South interpretation is an important cultural formation for belief in a linear history—it is more convenient to retain the linear national unification message. However, Taylor suggests, that the regional and human experience historical narratives of Vietnam are so fundamentally non-linear, that even a reversion of the North to South march cannot completely recover history linearization’s fabrications—the regional differences are too vast, and alternative histories too complicated. For as Taylor states, “There is no pan-Vietnamese village morphology, family system, pattern of religious practice, or model of material economy to provide the convenience of hierarchy defined as Vietnamese, but from place to place can be found many varieties of these, undergoing constant change…following the arbitrary turns of human experience,” (Taylor, 1998, p.971).

Patricia Pelley suggests in her recent work, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, that Vietnamese national historians have presented new renditions of the past as a fundamental activity of decolonization. As the present demands of national unification (and communist unification for that matter) beg for consistent historical messages that are fundamentally anti-colonial and anti-French, history has been rewritten and re-presented since 1975 over and over. Pelley’s book sets out to clarify these revisions. Her work is based on two basic assumptions (1) “new renditions of the past are essential in the process of decolonization: Vietnam’s unique historiography made this especially the case” (Pelley, 2002, p.236). 44 and (2) “Because Vietnamese declared independence following decades of anti-colonial struggle, a revolution, and nine years of military conflict to resist re-colonization, the new histories had to be fundamentally anti French cultural legacies (like a cleansing)” (Pelley, 2002, p.235). Pelley traces a series of revisions which as she terms “construct history”, focusing on cultural production of these narratives in the

44This “special case” included demands of (a) each dynasty having its own historical corpse (b) France added its own narratives (c) Franco Vietnamese added more and (d) the historical cannon that was inherited by 1945 revolutionaries demanded to be rewritten, (Pelley, 2002, p.235), *Postcolonial Vietnam*
45See p. 235 of Pelley’s epilogue in *Postcolonial Vietnam* for more in depth overview of these assumptions, direct quotes from p. 235
46See first chapter heading of Pelley
North. She claims in her epilogue that the work took her thirty years to complete, since “One thing is clear: representations of the national past had to correspond with the political and intellectual exigencies of post revolutionary and postcolonial times, and they were constantly in flux. The fluidity of the present, in other words, continually imposed new requirements on the past (Pelley, 2002, p.238).” This demand of the present to legitimize the past is ultimately our concern in national linearization of history in education.

As I stated before, the “(b)” second purpose of narrative mapping is to portray “national characteristics and messages.” Again and again the “characteristics of Vietnamese people” expressed to me by students were “high patriotism, strong and determined, adaptable, hard working, friendly, and peace loving.” Students drew these characteristics largely from the evidence of their “long history.” For high patriotism, high nationalism (which we will examine, in the end are not the same thing to these students) is shown in the constant linear struggle toward independence. Strength is shown in the years of war. Adaptability shown in Vietnamese culture’s ability to make foreign traditions their own (for as one International Relations graduate remarked: all traditions brought from foreign powers from Confucianism to Buddhism were “Vietnamized”). Hard-working heralds back to the long traditions of agriculture and struggle in “feudal regimes.” And friendly and peace loving are drawn mainly on the recent cultural trends that students observe- their present legitimizing their past.

This is not to say that Vietnamese students are completely uncritical of their history or somehow passive (for these narrative characterizations are patterns of all national imaginings). Most of the students I have interviewed are very bright and focused, and seem to even be itching at a more self critical interpretation of these narratives. As one Foreign Trade major in Ho Chi Minh City remarked, “One interesting fact is that people know more clearly Chinese history more than Vietnamese history, because of how it is taught. We forget after history class. History class talks all about victory of Vietnam, it doesn’t talk about loss. In school we learn only the positive side of Vietnamese history. I think this is a big weak point in education in Vietnam,” she said. She said that history class is mostly textual memorization in high school, without much

47 As she articulates in her introduction, most of her research is done on cultural production in the North by Northern historians, (Pellye, p.6).
49 Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
discussion in class and she didn’t think it was good. An International Relations undergraduate from Ho Chi Minh City also claimed, in regarding traditional culture moving from North to South, that “this is half true, half not.” Sparks of the criticism do seem to be rising. And as Professor Nguyen Hai Ke of the Faculty of History at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi expressed, “in the past when Vietnamese history was taught teachers would teach only that Vietnamese people are very brave and that the country was beautiful and had good resources. Today they are adding other elements such as the fact that Vietnamese people have always been poor.” He claimed that to completely misconceive history was different than to not fully understand history. When one does not fully understand we must add knowledge to this history, and conferences are currently being held in Vietnam to do just that.

Perhaps more analytical, more “theoretical” (dare we say it Duara?) history is to come for Vietnam, and perhaps students will demand it. However, one thing remains clear- if Pelley is correct- the present demands a legitimization of the past, and the current present of Vietnam is the birth of national unification and recent national success. It seems that legitimization of the past will be more important than ever. As my research has shown, for now history remains a fundamental tool of periodization and linearization in order to characterize a Vietnamese identity and “imagination” of national community which asserts the comforting knowledge expressed by an Information Technology student that “I know one thing, in all history and regions, all Vietnamese people love their country.” The high nationalism supposedly wide spread in Vietnam’s Long History is an essential characteristic of the education discourse.

The Cultural Shapes of Vietnameseness

“Memory and the nation have a peculiar synergy. Even when other identities compete with or supplant the national in postmodernity, they draw on the expanded role for memory generated in a crucible of nation-state....

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50 Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, 6:00pm
51 Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, 6:00pm
52 Interview with Dr. Nguyen Hai Ke, Faculty of History at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 23, 2006 9:00am
53 Interview with Information Technology 3rd year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm
Where premodern societies lived with the continuous past, contemporary societies have separated memory from the continuity of social reproduction; memory in now a matter of explicit signs, not of implicit meanings.”—Jeffrey Olick, Memory and the Nation

The next task for tracing the national discourse in education is to seek the, as I term them, “cultural shapes” generally accepted by students to define their identity. In Jeffrey Olick’s Memory and the Nation, Olick presents the importance of the role of memory in nation creation as well as national identity creation. Olick presents Pierre Nora’s memory-nation nexus where the memory nation and its ascendancy rely on historical narratives to provide continuity of identity. The nation is wholly formulated on “sites of memory” and “traces of memory” to provide the social cohesion necessary to a unitary nation. Where Olick focuses primarily on “memory” in the function of constructing historical narratives (as I have already presented), I would argue that memory serves as a powerful force to formulate cultural shapes upon which national image is constructed. I define “cultural shape” broadly and with much agency to define all cultural markers that individuals construct the “image” of their nation upon. These “cultural artifacts” become telling images that become remembered by all individuals of society in order to conceptualize their “nation” through time and space. The role of cultural shapes is crucial for remembering national history through time, and understanding cultural space in terms of past and present. Cultural shapes make it possible to “think the nation” on a conscious level.

In order to explore this question, in my interviews I began with a broad exploration by asking students what were the instant images that came to mind when I said the words “Vietnamese Identity” or “Vietnamese national identity.” What was it that these terms meant to them? Interestingly, I received much of the same “cultural shapes” from North to South.

A summary list of the most common images given are as follows: “ao dai” (the supposed traditional dress that has continued throughout much of “Vietnamese history), the “S” shape of Vietnam’s territory, water and agriculture, family and friends: the importance of family, foods

54 See Olick, J. Introduction: Memory and the Nation p. 379 for these memory construction explanations, and an overview of Nora’s memory-nation nexus. Nora suggests even beyond historical narratives as tangible sources of memory, the nation is now becoming even somewhat of a memory trace.

such as pho, Uncle Ho, the flag, people that are friendly, hard working, and peaceful, the long history and remnants of war, coffee, “flexibility like water” and “flexibility like bamboo,” farmers and conical hats, motorbikes, rice, education, and high patriotism. These “cultural shapes” were often presented to me in passionate tone and image descriptions such as “thinking of farmers in the rice fields wearing their conical hats,” etc... And as one IT student in Ho Chi Minh City explained (when I questioned how he had come upon these images throughout his lifetime) he said “I guess it has been through school and mass media, like newspapers and TV.” Therefore, “education” as a platform for cultural shape creation is an appropriate study.

Before discussing these shapes, however, it is important to first make a caveat distinction between “nation” and “culture.” I am not questioning these cultural shapes (or even historical narratives) as valid and entities and true aspects of “Vietnamese” (or people living in an area termed Vietnam) culture, and whether or not these shapes have been internalized as true aspects of cultural psyche. “Cultural Imagination” is not the subject of this study and is a different discussion. What I am interested in is the use of these cultural shapes for national imagination. These shapes are used for national imagination via the construction of (a) national memory (b) national distinction and (c) regional reductionism (which will lead us into the third aspect of our educational discourse discussion “binaries and regional reductionism”). Essentially, cultural shapes are fundamental national tools for creating a sense of unity tied to a national character. These transcendent almost omniscient shapes are absolutely vital for creating a sense of cohesion, and a national identity that an individual can process and articulate to a “foreigner” for example—as will be discussed. Therefore, I will now discuss how these cultural shapes were presented to me as functioning in the three processes described above.

(a) National Memory: When cultural shapes function as tools for processing the linearization of national history, they become social cohesion tools of national memory. Cultural shapes such as Uncle Ho, the flag, the “S” shape of Vietnam, remnants of war, and consistent high patriotism fall under this category. Even such aspects as the agricultural identity, family and friends, and the national characteristics such as “hard working” might fall under this.

56 Information drawn from: (A) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm; (B) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006; (C) Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006
57 Interview with Information Technology 3rd year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm
category. For these cultural shapes function as tangible cultural artifacts which speak to a unified history. As Anderson states: “As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of forgetting the experience of this continuity-product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century-engenders the need for a narrative of ‘identity’” (Anderson, 1983, p. 205). Anderson describes how an individual “remembers” a continuous past childhood that connects to the present through the aid of cultural artifacts: photos, souvenirs, journal entries, old toys, and stories told to you by your parents for example. Someone does not simply “remember” their childhood without the aid of these “cultural shapes” as we may term them. It is the same for nations. Cultural shapes such as flags, and “S” shaped continuities help individuals to remember their nation.  

The students who presented the images of Uncle Ho and the flag as essential to their understanding (it should be noted more students in Hanoi expressed this sensibility than in Ho Chi Minh City), described these images to remain consistent through their educational and cultural life. They are images in every classroom, and images that represent the independent end to thousands of year of “Vietnamese struggle against foreign invasion.” The “S” shape of Vietnam has become a continuous conceptual shape for understanding Vietnamese history’s evolution toward independence. The “S” shape remains the students’ imagified understanding of modern independent Vietnam: and therefore the “S” has become a sort of omniscient goal that was always within the psyche of Vietnamese nationalists- a territorial shape that rightly belonged to Vietnamese and that which they always attempted to reach. All national imaginations use territorial shapes in this way: shapes that which were always on the horizon and that which the revolutionaries, nationalists were always trying to achieve: whether modern America, modern India, or modern Europe- territorial shapes serve the purpose of national memory. As the

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58 See p.205 of Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Ideas taken from Anderson’s description of the person acquiring historical memory through artifacts such as photos, as he himself has done to recover his childhood.

59 Many students articulated cultural shapes historically with this phrase, the long history of the “Vietnamese struggle against foreign invasion.” Information drawn from (A) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm ; (B) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 ; (C) Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006
students of faculty of International Relations in Hanoi explained, “years and years of invasion, but then finally the territory became Vietnam with its modern “S” shape, and modern name.”

National “people” characteristics become essential for “remembering nation” in terms of processing how history has come to connect to a current national culture determining individual behavior. Students claimed that “you can see in Vietnam’s long history” always the same characteristics of Vietnamese people: hard working (since Vietnam’s history is that of agriculture, high labor, and much poverty), strong and highly patriotic (for Vietnam has always struggled against foreign invasion and foreign dominance, Vietnam has always wanted independence students say) and friendly and peace loving (interestingly these are characteristics that students say they feel are exemplified now yet they connect them, without reservation, to consistent ancient characteristics. The central role of family, (and values such as filial piety) was a cultural them expressed by every student interviewed. This family role can be traced back to periods of Confucianism through periodization and linearization, and therefore becomes articulated as a consistently Vietnamese characteristic. It should be noted that such cultural artifacts as literature, such as The Tale of Kieu, help to propagate these characteristics in education. The cultural shapes of people characteristics are important to all three national imagination functions (and so will be discussed again in national distinction and regional reductionism).

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60 Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
61 Information drawn from (A) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm ; (B) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 ; (C) Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, (D) Interview with Information Technology 3rd year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm ; (E) Interview with Foreign Trade University group interview, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm
62 Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
63 Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
64 The Tale of Kieu is a literature work read in high school in all regions of Vietnamese education. (expressed to be by educators at the USSH in Hanoi). Dr. Duong Ngoc Dung of USSH in Ho Chi Minh City, however, expressed how education utilizes the famous work for the purpose of expressing the value of “filial piety” as essential to Vietnamese character, when in fact this may be an incorrect reading of the work. Dung’s belief is that the work is actually an expression of “talent and destiny” and is related more wholly to the common man in Vietnamese experience than to an instructional manner on filial piety (Lecture by Dr. Duong Ngoc Dung on “The Tale of Kieu,” USSH Ho Chi Minh City, November, 2006)
Two phrases related to a Vietnamese characteristic of “adaptability” were presented to me by students in the North and South. “Flexible Like Water” and “Flexible like Bamboo” (it should be noted that it was a Hanoian International Relations undergraduate that phrased it “flexible like Water” and a Ho Chi Minh International Relations undergraduate that expressed “flexible like bamboo”). “Flexible like Water,” according to one student, is a phrase that is used to express the centrality of agriculture and water to Vietnamese culture, but is also a phrase used in education, books, cultural discussions and commentaries, and conferences. “It’s very famous in Vietnam, it’s like a character of Vietnamese culture: flexibility. It’s in every single work, every single work,” he said. Since Vietnam is an agricultural nation in “the long history,” the importance of water is that the river, the lake, all helps agricultural production. And water is flexible; it flows as do Vietnamese people”. When investigating further what was meant by this “flexibility” the students explained that Vietnamese people are inherently “adaptable” meaning that so many foreign cultural forces have penetrated their country, but Vietnamese people adapt each cultural force to their own “adaptation”. As the student explained, Confucianism, Buddhism and even the feudal systems were “vietnamized.” Dr. Nguyen Hai Ke on this subject discussed that it’s the ability to adapt to new environments that is the national identity: the ability of Vietnamese people to adapt to special situations. For this is what they have done in the past with struggles against environment, foreign powers, and poverty. And with the WTO/APEC modernization, he believes young people can do the same: that they have already adapted to this modernity. “So obviously the national identity has transcended” he said.

Therefore it can be concluded that these cultural shapes of images and character serve to form a “national memory” of “national identity” tied to history which shows an adaptable, flexible, hard working, patriotic Vietnamese people, struggling toward the “S” shaped independence now being lived out by the current generations in the age of modernization. These cultural shapes serve to form a national identity that is “transcendent.” (according to Dr. Nguyen Hai Ke).

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65 Graduate student articulated this “flexibility” as essential to most social theory taught and read in his education, Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
66 Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
67 Interview with Dr. Nguyen Hai Ke, Faculty of History at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 23, 2006 9:00am
(b) National Distinction: When I asked this image/cultural shape question of students, students often phrased their answers in terms of “when I describe my Vietnamese identity to foreigners” or “When I am abroad and someone asks me what it means to be Vietnamese,” or I always “tell tourists about.” I often would get this response, even if I did not term the question as “what would you tell foreigners about Vietnamese identity.” Granted, I am a foreigner, and we should take this qualitative reality with consideration. However, in the recent rapid globalization and modernization of Vietnamese culture, students articulated that they have thought more and more about their Vietnamese identity recently in the context of portraying “Vietnam” positively to people in other countries.

I would like to assert a proposed assumption here of the function of national identification and community identification in general: We adopt community identities for one of two purposes, based on situations for (1) similarity association or (2) contrast association. Either an individual (1) adopts a community identity in order to feel cultural association with a community group (in this case country) for belonging and processing of one’s own cultural placement in time and space. Or (2) adopts a community identity in order to feel disassociation with a community group or as a function of cultural distinction (for example if I assert these are elements that are unique to my cultural identity in virtue of the fact they are not part of another cultural identity).

Many students and educators in Vietnam suggested that much of the current national identity conception of late (with the recent global events taking place and influx in tourism—and therefore I found this to be especially the case with economics and tourism students) has taken place in the realm of this second purpose: contrast association.

As one Economics undergraduate at VNU in Hanoi articulated, “Maybe in everyday life it is difficult to explain I love my country, it is very difficult. That is until you meet foreigners. You go abroad and you realize how high your nationalism is. When I joined this program I traveled to many countries. And the thing that was most important to me was how I could bring a

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68 Information drawn from (A) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm ; (B) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 ; (C) Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, (D) Interview with Information Technology 3rd year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm (E) Interview with Foreign Trade University group interview, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm
peaceful beautiful image of Vietnam to people in other countries. So I prepare many things like the postcards of Vietnam: like students in ao dai. I am proud to introduce and explain daily life to them [foreigners]. When I go to Singapore and Malaysia and places like this I realize we are still a very poor country. So we all want to do our best to make people feel comfortable in Vietnam. Want to introduce famous places, famous tourist places for them to understand better Vietnam. Until Vietnamese go out and meet foreigners, they might not realize what their nationalism is."

This quote expresses a very common sentiment amongst students in both metropolises: the youth are anxious to express the validity and dynamism of their generation and of their country abroad. With the current economic successes and rapid globalization changes, they are anxious to assert the “beauty and peace” of their country. They are anxious to express how livable their nation and culture is in order to become more developed and accepted to the outside world. As a Masters student in the faculty of economics in Hanoi expressed, “In terms of national identity, if you don’t have anything to compare it with, you never think about national identity. Nationality was not so important before. What was important was to finish education, and get a good job. But then when we meet you for example we then start to think about it. Otherwise it’s a normal routine of a day. Vietnam just wants to make a country safe and peaceful, and then developed. When I meet foreigners it is important to me to say this is Vietnamese, and show Vietnamese people want to make friends, want foreigners to come. It is important to make friends with other countries for all of us” (we will return to these ideas later for the new eurocentrism of developed and developing). As Vietnam has self proclaimed, it has adapted a current economic policy in which its goal it to make friends with all nations in the world. In the recent months with APEC and entrance into the WTO, the necessity to assert a national identity and culture to foreign cultures has become even more important.

This assertion is accomplished via the feature of cultural shapes: through cultural images, tourism messages, and Vietnamese “characteristics” that are transcendent as consistent elements of national history and identity. These characteristics are currently being preached as Vietnamese people are all hard working, peace loving, friendly, and want to make friends. As a

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69 3rd year undergraduate Economics major, Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 3:00pm

70 Interview with Masters of Economics and Faculty of Economics department employee, Faculty of Economics, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

marketing undergraduate at the Foreign Trade University expressed, “When I go abroad I want to prove Vietnam is a developed country. We have joined the WTO, successfully organized APEC. Want to show that young people are dynamic. So want to show that Vietnam is a dynamic country. I have a hobby of making friends with people in other cultures so we can exchange cultures.” Students either wish in their national identity to express characteristics such as this “dynamism” or “peace loving” Vietnameseness- or they wish to express cultural shapes in the forms of images such as ao dai, conical hats, and agricultural identity. As the economics undergraduate expressed, she searches for postcards that represent these elements to show her friends in foreign countries.

Dr. Thuy Anh explained: these “cultural shapes” (as I am terming them) are very important for classes such as the Basics of Culture and the Basics of Tourism in the Faculty of Tourism at USSH in Hanoi. “To be a good tour guide we must teach these students about presentation of Vietnamese culture in everything with how they dress, to how they shape their presentations, to the food they serve. For example, the connection of water and the agricultural identity are the most characteristic of Vietnamese identity.” So nature is important, she said. So a tour guide needs to be able to plan a tour to link these aspects—for example do something connected to water. In the red river delta tour guides should use a wooden boat, not a machine. Vietnamese women tour guides should dress beautifully like a rice paddy: gentle but strong.

Using cultural shapes for mapping national distinction and portrayal of Vietnamese nationalism for other cultures is important for our last cultural shape function, and third element of educational discourse: regional reductionism. The philosophical agenda under the surface for this national distinction function is that there are “universal national” cultural shapes to express for the distinction. Vietnamese regions are so differing in culture and characteristics, (as Taylor suggests there is no “Pan-Vietnamese morphology” to express whatsoever), that this distinction process requires intense linearization and cultural shape education in order to accomplish such a unified belief amongst students.

(c) Regional Reductionism: The use of cultural shapes for characterizing a unified national identity that transcends the regions of Vietnam is perhaps the more important function in

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72 3rd year Marketing Undergraduate, Interview with Foreign Trade University Undergraduates (1st year-3rd year), Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm

73 Interview with Dr. Tran Thuy Anh at the Faculty of Tourism of The University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 9:30am
the national discourse. Most students interviewed in this study have never, in fact, traveled to
the other two regions of Vietnam (it should be noted that when I asked about “regions” the
widely accepted articulation of regions was of three: North, Middle and South—there are of
course other unofficial regions that operate within these forces, for example the “Mekong Delta”
in the south and the “highlands” in the middle74). Most students interviewed had barely
encountered that many “Vietnamese” individuals from the two opposite regions- and recognized
that there were many regional differences based in culture, geography, history, and lifestyle-even
in dialect or accent. However, all students were quite certain that all these regions still retained
“Vietnamese culture” and when I asked what this “Vietnamese culture” was that was so in
common, what was expressed were cultural shapes: ao dai, pho, fish sauce, Tet, water,
friendliness, motorbikes, peace loving, and “education” (for it is true that the education system in
the three regions retains largely the same educational curriculum and organization as will be
discussed in the institutionalization section).

As an International Relations graduate at USSH in Hanoi expressed, these are the things
that become in common “for example the importance of water. All Vietnamese people prefer
boiled foods and boiled meats. They prefer it because Vietnamese people like to eat all the stuff,
so it connects all the stuff in one bowl. But also, it is because of the water. Water has affected
every aspect of Vietnamese lives, like food. Everything comes back to the water and it shows
how in history things like how Vietnamese people have come together against floods.”75

Ao Dai was expressed most universally as a cultural shape that transcends all regions and
is so important for expressing ancient Vietnamese and current Vietnamese identity. (It should
also be noted that when I asked students when they thought ao dai originated the common
answer was about two to three centuries back. Ao Dai in its current form is in fact the invention
of 1930 culture in high Vietnamese society.76) Students in both the North and the South (which
the students admitted they could not actually be so sure about since they really had not met many
students from the opposite region) felt connected via this one simple thing: their Vietnameseness
which was composed of these cultural shapes, agricultural identities, and traditions and holidays.

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75 International Relations graduate, who discussed water as the most important characteristic to Vietnamese national
identity: Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
76 See “ao dai” history on www.wikipedia.org
It is through these things, as one IT undergraduate in Ho Chi Minh City expressed, “I know one thing, that all Vietnamese people love their country.”

We can therefore conclude that the vital importance of cultural shape creation and discourse is necessary for national imagination, and especially vital for educational discourse of nation for students to feel something that is Vietnamese and essential to their character. Cultural shapes serve to help students intuit their (a) national memory (b) national distinction and (c) regional similarities via expression of some “national unification” of cultural shapes. The next section shall focus on this last (c) function as an element of the third educational discourse medium: regional reductionism and the formation of tangible binaries.

The Unitary National Imagination: Regional Reductionism and the Formation of Binaries

The contested question of national identity, especially in Vietnam, is often answered with a mere replacement of national identity with regional identity. In attempts to recover authentic local culture and identity, some theorists propose to simply reduce identity to region.\(^77\) In Vietnam in fact, the three primary regions (and within them more sub-regions) retain such unique cultural factors that such a move seems perhaps more authentically grounded. Indeed students, and professors alike, express that regional differences in Vietnam as vast, and that it probably would be profitable for Vietnamese people to travel to other regions to understand these differences.\(^78\) However, Keith Taylor suggest that even this conversion would be misplaced “Vietnameseness.” He states, “I am interested in how the archive can be read to disperse the coherencies of Vietnamese histories as epistemological or hermeneutical categories, whether they be conceived as national histories or as regional histories. …Rather than simply opposing regional histories to a dominant national narrative, I believe that regional and national narratives are “configured.”” Again, Taylor is not interested in just merely replacing national narratives

\(^77\) Taylor discusses the problems of just shifting national narratives to regional narratives on p. 950 of *Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region*, as he states “Posing a regional identity does not erase or diminish the potency of a national identity but rather mimetically reinforces it in a schema of configuration” (Taylor, 1998 p. 950).

\(^78\) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006
with regional narratives for even these intuit imagination for completion. Instead, he proposes more branch-like epistemological or hermeneutical categories. However, even so, Taylor uses “artificial” regional explorations of alternative narratives of history, in order to show how these themselves violate a unified national history, and then in turn question the fabrications of these regional conceptions. 79 (This has already been discussed in more depth in “Is History Antitheoretical? Historical Narratives from North to South.”) Li Tana suggests such regional differences historically through two Dai Viets as opposed to one, both a Northern and Southern Dai Viet. 80 Students articulated such regional differences oriented in geography and custom that personhood characteristics of regions have formed: people in the North are more traditional, people in the Center are quieter and hard working, and people in the South are more open. 81 This is how students have grappled with regional differences, which as Taylor has suggests are so vast in Vietnam that there truly is no pan-Vietnamese national themes which can, with academic integrity, be expressed. 82 However, if regional differences in Vietnam are so vast, how is it that these students intellectualize “Vietnameseness” as national, and what are the implications of this imagination?

As already discussed, student primarily intellectualize this “Vietnameseness” via national history narratives and cultural shapes. However the implications of this intellectualization are the reductional qualities which eliminate alternative histories like Taylor’s and Li Tana’s, as well as subaltern histories and periphery cultural elements (this will be discussed more in depth concerning the “exclusive narratives’ problematic factors and orientation toward a new eurocentricism” in a later section). This orientation of unitary cultural shapes and histories that transcend regions eliminates regional differences that are important aspects of territorial culture, as well as structures the national narrative around an “S” shape oriented toward binaries.

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79 See p. 951 of Taylor’s Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond histories of nation and region for how his “surfaces” are ultimately also artificial
81 International Relations graduate in Hanoi who had just recently traveled to the south: Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
82 Again, see quote p. 971 of Taylor, K. Surface Orientations in Vietnam beyond histories of nation and region “There is no pan-Vietnamese village morphology, family system, pattern of religious practice, or model of material economy to provide the convenience of hierarchy defined as Vietnamese, but from place to place can be found many varieties of these, undergoing constant change…following the arbitrary turns of human experience.”
Binaries are essential tools in national and historical imagination, and are used in education for conceptualizing national “placement.” The problems of these binaries will be discussed more in a later section. However in all my interviews I have gathered that several primary binaries have emerged from these national unification narratives: North and South (as have been discussed before as the axis of “Vietnamese culture” spreading), the Sinocretic China and Vietnam axis, urban and rural, and West and East (before as a binary of colonialism, and then as national culture development, and currently as an axis of “developed and developing”). The problems of these binaries will be discussed, the purpose of this section is to understand how cultural shapes and historical narratives are used for “national unification” reductionism that obstructs regional differences, and ultimately frames a “nation” as open to such binaries.

Discourses of nation, “nation” that expresses a unitary “Vietnameseness,” leave the nation frame-worked for further “nation grouping categories” and hierarchical binaries. As Duara expresses in an essay, *The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism*, Japan utilized national Asian cultures as a tool of dominance by expressing the need for “Asian culture” or “Eastern Culture” to counter “Western European culture.” (In Vietnam when Japan dominated briefly, Japan was seen as a lesser of two evils when it came to France or Japan since Japan offered “Asia for the Asians,”84). Duara argues that “civilization discourse,” as tied to nationalism organized toward Pan-Asianism, ultimately bred “morality cultivating” societies, and “redemptive societies” and a nationalist historiography that was repugnant toward “social movements that refused to acknowledge allegiance to the nation-state.85 Subaltern Scholars argue that the dominance of Eurocentrism over “nation” as a concept has made postcolonial states subject to binaries such as Western and Eastern states, and furthermore Western and Eastern philosophy, or historiography.86 Therefore, with this framework structured, we can return to this problematic orientation. One thing is certain, that regional reductionism and cultural shapes—as used to articulate a unitary Vietnameseness nation—places postcolonial

83 The East/West binary problem is discussed in Subaltern Studies papers. See Prakash, G. (1994) *Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism*. The American Historical Review Vo. 99, No. 5
86 As Subaltern Studies scholar Gyan Prakash frames it “It is important to note that “Europe” or “The West” in Subaltern Studies refers to an imaginary though powerful entity created by a historical process that authorized it as the home of Reason, Progress, and Modernity.” (Prakash, p.1485). Also see pps 1480-1487 for various assertions of Eurocentric dominance in binaries including : History, Philosophy, Progress, and Civilization- all with capitals
Vietnam in a framework of a nation open to nation oriented binaries that students in Vietnam are well aware of.

**Institutionalization and Routinization: Educational Consistencies and Institutions**

This leads me to the last medium of educational national discourse: institutionalization. In *The Constitution of Society*, social theorist Dr. Anthony Giddens presents a set of theories on the nature of institutionalization and routinization of society via institutions. In establishment of consistent routines and ontological security, institutions function to solidify social identity formation. As Giddens puts it, Human agents may shape social institutions and groups through action, but these institutions in turn shape actions of the agents and often set boundaries in which to explore identity and choice of action.

We may extend this understanding to national discourse formation in education. Education in Vietnam is one of its most accepted achievements, and universal consistencies ranging from North to South. As one Economics undergraduate in Hanoi suggested, Vietnam surpasses all other Southeast Asian countries in education, and this is why it will surpass them eventually. Due to education’s widespread influence over the culture and future generations of Vietnam, as I have discussed before, education is a primary social instrument for shaping historical narratives and the cultural shapes of nation. Now that I have established the content of this narrative national imagination creation, the question is *how* education shapes this national imagination?

First education does so through the qualitative means that have been discussed: by creating a discourse of unitary historical narratives that are taught and memorized in all schools, by assigning texts that express these national values and cultural shapes (such as the *Tale of Kieu*) and by the some simple means as structuring education as more transmittal rather than

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87 See Giddens, A. (1986). *The Constitution of Society*. Polity Press Publications: Giddens presents an overview of a social theory of “structuration” which includes the shaping of the ontological security of the individual through institutional identity. Institutions accomplish this by a means of routinization and occupation of time and space and a dialectic that forms called a “duality of structure” where the individual and the institution simultaneously affect one another, shaping the individual’s social self consciousness. Giddens present a variety of original social theory terms, which as expressed above, include routinization, structuration, and ontological security

discussion oriented to merely circulate discourse of these cultural shapes. However, a third element of this discourse formation is through actual institutions which propagate the imagination of nation, and imagination of governmental communist nationalist ideology. These institutions, in a Giddens sense, shape collective imagination and action toward “national” imagination.

The two main institutions that I discovered for propagating nationalist ideals and government ideology in education are (a) government instituted youth organizations and (b) “good citizen” classes: a series of classes progressing from primary to university education which instruct on behavior, cultural values, and national organization.

(a) There are five primary government youth organizations in Vietnam: (1) The National Committee on Youth of Vietnam (2) The Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (3) The Vietnam Youth Federation (4) Vietnam National Union of Students (5) the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneer Organization and (6) The Vietnam Young Entrepreneurs Organization. The two primary organizations that hold the most influence over students and educational discourse are the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union and the Vietnam National Union of Students (aka Student Union). I interviewed student leaders from both organizations in order to determine the influence of the organizations on students’ national conceptions. The Student Union is more typical of a university setting, organizing social university events and community service projects for example. Most students are just automatically members of the student union and it is not so politicized. However, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union is the more prestigious of the two: that which selection is based on performance, and memberships of which is essential for securing a good job later on.

The official description of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union from the national website is as follows: “Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (HCYU) is a socio-political organization of Vietnamese youth. The HCYU was founded, led and trained by the Communist

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89 Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, 6:00pm
90 See http://www.doanthanhnien.org.vn/en/history/youthorg/youthorg_list for descriptions
91 Stated by International Relations (07) graduate in Hanoi, Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm. Information also gathered from: Interview with International Relations Student Union President, USSH Hanoi, Vietnam. November 23, 2006: 4:00pm
92 Interview with International Relations Youth Union President, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, December 8, 2006, 3:00pm
Party of Vietnam & President Ho Chi Minh. The HCYU’s members are progressive youths, striving for the Party’s ideal and goal of national independence and socialism, for the cause of rich people, strong country, just, democratic and civilized society.”93 The description speaks for itself in terms of national discourse. The values circulated in the Nationalist Youth Union are that of “national independence” “Socialism” and “democratic and civilized society” (the insertion of the word “democratic” here is interesting). Through social activities, prestige within all educational frameworks nationally throughout Vietnam, and student membership, it is clear that the HCYU seeks to create a national imagination that hinges on these values. The question is just how strong of a hold the union has on students’ conceptions.

As the Student President of the International Relations Department HCYU at USSH in Ho Chi Minh City described, “The Youth Union is a space for youth to grow up in the right way.” As many students have articulated to me, the Youth Union’s hold over student life is not so penetrating, and the union is not a source of just Communist ideology and politics. As the student president discussed, “We have clubs like the English club. And we put some philosophy in these, such as history of the Communist Party. But mostly we make youth slowly understand they live in a common community.94 They need to know what they should do, shouldn’t do. In my opinion things like the English club are more concerned with keeping students healthy and safe, and then just have some communist ideology. Also have like volunteer activities, like Green Summer.” Green Summer is a widely appreciated volunteer project where students during the summer break venture out to the poorer countryside to help build houses, and better the lifestyle of various villages. The student continued to describe how membership in the organization is received: current student leaders of the youth union, from primary school through university, watch out for other students of high performance educationally, socially, and morally. These students are then invited to join and learn how to be communist progressive youths themselves. “The Youth Union is a step to joining the Communist party. Memberships is voluntary, but you have to be a good person and student. At the end get a certification: So then you become a Communist Youth.” The Youth Union is not just concerned with Communist party ideology, however, as the student told me (as well as the former president of the same position at USSH in Hanoi). The Youth Union is much more concerned with just healthy lifestyles of the

93 See http://www.doanthanhnien.org.vn/en/history/youthorg/youthorg_list for quote
94 Notice this “common community” idea is the “imagination” I am interested in discovering
students and promotion of good activities, and then we incorporate the ideology into these. And he adds laughing, “You pretty much have to be in the Youth Union if you want to get any good job with the government.”

Most of the students I interviewed (for they were all excellent students) were members of the HCYU and expressed similar sentiments. Most students said they only were members for the outside activities and the opportunities in the future. The administrative qualities bored them, and they said the political communist ideology facets did not concern them as much. As an Information Technology student in Ho Chi Minh City expressed about the Youth Union’s influence on his cultural mentality, “I learned some about that in the youth union. But most of what I know about culture I learned in school or through mass media. The Youth Union is more political and I hate it. Politics is very ridiculous.”

Still, the Union still integrates this political ideology, and “national solidarity” strongly through these “outside activities.” Perhaps this is a more effective strategy, as all the students I interviewed that were members of the youth union just took the concept of “nation” for granted as implied in the organization- and national politics as its center. In fact, the disconnect presented by the IT students was echoed in many interviews (and as we shall see is a similar opinion as that of the good citizen classes). Many students laughed off the “Communist Political” aspects of the Youth Union claiming they were only members for the activity side of it. However, as the International Relations President explained to me, “we incorporate the ideology into the activities.” Although, he also mentioned that more discussion of democracy is being incorporated into the Youth Union. For “communism is not the same today as it was before. Communist youths are not the same. Communism is more open to democracy today.”

Still, communist or democratic, one ideology is universally propagated in these events and that is the idea of nation. The intense “nationalistic” “patriotic” fervor expressed to me by students (if not political fervor) suggested that nation is being considered a given in these youth union meetings as well as in education (after all the “student” organization is governmental). The

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95 All information drawn from: (A) Interview with International Relations Youth Union President, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, December 8, 2006, 3:00pm and (B) Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, 6:00pm

96 Interview with Information Technology 3rd year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm

97 Interview with International Relations Youth Union President, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, December 8, 2006, 3:00pm
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fact that “nation” is cloaked in community service projects and English club meetings, I believe, is more effective than explicit imagination creation- and institutions such as the HCYU are having an effect on this imagination (although the interesting political apathy expressed is something I will return to). For as the HCYU expresses, its function is to create “progressive youths, striving for the Party’s ideal and goal of national independence and socialism”\(^98\) and ultimately civilized society.\(^99\) Perhaps the mission statement should read, “for the Party’s ideal and goal of an imagination of national independence and socialism.” For this is its true function.

(b) **Good Citizen Classes:** Beginning in grade school, through high school, and up through university education there are a series of classes instituted in order to educate students on how to operate in “Vietnamese” society. These classes aim to provide a sense of Vietnamese culture, nationality, and behavior in order to formulate the future generations into good citizens.\(^100\) In primary school there is a class which teaches primarily behavior centered on such ideals as “filial piety” (one student thought the class might have been called “ethic city” but could not quite remember-interestingly all the students remembered the class but could not remember the name of the class).\(^101\) In high school the class transforms into a textual memorization, behavioral instruction, and cultural education class taken every semester that students are in school. Students described the classes with pain and universally stated that “Those were the classes I got the worst marks.”\(^102\) In high school the students said they learned everything from government organization, to traffic laws, to marriage laws. And everything was memorization, memorization, memorization, according to one student. At the university level the class transforms into 5 required classes that must be completed before graduating for every major: (1) Marxist Leninist Philosophy (2) Political Economy (3) History of Communist Party (4)

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\(^{99}\) See Duara’s implications of nations, especially in Asia, striving for “civilized society” in *The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism*: See “Part II. Asian Civilizations in Japan and China.” As Duara states, “The new civilizational discourse also entered through the same routes and brought with it the discource also entered through the same routes and brought with it the particular assumptions upon which it had been constructed or reconstructed in Japan, the geographical and environmental bases of civilizational differences, the role of linear progressive history, the binary construction, the synthesis formulation, and the redemptive character of Eastern civilization, among others.” (Duara, p. 113)

\(^{100}\) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm

\(^{101}\) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm

\(^{102}\) Information drawn from: (A) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm and (B) Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, 6:00pm
Ho Chi Minh ideology and (5) Scientific Socialism. When students described the classes they laughed about how much they hated them and were glad they had gotten them over with. Some version of the classes is taught no matter the region/city the university is placed in. And as one International Relations graduate explained, you have to take the final exams for all the classes again before you graduate. Even the Information Technology students at The International University in Ho Chi Minh City must take these classes—(these are their only classes taught in Vietnamese).  

These classes in creating dialogue of “nationhood” and “good citizen behavior,” and in virtue of the fact that the classes are held in all regions, are a powerful tool of national imagination formulation. The classes create discourse of nationhood in a one-way directional transmittal process. Students memorize texts in all the subjects, without much room for discussion, and supposedly are required to internalize the textual, cultural and national material they are given through memorization. Again, the fact that “nationhood” is taken for granted in these classes, and the fact that the classes are formulated in such a way as to merely color and characterize this “nationness,” propagates the national imagination that the government of Vietnam wishes to portray. This institutional function, along with government youth organizations, serves to “institutionalize and routinize” students into thinking of “nation” in a certain way—which includes national histories, cultural shapes, and political ideologies. This provides a powerful sense of Giddens oriented ontological security in “nationhood.” This ontological security, even if on a subconscious level, is a powerful solidification of national imagination.

Conclusion:

As my research indicates, education in Vietnam is providing a viable platform for the discourse of nation, nationess, and Vietnameseness. National imagination is fostered and

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103 (the international university in ho chi minh city of ho chi minh national university is the first university in Vietnam to hold all its classes in English- all classes for the 4 majors are held in English). Information from: Interview with Information Technology 3rd year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm

104 However, it is interesting that when I asked students what they thought of these classes and what they learned they took the question with much humor and groaned at the politicization of it all. This provides some hope of the self criticality potential of the youth as will be discussed as an ever evolving self and society dialectic at the end of this paper: Information drawn from all student interviews

formulated through the dialectic between society and self, via the medium of education. The educated students of Vietnam are the elite, and the future of Vietnam, and as I will examine, national imagination creation within the elite is the most powerful means for national solidification.\textsuperscript{106} Vietnamese Education creates this discourse and characterization of imagination through four main mediums (1) historical narratives revision and linearization in order to convey histories which legitimize the present of national unification, and provide characteristics of a “long history” of Vietnamese nationhood. (2) The creation and transmittal of cultural shapes in order to provide (a) national memory (b) national distinction and (c) regional reductionism. (3) The articulation of regional reductionism and national unification hinged on binaries and (4) through institutionalization in the establishment of “national” educational institutions and classes. As my research indicates, these efforts are in many ways successful for characterizing an imagination of nation for Vietnamese students. The rest of this paper will now discuss then what the implications are of this national imagination, and the four mediums used for its creation, as well as the problematic tensions of students not being aware that this national identity is imagined. The paper will end, however, with a discussion of the nature of Vietnamese students today, and how a more self critical future may be in sight, since after all Vietnamese culture is self proclaimed “flexible like water.”

**Part II. The Exclusivity of National Imagination: Subaltern Histories and Eurocentric Orientations**

In the 1980s a group of South Asian scholars\textsuperscript{107} came together to form a think tank and new field of Postcolonial Scholarship dedicated to recovering the history of a much ignored postcolonial subject: the subaltern. Subaltern Studies, as it is now termed, seeks to undo the standard of Eurocentric history, and to recover subaltern histories and narratives as they exist in

\textsuperscript{106} As Prakash explains in *Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism*, nationness, and therefore national history and discourse is often only spurred to imagination in the elites. This is why Subaltern Studies seeks the role of the subaltern in this conception. See pps. 1475-1480

\textsuperscript{107} The scholars include Ranajit Guha, C.A. Bayly, Gyan Prakash, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin, David Arnold, David Hardiman Sumit Sarkar, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyanendra Pandey, Gautam Bhadra, Susie Tharu, Ajay Skaria, Shail Mayaram, M.S.S Pandian
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The term “subaltern” was drawn largely from Antonio Gramsci’s writings and refers to: subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture. Essentially any individual that lies outside of the axis of center and majority: non-elites. Much of the research in Subaltern Studies has focused on postcolonial states in South Asia (primarily India) and how in postcolonial unification, “nationalism” history often normalizes history in its linearization and either ignores subaltern experiences, or only legitimizes them in terms of peasant rebellions or nationalist groups produced by the actions of the center.

As Gyan Prakash explains of Chatterjee’s (both subaltern studies scholars) arguments in The Nation and Its Fragments “Chatterjee sketches how the nation was first imagined in the cultural domain and then readied for political contest by an elite that normalized various subaltern aspirations for community and agency in the drive to create a modern nation-state” (Prakash, 1994, p. 1482). The ultimate concern in this normalizing and centering of history, which thereby excludes subaltern histories, is that History with a capital H becomes centered in Europe/The West. And the “Europe” or “the West” refers to an imaginary though powerful entity created by a historical process that authorized it as the home of Reason, Progress, and Modernity.” (Prakash, 1994, p.1485).

Essentially history linearization corresponding with national linearization marginalizes subaltern experiences that should also be included in these “national” histories, and also orients Postcolonial states toward an “imaginary” West where Reason, Progress, Modernity, and even History lie.

The relevance of these studies to my work is that “imagination” of national identity in postcolonial Vietnam creates subaltern exclusion in two ways (1) exclusion of minority Vietnamese experiences, and regional experiences and (2) Eurocentric subalternization of all Vietnamese people via an East/West binary which has become reformulated into “developed and developing, first world and third world nations.” Ultimately history linearization and cultural shape formation, as have been discussed, become inherently exclusive processes, and therefore

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108 Gyan Prakash states that “subalternity emerges between the folds of the discourse” on p. 1482 of Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism
109 See Prakash, p. 1477 for Antonio Gramsci’s definition of a “subaltern”
110 See how Ranajit Guha discusses this normalization of Subalterns in India into Gandhian nationalists, as how “elite nationalism rewrote history and hot its rewriting was directed at both contesting colonial rule and protecting its flanks from the subalterns.” P. 1481 of Prakash, G. Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism (Dec 1994)
The attempts to unify the “Nation-ness” of Vietnam requires the cost of ignoring the periphery that corresponds to that unitary linear portrayal.

Ethnic Minority Nationness, and Regional/Urban/Rural differences in Vietnam

The Ethnic Minority Subaltern

There are 54 ethnic groups in modern Vietnam. Of these ethnic groups, the majority ethnic group, “The Kinh,” represent 86 percent of the Vietnamese population. The group is believed to have originated in the North, with Chinese influence, and therefore the “Vietnamese” narratives that have been represented in my research and in all my interviews with students are really the experiences and narratives of “The Kinh” people.113 The other nearly 15 percent of “Vietnamese population” although considered “Vietnamese” via a passport, often live very different lifestyles than ‘mainstream’ Vietnamese culture and up until recently have not even been considered in historical accounts of the evolution of Vietnam.114

Most ethnic minorities live in isolated regions such as the Central Highlands, Northern Mountains or isolated Mekong delta regions. These groups usually live in extreme poverty, and everything from their style of dress, to their customs are different then what has been portrayed as “Vietnamese culture” by students.115 The poverty of these groups, as well as the often intense ethnic prejudices and inequalities, have spawned the Vietnamese government to institute a series of programs to try and aid the ethnic minority groups, particularly in education (some ethnic minority students may be allowed to pass the entrance exam with lower marks for example, or receive more financial aid from the government if accepted to a university-the numbers of ethnic minorities that make it to university level education however is still remarkably low).116

Recovering ethnic minority history, however, has proved very problematic. As of yet no book exists which covers the histories of all the ethnic groups in Vietnam, Dr. Nugyen Hai Ke said. “We’re trying to make one though.” In efforts to counter the dramatic inequalities that

113 Information drawn from (A) Interview with Dr. Nguyen Van Huy, Director of The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Hanoi, Vietnam. November, 23, 2006 2:00pm and (B) http://www.vme.org.vn/vietnam/
114 As stated by Dr. Nguyen Van Huy, Interview with Dr. Nguyen Van Huy, Director of The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Hanoi, Vietnam. November, 23, 2006 2:00pm
115 Interview with Dr. Nguyen Van Huy, Director of The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Hanoi, Vietnam. November, 23, 2006 2:00pm
116 Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 3:00pm
were only increasing in Vietnam, and in efforts to incorporate minority culture into the mainstream, the government approved a 1987 draft proposal for the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi as a means of preservation of ethnic minority culture. The museum opened in 1997. There were many motivations in the establishment, according to the museum’s Director Dr. Nguyen Van Huy, including “importance for the ethnic minorities who want understanding and respect, as well as the fact that there was cultural threat of loosing ethnic history.” VME is the only museum, or institution, dedicated solely to ethnic minority culture in Vietnam. However, the museum—to quote Dr. Nguyen Van Huy—is not a just a history museum. The museum is much more focused on contemporary life, the primary tasks of the researchers hired to construct the narratives of the museum are to collect objects from cultural contemporary life for example and to find these objects’ stories. The museum wants to represent the cultural customs of today of these minority groups, so that Vietnamese people and foreigners might better understand them, and then a “visitor can see a panorama of the whole picture of Vietnamese culture,” Dr. Nguyen Van Huy said. Ethnic minority history is very difficult to recover due to lacking sources, and lacking of prior efforts toward preservation.

As ethnic minority sites (such as Sa Pa)117 are becoming tourist attractions, for both foreigners and Vietnamese people, and the focus of representation of ethnic minority culture continues to remain that—merely minority culture, a beautiful anomaly to observe—one must question the dangers of exotification if more attention is not paid to these alternative histories, “subaltern histories” if you will, and their incorporation into the national narrative. One must question how such a low understanding of ethnic minority history affects “Vietnamese” people’s perception of these cultural elements presented in the VME and elsewhere.

The ethnic minority presence on university campuses is so low, that most students I interviewed about the subject would offer the response that they were sure there were ethnic minority students at their school, they just had just never met one.118 An IT undergraduate in Ho

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118 From : (A) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm ; (B) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 3:00pm ; (C) Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, 6:00pm (D) Interview with Foreign Trade University group interview, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm (E) Interview with Information Technology 3rd
Chi Minh City said that he “really only felt connected with the Kinh people, and maybe the Nunh,” just because those were the majority groups which he belonged to, and he just understood their customs and ways of life better. Some ethnic minority youths that I spoke with explained to me whole heartedly that they “were not Vietnamese” and that Vietnamese people did not consider them Vietnamese. As “Vietnamese History” remains dominantly that of the Kinh/Viet people and their “spread of traditional culture from North to South” (which we have already determined is in itself also an imagination), it cannot be helped that the ethnic minority experience, if not oppressed, will remain exotified as beautiful periphery. It can not be helped in the creation of “national imagination” which demands a dominant narrative for unification, a dominant narrative that is bound to be exclusive.

As one minority student articulated her experience at the university: she has received aid from the government, and succeeded very well in school in her special case- but for example many of her friends could not go to university even if they passed the entrance exam since they did not have enough financial aid to go. Her mother being from an ethnic group in the Northern mountains, and her father being from Hanoi, her life has involved much “balancing” of the two cultures. This “balancing” points to the indication that one group’s culture and history remains the “normalized” and dominant component, while the other remains the subaltern. As university students continue to “imagine nation” on an axis of only Kinh people, this imagination and history will continue to remain exclusive and ethnic minority histories will get lost in the “folds of the discourse.”

Regional Subalterns:

Again I would like to reference Keith Taylor’s perfect characterization of the regional differences in Vietnam: that there is no Pan-Vietnamese morphology, no regional continuities...
It is true that the cultural facets of each region and sub region of Vietnam are vast. When I questioned students of their impressions of these differences, often there would be a pause to try formulate what the response should be—for indeed many of the students had never traveled to any other regions or if at all only to the dominant tourist locations of the regions. To quote a Ho Chi Minh City IT undergraduate, “Ho Chi Minh City is like the border, and we never leave. One day if I make money I hope I can travel outside the city” (80% of his university is from Ho Chi Minh City).

Students often portrayed “regional differences” as windfall results of geography or climate, and the broad understanding of regional cultures was really all they said they were acquainted it with: The North being more traditional because this is where Vietnamese culture originated, The Central is hard working and quiet because they lead such hard lives and are very poor, the South is where people are more progressive and open minded, and wealthier. Some variations on food or clothing were also expressed. However, as one Economics Undergraduate in Hanoi stated (and most other students also expressed), “I know that we have regional differences, but what we have in common is that we are Vietnamese and love our country.”

When I questioned how students knew this if they had never traveled to these other regions, they were not always sure. But as the IT undergraduate said, “I guess I learned it in school, and through newspapers and stuff.”

The facts are however, that beyond the radical climactic differences of the three regions (The North has four seasons, the South has only the wet and dry; the Mekong Delta lies in the south whereas the mountains bordering China lie in the North, the Central has the coasts and highlands, in no way is there a climactic continuity to the country), each region (and especially the North/South division) has its own accent (and often minority groups within regions have their own dialects), and histories. The North to South march spread of traditional Kinh culture in no

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123 Interview with Information Technology 3rd year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm
124 Information from: (A) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm; (B) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 3:00pm
125 Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 3:00pm
126 Interview with Information Technology 3rd year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm
way represents the numerous alternative histories that lie between the folds in these regions. The majority of “state” history centers on Red River Delta articulations, but all three regions have their own ethnic groups with their own histories, have their own battles and military conflicts, their own dynasties and old empires (for example the “Champa” empire in the Center and “Khmer” in the Mekong), and all these histories and cultural differences culminate on a “beautiful confusion” (Taylor, 1998, p.974) of circular histories and cultural differences that become ignored on the “nation imagination axis.”

Students admitted to me that sometimes regional prejudices exist, and on university campuses students from the same regions tend to form groups and congregate only with one another. Students also admitted that they do not know all that much about other regions’ cultures and histories, but insisted that the differences were not that bad, and that all regions shared the same “Vietnamese experience,” and this they knew for sure. National imagination, by virtue of a territorial surface orientation that includes many regions and sub regions, in order to bear connection to culture, becomes inevitably exclusive and selective. As Duara has explained, in order to formulate history in any linear fashion—and especially with the nation—the philosophical agenda has to be determined, and from there history becomes just a picking and choosing selection process of which histories and cultural facets remain consistent with that philosophical agenda. For Vietnam, and its rush toward national unification and proving itself as a friendly, economically viable, and valid “nation,” there is no room for sifting in the

127 Interview with Dr. Nguyen Hai Ke, Faculty of History at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 23, 2006 9:00am; Also see Hy V. Luong. (2003). Introduction: Postwar Vietnamese Society: an overview of transformational dynamics. Postwar Vietnam. USA: Rowman & Littlefield for regional overviews
129 From (A) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 3:00pm ; (B) Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, 6:00pm
130 As articulated in each interview: (A) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm ; (B) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 3:00pm ; (C) Interview with International Relations 3rd year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, 6:00pm (D) Interview with Foreign Trade University group interview, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm (E) Interview with Information Technology 3rd year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm
periphery/subaltern narratives. The price for such an exclusive formulation is a sifting away of alternative human experiences into discounted “minority” experiences—bound to be lost from “national memory” eventually.

**The Need of a Surface of Here and Now for Ethnic and Regional Subalterns**

Some recognition of the exclusivity of the narratives are occurring, and efforts such as the VME in Hanoi are steps toward trying to incorporate more of the alternative histories into the national history. The “National History Museum of Vietnam” in Hanoi, as the VME Director Nguyen Van Huy explained, is just a general history museum, so it does not incorporate very much ethnic minority history. The “national history is focused on fights against colonial invaders and things like this,” but the VME is trying to help with this understanding. As Director Nguyen Van Huy explained, at the beginning of the exhibition when the museum was first opened they had panels where they would present time lines to show how ethnic groups also contributed to “the history of Vietnam.” He also explained that part of the museums job is to clarify an understanding of Vietnamese culture versus Viet culture (culture of the majority). The importance of asserting that ethnic minority cultures are also part of Vietnamese culture is essential.132

But the necessity to operate off the basis of a linear timeline that is Vietnamese national history, and to feel the need to legitimize ethnic minority history by showing how and where these histories fit into the preexisting linear model points to the true problem: exclusive linearization and normalization. The idea that solving the problem of exclusive national history lies in adding ethnic minority and regional history implies a preeminence and omniscience to the majority national timeline- which is in itself imagined. Taylor’s “surface orientation of time and space” are the real problems when it comes to authentic national imagination. An understanding that “Vietnam’s” history is not linear, and national imagination is constructed, allows for equal footing of all histories and subaltern experiences. As Taylor states, “My reading of the archive convinces me that human experience is ultimately episodic, not evolutionary, and that all histories, whatever the surface upon which are formed are equally discontinuous.” (Taylor, 1986,

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132 Interview with Dr. Nguyen Van Huy, Director of The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Hanoi, Vietnam. November, 23, 2006 2:00pm
Taylor ultimately proposes a focus of history toward a surface of here and now which is defined upon no linear experiences or binaries, but only the equally discontinuous human experiences of the collective. “All of these efforts to resist or critique national identities begin and end with efforts to represent or respond to the binary comprised of what enforces and what resists the nation, or of the binary of competition between a nation and other nations. I wish to dispel this fixation upon the nation and the binary relations it produces with the thought that all of these formulations of historical agency are contrived from the same random workings of human activity on the surface of time and place,” (Taylor, 1986 p.974). This quote perfectly orchestrates the discussion toward the final subaltern problem of this paper: the orientations of national imagination toward Eurocentric binaries, namely the current binary of developed versus developing “nation.”

Developed and Developing: The Eurocentric Binary

“Years ago I would feel depressed when I went abroad, for example I would go to Singapore and would only talk about how poor Vietnam was etc... Now this is changing. When I go abroad I want to prove Vietnam is a developed country. We have joined the WTO, successfully organized APEC. I want to show that young people are dynamic. I want to show that Vietnam is a dynamic country.”—Marketing Undergraduate, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City

If I were to pick one common theme to all my interviews and discussions with students, it would be talk of recent development, the WTO, and a phrasing of all political rhetoric in terms of developed versus developing countries. All the students I interviewed universally expressed to me that Vietnam is on its road to success, and that they are going to be the generation that

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helps Vietnam become a “developed” country.\textsuperscript{135} After the “long history” of poverty and hardship, Vietnam is finally getting what it has been working toward, and this generation is going to see it through.\textsuperscript{136} Granted, Vietnam entered the WTO during the two weeks preceding my research, and I was in Hanoi conducting interviews while APEC was being held and “developed” country leaders such as President George W. Bush and Prime Minister John Howard were walking Hoan Kiem lake—so the patriotic and political fervor was at an all time high. Still I could definitely feel the intense excitement in the students’ tone that was built on years of build up for postcolonial Vietnam’s nationhood to be given this validity.

As a MA student in the Faculty of Economic at VNU in Hanoi explained, “Many students go abroad to developed countries to observe how to develop Vietnam. Japan is often a choice because of its rapid development. Vietnamese people don’t worry so much about who in the past has made them hurt, they always look toward the future. Vietnam just wants to make the country safe and peaceful, and then developed.”\textsuperscript{137} He expressed to me how he wanted to go to a developed country, like America, to get his PHD because he wants to learn from the best, and then to return to help Vietnam develop further. An International Relations undergraduate in Ho Chi Minh City expressed some reserve about the rapid globalization, but explained how it was just something the country would have to work through for the sake of development, “I’m a little afraid that Vietnamese enterprises won’t be able to stand it. [globalization and current economic progress] Domestic enterprises might suffer. But we have to accept this if we want to become bigger and stronger. This is the characteristic of the Vietnamese people to be able to overcome obstacles. It just will take a long time.”\textsuperscript{138} On a survey that I gave to both students in Hanoi and in Ho Chi Minh City, from varying majors, I asked students to write out what they thought their role was for the future of Vietnam, as well as what they wanted to do when they graduated.

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotesubscript{135} As articulated in each interview: (A) Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm ; (B) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 3:00pm ; (C) Interview with International Relations 3\textsuperscript{rd} year undergraduates at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. November 30, 2006, 6:00pm (D) Interview with Foreign Trade University group interview, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm (E) Interview with Information Technology 3\textsuperscript{rd} year Undergraduates at International University - Ho Chi Minh City National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. December 5, 2006 6:00pm
\footnotesubscript{136} 3\textsuperscript{rd} year Marketing Undergraduate, Interview with Foreign Trade University Undergraduate group, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm
\footnotesubscript{137} Interview with Masters of Economics and Faculty of Economics department employee, Faculty of Economics, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam
\footnotesubscript{138} As stated by a 3\textsuperscript{rd} year International Relations undergraduate, Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
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Every single student listed something about wanting to help Vietnam become “more developed” and to develop towards further peace and prosperity.

The times are exciting for Vietnam, since Doi Moi’s establishment in 1986, Vietnam’s GDP has increased steadily (GDP grew from US$114 in 1990- to $414 in 2001). Poverty has gone down from 58 to 37 percent and there have been tremendous increases in FDI. The United States lifted the trade embargo in 1994, and Vietnam joined The Asia Pacific Economic Council (APEC) in 1995. Inflation was decreased from 775% in 1986 to 3.4% in 2000. And in November, 2006, Vietnam was allowed to enter the WTO. One can literally watch the rapid change on the streets in the urban areas, and one can feel the bustling excitement of Vietnam asserting itself into the world system. The recent economic and social successes Vietnam’s policies, and recent world integration, are not what I wish to question. I would like, however, to bring to attention the purpose of assertion and this orientation of rhetoric of developed and developing states that has become so commonplace in current global politics.

The world system has come to be termed an “International” system, the “United Nations” holds the seats of the most powerful (and not so powerful) forces on the globe, business has shifted toward “multinational” corporations, “international NGOs” are changing the playing field in terms of governmental power. The acceptance of “nations” as the fundamental political unit of entry for all cultural forces is clear. It is only natural then that as “postcolonial” territories broke free from previous dominating powers that they too became “nations” in order to assert their validity as autonomous political units—and to hopefully one day gain as much validity as the “Big States.”

As I have discussed before, the nation state is merely a political system developed during the enlightenment period by primarily European forces. “Nation-state” was a political concept of the west. However, the “West’s” dominance over global politics made it inevitable that the world system be built on the building blocks instituted by the West. Nation-ness is generally accepted to connote a degree of autonomy. We are told ‘nation’ is supposed to be the highest form of political order and organization, that which the world has been “evolving” too.

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141 Chatterjee, P. (1998) Beyond the Nation? Or Within? “Social Text” No. 56 : discusses how the “nation” has been held as a high form political order throughout the article
Current globalization is supposedly made possible by the easy exchange of cultures and goods across national boundaries. Alliances can now be made easily in the form of national alliances: the age of colonialism is supposedly over and free agent nations have finally found the political organization necessary for a true world system of free actors. However, the fact that “nation” is an imposed political concept, and “nationess” an imagined concept, are not commonly considered.

Postcolonial Criticism must consider the imposed and imagined aspects of nation, for nations in adopting such imagined conceptions inevitably set themselves up for the framework of nation oriented binaries. In becoming a “lesser” nation on the scale of Big to Little nations, postcolonial states become subject to a wide range of hierarchies: as Chakrabarty puts it in Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History, “the third world historian is condemned to knowing ‘Europe’ as the original home of the ‘modern’ whereas the ‘European historian does not share a comparable predicament with regard to the pasts of the majority of humankind” (Prakash, 1994, p. 1486). This idea of the “home of the modern” being seated in the West on this West to East binary continues to be relevant to present postcolonial nationality. Whereas before white mythology (a term used by Jacques Derrida in his work Margins of Philosophy) seated Reason, History, Progress (Derrida, as quoted by Prakash, 1994, p. 1486), and even “Civilization” in the West, now “Developed” and “The Future” sit in the west, as third world nations take it upon themselves to work toward this level of living. Colonialism is supposedly no longer existent; “nation-states” supposedly eliminated it as a viable force. However, whereas Colonialism created a previous axis of power of Western domination and Eastern subordinates, I cannot help but wonder if the new axis of power has become developed and developing nations.

The students I spoke to explained over and over the importance of progress, the importance of making “friends with other nations” and developing further. As one Foreign Trade undergraduate at the Foreign Trade University in Ho Chi Minh City explained hopefully, “In ten to twenty years I think Vietnam is going to surpass nations like Malaysia and Singapore,

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we’re on our way.” A Marketing undergraduate agreed with him, “Vietnam is a player, we have to learn the rules of the game so the WTO is the beginning. With the WTO we can create a win win result for the players.” Students expressed to me that their ultimate goal is to make Vietnam as developed as possible, hopefully one day as developed a nation as mine.

I do not bring these quotes and discussions of problematic binaries up in order to suggest that the nation-state political system be completely abandoned. I also do not wish to dilute the recent economic successes of Vietnam, or wish to suggest some reversal of development. The recent successes and goals of Vietnam’s recent policies seem to be promising and exciting for the future generations of the culture: already standards of living are better, and the students are looking far into their future, a future that because of recent globalization trends they view as more global, more multicultural, and more promising. Rather, I wish to suggest that in an uncritical acceptance of a national imagination, Vietnamese students and Vietnamese people as a whole allow for “uncritical” acceptance of new West to East binaries based on nations. I only wish to suggest that the force of the West to East binary is no way weakened by the appearance of Postcolonial nations, but perhaps it is even strengthened. These facts make it all the more important, as the scholars of Subaltern Studies would suggest, for postcolonial criticism to be concerned with recovery of authentic histories/reversal of linearization, and investigation of how individuals “imagine” their nationality in order to hopefully mitigate the “subalternization” of entire postcolonial states.

Part III. Flexible Like Water: the Future of the “Dynamic” Vietnamese Youth

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\(^{145}\) 3rd year Foreign Trade Undergraduate, Interview with Foreign Trade University undergraduate group, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm

\(^{146}\) 3rd year Marketing Undergraduate, Foreign Trade Undergraduate, Interview with Foreign Trade University undergraduate group, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm

\(^{147}\) Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 3:00pm
In this essay I have given an overview of how “nation” is in reality an imagined entity, a political system derived from the Eurocentric west that has been adopted as the highest form of political order, and therefore shapes imaginations and conceptions of cultural social identity. This national ‘imagination’ is true of all nations (and all communities for that matter) and is not unique to Vietnam. My study does not portray Vietnam (and Vietnamese students) as somehow more passively susceptible to these imaginations, rather my discussion of and research in Vietnam serves as a platform for discovering the implications of this imagination in postcolonial states in general. Education was the best medium to research this national imagination discourse, since as theorists such as Duara and Subaltern Studies researchers suggest, national imagination on the whole is spurred by creation of the imagination in elites. Also, education in Vietnam is its most powerful and universal force of discourse for future generations. My study merely aims to discover by what means students in Vietnam access national identity, and what the shapes of their imaginations are. Some of the problematic features of not being aware of the imagination quality of nation have just been presented, however this does not in any way invalidate the future of Vietnamese youth or the richness of Vietnamese culture. Although, culture may be a tool in thinking nation (as I have discussed) this does not mean that I suggest that “Vietnamese culture” is in some way fabricated on not deep and rich. It is in fact the very richness of this culture that demands a more critical understanding of its depth (although the abstractness of the term “culture” is also problematic). Linearizing and reducing alternative histories and cultural traditions/features to a simple territorial and political plane of “nation,” actually robs the authentic human experience surface orientations of history and culture. I merely wish to present the fact of nation being imagined, and how it is being imagined, in order for students to become critical of these facets as they themselves analyze their cultural and social placement in their culture and in the world.

Already, many of the students I interviewed suggested an itch toward more critical thinking of the subjects that I have presented. As quoted before, some students explained how history in school is only taught in a positive light and that discussion is not encouraged, and that this is a weak point in education. At a group panel interview of economics majors in Hanoi,

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149 Interview with Foreign Trade University undergraduate group, Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2, 2006, 6:00pm
students asked me about my opinion of national identity and “Americanness,” and were surprised at how openly critical I could be of the concept. As one student said in hushed tone, “We are not allowed here to criticize anything” (in reference to the communist nature of the Vietnamese government). Some obvious contradictions existed in my interview discussions, and students would become aware of them as they presented them. For example the cultural shapes of “peace loving” yet a “long history defined by war.” One International Relations graduate in Hanoi explained to me that there is a trend toward political apathy in the youth, and that she feels really actually most people she talks to are only beginning to pay attention to politics recently with all the current development events. So she felt political apathy might be beginning to characterize the youth. At her remark, the student sitting across from her laughed and remarked, so I guess we are contradicting ourselves then, “before we said the most characteristic feature of Vietnam was high nationalism. It is a very big question right now. I guess some people are saying the phrase “Peace has made us loose our nationalism.” Because for a 1000 years we were fighting against foreign invaders, and we had high nationalism, and now we have peace and we have nothing.”

A Foreign Trade undergraduate in Ho Chi Minh City was fairly critical of current events, and frustrated that much of the culture and students seemed to passively accept the ideas given to them. He explained that on the Internet there are sites where Vietnamese ex-pats discuss current events in Vietnam in very critical tone and that he reads them occasionally, although he doesn’t agree with them that everything should be changed. As he stated, “But if we really want to develop, everything: economics, politics needs to be examined. Not just culture. And we need some more democracy. Vietnamese people must be able to have ideas and feel they can speak them. People often have opinion s but are scared to speak them… I think this is characteristic of Vietnamese people in our long history: the characteristic of not really allowing the individual to demonstrate their ability/opinions. The bad side of all these strong family relationships, life, relatives, relationships between people is there is not too much confidence for individuals to challenge things.” He believes the future for these changes and more critical culture is in the youth.

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150 Interview with Economics Undergraduates (first year through third year) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 22, 2006 3:00pm

151 Stated by one International Relations (07) Graduate, Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
Overall, I was very impressed with the competence and eager quality of all the students I interviewed, and if the future of Vietnam is in their hands I can only hope that they will make the changes necessary to create a more informed and critical society, and globe. I along with them have a responsibility to inform others of the diversity of human experience in surface orientations. For the real strength in global community might be in understanding the non-linear, non-nation, individual experience. What might be the autonomous strength in agency over identity and understanding of others if students realize that such entities as nation are imagined? As one student phrased it, when I questioned about what students believe is the common national characteristics among Vietnamese regions, “there are so many Vietnamese conflicts outside and inside, majority and minority, southern and northern, and also the histories and influence of foreign forces were very different, so you say what is common? But I say, what makes so much contradiction?” His question is my question, and I can only be hopeful that he asked it. If “Vietnamese” people are, as they say, “flexible like water,” who knows to what critical and authentic frontiers and orientations these youth have potential to flow to.

Conclusion

Overall, this study has merely presented a question, a question of “What makes so much contradiction?” A question of: is nation actually the highest political order, or if it is in fact an Andersonian “imagined community.” The strategic use of education in Vietnam for shaping national conception suggests the latter. Nation is itself an arbitrary political system that which we have attributed omniscience as the evolutionary end of social systems, and the ‘natural’ cultural order. However, nationness and national identity are in fact imagined. As postcolonial states, such as Vietnam continue efforts toward postcolonial nationalism and unification, reductional means and linearization of history and cultural shapes will be necessary to communicate this unitary message. The costs of such linearization is marginalization of subaltern

152 Stated by same International Relations (07) Graduate, Interview with International Relations graduates (07), University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, Vietnam. November 20, 2006, 4:00pm
histories and cultural shapes, and an unauthentic linear national model which in turn is susceptible to nationally oriented binaries such as ‘East and West’ and ‘North and South.’ In creating an imagination of “nation” in postcolonial states, we must question if imagination of a hierarchy of Big to Little states, developed and developing states, is not also implied in the imagination.

Education is a platform for this national imagination creation, and is the primary means of national imagination creation in Vietnam. As presented, education creates this national imagination via four mediums (1) historical linearization (and in fact revisionism) and periodization (time mapping) (2) fostering of cultural shapes (3) reductionism of regions, and creation of binaries, and (4) through institutionalization and routinization via government instituted youth organizations and national ideology classes. As presented, it is through these means that students primarily gather their national memory and national distinction in order to “think” a Vietnamese nation. By fostering these mediums, Vietnameseness becomes a given to students spanning all regions and backgrounds.

Keith Taylor suggest a reorientation toward a historical surface of here and now, a surface that is not bound to surfaces of time and space and all unauthentic linearizations that time and space imply. By liberating our thinking of history and nationality from linearizations and reductions, the authentic human experience and cultural orientation might be made available for discovery.154 Benedict Anderson suggests simply an understanding of how we “imagine” nation, and how this imagination effects all other conceptions of cultural identity so that we might not accept the nation as omniscient, and the world system as built on inevitable national units. 155 Subaltern Studies presents a task of rescuing the histories of the subaltern from the fabrications of “nation” and “national history.”156

I have considered all of these suggestions in my study. I, however, am not suggesting a complete abandonment of the political nation in Vietnam, nor am I suggesting countering national unification and cultural appreciation of Vietnameseness for educated youth. Rather, I am simply suggesting a critical awareness that nation is imagined, and if students in Vietnam (and

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around the world) might become aware of the tools (as presented in this study) by which they “think”\footnote{Anderson, B. (1983), \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism} Verso Publishers.} the nation, only then may it actually become possible to “think beyond the nation.”
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