

David G. Marr & Christine P. White, Editors

POSTWAR VIETNAM:
DILEMMAS
IN SOCIALIST
DEVELOPMENT

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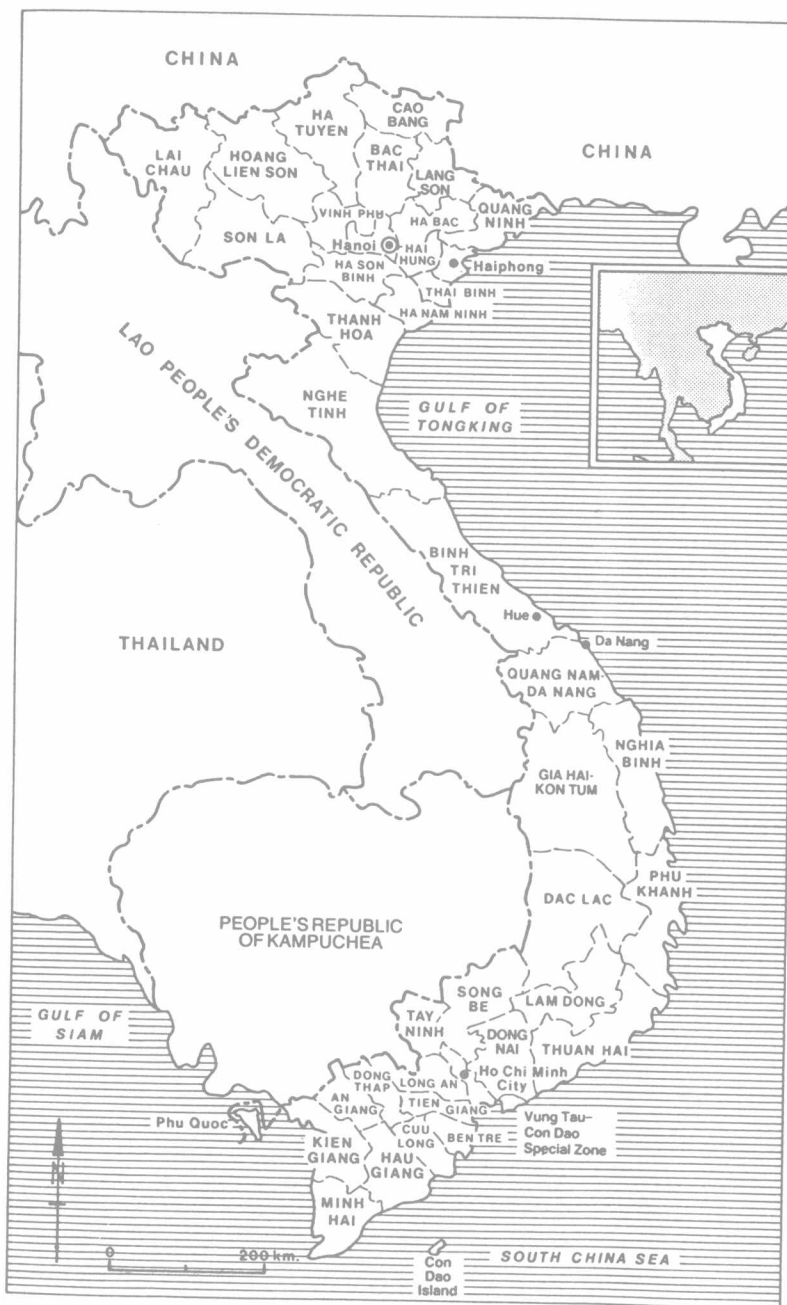
DEVELOPMENT

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and the
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ABBREVIATIONS

ACFOA	Australian Committee for Overseas Aid
AFP	Agence France Presse (Paris)
BUSCSCV	Bulletin of the US Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam
CIP	Commercial Import Program
CMEA	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
CMPC	Central Military Party Committee
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
ELE	Editions Langues Etrangères (Hanoi)
ESC	European Socialist Countries
FBIS-APA	Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report: Asia and Pacific (Washington)
FEER	Far Eastern Economic Review
FLPH	Foreign Languages Publishing House (Hanoi)
GPD	General Political Directorate
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRRI	International Rice Research Institute
JPRS	Joint Publications Research Service (Washington)
NCKT	Nghien Cuu Kinh Te [Economics Research] (Hanoi)
NEP	New Economic Policy
NEZ	New Economic Zone
OMPI	Organizacion Mundial de la Propiedad Intelectual [World Intellectual Property Organization]
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PNVN	Phu Nu Viet Nam [Women of Vietnam] (Hanoi)
QDND	Quan Doi Nhan Dan [People's Army] (Hanoi)
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SIDA	Swedish International Development Authority
SDSRV	Statistical Data of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
SWB/FE	Summary of World Broadcasts/Far East (BBC Monitoring Service)
TCCS	Tap Chi Cong San [Communist Journal] (Hanoi)
TCHDKH	Tap Chi Hoat Dong Khoa Hoc [Scientific Activities Journal]
TCNCKT	Tap Chi Nghien Cuu Kinh Te [Economic Research Journal]
TCQDND	Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan [People's Army Journal]
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities

VCP	Vietnam Communist Party
VHNT	Van Hoa Nghe Thuat [Art and Culture]
VDRN	Vietnam Documents and Research Notes (US Embassy, pre-1975 Saigon)
VNA	Vietnam News Agency (Hanoi)
VNC	Viet Nam Courier (Hanoi)
VSF	Vietnam State Bank
XHH	Xa Hoi Hoc [Sociological Review] (Hanoi)



Vietnam: provincial boundaries and principal cities

Postwar Vietnam

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	1

I. KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIETY

1) Tertiary Education, Research, and the Information Sciences in Vietnam	15
<i>David G. Marr</i>	
2) Learning for Life? Glimpses from a Vietnamese School	45
<i>Susanne Rubin</i>	
3) Women and Family Planning Policies in Postwar Vietnam	61
<i>Nguyen Huyen Chau</i>	

II. ECONOMIC POLICY AND REFORMS

4) Party Policies and Economic Performance: The Second and Third Five-Year Plans Examined	77
<i>Vo Nhan Tri</i>	
5) The Limits of Planning and the Case for Economic Reform	91
<i>Suzy Paine</i>	
6) Issues in Economic Unification: Overcoming the Legacy of Separation	95
<i>Melanie Beresford</i>	
7) State Finance in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam: The Difficult Transition from "State Bureaucratic Finance" to "Socialist Economic Accounting"	111
<i>Max Spoor</i>	
8) Alternative Approaches to the Socialist Transformation of Agriculture in Postwar Vietnam	133
<i>Christine Pelzer White</i>	
9) The Problem of the District in Vietnam's Development Policy	147
<i>Jayne Werner</i>	
10) Some Aspects of Cooperativization in the Mekong Delta	163
<i>Ngo Vinh Long</i>	

III. INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

- 11) The Regularization of Politics: Continuity and Change in the
Party's Central Committee, 1951-1986 177
Carlyle A. Thayer
- 12) The Military Construction of Socialism: Postwar Roles of the
People's Army of Vietnam 195
William S. Turley

IV. TRENDS IN AID AND TRADE

- 13) Results and Limits in CMEA-Vietnamese Trade Relations,
1975-1985 213
Anna Petrasovits
- 14) External Assistance in the Context of Vietnam's Development
Effort 225
Karl H. Englund

Chronology	233
Bibliography	239
List of Contributors	247

LIST OF TABLES AND DIAGRAMS

Map

Postwar Vietnam	Frontispiece
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Tables

2.1 Number of Instruction Hours/Week	49
6.1 Index of Output of Major Industrial Products 1957-1974	102
6.2 Growth Rates of Industrial Sectors (1970 constant prices)	110
7.1 State Budget SRV (1976-1984)	125
9.1 Model of the District Economic Structure	149
9.2 The Scale of Several Districts in 1977	153
9.3 The Structure of the Total Value of Products in a Number of Districts, 1977	154
11.1 Retention and Promotion Rates on the Central Committee	182
11.2 Sectoral Composition of the Central Committee, 1960-1986	187

Diagrams

1.1 Information Flow Chart (Nguyen Khac Vien)	40
1.2 Information Flow Chart (Author: David G. Marr)	41
2.1 One page from a Physics Textbook	53
11.1 Rate of Growth in the Size of Central Committee Membership by Status, 1951-1986	181
11.2 Composition of the Central Committee by Seniority, Promotion, and Membership Status	182
11.3 Generational Transition--The Passing of the 1951 Central Committee	185
11.4 Sectoral Composition of the 1982 Central Committee (Full Members)	186

Plates

Following page 60
Plate 1: A Lecture to Class 8G
Plates 2 and 3: Pupils in Class 8G

INTRODUCTION

David G. Marr and Christine Pelzer White

"The entire socialist world is in the midst of a theoretical crisis," Tran Bach Dang told one of the editors of this book in early 1988.¹ Veteran of thirty years of fighting the French and then the Americans, since 1975 one of Vietnam's most widely read communist authors, Mr Dang clearly was troubled that the ideology which had sustained him for so long did not seem to be providing answers to current problems. He acknowledged that there was no consensus on where to turn, what to do. The implications were more serious for Vietnam than for other socialist countries, as it faced serious food shortages, rampant inflation, administrative confusion, and continuing military threats from China. Furthermore, in the absence of normal diplomatic relations with the United States and a peaceful closure to the war which ended over thirteen years earlier, the leadership remained nervous about the intentions of its former adversary and no longer even claimed that it had won that war.²

The mood among Vietnam's communist leadership had been very different in late April 1975 as the Vietnam War came to an end. The seemingly impossible task which the Communist Party had set itself of resisting American high-technology military power had been accomplished. The country was free of foreign troops and foreign exploitation for the first time in 113 years. Three decades of death, destruction, and psychological trauma had been vindicated. Now, as Ho Chi Minh had imagined before he died, a peaceful Vietnam could rebuild itself ten times more beautiful. It seemed that success on the economic front would be swift and easy in comparison with the long struggle for national liberation and reunification which had just ended. As one Central Committee member told a Western correspondent, "Now nothing more can happen. The problems we have to face now are trifles compared to those of the past."³

On Tet 1976, Party Secretary Le Duan promised each family a radio set, refrigerator, and TV set within ten years.⁴ It was as if he expected the economy of newly reunified Vietnam miraculously to combine the (pre-airwar) industrial development of the north

¹ Interviewed by David Marr in Ho Chi Minh City, March 25, 1988.

² The SRV's Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach pointed out in an interview given to an American journalist that "Both countries [i.e. Vietnam and the United States] have been victims of war. There are no losers and no winners. . . . It is very uncomfortable to have enemies. If you have an enemy, you sleep with only one eye shut. It is the wish of the Vietnamese to have peace and friendship with the U.S." *USA Today*, June 10, 1988.

³ Tiziano Terzani, *Giai Phong! The Fall and Liberation of Saigon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 294.

⁴ *Nhan Dan* (Hanoi), February 2, 1976.

2 Postwar Vietnam

with the wartime American-created consumer society in the south. In December 1976 the Fourth Party Congress announced the aim of largely completing Vietnam's transformation from small-scale production to large-scale socialist production within about twenty years.⁵ Optimism reigned supreme. The triumphant leadership believed that these goals could be achieved via egalitarian, centrally planned socialism, bypassing the social inequalities of the capitalist development path.

History did not follow this projection. The planned leap into large-scale socialist production did not materialize; instead the country staggered from one economic crisis to another. What is the explanation for this disastrous record? As of 1975, the economic infrastructure of the country had advanced little since French colonization of Vietnam in the late nineteenth century. The productive base of the economy was still agriculture. French colonial "mise en valeur" of Indochina which began at the turn of the century had developed a modest railroad network and an export-oriented plantation economy but virtually no industry. The factories which had been built in the north with socialist-bloc aid between 1954 and 1964 had been destroyed or heavily damaged during the airwar, while the industrial sector near Saigon which had mushroomed in the early 1970s amounted to little more than an assembly of imported parts. Any gains from two decades of competing socialist and capitalist development in the north and south of divided Vietnam between 1954 and 1975 had been more than offset by the negative and distorting effects of war devastation and foreign aid dependency. Not only had industrialization not taken place, but the agricultural infrastructure of the economy had been gravely damaged: thousands of hectares of agricultural land had been poisoned by Agent Orange and other chemical agents, while former "free fire zones" were a hazard to clear due to unexploded ordnance, and continued to claim lives and limbs as farmers attempted to reclaim the land. Defoliation during the war of millions of square miles of forests left the land unprotected and vulnerable to flooding.⁶

A hundred years earlier, the country's administrative and non-productive population, supported by taxes and rent from agriculture, had been relatively small. The power of the central government to extract a surplus from the villages through taxation had been limited and contested. The socialist government was soon to discover that these fundamentals had not changed. However, in the intervening years the number of people who had come to expect to live off the government payroll rather than to engage in manual labor in production had mushroomed out of all proportion to the productive capacity of the country. The ideological fervor with which socialist and capitalist development respectively had been touted for two decades on either side of the seventeenth parallel, the dramatic increases in the number of educated people who expected white collar jobs, and the distorting effects of foreign aid had produced a revolution in rising expectations. The educational infrastructure of a much more developed country had been created which was out of proportion to the capacity of the economy to provide suitable jobs. No postwar government could have met popular demands and radically escalated needs without massive foreign assistance. In short, at the end of the war, the leadership not only expected to work miracles; miracles were expected of it by the population.

⁵ Communist Party of Viet Nam, *Fourth National Congress: Documents* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), p. 59.

⁶ Postwar Vietnam's attempts to rehabilitate its natural environment are summarized in Elizabeth Kemf, "The Re-Greening of Vietnam," *New Scientist*, No. 1618, June 23, 1988.

The first rude postwar shocks came when China and the Soviet Union reduced economic aid to Vietnam, and the United States refused to provide the three billion dollars of reconstruction assistance promised by President Nixon in 1973. Meanwhile, the abrupt end of American aid to the south divested the former members of the Saigon government, military, and police of employment which had been funded by American taxpayers' money rather than the Vietnamese economy. It also deprived the southern population, particularly the large middle class, of the foreign consumer goods to which they had grown accustomed during two decades of the American Commercial Import Program (CIP).⁷

In the initial postwar years the leadership tended to blame development problems on the war. This argument needs to be taken seriously. According to Vietnamese statistics, in the south alone the war produced 20,000 bomb craters, 10 million refugees, 362,000 war invalids, 1 million widows, 880,000 orphans, 250,000 drug addicts, 300,000 prostitutes, and 3 million unemployed; two-thirds of the villages were destroyed and 5 million hectares of forests destroyed.⁸ Not a promising start for attempting to build a socialist economy, or any economy.

However, the legacies of underdevelopment, foreign occupation, wartime destruction, foreign aid dependency, and high popular expectations were not the only problems facing the postwar government. Within the Communist Party itself many became increasingly aware that a large proportion of Vietnam's economic problems could not be blamed on colonialism, imperialism, or war, but were actually the result of counterproductive economic policies. Two broad tendencies emerged within the leadership. On one side were the orthodox, who wanted to consolidate the system instituted in the north since the late 1950s and expand it, barely modified, to the south. On the other side were the reformers, who felt that certain economic policies long considered the only socialist route to economic development needed to be jettisoned or changed. Core socialist policies--central planning, state price controls, priority to heavy industry, cooperativization as the vehicle for state procurement of agricultural produce, and egalitarian wage and distribution policies--were all increasingly called into question. This was due to the winds of ideological change blowing through socialist countries throughout the world, as well as the response to specific economic crises in Vietnam.

Until 1979 orthodoxy prevailed: it was assumed that the entire economy would be managed from Hanoi; heavy industry would receive investment priority, and the wartime "subsidy and procurement" system of cheap rations for state sector employees, subsidized consumer goods for peasants, and low prices for the products of agricultural cooperatives would be continued. In the newly liberated south, re-education camps would transform former ARVN officers and ex-Saigon government officials into faithful citizens, reactionary culture would be stamped out, capitalist entrepreneurs eliminated, and farmers in the fertile Mekong Delta organized rapidly into cooperatives which would provide a surplus to help feed the whole country and finance development. Not only did these policies of socialist transformation not work in the south, but a crisis in food procurement developed in the north as the peasants refused to continue levels of delivery to the state at prices which often did not even cover costs of production. During the war, peasants in cooperatives in the north had given up any rice surplus to the state at low prices to feed their sons and

⁷ On the development and political impact of the CIP see George McT. Kahin, *Intervention* (New York: Knopf, 1986), pp. 85-88.

⁸ *Vietnam Ten Years After* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1985), p.6.

4 *Postwar Vietnam*

husbands in the army; in exchange they had benefitted from the distribution of consumer goods, especially clothing, bicycles, and thermos flasks, provided by Chinese foreign aid. This key aspect of the "subsidy and procurement" system broke down after the end of the war when wartime moral and material incentives were no longer operative and Chinese commodity aid stopped. Crop losses in 1978, followed by the brief but destructive war with China in 1979, brought Vietnam to the brink of economic disaster.

In this context, the advocates of economic reform finally carried the day in top-level policy discussions. In September 1979 the historic Sixth Plenum of the Party Central Committee (Fourth Congress) opened the way for an expanded role for family-based production and economic exchange at market prices. The issue of the relative roles of "plan and market" was finally opened to discussion.⁹ The plenum resolution argued that socialist economic transformation must go through steps which could not be leapt over or ignored by revolutionary will. The unsuccessful attempt to control all economic decision making and transactions through central planning and state prices was attacked in terms which included an ideological challenge to the orthodox: "voluntarism is the enemy of Marxism-Leninism and of revolutionary science." The program of economic reforms was presented as based on the recognition of "objective laws" which the orthodox, in their "revolutionary ardor," preferred to ignore.¹⁰

Nonetheless, for two years these policy changes had very little practical impact, probably reflecting opposition as well as confusion within the Party at various levels. The proposed move in the direction of untying the unseen hand of the market and allowing direct producers more freedom in the disposition of the fruits of their labors threatened the role and power of lower-level cadres who spent their time communicating plan targets to peasants and workers and urging them to work hard to overfulfill the plan. Meanwhile, living conditions were becoming even more desperate for millions of citizens. It was in this context that Nguyen Khac Vien, head of Vietnam's Foreign Languages Publishing House, wrote a letter to the National Assembly severely criticizing the Party leadership. No one accepted responsibility for obvious errors, he complained, much less taking resolute corrective measures. Instead of mindless exhortation and bureaucratic obfuscation, Vietnam needed careful, critical analysis of its many difficulties. "A political orientation which is not based on a scientific analysis of society is like a building constructed without first testing the soil."¹¹

In 1981-1984 food output improved significantly, reflecting the hard work and long hours which farmers put into the soil, aware that any surplus could be sold on the open market. However, the authorities did not take advantage of this breathing space to expand production of crucial farm inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, fuel) and consumer goods, to reduce the dangerous government budget deficit, or to tackle continuing population growth. By 1985-1986, rampant inflation was making rational economic decision making impossible, while stories of corrupt cadre circulated everywhere. In contrast to 1975-1976, when most people expected the Party to take hold of postwar reconstruction and development in the same vigorous manner as the earlier fight against foreign invaders, in 1986 the

⁹ "Plan and Market" (editorial), *Nhan Dan*, October 22, 1979.

¹⁰ "Objective laws and revolutionary ardor" (editorial), *Nhan Dan*, October 13, 1979.

¹¹ Georges Boudarel, ed., *La bureaucratie au Vietnam* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1983), pp. 115-19. Dr. Vien's comments circulated widely, although the letter was not published inside Vietnam. He was not punished for his temerity, perhaps reflecting a 1981 shift of power back to the reformists.

majority of citizens had lost confidence in the existing leadership. Party legitimacy could no longer be taken for granted, but would need to be proven once again.

Personnel changes at the Sixth Party Congress in December 1986 represented another top-level attempt to grapple with intractable reality. The new secretary general, Nguyen Van Linh, gave every sign of appreciating the seriousness of Vietnam's position and supporting economic reforms. His speeches were filled with admissions of past Party mistakes, blunt criticism of those cadre who continued to evade or ignore reform instructions, and encouragement to citizens to take matters into their own hands. He particularly encouraged greater freedom of the press, including letters from the public and critical investigative journalism. Political openness was added to the reform agenda. A major problem, he noted, was that the political system had become opaque in both directions--citizens unable to fathom the logic of higher decision making, and leaders often groping in the dark, unable to ascertain what was happening in the villages or factories.

By early 1988, despite Linh's initiatives, conditions were worse than ever. Inflation soared as high as 1000 percent per annum, many farmers lost interest in maximizing production, and city folk despaired of making ends meet. Although reform laws emanated from the increasingly influential National Assembly, for example on foreign investment, export-import procedures, and property ownership, they seemed to make little dent on the way middle and lower-level cadre conducted affairs. An IMF delegation sent to Hanoi to renegotiate Vietnam's arrears in interest payments found the National Bank preoccupied with the introduction of new currency denominations. In one week prices jumped 54 percent, and the IMF team departed without an agreement.

Matters came to a head when the specter of famine gripped inhabitants of a number of northern provinces in April-May 1988. Although bad weather and insects provoked the immediate crisis, the underlying causes were administrative and economic. First, province leaders provided grossly over-optimistic harvest projections; then the Politbureau failed to heed ministerial recommendations to import grain. Once the danger was grasped, prime attention focused on extracting more paddy from farmers in the Mekong Delta. If the government had publicly admitted the northern shortfall in March and appealed for southern donations on humanitarian grounds, there might not have been a crisis. Instead, all was done in secrecy, so that farmers understandably considered the "request" as just one more state tax.

In early May, still facing serious food deficits in several northern provinces, Hanoi dispatched messages overseas requesting emergency assistance, and this news was broadcast back to Vietnam on the BBC and Voice of America. By the end of June the food crisis had been overcome for the moment, but pressure was increasing on the Party and government to explain the entire episode to the public. In particular, journalists were angry at having been kept in the dark for at least three months, or in some cases forbidden to print facts already in their possession. They now published interviews and descriptions deeply embarrassing to the authorities. Members of the elected National Assembly also pried information out of the bureaucracy and helped to publicize faults. While the press generally cast its criticism in terms of inept leadership, between the lines one could read ever greater doubts about hallowed institutions and ideological assumptions.

Most of these postwar events in Vietnam have gone unnoticed in the West. A cynic might conclude that the vast media coverage of the Vietnam War in the decade before 1975 produced a feeling of surfeit. Ethnocentrically, Vietnam was not a "story" after the

Americans left. The truth is more complicated. It must be noted that Hanoi has not made it easy for Western journalists or scholars to ascertain what is happening. Initially those reporters who managed to gain entry to Vietnam tended to harken back to epic wartime events or dwell on foreign legacies, for example American soldiers missing in action, the Amerasian children, decaying French villas in Hanoi, a few ancient Citroëns and Chevrolets in the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. Meanwhile, most Western newspaper editors apparently felt that the real "Vietnam" stories were not in Vietnam at all, but among the refugees, the veterans, the old Washington policymakers, and the public figures of the former anti-war movement.

Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea in December 1978, and China's invasion of Vietnam in February 1979, served to renew Western interest in the region as a whole, if not in Vietnamese domestic developments. Those on the right who had long assumed some international communist conspiracy to overrun Southeast Asia were bewildered by such open, bitter conflict among Kampuchean, Vietnamese, and Chinese Marxist-Leninists.

In America, reflecting Washington's current geopolitical analysis embodied in the Reagan Doctrine, writers tended to uphold the Chinese, to regard Vietnam as a Soviet pawn, and to ignore or downplay the moral implications of tacitly supporting Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Meanwhile, those on the left who had expected anti-imperialist solidarity to persist beyond destruction of the three American client regimes in Indochina in 1975 were equally nonplussed. They tended to divide into pro-China and pro-Vietnam camps, or simply to throw up their hands in dismay.

The international dimensions of the Vietnam story since 1975 are important. Washington's decision to isolate Hanoi economically as well as diplomatically profoundly colored internal affairs in Vietnam. Vietnam's 1977 attempt to attract Western investment was doomed before it started. By the same token, Hanoi's refusal in 1977 to drop its demand for American reparations became an obstacle to diplomatic normalization, and played into the hands of those in Washington who favored a decisive tilt towards Beijing.

Simultaneously, growing tension with China led to policies which caused the exodus in 1978-1979 of at least 300,000 overseas Chinese, many of whom possessed valuable commercial and technical skills, and meant that Vietnam's generals could not be denied the resources and manpower they requested. Neither could military aid from the Soviet Union be reduced in favor of more economic aid. The siege mentality which had fueled the Vietnamese resistance for so long gained a new lease on life, strengthening conservative repression of public debate of domestic policy options, reinforcing the institutional status quo, and warping the initiatives of economic reformers.

From 1979 to 1987 the international cleavages surrounding Indochina remained fixed, although the danger of another major Sino-Vietnamese armed conflict gradually abated. Western media attention tended to focus on skirmishes along the Thai-Kampuchea frontier, refugee camp inmates, the occasional third-party proposal for negotiations. Two book-length studies went deeper, probing the causes of dramatic strategic realignments in the region after 1975.¹² However, there has been only one book-length attempt to link

¹² Grant Evans and Kelvin Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Indochina since the Fall of Saigon* (London: Verso, 1984). Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1986).

strategic and domestic developments, and to examine internal economic, social, and institutional questions on their own terms.¹³

Today, a curious American, European, or Australian going to her local library, or even a nearby university collection, will have difficulty finding enough on domestic Vietnam since 1975 to compose a high-school essay. Consulting major on-line computer data bases is not much more rewarding. Nor can she contact an established center for Vietnam studies in the West, as none exists. In fact, among socialist states, only Albania and Outer Mongolia are likely to prove scholastically more elusive than Vietnam.

And yet, by population Vietnam is the sixteenth largest country in the world and third largest socialist society. It deserves to be studied because it is there. It also offers fertile ground for comparative analysis by political scientists, economists, sociologists, and historians. Sufficient data exists to satisfy both empiricists and theoreticians. No longer is contact with Vietnamese academic institutions impractical; scholars can now travel in both directions, attend conferences, utilize library collections, even begin to talk about fieldwork projects. As in the case of China studies fifteen years ago, misunderstandings and setbacks are bound to occur, but the general trajectory is towards expanded scholarly communication.

All of these factors prompted the Joint Committee on Southeast Asia of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council to convene a conference on "Postwar Vietnam: Ideology and Action."¹⁴ Participation was deliberately international in scope, involving specialists from eleven different countries. We were particularly fortunate to gain the involvement of five Vietnamese scholars resident overseas (Lam Thanh Liem, Nguyen Duc Nhuan, Nguyen Huu Dong, Ngo Vinh Long, and Vo Nhan Tri),¹⁵ two scholars from Eastern Europe (Anna Petrasovits from Hungary and Teresa Halik from Poland), one from Sweden (Susanne Rubin), which operates a large aid program in Vietnam, and a senior UN official (Karl Englund) possessing over eight years experience in Vietnam. We also felt we did something towards bridging the gap between Francophone and Anglophone academic traditions on Vietnam. With almost one-third of the participants more comfortable in French than English, conference proceedings moved back and forth in both languages, although we must be self-critical and admit that none of the three papers in French was translated to appear in this book.

Besides choosing to emphasize domestic over external questions, we gave relatively more attention to economic policies and performance than to matters of politics, history, language, or culture. The conference theme of "ideology and action" was designed to move us away from the well-worn conceptual framework of "tradition and revolution," to

¹³ William Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon* (Athens: Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1985).

¹⁴ The conference brought twenty-two scholars to the Institute of Development Studies (Sussex, England) in September 1985. In addition to the contributors to this volume we would like to thank the following individuals for their valued participation in the 1985 conference: Judith Appleton, Anthony Barnett, Georges Boudarel, Nayan Chanda, Nguyen Huu Dong, Teresa Halik, Udo Janz, Lam Thanh Liem, Nguyen Duc Nhuan, and David Szanton. In 1986, the editors invited two scholars not at the conference, Melanie Beresford and Nguyen Huyen Chau to contribute essays of relevance to the theme of "dilemmas in socialist development."

¹⁵ Arrangements were also made for two specialists to come from Vietnam, but at the last moment they conveyed their apologies. Fortunately, since 1985 it has become less problematical to invite participants from Vietnam to such academic gatherings.