Vietnam's War on COVID-19: an Ethnography of Pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract

This thesis presents new knowledge of how state-society relations function in contemporary Vietnam by analysing everyday negotiations around the implementation of the country's Zero-COVID policy. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in and around one of Ho Chi Minh City's most coronavirus-impacted neighbourhoods across 18 months between 2021 and 2023 through participant observation, interviews, life histories, and a participatory photography project with local university students, the study is one of a limited number of ethnographies of the pandemic informed by data obtained through in situ anthropological research methods.

The analysis focuses on three themes emerging from the ethnography. A chapter is devoted to each. *Saigon is bleeding* (*Sài Gòn đổ máu*) considers norms and values around the just distribution of resources that emerged as the state failed to feed citizens during lockdown. The theory of moral economy that James C. Scott applied to analyse Vietnamese peasants' subsistence ethic fifty years earlier holds true for an urban setting in contemporary Vietnam, it is shown.

Mētises meet metrices problematises theorisations of top-down planning that dichotomise officials and subalterns by revealing how low-level officials exploit their embodied knowledge to improvise workable compromises in day-to-day regulation situations. I develop the concept of *có lý có tình* (being right but reasonable) to capture the qualities of Vietnamese officials who prosecute the state's agenda in a manner acceptable to both the public and their bureaucratic masters.

Interpellation by infection considers how state-society relations are mediated through ideological discourse. I introduce two new theoretical takes on Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation. *Interpellation by infection* expresses how citizens were rendered subjects via Vietnam's uniquely comprehensive coronavirus contact tracing system. *De-interpellation* accounts for the societal discombobulation when that system and the subject-effect it produced suddenly ended.

By showing how the state's coronavirus control policy was adapted and contested at the everyday level, the ethnography contributes to developing a more accurate understanding of how power really operates in Vietnam.

Contents

Acknowledgements

I am indebted first of all to the city dwellers who gave their time to participate in this research during a difficult period in Vietnam's recent history. Without their generosity and openness, this ethnography would not have been possible. People let me into their homes and into their lives, patiently explained things to me, helped me with my language queries, invited me to family celebrations, and displayed care during the coronavirus pandemic. For these things I am very grateful. In *khu nhà cháy,* Trọng, Hiếu and Yến looked out for us, cooked for us, and showed us where to buy the cheapest flip-flops. Hồng and Duy were great neighbours, guides, and friends. Ngọc the pharmacist looked out for my wellbeing, talked to me about the past, and gave me old copies of *Tạp Chí Thuốc vá Sức Khỏe.* Mr Nguyễn helped to fix the broken things in Number 5 and never expected anything in return. Mrs Nương and the hotpot gang were friendly faces in frenetic surroundings and Thủy kept me and my companions well refreshed at the coffee stand.

I learnt and continue to learn something new about Vietnam every time I talk to my research partner Phương. Catching up on the latest political gossip over coffee together was one of the most enlightening ways to spend time during my fieldwork and one of my favourite too. I look forward to supporting him in his doctoral journey to come. I appreciate the Centre for Vietnamese and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Ho Chi Minh City for hosting me during my fieldwork. Thanks to Phạm Thanh Thôi for being an enthusiastic collaborator in our shared research endeavours and for inviting me to the USSH Anthropology Festival!

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I lost my remaining Grandparents over the course of this Ph.D. I think that they and those who passed before them would be proud that I got the job done, despite the challenges. My Mum taught me to be a nice person, the most important thing of all. Thank you for your care and support during this endeavour and at all times and to my sister Sarah for your help with all manner of logistical tasks as I moved addresses, married, misplaced things, renovated, quarantined, and self-isolated. Get well soon, Dad.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my partner Anh John who jumped into the abyss with me by returning to Vietnam in late 2021 when the pandemic's end game had yet to play out and so much was still uncertain. You never signed up to live under an authoritarian lockdown, to spend weeks in quarantine, to get involved in alleyway drinking competitions, and to eat duck embryos all in the name of ethnographic closeness but you did so anyway, usually with a smile.

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0. Prologue

I met 76-year-old Bác Tuấn (Uncle Tuấn) in early October 2022 at the intersection of Bùi Viện and Trần Hưng Đạo streets in district 1, central Ho Chi Minh City. Wearing a faded anorak and brown honeycomb slippers (*dép tổ ong*), he was carefully polishing his scooter with a pink rag. Over several in-depth interviews, Uncle Tuấn reflected on the tumult of his life: his battlefield experiences, his ensuing post-traumatic stress, the tropical storm of 1997 that sank the fishing boat he operated from Bạc Liêu near Vietnam's southern tip taking the lives of its crew, the hardship of postwar rationing, and the recent COVID-19 lockdown.

Figure 1: Bác Tuấn (Uncle Tuấn) cleans his scooter at the junction of Bùi Viện and Trần Hưng Đạo streets in district 1. Photo: Diana Lê, 12 October 2022.

When asked to compare the recent coronavirus pandemic to previous periods of upheaval in Vietnam, he said:

> *It's worse than the era of rationing (thời bao cấp). It's much worse. The entirety of the South [of Vietnam] suffered. During the rationing era, some were rich, some were poor, but at least people had freedom. During the rationing era, even if people suffered, they still had freedom to do things. With the pandemic, you were forced to stay at home.*

<div align="right">Uncle Tuấn interview transcript, 12 October 2022</div>

And when asked to compare the loss of personal freedom in wartime and under coronavirus lockdown, Uncle Tuấn said:

> *The war happened in different places here and there. You could still escape to other places. Nothing is worse than this pandemic. Let me explain it to you. For example, during this pandemic, people suffered, they went hungry, but they didn't have the freedom to do extra work to earn money for food. They could only rely on government assistance. But during the war, even though there was suffering, people had the freedom to go out, interact with others, take on jobs, and earn money. Nothing can compare to the situation during the pandemic.*

<div align="right">Uncle Tuấn interview transcript, 12 October 2022</div>

Uncle Tuấn was far from alone in describing the hardships of life during the fourth wave of coronavirus cases in Ho Chi Minh City in mid-2021 in such terms. In July 2023, I organised a COVID conversation event for Ho Chi Minh City youth, discussed in appendix 1 of this thesis. One participant, a female journalism student at a public university, acknowledged that the citywide lockdown two years earlier was likely to have been a once-in-a-lifetime experience:

> *I don't want to forget [the lockdown] for the sake of research. I know I am a witness to an historical period. Maybe when I'm 80 years old, I will be in the last surviving generation from the terrible COVID pandemic in Saigon.*

<div align="right">COVID conversation group transcript, 30 July 2023</div>

And when asked for his general reflections on lockdown, television personality Mr Huỳnh Minh Hiệp, 52, whom I interviewed at his exhibition of COVID-19 ephemera, hinted at the psychological discombobulation it caused:

> *The pandemic was so terrible. During over 50 years of living in Saigon, I had never witnessed anything like that. I saved the COVID-19 objects that you see in my exhibition for future generations because, in our history, Saigon has never been in such a situation. There were only ambulances, police cars, and volunteers' vehicles on the street, and no people in sight. It was so strange. I couldn't get my head around it.*

<div align="right">Mr Hiệp interview transcript, 4 June 2022</div>

These stark evaluations from people of different ages and genders show that the coronavirus pandemic was widely recognised as an exceptional, challenging time, not just by the young who had not seen too much turmoil in their lives but even by the old who had. By sharing stories from city dwellers like Uncle Tuấn, Mr Hiệp and Nhi, this ethnography provides a detailed on-the-ground account of Vietnam's war on COVID-19.

1. Introduction: Vietnam's War on COVID-19

A state of exception?

Shortly after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus global pandemic in March 2020, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai described the situation as a state of exception (2020). Under the exceptions argued for by the Western theorists he cites (Agamben, 2004; Žižek, 2006) the sovereign state seizes extraordinary powers. But under the 'COVID exception', Appadurai argued, states conceded that their power was limited and recognised that the virus would only be beaten through state-society cooperation:

> ...noteworthy, especially for anthropology, is the concession by many states that they cannot face this crisis without the help of society at large, through practices of self-isolation, self-monitoring, mutual caring and self-reporting. The social has been rediscovered by the state, even in the most draconian cases such as that of China, where the dramatic lockdown of Wuhan did nevertheless require public compliance with the state.
>
> Appadurai, 2020: 222

As a part-military, part-humanitarian intervention justified through a moral aim of saving lives, Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy did have the *appearance* of being a state of exception in the conventional sense. This study goes beyond appearances, however, bringing ethnographic data collected during long-term, face-to-face fieldwork in Ho Chi Minh City into dialogue with existing anthropological scholarship on the workings of power in Vietnam to examine how state-society cooperation took shape at a time of crisis. Since Appadurai's assertion, analyses of the governance and politics of state responses to the coronavirus have confirmed that political regime type did influence the success of states' responses but in the structural context of the relationship between state and citizens (Harriss and Luong, 2022; Luong, 2022) or within an overall 'social compact' between state and citizenry as Jasanoff et al. (2021) put it. However, for reasons discussed further in chapter four, many accounts of Vietnam's response to COVID-19 have fixated on the nature of its political system.[1] This study provides an ethnographic account of state-society interactions in Vietnam during the pandemic that contributes towards redressing this imbalance.

For as anthropologists of Vietnam such as Hy Van Luong and Erik Harms have shown, state-society negotiations are nothing exceptional in the socialist state and take place in many

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[1] Notable exceptions are Dinh and Ho (2020) and Nguyen (2022). These articles emphasise cooperation between state and society during the pandemic in Vietnam.

areas including welfare provision (Luong 2021, 2023), urban planning (Harms, 2020), notions of 'civilised' behaviour (Harms, 2016a), urban order (Harms and Labbé, 2022), and heritage-making (Luong, 2017). These negotiations are an established feature of Vietnam's political system and come in many forms. Under Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy, however, state-society negotiations impacted day-to-day life more than usual and had an added urgency, given the danger to human existence posed by the coronavirus. As Luong has noted and I was able to witness and document myself (Tough, 2021a), "There were intense fear-driven tensions and negotiations among different levels of the Vietnamese government and between state and society, especially with the spread of the Delta strain of COVID-19 in the second half of 2021." (2022: 761).

This study has aimed to develop a detailed understanding of everyday experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic period among members of a densely-populated urban neighbourhood in Vietnam's biggest city. The thesis draws on 18 months of ethnographic data collected in Ho Chi Minh City as the coronavirus pandemic unfolded and in its aftermath. Fieldwork took place in January 2020, between March and July 2021 and between December 2021 and January 2023. The staccato nature of fieldwork reflects the disruption caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic to researchers in general and to those seeking to collect data beyond their home country's land borders in particular.[2] Data were also collected during follow-up visits in April 2023 and in February 2024.

Accidental anthropology

Several anthropologists of Asia have serendipitously experienced and then documented unforeseen events during doctoral fieldwork that was supposed to focus on other topics. Noel Salazar (2010a) whose study of cultural mobility in Yogyakarta was disrupted by a volcanic eruption, earthquake and mini tsunami, for example, seized the opportunity to study lived experience of these disasters instead. In Bangkok, Claudio Sopranzetti (2012) planned to study urban mobility through ethnographic research with motorcycle taxi drivers. During fieldwork, however, he unwittingly became a participant observer in the Thai Red Shirt movement and so trained his ethnographic gaze on his interlocutors' involvement in those protests. And Frank Pieke was supposed to focus on the social structure of Beijing work units but instead ended up documenting the 1989 People's Movement in which he unexpectedly became entangled (1995a, 1995b).

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[2] Between March 2020 and March 2022, Vietnam's strict national border closure prevented most overseas researchers from entering the country. As the spouse of a foreign expert (*chuyên gia*) working in the private sector, I was able to enter the country. This reflects the trend of selective allowances for 'essential' travel during the global coronavirus pandemic being defined mainly from a socio-economic perspective (Salazar, 2021). See Skovgaard-Smith (2023) on the intensifying impact of pandemic-era immobilities over time.

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Through its entirely unintended focus on an unfolding global pandemic, this study may be considered the latest research project executed in the tradition of accidental anthropology in Asia. It is also, however, a response to calls for anthropological studies that document the quotidian practices of the pandemic (Steenberg and Reyhé, 2020) as well as a broader appeal for studies of the human dynamics of crises (Salazar, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic may have been an exceptional crisis, but I aim not to overemphasise the exceptional in the chapters that follow. Having engaged with Ho Chi Minh City since 2003, I consider the societal response to the coronavirus crisis in the context of my ongoing reflections on culture and social practice in the city rather than as a discrete, temporally-bounded event.[3] By intensifying state-society negotiations and rendering them available for anthropological analysis, the pandemic acts as a "sampling device, a way of gaining access to particular (pre-existing) configurations of demographic and economic circumstances, ideas, and institutional relationships." (Rosenberg, 1992: 118).

Having introduced the topic, set out the rationale and aim of the study, and located it in research on state-society relations in Vietnam and in the accidental anthropology tradition, I now provide an overview of the anthropological literature on COVID-19 to date with a focus on Vietnam. I then synthesise information from various publicly-available sources about the country's particular interpretation of a 'Zero-COVID' approach to dealing with the virus and consider how Vietnam fared in controlling the virus. Vietnam's contact tracing regime, one of the world's most sophisticated, is discussed in detail, given its centrality to the arguments presented in chapter seven. I then outline the structure of the thesis, explain the significance of the research, acknowledge some of its limitations, and conclude.

The anthropology of COVID-19

Anthropologists began to document and reflect on the pandemic from its earliest days in dedicated fora such as a special issue of *Anthropology Now* journal (Higgins, Martin and Vesperi, 2020) and a special section of *Social Anthropology* journal (Soto Bermant and Ssorin-Chaikov, 2020). Contributions to the former, such as Troolin's real-time account of social distancing in Papua New Guinea (2020) and Luong's discussion (2020) of the role of social media in shaping perceptions of COVID-19 among Ho Chi Minh City residents, drew on the authors' contemporaneous observations of life during the early pandemic period. In the latter journal, anthropologists considered how the coronavirus phenomenon recalled themes within

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[3] From 2003 to 2004 I taught English and lived inside a state-affiliated language school in district 3 (*Trung tâm Đào tạo, Bồi dưỡng Kiến thức ngoại giao và Ngoại ngữ*) and in 2005 volunteered at a state-run school for street children (*Trường ngày 15 tháng 5*) in district 1 while studying Vietnamese language at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities.

their past research such as global inequities in access to vital medical resources (Comaroff, 2020) and ageism and caregiving (Sadruddin and Inhorn, 2020). Meanwhile, a collection of articles in *City & Society* journal gave anthropological takes on urban life from across pandemic-affected Southeast Asia (for Singapore see Koh, Lim and Tan, 2020, for Yogyakarta see Lazuardi, 2020, for Ho Chi Minh City see Earl, 2020; Thoi, 2020; Tough, 2021 and for Hanoi see Thao, 2020) and beyond. Other Vietnam-focused publications cover topics including informal food vendors' economic survival strategies (Pham, Nguyen and Earl, 2021; Thai, 2024), lockdown as an intimacy accelerator (Nguyen, 2021), collective quarantine (Nguyen, 2021), state-society relations (Luong, 2022), social capital during crises (Thoi, Nguyen and Harms, 2023), post-pandemic improvements to migrant workers' conditions (Thoi, Lam and Nguyen, 2024), the ongoing repatriation flights corruption trial (Lincoln, 2024), and post-pandemic challenges for Vietnam's tourism and heritage sectors (Hutnyk and Nguyen, 2024).

Whether capturing the zeitgeist of the early pandemic period or assessing the disaster's lingering impacts on society, the aforementioned article-length discussions of COVID-19 in Vietnam represent valuable contributions to knowledge. Book-length ethnographies of the pandemic in Vietnam that draw on fieldwork conducted by a researcher living within a community for an extended period, however, are few. Anthropologist Christina Schwenkel's *Sonic Socialism: Crisis and Care in Pandemic Hanoi* (forthcoming) and the present study are two such ethnographies. For pandemic-era travel bans, institutional restrictions on face-to-face research, and the difficulty of making plans to study an unfolding crisis have made conducting long-term ethnographic fieldwork on the coronavirus phenomenon difficult. It is therefore unsurprising that most completed Ph.D. theses in anthropology that take the COVID-19 pandemic as an object of study have derived most if not all of their ethnographic data through online methods or via limited participant observation in their authors' local communities.[4]

The next section draws on various public health indices and bureaucratic documents to produce an account of Vietnam's Zero-COVID approach to and its success in suppressing the coronavirus. While bureaucracy itself is anthropologically interesting (see Hull, 2012; MacLean, 2013) and a chapter of this thesis is dedicated to bureaucratic brokerage, I keep my discussion of state directives and other bureaucratic instruments through which the Zero-COVID policy was enacted relatively brief. For city dwellers did not inhabit government directives during the pandemic. They lived - and some died - in coronavirus-affected

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[4] Topics include student experiences of universities' virus mitigation measures (Marshall, 2024; Moskun, 2022), food insecurity (Bradley, 2021), workers' rights (Manzano, 2022), familial caregiving (Madsen, 2024), and home-making in lockdown (Xiao, 2024).

communities in the alleyways of district 4 and in other parts of the city. Moreover, the sheer number of directives issued does not indicate an effective official response to a disaster, despite some analyses suggesting that it does (Nguyen, 2022). To reify directives would be to follow the same reductive approach of the above-mentioned evaluations of the pandemic that fixate on regime type. This would also not aid an understanding of the nature of state-society interactions in Ho Chi Minh City under the Zero-COVID policy.

Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy

The WHO declared the coronavirus global pandemic on 11 March 2020. While the pandemic was a global phenomenon, different national governments pursued divergent approaches to suppressing the virus, experiencing very different case and fatality rates (WHO, 2023). Along with China, South Korea, New Zealand and Taiwan, Vietnam initially pursued a Zero-COVID policy, aiming to keep viral transmission as close to zero as possible and ultimately to eliminate it entirely.[5] Over the following fifteen months, Vietnam suppressed the coronavirus remarkably well by following its Zero-COVID approach, was recognised by public health experts as a COVID-19 exemplar (Nguyen et al., 2021; Pollack et al., 2021), and won praise from the World Bank (2020). Out of a population of approximately 97 million, in 2020 Vietnam recorded only 3,573 coronavirus cases from about 2.7 million people tested, and 35 pandemic-related deaths (Mathieu et al., 2020). This represents a case and death rate per 100,000 among the lowest in the world (Dong, Hongru and Gardner, 2020: 533-534).

Vietnam's Zero-COVID regime, in place until October 2021, involved aggressive public health measures to suppress any local outbreaks: contact tracing, mass testing, localised lockdowns and centralised isolation of the infected and their direct and indirect contacts, usually in converted university dormitories, empty resettlement housing for the urban poor, field hospitals, or regular hospitals until they tested negative. Cross-border human movement was also tightly controlled under an effective closed-border policy, albeit with some exceptions, and an intensive public health awareness campaign was enacted. This involves propaganda signs, banners, broadcasts and text messages sent to every mobile phone. The government's '5K' campaign promoted everyday health protection measures: *khẩu trang* (face mask), *khử khuẩn* (disinfect), *khoảng cách* (distance), *không tụ tập* (gathering), *khai báo y tế* (health declaration) and its distinctive multicoloured logo could be seen in various guises throughout the city (see figure 2 for an example). Through the shaping of the physical and discursive environment, the state mobilised citizens to behave as it wanted them to. As several

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[5] Skegg and Hill (2021: 1) point out that "Zero-COVID is an action-oriented definition, which acknowledges that some community transmission will occur after importation, though steps will be taken to extinguish it." They thereby dispel the notion that Zero-COVID policies aimed for absolutely zero cases.

of the images in this thesis illustrate, the urban realm was re-fashioned to create a mindset appropriate for Vietnam's COVID-19 fight.

Figure 2: '5K' mural painted on school's outer wall repeats health ministry's five commands for combatting the pandemic. Author's photo, 21 October 2022.

Contact tracing

Vietnam's contact tracing strategy was comprehensive, based on tracing degrees of contact from F0 (an infected individual) to F1 (an individual who had had close contact with F0 or were suspected of being infected themselves), and F2 (a close contact of F1). While F3, F4 and F5 were all recognised statuses, there were no corresponding actions listed in the national policy for such individuals.[6] Once a patient with COVID-19 had been identified (F0), local public health officials, with support from healthcare workers, security officers, the military, and other civil servants, questioned the patient to ascertain with whom they might have been in contact and whom they may have infected within the past 14 days. All close contacts (F1), defined as people who had been within approximately 6 feet (2 metres) of or had been in contact with a confirmed case for 30 minutes or more, would be located and tested. An F1 who tested positive would be placed in hospital isolation at no cost. If an F1 did not test positive, they would be quarantined at a government-run quarantine centre for 14 days. Close contacts of the previously identified close contacts (F2s) would have to self-isolate at home

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[6] This did not stop some people from seeking medical attention when they believed themselves to be or were confirmed to be of F3, F4 or F5 status, leading Ho Chi Minh City's medical authorities to urge citizens "not to panic and self-evaluate…these are inappropriate reactions." (HCDC, 2020).

for 14 days. In Hanoi, the authorities required supervised or monitored home isolation for individuals of F3, F4 and F5 status (Luong, 2022) at certain points in the pandemic which went further than the official policy mandated.
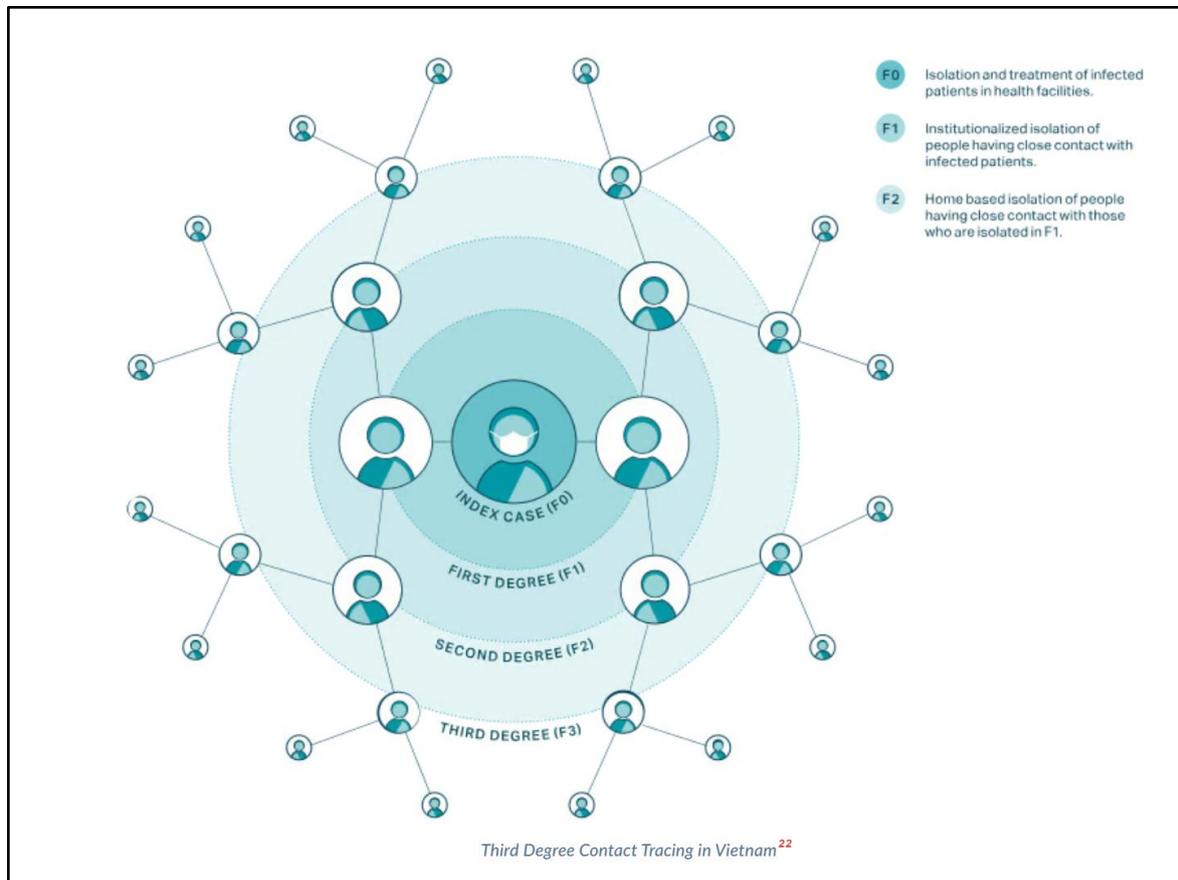
Figure 3: Third degree contact tracing system. Source: Vietnam Ministry of Health

As chapter six of this thesis demonstrates, in Vietnam, policies often end up being adapted by officials with the result that they end up operating in a very different way than envisaged in policy documents. In the case of Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy, however, the impact on individuals' bodily freedoms of officials misinterpreting or overinterpreting provisions within that policy were more immediate and more severe than in business-as-usual cases of policy 'entrepreneurship'. Vietnam's unique approach of identifying and quarantining suspected cases based on their epidemiological risk of infection rather than whether they displayed symptoms was initially lauded, given that almost half of all cases never develop symptoms. However, inadequate separation of the infected and the potentially infected inside quarantine centres reputedly caused those who were not initially infected to catch COVID-19, causing case rates and deaths to escalate.

According to the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al., 2021), which compared nine policy measures adopted by different national governments to tackle

COVID-19 between January 2020 and December 2022, Vietnam's set of interventions was among the world's most stringent: compared to 183 nations over the two years, Vietnam had the twelfth-highest average stringency.[7] April 2020 when Vietnam held a short nationwide lockdown was the most stringent month, with a stringency score of 96.3/100. Once very low transmission rates had been achieved, the sustained containment phase began and normal economic and social activities resumed.[8] Of course this tracker says nothing about how measures were implemented on the ground. As this ethnography shows, exceptions to and reinterpretations of various policies abounded, often out of concern for protecting human welfare, like the Zero-COVID policy prescriptions themselves.
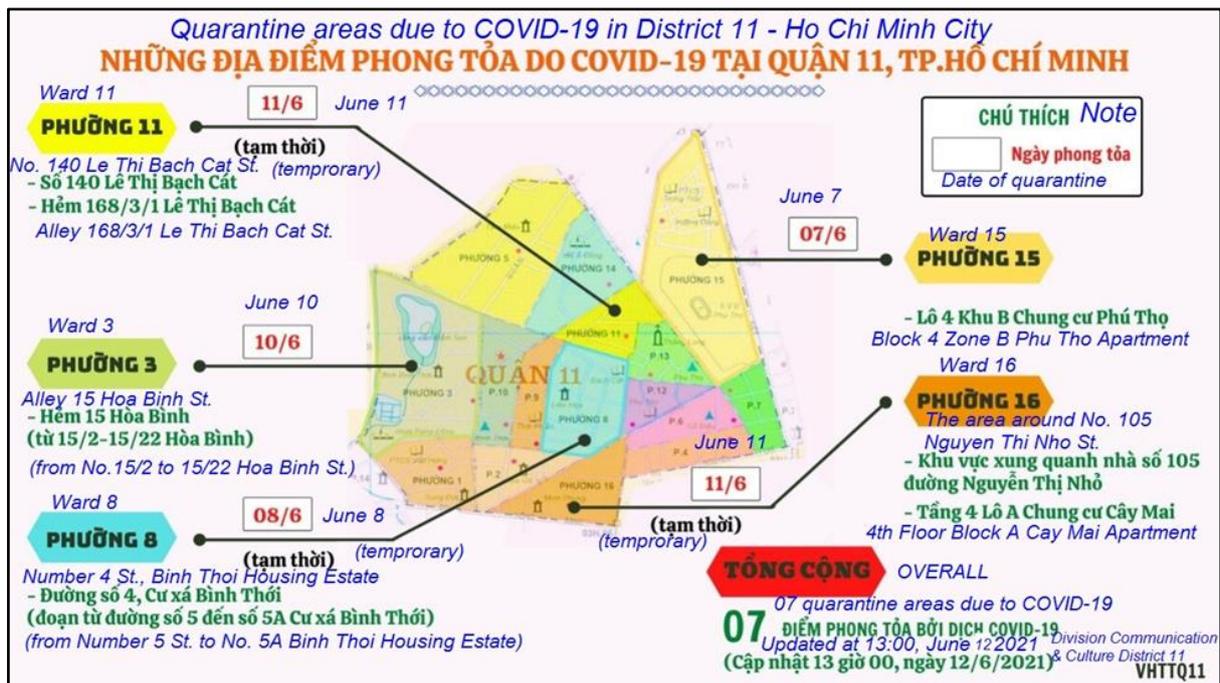
Figure 4: Map showing localised coronavirus lockdowns in district 11, Ho Chi Minh City, June 2021. Credit: District 11 Division of Communication and Culture.

While many other countries remained in lockdown for much of 2020 and early 2021, the majority of people living in Vietnam enjoyed relatively high mobility within a carefully-managed Zero-COVID bubble within the country's national borders. Case numbers eventually rose, however. Physical distancing measures that had helped to control previous variants proved ineffective against the highly transmissible Delta strain which spread rapidly among a largely unvaccinated population. Directive 15, a citywide social distancing order, was imposed

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[7] The nine metrics were: school closures; workplace closures; cancellation of public events; restrictions on gatherings; closures of public transport; stay-at-home requirements; public information campaigns; restrictions on internal movements; and international travel bans. The index on any particular day was calculated as the mean score of the nine metrics, each taking a value between 0 and 100 (with 100 being the strictest response). If policies varied at subnational level, the index would be shown as the response level of the strictest sub-region.

[8] Economic growth reached 2.9 per cent in 2020 and 2.6 per cent in 2021 (International Monetary Fund, 2021), one of the strongest performances in Southeast Asia.

on 31 May, banning gatherings and forcing a shutdown of certain businesses and services. Ho Chi Minh City became the epicentre of Vietnam's coronavirus emergency. In a context of mass testing, many thousands of cases were logged daily.[9] This surge ended the practice of barricading outbreak areas while life elsewhere in the city continued as usual.

From 8 July 2021 to 30 September 2021 the whole of Ho Chi Minh City lived under directive 16. Citizens were required to stay at home and could only go out for basic necessities like food or medicines or to work at factories or businesses still allowed to operate. And with official dispatch *2490/UBND-VX,* issued in late July, the city government controlled human movement even more strictly, implementing a 6pm - 6am curfew for several weeks. Households were issued shopping vouchers divided into time slots by odd or even days to minimise crowding in stores and markets. Food, medicines, and essential items were also supposed to be distributed by civil servants, volunteers and 34,000 troops sent from Hanoi to join the 'pandemic fight' (Vu, 2021). But the proxy shopping system was soon overwhelmed.

Figure 5: A makeshift roadblock fashioned from an upturned table, old tyres, red and white 'hazard' tape and a metal barricade with barbed wire on it blocks a street in district 5. Photo: Minh Triết Thiên Lâm, 4 September 2021.

As coronavirus cases surged, official rhetoric became increasingly uncompromising. On 6 August 2021, the Vietnamese government issued urgent resolution 86/NQ-CP. The

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[9] With World Bank support, Vietnam's testing capacity increased from around 14,000 tests a day to over 100,000 tests a day between March 2020 and December 2021 (World Bank Group, 2021).

resolution called on Ho Chi Minh City to 'control the pandemic' by 15 September 2021, with similar deadlines set for nearby provinces. When cases continued to escalate and it seemed the deadline would be missed, the Chairman of Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee Mr Nguyễn Thành Phong was relieved of his position for the remainder of the 2021-2026 term (Radio Free Asia, 2021b). Lockdown was lifted by the city government in early October 2021, although cases and deaths continued to be recorded. As vaccination became widespread and the 'new normal' (*bình thường mới*) phase of lessened restrictions got underway, updated messaging was deployed through the '5T' campaign (figure 6).

Figure 6: Sign transmitting 5T anti-epidemic campaign commandments. Credit: Minh Triết Thiên Lâm, 5 December 2021.

The campaign's commandments were: *tuân thủ nghiêm* 5K (strictly comply with '5K' measures), *thực phẩm đủ tại nhà* (keep enough food at home), *thầy, thuốc đến tại gia* (teach and medicate at home), *test COVID tất cả* (everyone test for COVID), *tiêm chủng tại phường, xã, đối với các xã phường tăng cường giãn cách xã hội* (vaccinate in wards and communes, increase social distancing for communes and wards).

A national memorial service was held on 19 November 2021, and smaller local events were organised to remember the deceased, including on Đoàn Văn Bơ street where I lived during fieldwork (Quan 4 Ho Chi Minh City, 2021). The aforementioned article mentions 1,200 district 4 residents having died from COVID-19 between May and November 2021 during the fourth wave of cases. Ward-level statistics for coronavirus deaths are difficult to locate, although in a state media article, the chairwoman of ward 9 in district 4 stated that 122 people had died in that ward during the fourth wave (Tuoi Tre, 2021b). In the first two locations at which I lived during fieldwork, introduced in chapter three, people reported being aware of eight to ten people dying of coronavirus in their immediate alleyway area of approximately twenty tube houses. There are no reliable data confirming that coronavirus deaths were underreported. At the time of writing, 628,737 cases and 20,476 deaths from coronavirus have been recorded in Ho Chi Minh City but officials had earlier conceded that true case numbers were likely up to five times higher (VTC, 2021). For the period when coronavirus case numbers were reported to the WHO by 193 countries (January 2020 to December 2023), in cumulative terms Vietnam suffered the 15th highest number of cases and the 28th highest number of deaths in the world. Per 100,000 of population, Vietnam suffered the 119th highest number of deaths and the 89th highest number of cases (WHO, 2023).[10] Having discussed Vietnam's approach to controlling the pandemic and the country's pandemic performance, I now explain the significance of the research and highlight some of its limitations.

Significance of the research

COVID-19 caused taken-for-granted structures of life to be suspended worldwide. Viral containment measures such as quarantines, isolation, and distancing disrupted social relations and public discourses of stigma, danger, fear, and loss exacerbated existing social divides, impacting how people lived with one another. As discussed earlier in this chapter, pandemic-era travel bans, institutional restrictions on face-to-face research, and the difficulty of making plans to study an unfolding crisis have made conducting long-term ethnographic research on the pandemic difficult. Anthropological knowledge on this important phenomenon is therefore lacking. Drawing on 18 months of fieldwork conducted in Ho Chi Minh City between 2021 and 2023, this study is one of a limited number of long-term ethnographies of the pandemic informed by data derived through in situ methods. As such it makes a distinctive contribution to addressing the aforementioned research gap.

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[10] While the WHO prioritises health when ranking countries' pandemic successes, there are other indicators that might be used and the arena in which success is judged can vary, Harriss and Luong (2022) point out.

Early in the pandemic, anthropologists Laia Soto Bermant and Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov urged researchers to develop conceptual and analytical tools for understanding and engaging with reality in the COVID-19 era (2020). I have responded to that appeal in this thesis by developing three new concepts that may be of use to political anthropologists and other researchers interested in thinking through the social and political dynamics of the pandemic. *Interpellation by infection* offers a new way to consider processes of subjection that take place during responses to infectious disease outbreaks, particularly in response strategies enacted in exemplary societies that aim for viral elimination. A complimentary concept of *de-interpellation* theorises the societal discombobulation that results when an all-powerful subjection process, such as that enacted through Vietnam's uniquely comprehensive Zero-COVID contact tracing regime, suddenly loses its potency. And the concept of *có lý có tình* (being right but reasonable) captures the qualities that Vietnamese local officials brought to their work as bureaucratic brokers mediating between the state and community members during the coronavirus pandemic. With this concept, I show how the state can be more amenable to the influence of low-level officials than has commonly been portrayed. These ethnographically-derived concepts and the wider study contribute to the fields of political anthropology, Vietnam studies, and development studies.

As an ethnography of a pandemic, however, the study also supplements the existing literature within medical anthropology on COVID-19 (Adams and Nading, 2020; Manderson et al, 2020; Gamlin et al., 2021; Earl, 2022) by evaluating how the spread of a transmissible disease affected existing patterns of state-society cooperation. However, this is not an ethnography of health and the cultural, historical, social and political forces that shape health as a concept. For while I engaged in background reading on the anthropology of infectious disease before entering the pandemic-affected city (Diniz, 2016; Farmer, 1990; Gomez-Temesio, 2018; Lincoln, 2021; Lindenbaum, 1978), I lacked sufficient knowledge of epidemics to pursue a health-focused enquiry.

The ethnography also contributes towards challenging orientalist notions of 'mask culture' (Zhang, 2021) that emerged in Western discourse around Asian countries' approaches to controlling the coronavirus. Public health experts have recognised that such prejudice prevented European and North American nations with much higher case and fatality rates from learning lessons about pandemic control from countries like Vietnam in a timely manner (Farrar, 2021). Through the empirical data it has developed about social life during and after Zero-COVID policy implementation, the study also contributes to the nascent multidisciplinary field of COVID-19 studies.

Limitations

My plans for an entirely different ethnographic project researching the construction of national narratives in Vietnamese museums had been approved (Tough, 2020) and I was due to begin fieldwork when the coronavirus crisis started. Over the preceding 18 months, I had developed my knowledge of Vietnamese museum practice and curatorship in preparation for that fieldwork. When I entered the coronavirus-affected field in December 2021, although I had drawn up new project plans informed by my observations from the advancing fourth wave period in Ho Chi Minh City (Tough, 2021b), I did not have a sedimented knowledge of the phenomenon I was going to study. As such, I felt somewhat underprepared for the task ahead. However, opportunities to document emerging phenomena and commit what is unfolding to the ethnographic record are rare and reaping the serendipity dividend, as I term it in chapter two, means being prepared to depart from pre-existing plans and change study site, topic or methodology as necessary.

Another limitation is my not having been physically present in Ho Chi Minh City to collect data between mid-July and early December 2021 at the height of Vietnam's fourth wave of coronavirus cases, illness having forced my return to the United Kingdom (UK). During that period, city dwellers were required to stay at home and vaccination was not widespread which would in any case have made collecting ethnographic data through face-to-face interaction difficult from both practical and ethical perspectives. Once lockdown was lifted, I received ethnographic reports from my research partner living in district 11, Ho Chi Minh City. Drawing on these reports, secondary sources such as internet news articles, and my communications with city dwellers via Zalo messenger throughout that period, I developed plans for the present study.

Finally, as a non-native Vietnamese speaker, some of the nuance in the Vietnamese language materials analysed for this study will have eluded me. I have therefore discussed the meaning of particular words, phrases and slogans with Vietnamese contacts via Zalo messenger, especially during the data analysis phase, to check my understanding. I have also consulted differently-situated Vietnamese interlocutors for their views on certain scenarios such as the bánh mì controversy, discussed in chapter six, in an attempt to guard against imposing my own views on the data unchecked. Nevertheless, and as explored further in the next chapter, I recognise that my depiction of the coronavirus crisis in the ensuing ethnography is partial and situated (Strathern, 2005).

Thesis structure

This thesis is organised into eight chapters: the prologue, this introduction, the methodology, a review of relevant literature, three empirical chapters, and a conclusion. The empirical chapters are not just empirical in a conventional sense but include discussion and use of literature and theory appropriate for their respective themes. Appendices include a separate account of the *Archiving COVID-19 Heritage in Ho Chi Minh City* grant-funded collaborative research project (appendix 1) which I have led alongside my Ph.D. project. In this thesis, where photographs from the aforementioned online archive are included, they have been labelled as 'anonymous submission to chuyenthoidich.vn online archive'. A selection of research partner field reports from the immediate post-lockdown period in October and November 2021 when I was not physically present in Ho Chi Minh City are included in appendix 2. These first-person accounts from an historic period in the city may be of interest to Vietnam studies scholars. I now summarise each chapter's content.

The prologue contextualised the COVID-19 pandemic in the longer trajectory of tumultuous events in Vietnam's recent history through direct quotes from city dwellers of different ages and backgrounds whom I encountered during fieldwork.

This Introduction chapter has located the study in research on state-society relations in Vietnam, in the accidental anthropology tradition, and in the existing anthropological literature on COVID-19. It has explained Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy and assessed the country's overall pandemic performance, discussed the significance of the research, and its limitations. Following this explanation of the thesis structure, the chapter concludes.

Chapter two 'Uncertainty, serendipity, opportunity: researching ethnographically during COVID-19' discusses the methodological implications of conducting ethnographic research on an unfolding phenomenon in a context of profound uncertainty. This chapter contributes conceptual, methodological, and ethical reflections to the recently-reinvigorated debates around how ethnographers should approach the unforeseen. The chapter may also serve as a helpful resource for other researchers who find their fieldwork severely disrupted by unanticipated phenomena. A sole-authored manuscript including content from this chapter and appendix 1 has been submitted to *Qualitative Research* journal for publication.

Chapter three 'Khánh Hội xưa - Quận 4 ngày nay (Khanh Hoi of old, district 4 today)' introduces the city district and sub-district wards where most of this study's ethnographic data were collected, providing essential geographical, demographic, and economic information for

the ensuing empirical chapters. Chapter three enables the reader to better understand the research context and appreciate some of the economic and spatial constraints that residents would have been under when trying to comply with physical distancing regulations during the pandemic.

Chapter four 'Conceptualising state-society relations in contemporary Vietnam' provides essential theoretical grounding for the three subsequent empirical chapters. This chapter outlines the three main approaches to conceptualising state-society interactions in the anthropological and political science literature: dominating state, mobilisational authoritarianism, and dialogic relations. Many accounts of COVID-19 in Vietnam reflect the first and second of those schools due to a lack of fieldwork access during the pandemic whereas the present study draws on ethnographic data to bolster the third conceptualisation.

Chapter five 'Saigon is bleeding: subsistence struggles and social solutions during citywide shutdown' is the first empirical chapter and analyses societal responses to food shortages in Ho Chi Minh City during the 2021 coronavirus lockdown. In this task, I employ the theory of moral economy popularised by political scientist and anthropologist James Scott (1976) and draw on legal scholar Pham Duy Nghia's discussion of Confucian values in contemporary Vietnamese society (2005). I show how city dwellers' decisions about the appropriate distribution of resources during a time of dearth reflected historical and sociocultural factors rather than 'rational' profit-seeking behaviour.

Chapter six 'Mētises meet metrices: knowledge frictions in the local implementation of Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy' is the second empirical chapter. This chapter responds to an appeal for anthropologists to consider more carefully how local officials deploy their embodied knowledge when implementing high modernist plans. I develop a Vietnam-specific version of *mētis,* a conceptualisation of embodied knowledge advanced by Scott (1998). This concept is *có lý có tình* (being both right and reasonable) and is informed by this study's ethnographic data that capture the knowledge, skills, and values that Vietnamese officials brought to the bureaucratic work they undertook in their communities during the pandemic.

Chapter seven 'Interpellation by infection: sick citizen-subjects under Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy' explores how state-society relations were mediated at the level of discourse and analyses ideological processes through which citizens were exhorted to comply with Vietnam's stringent coronavirus control policy. I introduce two new takes on philosopher Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation. *Interpellation by infection* explains how Vietnamese citizens were rendered subjects during the COVID-19 pandemic through the country's

elaborate contact tracing regime. *De-interpellation* captures the societal discombobulation when the powerful interpellative process was ended as infection became widespread and the tracing regime was overwhelmed.

Chapter eight, the conclusion, summarises the study's contributions to knowledge and identifies potential avenues for future research.

Conclusion

Policies and legislation cannot be analysed exclusively at the fountainhead. Social scientists must longitudinally follow the meandering course of state commands through legislative bodies, regulatory agencies, and the people on the ground entrusted with distributing resources and applying sanctions. Beyond researching state officials, social scientists must see how rules, laws, regulations, and other commands are 'lived' over time. That is, they must explore how the targets of policies have 'rewritten' the rules through their everyday actions.

<div align="right">Migdal, 2020: 346</div>

This chapter has contextualised this study's ethnographic account of the coronavirus pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City in two ways. Firstly, it has clarified that, although this is a study of an exceptional event carried out in the tradition of accidental anthropology, the state-society negotiations analysed in this thesis are anything but exceptional in Vietnam. They are a longstanding feature of the country's political system and are very much 'how things work'. This has been observed in other contexts such as in Uganda where Macdonald and Owor noted, "while COVID-19 marks an extraordinary event, corona-politics is normal politics in Gulu." (in Green and Kirk, 2020: 24). Under the collaborative arrangement that was Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy, however, a flurry of new regulations reaching far into citizens' everyday lives required a new intensity of state-society negotiations. It is upon these intensified negotiations that this study focuses ethnographically.

The second way in which this chapter has contextualised the account to follow is by providing factual information about the Vietnamese government's Zero-COVID approach to managing the pandemic, charting how that policy evolved and fared over time. As this study concerns policy implementation at the action level (Rigby, 1976) rather than policy formulation at the bureaucratic level, detail of particular government directives and decisions has been kept relatively limited. In this study, like political scientist Joel Migdal, I have been more interested in following the meandering course of state commands as they were 'lived' during the coronavirus pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City rather than the diktats themselves. The next

chapter discusses the methodology I used in this task, including the implications of conducting ethnographic research in exceptional circumstances, and considers the role of serendipity in contemporary ethnographic practice.

2. Uncertainty, serendipity, opportunity: researching ethnographically during COVID-19

Wuhan, January 2020

On New Year's Day 2020, I travelled from London to Ho Chi Minh City to conduct preliminary research to inform my doctoral fieldwork with Vietnamese museum curators, due to start in April that year. I took the cheapest flights, requiring long layovers at Wuhan Tianhe airport in central China on both the outward and return legs. Transit passengers could take a city tour but, lacking energy, I chose to sit and wait in the terminal. It was a sleek and soulless place, enlivened only by local travellers loudly slurping instant noodles at their seats and by the sight of a regional airline's VIP check-in desk complete with ostentatious red carpet and velvet rope. Many travellers inside the terminal wore disposable face masks. I wondered whether people engaged in this practice to protect themselves from the thick smog that obscured almost everything outside the terminal building. Or maybe wearing a mask in a busy public place was connected to culturally-embedded notions of civility, as I knew from past experience to be the case in neighbouring Vietnam. Rumours circulating on Chinese microblogging site Weibo about a deadly virus spreading locally, however, had no doubt driven some to use a mask. For even though it was not yet widespread public knowledge, Wuhan was at that time the epicentre of the growing coronavirus outbreak that would before long escalate into a global pandemic, bringing death, illness, and economic devastation and causing normal life to be suspended worldwide.[11]

A few days after returning to the UK in mid-January, I received a bilingual Mandarin Chinese-English letter from Public Health England stating that I had been on the passenger manifest for a recent flight from Wuhan Tianhe to London Heathrow and should call to discuss my health status. I had no symptoms of the 'mystery virus' that would soon be known as COVID-19 but there were no tests available to confirm a person's viral status at that time anyway. I continued preparing for fieldwork. A week after I had returned to the UK, Vietnam reported its first COVID-19 case. As the pandemic worsened over the following months, governments closed national borders in an attempt to slow viral spread. Vietnam's own frontier

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[11] As I arrived in Vietnam, UK media outlets reported a 'mystery virus' circulating over the border in China (BBC News Online 2020a) but the scale of devastation that the pandemic would wreak worldwide was as yet unknown.

closure, enacted on 29 March 2020, would prevent me from entering the country again. Once I had got back into Vietnam over a year later, the deadly fourth wave of coronavirus hit Ho Chi Minh City, causing me to lose access to my proposed field site and eventually to refocus my research on the social impacts of COVID-19 in a community badly affected by the virus.

Your travel itinerary

		Date	Airport	Airline	Operated by
✈		**Departure** 21:10 Wed, 1 Jan	London (United Kingdom) - Heathrow (LHR) Terminal 4	China Southern Airlines CZ 674	China Southern Airlines
		Arrival 16:20 Thu, 2 Jan	Wuhan (China) - Wuhan (WUH)	Aircraft type - 788	Class - Economy
Departure Duration: 19 hours 55 minutes	─○─	**Connection - Change plane** Check with airline for boarding time and gate! Transfer duration: 5 hours 20 minutes			
		Departure 21:40 Thu, 2 Jan	Wuhan (China) - Wuhan (WUH)	China Southern Airlines CZ 8317	China Southern Airlines
		Arrival 00:05 Fri, 3 Jan	Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) - Tan Son Nhut (SGN) Terminal 2	Aircraft type - 738	Class - Economy
		Departure 01:40 Mon, 13 Jan	Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) - Tan Son Nhut (SGN) Terminal 2	China Southern Airlines CZ 8318	China Southern Airlines
		Arrival 06:20 Mon, 13 Jan	Wuhan (China) - Wuhan (WUH)	Aircraft type - 738	Class - Economy
Return Duration: 23 hours 50 minutes	─○─	**Connection - Change plane** Check with airline for boarding time and gate! Transfer duration: 8 hours 15 minutes			
		Departure 14:35 Mon, 13 Jan	Wuhan (China) - Wuhan (WUH)	China Southern Airlines CZ 673	China Southern Airlines
		Arrival 18:30 Mon, 13 Jan	London (United Kingdom) - Heathrow (LHR) Terminal 4	Aircraft type - 788	Class - Economy

Figure 7: London - Wuhan - Ho Chi Minh City travel itinerary, Jan 2020.

Introduction

The global coronavirus pandemic thrust a new reality on ethnographers, one in which the physical proximity required for immersive, face-to-face fieldwork had the potential to accelerate the spread of a dangerous virus. The imperative for so many researchers to switch field location, transition to digital methods, change their sampling strategy, or make multiple such adjustments in response to COVID-19 has reinvigorated debates around how ethnographers should approach the unforeseen, attracting a wide, engaged audience (Barker et al., 2023; Copeland, 2022; Fotta and Gay y Blasco, 2024; Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020, 2024; Meckin, Nind and Coverdale, 2023; Wood et al., 2020). This chapter contributes conceptual, methodological, and ethical reflections to those debates. It may also serve as a helpful resource for other researchers who find their fieldwork severely disrupted by unanticipated phenomena.

The rest of this chapter is divided into two main parts. In the first part, I summarise how the pandemic's disruptive impacts forced a new focus in my doctoral project and led serendipitously to a grant-funded collaborative project that I have pursued concurrently. As Luong (2015) observes, ethnographers' own roles and positions in field research serve to limit their knowledge so teaming up with these and other Vietnamese collaborators during fieldwork has helped me to develop a fuller picture of the COVID-19 phenomenon than I could have done alone. That project is described in appendix 1 of this thesis. I then discuss the research question that guided data collection and introduce the notion of 'disruption as method' that underpinned my approach to researching an unpredictable phenomenon in real time. Thereafter, I focus on ethical concerns of conducting face-to-face fieldwork during a pandemic and reflect on my positionality, including in relation to major differences in the UK's and Vietnam's national responses to COVID-19. I then outline the ethnographic research methods used, explain how coronavirus circulation impacted their use, and explain the disjointed temporal span of fieldwork. I then discuss the data analysis process. In the second part of the chapter, I reflect on the role of serendipity in ethnographic practice in general and in the present study in particular, and how it operates at various levels. I conceive of serendipity as a strategy for ethnographic discovery and a welcome driver of methodological innovation rather than something to be anticipated, avoided, and eliminated. After making suggestions as to how affordances for serendipity might be built into the ethnographic research process, the chapter concludes.

Research, interrupted

> *Interruptions and eruptions mock the field worker and his inquiry; more accurately, they may be said to inform his inquiry, to be an essential part of it. The constant breakdown, it seems to me, is not just an annoying accident but a core aspect of this type of inquiry.*

<div align="right">Rabinow, 1977: 154</div>

In mid-March 2021, once I had returned to Vietnam and been released from 15 days of mandatory hotel quarantine, a curator introduced to me by staff at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH) in Ho Chi Minh City named Giang agreed to take me on a private tour of the War Remnants Museum. At that time, fear of COVID-19 was rising in the city. People I knew were increasingly scaling back non-essential activities and the streets felt empty. On the day of the tour, another coronavirus case had been detected in the city, prompting senior staff to order the museum to shut immediately. Below is a direct excerpt from

my field notes that describes Giang and I looking around the deserted galleries as the museum closes around us.

> *After walking around the open air gallery we went indoors where I thought I might find a bit of relief from the heat. But as there were no visitors, there were neither operational fans nor air conditioning and the air hung heavy in the cavernous space. On the ground floor, instead of the usual automated videos from anti-war protests in Western countries was a blank screen. Giang then took me to the upstairs galleries, explaining that the museum would open only from 7.30am until 11.30am from tomorrow onwards due to the worsening pandemic situation. We looked briefly in each gallery. The 'agent orange through childrens' paintings' area was missing the two defoliant victims usually stationed there. They haven't been coming in during the pandemic, Giang said. Some workmen were finishing up fixing an air conditioning unit in another gallery. We set off for the third floor but as we were making for the staircase, a WC attendant told Giang the museum was closing. She seemed shocked. As we reached the top floor, a guard was securing the glass doors of one of the galleries with a large padlock. Giang, clearly superior in the museum hierarchy, told him to give us a minute. It seemed she wanted to finish the tour. We had a quick look around but she quickly said that we'd better go. She turned off the lights and the large free-standing fan nearby and we walked quickly to the remaining open exit. As we went down the staircase, I saw the walls were splattered with what looked like bird faeces. Cosmetic tasks like this will be done when Vietnam and the museum welcome foreign tourists back, her colleague Vinh had said earlier. But he confessed he doesn't think this will be for a long time.*

Field notes, 10 May 2021

The rushed closure of one of the city's cultural landmarks reflects the authorities' growing concern about the deteriorating public health situation. Progressively more stringent provisions within the country's Zero-COVID policy were being implemented, disrupting city life significantly (Tough, 2021a) and forcing a five month break in my fieldwork. When I returned to the UK, it was uncertain whether going back to Vietnam would be possible so I had considered alternative study topics. I became aware of ongoing efforts within British-Vietnamese communities to restore and re-archive a collection of rare documents and artefacts pertaining to the work of the An Viet Foundation.[12] Anthropologists engaged in postcolonial studies increasingly adopt historical perspectives and use archives in their research (Stoler, 2009; Trundle and Kaplonski, 2011; Zeitlyn, 2012). Inspired by this

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[12] The An Viet Foundation (AVF) was established in Hackney in 1981 to support Vietnamese settlement in London after the 'Vietnam War'. The AVF became a central hub for Vietnamese families, providing support with housing, health, English and Vietnamese language classes. The AVF formally closed in 2017.

burgeoning vein of scholarship, I had discussed the possibility of engaging ethnographically with the *An Viet* Foundation's archive with Diana Lê who was working on the restoration project. Ultimately it became possible to return to Vietnam so I took the opportunity to document the unfolding pandemic instead. I stayed in touch with Diana, however, and in early 2022 we joined with Nguyễn Tăng Quang, an artist who had published an iconic picture book (Nguyen, 2020) depicting his stay in government quarantine *Con Đã Về Nhà* (I'm Home), securing funding for a Ho Chi Minh City-based research project that fused our interests in archives, art, and ethnography (see appendix 1).

When 'being there' (Geertz, 1988; Watson, 1999) in Ho Chi Minh City for several months in 2021 was impossible, I remained in contact with interlocutors and friends in Vietnam via the Zalo instant messaging app. These exchanges became a vital means not only for maintaining relationships but for learning about city dwellers' subjective experiences of pandemic. In the tradition of field-based associates supporting ethnographers to study societies inaccessible to their direct observation (Benedict, 1947; Mead, Métraux and Beeman, 1953), two paid local research partners periodically emailed me short ethnographic reports depicting their daily lives and public spaces around the post-lockdown city.[13] I then planned an ethnographic enquiry focused on everyday experiences of pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City. The aspects of social life that they documented, interpreted, and translated in these reports informed my updated research plans and a selection are included in appendix 2 of this thesis. Although disappointing, this whole turn of events presented me with the opportunity to instead study the remarkable pandemic phenomenon that was upending city life and respond to appeals for more ethnographic studies of the pandemic in Vietnam and beyond (Higgins et al., 2020; Luong, 2020; Steenberg and Reyhé, 2020).

Research (re)design

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, many doctoral students abandoned or drastically scaled back their plans to collect data through long-term field-based ethnographic research and switched to digital ethnography. As the global coronavirus pandemic was declared before I had commenced my fieldwork proper, switching to use remote methods to collect the majority if not all of the data for this Ph.D. thesis was not a suitable or appealing option. Moreover, knowing from past experience of living in Vietnam how important face-to-face contact is in building relationships, I chose not to research with Vietnamese online communities while physically in the UK. I instead made a personal decision to strive for no more than one year to re-enter Vietnam while developing my Vietnamese language skills

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[13] Following Nguyen (2019) I use the term research partner to refer to local colleagues who have collected or supported me to collect field data for this study, recognising their role in the intellectual process in which meaning and knowledge are shaped and created by researchers and those they collaborate with in the field.

through online tuition and obtaining limited field data from Vietnam-based research partners and via secondary sources. If, after one year, field access remained blocked, I would reluctantly switch to a different field site in the UK or in Europe to conduct ethnographic research while living in a community. In the end, the bulk of the data that form this study's empirical basis were obtained through in-person ethnographic encounters while living among Vietnamese for an extended period of time. Face-to-face fieldwork, "the basic constituting experience not only of anthropological knowledge but of anthropologists...a shared archetypal experience" (Stocking, 1983: 7) was therefore the primary means by which ethnographic data for this study were gathered. Observations that I made during Ho Chi Minh City's escalating fourth wave period informed my work to change the study from a museum ethnography to an ethnographic enquiry into the social impacts of the government's Zero-COVID policy in one working-class community (Tough, 2021b). Living in an alleyway setting would be a higher level of immersion than conducting the previously-planned institutional ethnography but, seeing as my new study required me to closely observe and participate in the everyday co-operations and accommodations taking place locally as part of society's response to COVID-19, this was an appropriate location in which to base myself. Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod argues "...it is how institutions, rules and ways of doing things manifest in the everyday and are encountered by a community – the manner in which they happen – that reveal what they stand for." (1993: 13). For this study, I documented the everyday manifestations of rules and of 'ways of doing things' during COVID-19 by engaging with city dwellers in their community as a participant observer.

I began fieldwork with a broad overarching research question: 'What does it mean to experience the COVID-19 pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City?' The wide focus was partly to avoid limiting the scope of the enquiry from the outset as this can inhibit the development of new, theory-shaping knowledge from the data (Silverman, 2006). Additionally, as the coronavirus phenomenon was unprecedented and researching it was difficult for reasons discussed in the Introduction chapter, any data secured under such adverse conditions would contribute to filling the lacuna in anthropological knowledge on COVID-19 that had been identified (Bear et al., 2020; Soto Bermant and Ssorin-Chaikov, 2020). The research question emerged from my own experience of living in Ho Chi Minh City as the fourth wave of coronavirus cases upended social life and was also informed by my own twenty-year engagement with the city.

Disruption as method
Given that I was returning to fieldwork in Ho Chi Minh City in late 2021 when it was unknown whether or not another wave of coronavirus or a more virulent strain was going to emerge, it was important to adopt a flexible methodological approach. Although I had made

research plans before departure (Tough, 2021b), to study the pandemic within the parameters of the possible and reap the serendipity dividend necessitated treating disruption as method. For example, taking a lead from local researchers (Nguyen 2020; Nguyen 2021), I included tentative plans to collect data from home isolation, or from institutional quarantine had the re-imposition of the strictest Zero-COVID policies confined me to these environments. In the end, such policies were not reintroduced during my fieldwork, but by conceiving of disruption as method, a return to the field became feasible as I would be able to continue to collect relevant data even if the coronavirus crisis lurched in another unexpected direction. Although Vietnam's vaccination rate was very impressive by the time I returned to the field, not knowing whether the authorities would re-impose strict anti-virus measures nor whether vaccines would be effective against Omicron or other potentially more severe variants required a "leap into the abyss" (Scott, 2024: 55).

Figure 8: Confirmation of being quarantined on arrival in Vietnam, 12 March 2021.

My entries to the field were preceded by compulsory quarantine in a hotel room (15 days in March 2021, 8 days in December 2021), my request to enter the much cheaper government quarantine facility having been turned down as it was unsuitable (*không thích hợp*) for foreigners. Face-to-face interactions with staff were not allowed outside of a few heavily circumscribed situations such as the twice-daily temperature checks performed at the door by a nurse in full personal protective equipment (PPE). Being a participant observer in hotel quarantine - a distinctly liminal experience - therefore involved adhering to a set of written rules regulating bodily conduct, adapting to institutional norms as they became apparent, and paying close attention to how any infractions of these rules or norms were dealt with. The dearth of social interaction meant that many of the observations recorded in my field notes were sensorial, relating to the sounds, smells, and physical sensations of quarantine that were heightened in an environment otherwise lacking stimuli, or contemplative of the streetscape

below. In the week after I was released from quarantine, I prioritised going out and making observations and conducting interviews with the help of my research partner, introduced later in this chapter, in the neighbourhood and beyond. Therefore, if another lockdown were suddenly imposed, I would at least have some baseline data from that period when walking around outdoors was permitted.

Figure 9: Waiting to be called forward by nurse in hazmat suit (*quần áo bảo hộ y tế*) and visor for final qPCR test on day 14 of quarantine. A ground floor hotel room has been converted to a coronavirus testing centre. Author's photo, 26 March 2021

Ethics and positionality

Like Camfield and Palmer-Jones (2015), I recognise that ensuring rigour in qualitative research is a matter of ethics. This chapter's transparent account of the qualitative research process is therefore presented with my ethical commitments to research participants, peers, and funders in mind. As relatively few extended face-to-face ethnographic studies have been conducted on the topic of COVID-19, those ethnographies that do exist may carry additional

weight and this makes openness about the research process even more important. Before fieldwork commenced and with reference to disciplinary guidance (American Anthropological Association, n.d.), the approach to public health protection adopted by the Vietnamese authorities, and urgent calls for ethnographic studies of the pandemic to be carried out, I carefully considered the potential benefits and harms of conducting face-to-face ethnographic research in a coronavirus-affected context in a less economically developed country. Measures to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19 such as masking and disinfecting were identified in my application for ethical approval and I used these measures once data collection began. Precautions applied by the Vietnamese authorities to people entering the country further minimised the likelihood that the ethnographic research conducted for this thesis would exacerbate viral transmission. For example, I completed compulsory quarantine on two occasions when entering the country in 2021. I had had to produce a negative coronavirus test result before being able to board flights towards Vietnam and produce successive negative test results while in quarantine before being released into the wider community.

Stellmach et al. (2018) identify scenarios when an anthropological presence is not useful during public health emergencies such as in the first hours after a mass casualty event or in situations of very high ongoing insecurity. I did not collect field data at the pandemic's severest point in Ho Chi Minh City in mid-2021 when vaccination levels were low and infection rates were mushrooming. And with the risk of spreading coronavirus mitigated through the measures described above, the importance of contributing to knowledge by documenting an historic event was judged to outweigh the risks of the research harming those involved in it. Ethical approval was duly received from the University of East Anglia Research Ethics Subcommittee (ETH2223-2587; ETH2324-0219). City dwellers whom I encountered provided verbal informed consent to participate in interviews and where identifying images have been used in the thesis, participants signed a release form allowing their personal likenesses to be used in this way. All participants were informed how to withdraw their consent.

My contemplation of ethical issues went beyond that required by these institutional requirements, however. Anthropologist Oscar Salemink, seemingly influenced by anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's earlier critique of accountability practices in the academy (2000), argues, "even research which is fully conducted according to ethical codes may have adverse consequences for the research population. Therefore, constant reflection is needed which can only come through transparency and debate rather than through a fixation on rules and procedure – through process-oriented, contextually informed and case-specific emergent ethics rather than through fixed ethical codes." (2003: 190). What this meant in practice was reflecting at intervals on the kinds of stories I was being told and making judgements around whether to add particular accounts to the ethnographic record. COVID-19 as a research topic

in general is an especially sensitive one as it connotes death and trauma. During interviews and informal conversations, I remained alert for subtle indications that a respondent may be becoming uncomfortable discussing this topic and ended the conversation if necessary, cognisant that some city dwellers may not want to remember their epidemic experiences at all. The research explicitly avoided a focus on recent COVID-19 deaths or mourning.

As anthropologists have noted (Fotta and Gay y Blasco, 2024), COVID-19 made visible in new ways the existing inequalities that separate researchers and research participants. Prevented from working during lockdown, a lot of itinerant vendors were still struggling to recover financially during my data collection period. Many had sought succour in their rural hometowns (*quê*) as lockdown loomed in mid-2021 and had only returned to the city many months later, after the restrictions had been eased. That I had the time and financial means to go around the city asking people about the pandemic underlined a clear difference in our material circumstances. As noted earlier, Vietnam led the world in suppressing COVID-19 for a long period, despite the country's relatively limited economic means. Entering Vietnam in March 2021, my home nation of the UK was, conversely, suffering very high COVID-19 infection and mortality rates. In my conversations with city dwellers, I mentioned that the UK had suffered far higher COVID-19 case and death rates than Vietnam (Mathieu et al., 2020). In response, locals often expressed pride at Vietnam's approach to viral suppression and commiserated with me over the situation that had unfolded in the UK. I enjoyed particular forms of privilege that enabled me to conduct the present study. However, the pandemic challenged an assumption that more economically developed countries are able to control public health emergencies more effectively than less economically developed countries.

Comparison is acknowledged as critical in the dynamic process of anthropological knowledge production (Holy, 1987; Nader, 2015). As each nation was fighting the very same pathogen and because the price of state failure was high - citizens' deaths - the coronavirus crisis served as a potent arena for making nation-based comparisons during fieldwork. The status of researcher and interlocutors as humans equally susceptible to infection and equally at the whim of decisions made by our national governments around how to control the common coronavirus threat acted as a leveller of sorts. That I was talking to locals about a pandemic that my home nation had controlled far less effectively shows how researcher and research participants' positionalities must be understood as context-specific rather than fixed and immutable. Some foreigners did not wear face masks early in the pandemic contrary to the authorities' exhortations, attracting some social media abuse and verbal attacks in public places (Tuoi Tre, 2020). I did not experience anything like this while conducting this research. Nor did I find my neighbours reluctant to interact, apart from a few older residents who seemed to have reservations about coming to the door, although it was not clear whether this was due

to my foreigner status or a general uneasiness about interacting with strangers in the wake of the pandemic.

Ethnographic methods

The choice of methods used in this study has been informed by an interpretivist epistemological approach that conceives of social reality as intersubjectively constructed by those participating in it, rather than a set of objective facts to be discovered (Geertz, 1973). Data were collected primarily through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and life history interviews and, secondarily, via participatory photography and follow-up group conversations. These particular qualitative methods rather than surveys or other types of quantitative analysis were used not only to enable the construction of knowledge from city dwellers' own experience in their own context but also to demonstrate respect for and interest in their lives. Combining methods enabled me to address the rich texture of reality through triangulation, as discussed further in the data analysis section. Kinship terms are an integral part of Vietnamese culture (Luong, 1990). When living in Vietnam between the ages of 18 and 20, I had referred to myself as *em* (younger sister) as did all others I encountered when I was not perceived to be older than them. My January 2020 scoping visit to Ho Chi Minh City was the first occasion on which I had been addressed, and started referring to myself as, *chị* or *cô* (older sister). This is an important shift in status according to Vietnam's highly descriptive kinship terminology and shaped every interaction I had with Vietnamese people during fieldwork for this project. I deduce that this change in status was to my advantage during fieldwork, as age can connote wisdom in Vietnamese culture. I also consulted secondary sources such as internet news websites and reader discussions beneath them. I will now discuss various methods and how coronavirus circulation impacted their use.

<u>Participant observation</u>

Ethnography might be described as 'research through closeness' given the importance of physical proximity in ethnographic fieldwork. Masking outdoors was mandatory until September 2022, so for most of the time when I was engaged in fieldwork for this study. Even when it was no longer mandatory, masking remained widespread in my neighbourhood and around the city due to habit, masks being worn for other purposes such as protecting against dust and pollution, and because masking became strongly linked to Vietnam's civility discourse, as discussed in chapter seven. However, during my fieldwork and as Robert observed in a Ho Chi Minh City market earlier in the pandemic (2020), wearing a mask was to an extent was a matter of acquaintance. To give just one example from fieldwork, when my prospective landlord and her grandson were showing me around the empty property I was interested in renting, we all wore masks. When I confirmed then and there that I wanted to

rent the property and we sat down to deal with the paperwork, she indicated we should all remove our masks, presumably as we were now forming an ongoing acquaintance (Field notes, 12 December 2021). In our many subsequent indoor interactions, we did not wear masks in each others' presence again. However, when I was out and about talking to people I did not know, these were mask-mediated affairs. To converse in such circumstances, it was important to maintain eye contact and try to move conversations away from noisy traffic, given that masks muffle speakers' voices and prevent listeners from lip reading. Food vendors were blamed for spreading infection during the pandemic and even though masking outdoors was no longer mandatory, some local sellers almost always wore masks to avert any accusations of being unhygienic. In one case, I only saw a particular local vendor's face just before the end of fieldwork, after a year of interacting with them.

Interviews

Interviews offer the researcher more control over the progression of a discussion and can present an opportunity to have a conversation that is less disrupted than in day-to-day life. As mentioned earlier, my research partner served as translator for interviews early on in my fieldwork and away from my local neighbourhood as I did not judge my Vietnamese language skills good enough to conduct these myself. I had enlisted him based on his English language ability, qualitative research experience, and knowledge of city bureaucracy. This generally worked well although I could sometimes hear him converting my 'foreigner' questions into more 'Vietnamese' alternatives when I was interested in leveraging my position as a foreigner to ask obvious or strange questions. Once I was more confident in my Vietnamese language ability and had got to know people in the locality, I sat down with neighbours several times for life history interviews or, if they were time-pressed, once for a regular pandemic-themed interview. Living in the community long-term, I also engaged in informal conversations with my neighbours on a day-to-day basis. I recorded the knowledge that I acquired through these encounters in daily field notes that I subsequently coded.

In my low-income neighbourhood, described in the next chapter, residents work long hours so it did at times prove challenging to get people of working age to agree to an interview. I therefore interviewed people at various times of day, speaking to a 21-year-old bánh mì seller between 10pm and 11pm as he served his last few customers driving along Đoàn Văn Bơ street, a hotpot restaurant worker early in the morning after he had returned from the market with vegetables for the next day's business, before he headed off to bed, and the landlady of my rented room as she played with her daughter mid-morning. In some cases, it appeared that interviewees were providing narratives that they expected to be the 'right' ones such as pharmacist Ngọc thanking me personally for the AstraZeneca vaccines sent to Vietnam by the

UK under the COVAX initiative. Having considerable participant observation data from spending time in her shop and attending church together allowed me to understand her answers in context.

Participatory photography

To obtain data on what was a visual as well as a viral phenomenon, I included participatory photography in my revised doctoral project's methodology. Using this method involved five local youth and I independently photographing COVID-19 materiality such as posters, signage, murals, graffiti, discarded personal protective equipment, disinfection paraphernalia and barricades that we witnessed in our Ho Chi Minh City neighbourhoods between March and June 2022. We then shared our photos in a group chat on Zalo instant messenger and in a shared drive. Except for one recent sociology graduate from among my existing contacts, all participants were studying at the city's University of Economics and Finance. They were recruited via snowball sampling via a student I had met through an online initiative connecting Vietnamese students with native speakers when their face-to-face English classes were cancelled during lockdown. Group members were asked to share images of material objects with potentially interesting backstories and not to photograph humans as informed consent could not be guaranteed. As well as collaborating remotely, once all group members were fully vaccinated, we engaged in four face-to-face conversations in cafes and bubble tea shops near the students' university campuses.[14]

At photo group meetings, I displayed our accumulated images on a laptop and we discussed our different ideas about what each image depicted, the viewing process constituting a dynamic interaction between the original photographer, other group members, and the image in which meaning was actively constructed. Sessions were audio recorded, transcripts arising were subject to thematic analysis, and emerging themes such as ethical officialdom and civility shaming are explored in this thesis. In the final session, we agreed that the number of images and common themes emerging from our pilot warranted a categorisation system and speculated as to the form this might take. I had deliberately not imposed such a system so as not to influence the data collection process. The project was at an end so we did not end up categorising our images. But the discussion prompted us to consider the possibility of an online archiving project under which city dwellers could submit their visual memories of

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[14] We had originally planned more than four group conversations. But as Vietnam experiences rapid economic growth, high-achieving young individuals like the photography group members are booked up with extra classes, making applications to study abroad, doing internships, and embarking on entrepreneurial pursuits enabled by digital marketplaces (Phan and Bae, 2021). This meant that our photo group was just one of a portfolio of interesting things that they had to attend to, which made finding opportunities to meet as a collective difficult. This contrasts with my first period of residence in Ho Chi Minh City in 2003. Back then, students did not have schedules as such, let alone computers and smartphones on which to coordinate them.

pandemic and categorise them by co-creating the associated metadata. I have led that project entitled *Archiving COVID-19 Heritage in Ho Chi Minh City*, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council and Global Challenges Research Fund and UEA's Impact Acceleration Account, alongside my doctoral research (see appendix 1).

Participatory photography was used for three reasons. Firstly, as this method involves individuals gathering, sharing, and analysing data via a smartphone without coming into physical proximity with potentially-infected others, it is relatively safe to use during a pandemic. Secondly, this method enabled the team to efficiently gather data from multiple neighbourhoods and to do so rapidly before COVID-19 objects disappeared from the public realm, and to quickly engage in initial analysis, harnessing the "temporal immediacy of electronic communication (that) makes fieldwork in new contexts of timespace possible." (Marcus and Mascarenhas, 2005: 15). Thirdly, field research in so-called developing countries has colonial foundations and indigenous voices have historically been silenced in hierarchical research processes (Rappaport, 2007, 2016; Heffernan, Murphy and Skinner, 2020). Participatory methods offer opportunities for "embracing a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic positions." (Mbembe, 2016: 37). Visual methods in particular can help to reduce power imbalances in field research by giving participants a role in setting the research agenda and in analysing the accumulated data (Byrne, Daykin and Coad, 2016; Pink, 2001).

When making plans to use participatory photography, there remained a risk that fresh physical distancing restrictions could be imposed in Ho Chi Minh City. It was therefore necessary to consider how this method could still be used under those circumstances. Earlier in the pandemic when face-to-face data collection with human participants was impossible, some researchers used a novel method of contemporary archaeology to systematically gather and log photographic and location data about COVID-19 ephemera in the public realm (Angelo et al., 2021; Magnani et al., 2022; Schofield et al., 2021). This enabled them to determine how the material response to the pandemic and citizens' behaviour changed over time and across space.[15] In the end, the most significant physical distancing restrictions were not re-enforced in Ho Chi Minh City once they had been repealed. Therefore it was not necessary for group members to solely use contemporary archaeology during, for example, their twice weekly permitted walk to the supermarket, this being the only outdoor mobility most city dwellers were permitted to engage in at the height of the city's lockdown. Had the coronavirus situation

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[15] During the new normal period of lessened restrictions, COVID-19 objects were gradually removed from Ho Chi Minh City streets, repurposed, or otherwise absorbed into the fabric of the city (Tough, 2022)

worsened while our project was ongoing, however, having discussed this method in our first in-person meeting, we would have been ready to use it to continue collecting data in a more distanced way.

This initiative generated a valuable stock of photographs with annotations and led to two spin-off interviews with a group member's friend keen to discuss their recent experience of hospital quarantine. Our group meetings also provided an opportunity for face-to-face contact in the months after Vietnam's strict Zero-COVID policy had been ended and the new normal (*bình thường mới*) phase of the pandemic had been announced. At that time, city dwellers were wrestling with emerging social norms around how to behave if they suspected they had been exposed to the virus but were no longer subject to the aggressive contact tracing system and its threat of compulsory quarantine or home isolation. In chapter seven, I conceptualise the discombobulation that we experienced in our meetings then as *de-interpellation*.

Data analysis

During fieldwork, I recorded field notes in a notebook or app contemporaneously and transferred them into word documents, usually the same day in the evening, this process constituting a preliminary stage of data analysis. Interviews were audio recorded and interview transcripts were then produced in English and Vietnamese by myself, occasionally by the interviewee themselves, or by bilingual Vietnamese young professionals or students known to me. As all translations are selective renderings of data, I also considered how an individual's background and positionality may have affected how they translated particular words and phrases. For quality control purposes, I asked Vietnamese friends and interlocutors to check these materials wherever possible. Analysing Vietnamese language materials about COVID-19 presented some challenges despite my Vietnamese language skills. Pandemic-related terminology can be specialised and the full meaning of particular words and phrases is likely only be fully grasped by a native speaker. I have asked multiple native Vietnamese speakers including my Vietnamese language teachers about the meaning of particular phrases or words if these have been unclear to me.

On returning to the UK, I engaged in thematic analysis, aided by NVivo, of field notes, interview transcripts, and visual materials, identifying themes that captured some important aspects of the data in relation to the research question. While data analysis is an ongoing process, I formally applied codes to the data in 2023 as the global COVID-19 pandemic was moving into a less acute phase. This means that the process of revisiting and coding the data took place when the COVID-19 'end game' was playing out. Biographical and historical time therefore provided opportunities for rich recontextualisation of the data. When I did not

personally observe a particular event unfolding, for example, during the most severe period of pandemic between July and September 2021, I have triangulated the interlocutor accounts with secondary sources and with accounts of the same phenomenon that I have obtained from other city dwellers. I obtained these accounts by exchanging messages and links to relevant webpages and documents on Zalo instant messenger with my contacts or if in Vietnam at the time, I asked them questions while we had coffee. Where it has not been possible to ascertain how a particular event unfolded, I explain in the thesis why divergent understandings of the same phenomenon may exist.

Serendipity, disguised as catastrophe

Described as "the art of making an unsought finding" (Van Andel, 1994: 631) as opposed to a deliberate discovery by experimentation or *ex post facto* prediction, serendipity is considered an important ideal in scientific enquiry (Pievani, 2024). The value of serendipity in ethnographic practice specifically has been widely acknowledged (Hannerz, 2006; Hazan and Hertzog, 2011; Herzfeld, 2012, 2014; Kirk and Miller, 1986; Miller, 2013; O'Dell and Willim, 2011; Rivoal and Salazar, 2013; Stoller, 2014). Disasters have even been described as "serendipity, disguised as catastrophe" (Pelto and Pelto, 1978: 185). This statement should be interpreted carefully. Over seven million COVID-19 deaths have been reported to date by the WHO (2024) making the global coronavirus pandemic an undeniable human catastrophe. That this disaster serendipitously coincided with my doctoral fieldwork period, however, presented a remarkable opportunity to witness and commit to the ethnographic record an extraordinary event and make a contribution to knowledge in the tradition of accidental anthropology. Because such research cannot be pre-planned, ethnographic studies of disasters, revolutions, and other such ruptures are few, making it incumbent upon researchers to seize these opportunities if it is ethical and useful to do so (Stellmach et al., 2018). How the research that informs this thesis was judged as meeting these conditions was discussed in the previous ethics and positionality section. Serendipity can exert its influence at the macro level – the study topic, for example - or at the micro level in terms of the day-to-day happenstance that ethnographic research entails. Before discussing the former, in the next section I give an example of the latter.

Electric shock

On returning to Ho Chi Minh City in December 2021, I had to find a new fieldwork home at short notice. With little time and with city-based contacts unwilling to view properties on my behalf when I was UK-based due to their fear of visiting areas with high COVID-19 rates, after peering at a few grainy videos sent through the Zalo instant messaging app, I decided to move to an alleyway off a busy main street in district 4, part of the city previously relatively little

known to me. As Strathern (2005: vii) points out, "social scientists always enter social worlds through specific social nodes and work through particular sets of relationships, making connections across various contexts, patterns and processes to produce ethnographic knowledge in which our depictions are always partial and situated." In my case the node was a Vietnamese London-based colleague of my partner. It just so happened that district 4 had had the highest concentration of COVID-19 cases in the city. Her parents normally let a four-storey tube house situated next to their own property to students from Mekong Delta locales who would share two sets of bunk beds in each of the two main bedrooms. They would also rent out the stifling top floor room with a fold-out bed on a short term basis to a single low-income migrant worker in need of a cheap place to sleep. However, as noted in the Introduction chapter, such students and workers had largely fled the city before lockdown for their hometowns and the property had therefore been vacant for some time.

My new fieldwork home turned out to have several broken appliances, this not having been apparent on the Zalo video calls during which my partner and I viewed the property. This was a bit of a shock - uncomfortable, inconvenient, and nearly transformed the notion of accidental anthropology discussed in the previous chapter into a dangerous reality at times. But the need to get things fixed necessitated frequent interactions with my landlord and drew in multiple family members and neighbours keen to help two outsiders settle into the community. The ensuing conversations not only helped to build neighbourly relations but often centered around what constituted a 'comfortable' standard of living - a good life - there in the alleyway.[16] They also revealed the indispensability of electrical home appliances in the unsustainable 'electric lives' of contemporary Vietnamese householders (Endres, 2024).

The imperative to repair these broken appliances and the close-knit alleyway setting enabled me to strike up a friendship with a middle-aged neighbour and part-time app-based motorbike taxi driver who was adept at fixing things, his 'make do and mend' skills a legacy of the postwar period when embargoes prevented new parts from entering Vietnam. Once a cyclo driver for tourists Mr Nguyễn spoke fairly good English and became an interesting commentator on life in the alleyway and beyond, enjoying using his English language skills not only to impress our non-English-speaking neighbours but to voice critical views about peoples' behaviour on the alley when they were within earshot. He entered my house to help fix things and this prompted discussions about our relative possessions, the amount of living space we had, the cleanliness of our homes, the number of cockroaches and so on. A serendipitous set of circumstances therefore helped to foster a relationship with this important

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[16] For a more general discussion of living standards and expectations in Vietnamese cities see a recent special issue of *Positions: Asia Critique* on notions of the good life in socialist Asia (Nguyen, Wilcox and Lin, 2024).

and unique informant during my fieldwork. In addition, his wife was a cleaner in a luxurious housing development in foreigner enclave Thảo Điền. She told select residents about her husband's mending skills and, as his rates were lower than the excessive repair fees levied by the building's management company, he entered the complex reasonably regularly to do repair jobs for expats. If the security guard asked why he was visiting the complex, he maintained he was 'visiting a friend'. This arrangement demonstrates interdependencies between one district 4 alleyway community and a master-planned development several miles away, revealing those supposedly exclusive spaces as, in fact, 'porous enclaves' (Harms, 2015) that sustain city dwellers in parts of the city that on the face of it have no connection to them at all. The next section considers how ethnographers might best manipulate the conditions that can lead to serendipitous outcomes and identifies potential barriers to serendipity in the current research climate.

Affordances for serendipity

Herzfeld has argued, "The very chanciness, the serendipity, of anthropological research, which is often the object of reproachful critiques by more positively-inclined social scientists (and by ill-informed public critics, insofar as they take any interest at all), is actually the source of its greatest strength." (2012: 12). But what, if anything, can researchers do during fieldwork to induce something that seems so ephemeral? This section acknowledges that, while rigorously preparing for serendipity is impossible, affordances for serendipity can be built into the ethnographic research process and suggests how researchers, supported by research institutions, might do this.

Eighteenth century novelist Horace Walpole is credited with coining the term serendipity in his English version of Persian fairy tale *The Three Princes of Serendip*. Walpole argued that explorers who end up making unsought findings are not only lucky but also sagacious, meaning wise and shrewd enough to recognise and seize opportunities when they arise. While Pieke focuses on anthropologists' research techniques rather than the sagaciousness of fictional princes, he also acknowledges the role individual agency plays in chance discoveries:

> *Methodologically, serendipity is vital to us as a strategy of ethnographic discovery, a guiding principle for the design of research projects…Anthropology requires a methodology (or at any rate a strategy) to invite serendipity in as much as positivist research requires a methodology to keep it out.*

Pieke, 2000: 149

When formulating research plans, Pieke advocates adopting an exploratory approach that allows the unexpected to eventuate.[17] In this study, by purposively choosing the expansive research question 'What does it mean to experience the COVID-19 pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City?' I avoided restricting my interest in a little-studied empirical phenomenon to particular social groups or topics, profiting from the fortuitous encounters brought about by "non-goal-oriented participant observation, the so-called 'deep hanging out' that lends ethnographic research its ability to think outside the box." (Harms, 2022: 328).

Beyond decisions around research questions, methods, and sampling strategies, researcher opportunism is also recognised as an important driver of serendipitous discoveries. Hannerz, for example, recommends researchers remain willing to, "depart from research plans and research designs that we carry into the field when we run into opportunities that simply should not be missed." (2006: 32). However, while opportunism is agentic, the extent to which researchers can exercise it depends upon environmental factors, such as a research institution's socio-epistemological norms. As philosopher Samantha Copeland puts it:

> *Serendipity can, to a degree, be controlled. This is paradoxical on the individual level, insofar as the individual cannot control the rest of serendipity. Rather, environmental and even internalized constraints that reflect the norms and resources of their community and context can prevent individuals from utilizing the skills they have.*

> Copeland, 2019: 2403

Indeed, audit culture (Strathern, 2000) goes against the development of serendipity-based norms that foster the kind of open-ended research that may lead to chance discoveries. If, as Copeland argues, "The most important aspect of serendipity is its role in disrupting and changing epistemic expectations, in particular about the kinds of discoveries that might be made and where they may originate…" (2019: 2403) then the various accountability exercises that researchers engage in may limit expectations around what might constitute potential sources of knowledge.

Despite the structural limitations in terms of time, resources, and research objectives that are imposed by universities, funding agencies and government institutions, there is evidence that COVID-19 brought about more pragmatic approaches to research governance that supported serendipitous discovery-making. Abram, Lambert and Robinson (2023) highlight the development of rapid review and response mechanisms by certain research

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[17] Strategies for inviting serendipity into positivist science have been taken forwards in recent decades, however. Inside the Francis Crick Institute - a biomedical research facility that I often walk past in central London - laboratory space is deliberately designed to be shared between scientists in different disciplines in order to foster new connections and stimulate serendipitous advances (Matthews, 2015).

funders during the pandemic. These streamlined processes supported some researchers - especially in the life and biomedical sciences but also the social sciences – to secure financial support to opportunistically study the unfolding public health crisis. Encouragingly, some of these mechanisms appear to have been carried forwards into funders' business-as-usual processes. The ethnographic data discussed in this thesis were also able to be collected within the previously-mentioned limitations during a time of pandemic. Financial support from the Leverhulme Trust for increased research costs associated with compulsory quarantine, coronavirus testing, and higher flight ticket prices was pivotal in making this the case.

Finally, Salemink identifies careful work done during the *préterrain* as vital for making serendipity go the researcher's way, arguing that "The single most important thing that (aspiring) anthropologists can do is to patiently build relations of long-term mutuality and reciprocity – which is something that can be prepared for before the actual field research." (2015: 144). Lainez and Pannier (2024) also emphasise patience and a willingness to engage in a 'trial and error' approach to securing research permissions, and securing lucky breaks in order to engage in anthropological research in Vietnam. Maintaining relations for no explicit purpose with many city dwellers since first living in Ho Chi Minh City in 2003, initially by exchanging letters and later via social media platforms, gave me a baseline understanding of everyday reality against which I have been able to comparatively analyse the recent pandemic's disruption, generating questions to be addressed through future research.

This chapter has summarised how disruption caused by the coronavirus global pandemic forced a new focus in my doctoral project. It has explained how the data that inform this thesis were collected and analysed, detailed factors that have influenced conclusions drawn from the data, and discussed the ethics of conducting face-to-face fieldwork during a pandemic. The chapter ends by restating the importance of serendipity in this project's development and in contemporary ethnographic practice more generally.

Conclusion

For ethnographers, the field has always influenced the research design, rather than vice versa. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, a coronavirus-stricken field inflicted unprecedented disruption on fieldworkers, requiring them to overhaul their projects *en masse*, reinvigorating debates around how to approach the unforeseen in ethnographic research. In this chapter, my own disrupted ethnographic research journey has been used as a case study to show how the vicissitudes of the pandemic not only ended my original doctoral fieldwork plans but serendipitously gifted them a fruitful new focus and catalysed an additional three-year participatory research project. As part of a "strategy to invite serendipity in" (Pieke, 2000: 149), I reimagined disruption as a key driver of the ethnographic method rather than something

to be avoided and contained, preparing to collect data from institutional quarantine or from the confines of my alleyway home had the circumstances required it. If serendipity is "an engine for moving anthropology forward, (that) at the same time holds in store the promise and the prospect of derailing elsewhere towards other destinations' (Hazan and Hertzog, 2011: 9) then this chapter has described the process of getting to one such unexpected destination.

While both luck and sagacity play a role in ethnographers' serendipitous discoveries, regulations and funding decisions, influenced by the prevailing socio-political and economic context for knowledge production, increasingly dictate the extent to which researchers are able to study emerging events and go on to make fortuitous discoveries. As Henig and Knight remind us, we live in an era of 'polycrisis', "a knot in history when eventedness is denser – where multiple critical events are clumping together." (2023: 6). This new reality requires an ethnographic and epistemological approach no less focused on protecting those involved in the research process from potential harms and that better supports ethnographers to seize rare opportunities to study the unforeseen.

3. Khánh Hội Xưa - Quận 4 Ngày Nay (Khanh Hoi of old, district 4 today)

As researchers, we bring our own discriminating gaze. We locate a site, find relevant informants, survey social landscapes, and watch events unfold.

Siu, 2016: 16

Introduction

The founding of what is now Ho Chi Minh City is commonly linked to the arrival of General Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh and his troops in 1698 during Vietnam's Nguyễn dynasty and the administrative order implemented thereafter. This version of events has been incorporated into twentieth century nationalist narratives around *nam tiến* (the march to the south). Beforehand, the area had long been known as Prey Nôkôr, part of the Khmer kingdom. In 1859, French invaders destroyed the citadel of Saigon (*Thành Sài Gòn)* and seized the city, making Saigon the capital of the Cochinchina colony from 1862 to 1949 and the capital of French Indochina from 1887 to 1902 and then again from 1945 to 1954. From 1949 to 1955, Saigon served as capital of the State of Vietnam, part of the French Union and then a short-lived semi-constitutional monarchy that claimed to rule Vietnam in its entirety.

Figure 10: Pont Tournant (Swing Bridge) over the Arroyo Chinois (Bến Nghé Canal). The bridge connected the city centre (left) with the port area (right). Construction, undertaken by Société de Construction de Levallois-Perret, was completed in 1903. Credit: Tim Doling.

Following Vietnam's partition in 1954, Saigon became the capital of South Vietnam until the country was defeated by North Vietnam in 1975, bringing the 'Vietnam War' to an end. The unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam came into existence in 1976 and Saigon was renamed after Hồ Chí Minh, the first President of North Vietnam. The city is now referred to as Saigon and Ho Chi Minh City by its residents interchangeably. The city's official population is estimated to be 9.6 million people (United Nations, 2024) but once city dwellers without household registration have been taken into account, the true figure is thought to be around three million higher (Gubry, 2019).[18] However, recent research by the Ho Chi Minh City Institute for Development Studies, discussed in online media (VNExpress, 2024a; VNExpress, 2024b), revealed that the high cost of living, greater economic development in various provinces, and increased options for working online from locations outside of Ho Chi Minh City were deterring potential migrants from moving to the metropolis. While this has been portrayed as reversing an inexorable rise in the city's population, results from Luong's longitudinal and panel study (2018) had already raised the changing configuration in urban-rural migration in Vietnam.

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[18] In 2017, the city's Mayor described the population as having already reached 13 million and cited an average population density of over 6,200 inhabitants per Km^2, higher than in Tokyo (VNExpress, 2017).

Ho Chi Minh City consists of sixteen inner-city urban districts (*quận*), five outer-city suburban districts (*huyện*), and one municipal city. Surrounding the metropolis are the agricultural provinces in the Mekong Delta (south-west), agrarian Tây Ninh province (north-west), and the industrialising south-eastern provinces of Bình Dương, Đồng Nai, and Bà Rịa–Vũng Tàu. This study has focused ethnographically on the particular case of Ho Chi Minh City's district 4 and three of its sub-district wards, a ward (*phường*) serving as an administrative unit at the lowest level of governance in Vietnam's cities and smaller urban areas. It is helpful to consider Lund's description of a case as an "edited chunk of empirical reality where certain features are marked out, emphasized, and privileged while others recede into the background… a case is not 'natural,' but a mental, or analytical, construct aimed at organizing knowledge about reality in a manageable way." (2014: 224). Through the case it presents, the thesis provides an analytical generalisation, the "identification of fundamental or constituent properties in an event or phenomenon." (2014: 226). The constituent properties of the COVID-19 phenomenon in Ho Chi Minh City are discussed across the chapters of this thesis.

As discussed in the previous chapter, despite being the part of Ho Chi Minh City worst affected by the coronavirus crisis and therefore an apt location in which to study the pandemic's social impacts, I did not purposively select district 4 as a case. Rather, serendipitous events led me towards that part of the city. I was, however, familiar with the alleyway way of life from my past residence in the city, as noted in the Introduction chapter. Although data from other parts of the city are presented in this thesis and I have also drawn on secondary sources such as internet articles, the majority of the ethnographic data I discuss were collected in district 4. In the sections below, I draw on publicly accessible secondary sources to briefly introduce district 4: its history, location and demographic characteristics, its place in city imaginaries, its infrastructure, and its administration. I draw from my field notes and interviews to describe my immediate field site, a place referred to locally as the burning house area (*khu nhà cháy*) after an infamous conflagration decades earlier, the sub-district ward in which it is located, and the two other wards in which I was immersed during fieldwork. I describe the alleyway-based way of life of many local residents, give some everyday examples of economic solidarity from my neighbourhood, and discuss how the field area is regulated before concluding.

History and repute

According to District 4 People's Committee (Quan 4 Ho Chi Minh City, 2025) the ancient land known as Khánh Hội comprises several areas brought together as part of General Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh's efforts to administratively organise the city, namely Khánh Hội, Vĩnh Hội,

Cây Bàng, Xóm Chiếu, and Nguyễn Kiệu islet.[19] During the French colonial period, district 4 was known as Xóm Chiếu or Khánh Hội.[20] The current name district 4 has been used since 1959, although the exact area covered by the district has shifted somewhat in light of administrative changes over the years. As discussed in more detail later in this chapter, with the Sài Gòn River and canals on each side, district 4 has always been a fishing and trading hub. To this day, the district is considered a culinary destination, renowned especially for its seafood. In the 1980s and 1990s, the district was the city's centre of mafia activity, the waterways, alleyways, and proximity to district 1 making it a handy criminal hub. Locals told me that the spaces beneath stilt houses along the river and canals have provided excellent hiding places for those resisting both French and American invaders over the years.

Until his incarceration and subsequent execution in 2004, Năm Cam ('Godfather of Saigon') and his associates wielded power over the district including its brothels and gambling dens near the port that had originally been set up to cater to American troops during the 'Vietnam War'. A friend who grew up in the district, now a senior executive at an app-based multi-service digital platform, recalled people running around her neighbourhood with knives (Field notes, 28 March 2022) and many participatory photography group members originally from elsewhere in the city or from other provinces such as Tây Ninh were still somewhat trepidatious about visiting district 4, having heard scare stories from their parents (Field notes, 10 March 2022). A 30-something lifelong resident expressed pride that the drug-taking and gambling he had witnessed when growing up in the district had now been eclipsed in the public imagination by the area's quality street food, especially that sold on 20 Thước 'food street'.[21] He now leads gastronomic tours in district 4 for foreign tourists, although for two years he was prevented from doing so by Vietnam's closed border policy during the pandemic. As well as an administrative one, the distinction made between inner-city and outer-city Saigon is an important psychological and symbolic one that structures not only spatial but also social relations, argues Erik Harms in his seminal ethnography *Saigon's Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (2011) that explores the impacts of rapid urbanisation on people living at the city's urban-rural interface. As part of the inner city (*nội thành*), district 4 is considered part of the city's "modern and forward-moving urban core" (2011: 2) whereas the outer city (*ngoại thành)* is linked to the "traditional and past-oriented rural countryside" (2011: 2).

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[19] A documentary recently uploaded to YouTube entitled 'District 4 of old, Khánh Hội islet' (Hang Phim Nguyen Dinh Chieu, 2024) provides further information on the area's history.

[20] For further historical details of Khánh Hội area including before the French colonial period see Cherry (2019).

[21] Thước is a unit of measurement equivalent to 0.4 metres. Thước also can be used to refer to a ruler so its usage here may refer to the street's straightness.
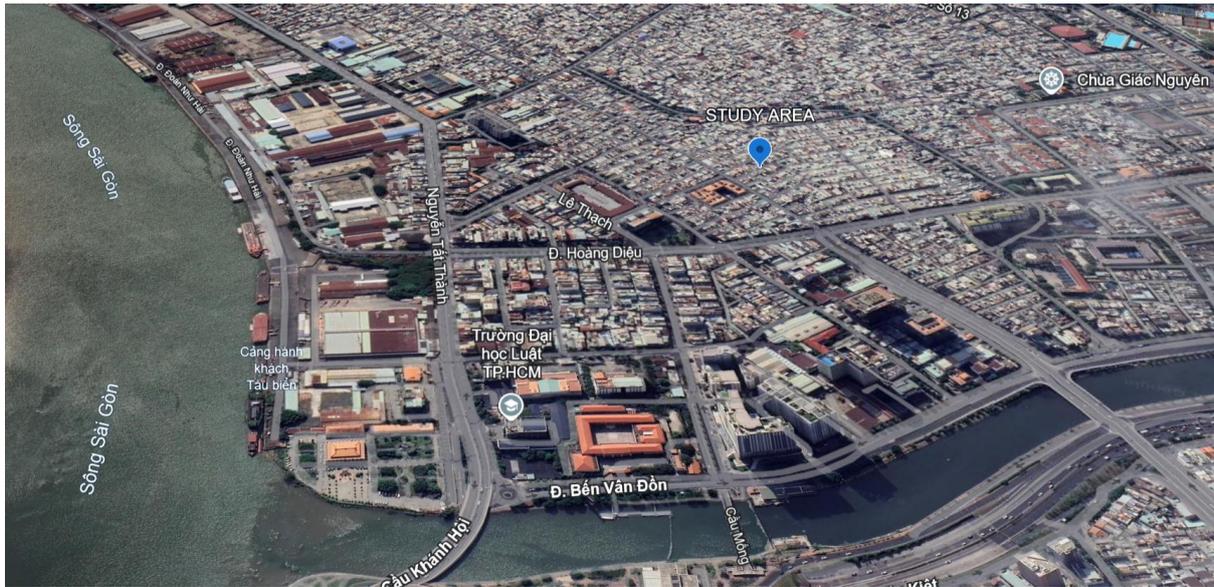
Figure 11: Aerial view of study area in northeast district 4. Source: Google Earth.

Geographical and demographic characteristics

District 4 is a triangular island, separated from the rest of Ho Chi Minh City by the Sài Gòn river and Bến Nghé and Tẻ canals. It is one of the city's most flood-prone districts, given its proximity to the river, so the local authorities build ledges in front of each property's entrance with the aim of preventing them from being inundated when it rains heavily. To the east, district 4 borders Thủ Đức municipal city across the Sài Gòn River and district 7 across the Tẻ canal. To the west, district 4 borders district 1 and district 5 with the Bến Nghé canal serving as the boundary. To the south, district 4 borders district 7 and district 8 and the boundary is the Tẻ canal. To the north, district 4 borders district 1. The Bến Nghé canal is the boundary. According to the 2019 census, district 4 continues to have a young population with over 33 per cent aged 20 to 39 years old, 29 per cent aged 40 to 59 years old and 13 per cent aged 60 and over (Quan 4 Ho Chi Minh City, 2019), broadly reflecting the wider city's demographic profile. Nationally, over 60s account for 12 per cent of the population (UNFPA, 2019).

Workers such as those from Vĩnh Long and Bến Tre provinces in the Mekong Delta whom I got to know during fieldwork and other migrants like them contribute to the large cohort of working-age people locally. District 4 has a strong tradition of blue-collar labour, with workers employed in various small-scale manufacturing sectors, including construction, mechanics, and electronics and in the hospitality trade. Moreover, the district's commercial and industrial zones attract many workers from other parts of the city and from the countryside. The migrants I met compared district 4 unfavourably to more 'attractive' parts of the city and preferred the idea of living in the more spacious (*rộng*) countryside than in Ho Chi Minh City.

They agreed, however, that the city was good for making money. As the city began to be affected by Vietnam's fourth wave of cases and the countryside retained relatively low case rates, many of these migrants sought succour in their home provinces.

Figure 12: Đoàn văn bơ street, district 4, lined with traditional shophouses. Author's photo, 21 December 2021.

District 4 (*quận bốn* or *quận tư*) is the smallest district in Ho Chi Minh City by size, at 4.18 Km^2 accounting for just 0.2% of the city's total area.[22] It is the smallest district in Vietnam by land area. Its population is 176,501 people[23] of whom 95.43% are Vietnamese, 3.9% are Chinese and the remainder are ethnic Khmer, Cham, Indian or from another ethnic background (Quan 4 Ho Chi Minh City, 2025). District 4 has the highest population density of any city district and in Vietnam overall at 42,225 inhabitants/Km^2 according to the same article. For comparison, London's most densely populated borough Tower Hamlets has a population density of 16,478 inhabitants/Km^2 (Office for National Statistics, 2024). The citywide average population density in Ho Chi Minh City is 4,513 inhabitants/Km^2 (Cuc Thong Ke Ho Chi Minh, 2024) compared to 5,690 inhabitants/Km^2 in Greater London (Office for National Statistics, 2024). Important sites in district 4 are Nhà Rồng wharf (Dragon Wharf) from which young nationalist Ho Chi Minh (then named Nguyễn Tất Thành) set sail for France in 1911. The Ho

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[22] While district 9 merged with districts 2 and Thủ Đức in 2020 to form Thủ Đức municipal city, many still refer to the area covered by old district 9 as such, hence using the term in chapter five of this thesis. Further municipal cities are mooted for Hóc Mon, Thủy Nguyên, Sơn Tây, and Hà Đông (Tinh Uy Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 2024).

[23] A spike in deaths in district 4 during the COVID-19 pandemic is recorded in the city's 2023 statistical yearbook (Cuc Thong Ke Ho Chi Minh 2024: 70, section 'Số trường hợp tử vong được đăng ký khai tử phân theo giới tính và theo đơn vị hành chính cấp huyện [Number of deaths registered by sex and by district]'.

Chi Minh Museum is now located here, the patriot's departure having been mythologised as the beginning of his global search for ways to liberate the nation.

Infrastructure

There are six main roads in the district's traffic network: Nguyễn Tất Thành, Hoàng Diệu, Khánh Hội, Bến Vân Đồn, Tôn Đản and Đoàn Văn Bơ, my local main street. The largest and most important of these roads is Nguyễn Tất Thành boulevard that runs throughout the eastern part of the district, stretching over two kilometres, passing through District 1 and the port before curving in a southwesterly direction to *huyện* Nhà Bè. In terms of transport links to other districts, the vehicular Rainbow Bridge (*Cầu Kênh Tẻ)* connects district 4 to district 7 and the Mong Bridge (*Cầu Mống*) crosses the Tẻ Canal connecting districts 1 and 4. Built by Société de Construction de Levallois-Perret in 1894, this pedestrian-only bridge is an admired feat of civil engineering. Street performers, impromptu coffee stands, and young people taking selfies can often be found here. In the evenings in Chuong Duong Wharf Park (*Công viên Bến Chương Dương*) near where the bridge meets district 1, locals walk around while stretching or use the outdoor gym equipment. Thủ Thiêm 3 Bridge, due to open in 2030, will connect district 4 with district 2 across the Sài Gòn River, linking what will - once cargo is redirected to Cần Giờ super port - become a passenger-only port and the Thủ Thiêm New Urban Area.

Figure 13: Mong Bridge taken from district 4 looking towards Bitexco Tower and mothballed 'ghost tower' in district 1. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

In the past decade, several large apartment buildings have been built in district 4, many along arterial Bến Vân Đồn street. These exist in proximity to slum dwellings that line the Tẻ canal and Sài Gòn River. Planning permission is expected to be granted for several more large apartment buildings in the years to 2035. The city's recently-approved urban development plan to 2030 aims to increase the average floor area of housing per capita to 30-32m^2 (Luat Viet Nam, 2025) from almost 23m^2 in 2024 (Sai Gon Giai Phong, 2025). In line with the approach taken under previous plans to address similar aims, the remaining slum properties in district 4 are supposed to be cleared. The district's sole hospital is located on Bến Vân Đồn street near Calmette Bridge. This is where the sickest COVID-19 patients in my neighbourhood were taken for emergency treatment. A new hospital is planned for district 4. Staff at the current hospital have highlighted a lack of up-to-date equipment and crumbling infrastructure (Vietnam.vn, 2023).

Figure 14: Modern high-rise buildings and slum housing alongside the Tẻ Canal. Credit: VietnamNet.

Administration

In his ethnography *Wards of Hanoi,* Vietnam specialist David Koh explains the structure and organisation of ward state machinery in detail (2006: 33-44) and I now

summarise some of the most basic details from Koh's explanation.[24] As set down in Vietnam's constitution, three levels of administrative divisions exist in Vietnam: provinces, districts, and communes. Wards are commune-level units that exist in urban areas. A fourth, unofficial tier of *khu phố* (neighbourhood) also exists, the most basic unit of organisation for local populations. Each ward has three main administrative and governing components: a resident-elected assembly representing the people and the state (people's council), the executive agent of the state and of the people's council (people's committee) and the ward branch of the party. The ward party-state machinery can therefore be described as a three-pronged political structure with the ward party branch the most important leg. Having introduced the administrative unit of the ward, I now explain some recent district 4 ward boundary changes and highlight the demise of the neighbourhood group (*tổ dân phố).*
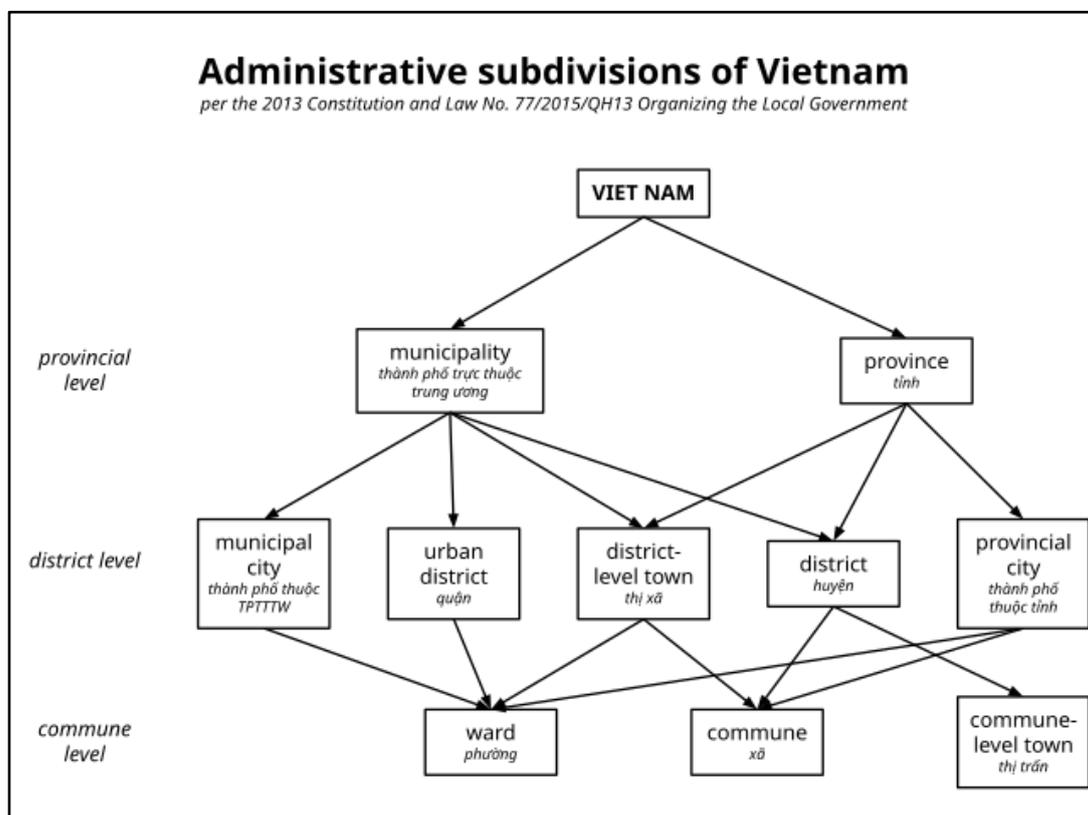
Figure 15: Current administrative subdivisions of Vietnam. Credit: Minh Nguyen.

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[24] From my observations, locals' interactions with ward officials were far more frequent and meaningful than their dealings with the police (*Công an nhân dân Việt Nam* - Vietnam People's Public Security, commonly referred to as just *công an)* who tended not to turn up when contacted, citing their low pay that gave them no incentive to intervene in potentially violent disputes. Aside from the occasions when they would collect new army recruits from their alleyway homes for onward transport to a barracks (Field notes, 15 February 2022), members of the militia (*Lực lượng Vũ trang nhân dân Việt Nam* - Vietnam People's Armed Forces) seemed to spend a lot of time sullenly playing on their mobile phones in the nearby office.

As of 1 January 2025, the number of sub-district wards citywide has been reduced by 39. District 4 now has ten wards (*phường*), down from the thirteen wards that existed when this study's fieldwork was being conducted (Nguoi Lao Dong, 2024), and Ho Chi Minh City has 210 wards in total.[25] In 2021, ward 12 was merged with ward 13 (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2020) but district 12 still featured on the google map entries of many local businesses, causing confusion for people visiting the area. Most of the data for this thesis were gathered in densely populated wards 9 and ward 10 (the latter of which merged with ward 8 in January 2025), and less densely populated ward 13, all in the northern part of district 4. The administrative construct of the neighbourhood group (*tổ dân phố*), discussed primarily in chapter six of this thesis, has been abolished citywide as of 01 January 2025 (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2024a).
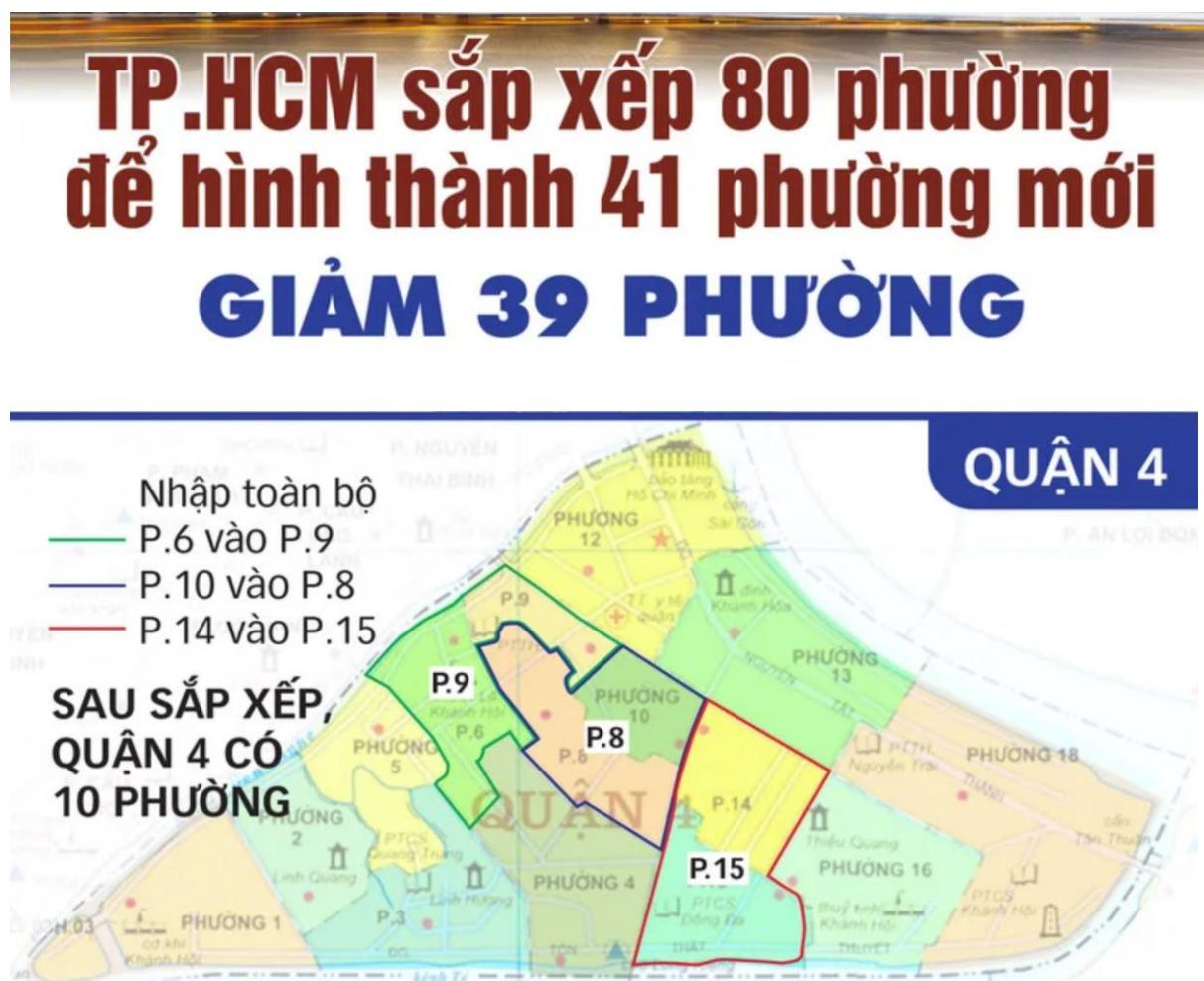
Figure 16: "Ho Chi Minh City rearranges 80 wards to make way for 41 new wards. Reduction of 39 wards." District 4 ward map with boundaries of three newly adjusted wards overlaid, accurate as of 01 January 2025. Credit: Tuoi Tre Online.

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[25] Ward reorganisations occur relatively often. In this round, the need to align wards with criteria set by the National Assembly regarding population size (15,000 people) and area (5.5 square kilometres) has been cited. Some of my interlocutors believed the need to harmonise ward sizes also stemmed from competition between ward officials as to the size of their patches and their potential for personal gain linked to their ward size.

Reasons cited by Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee include the need to more efficiently allocate resources and better address the challenges of urbanisation through a revised administrative structure. However, a lack of relevant skills among many ageing neighbourhood group leaders to fulfil their assigned tasks became especially evident during the pandemic. This was likely another factor in the elimination of neighbourhood groups, a significant change to low-level urban governance in Ho Chi Minh City. The city party committee held 'listening sessions' with locals to understand any snags while urging them to respond positively to feedback which suggests that citizens and officials negotiate the implementation of state policies. These sessions were publicised online, showing that the authorities wish to be seen listening to citizens' policy implementation experiences (Nguyen, 2024b).

This thesis discusses the spatial units of ward (*phường*) and sub-ward neighbourhood (*tổ dân phố*). During the pandemic, officials working in these domains were responsible for enforcing the Zero-COVID policy locally, facilitating access to vaccinations, distributing foodstuffs, and other important tasks. Moreover, coronavirus 'risk levels' were ascribed to wards by the city authorities according to their case rates. But, as Erik Harms reminds us, such administrative categories neglect the social:

> *"...the term ward references an administrative spatial unit that does not imply neighbourly sentiments on its own…we cannot assume that administrative categories like district, ward, subward and so on will be the most important spatial boundaries, because they are themselves artefacts of an administrative social spatial order imposed from top down onto society by the state and do not necessarily reflect bottom up understandings of social space. Although such administrative state categories cannot be ignored (because they have real effects in the world), the neighbourhood should primarily be understood as emerging out of a congeries of associations that people themselves refer to: their friends and associations, groups they see themselves as part of, their favourite places, and spatial markers they themselves describe, such as street names, alleyways, markets, churches, temples, railroad tracks, water bodies, cafes, eateries, safe and unsafe areas, and unexpectedly significant nooks and crannies in the urban fabric that come to act as meaningful social space."*

Harms, 2022: 334

'Khu Nhà Cháy' (Burning House Area)

Demonstrating this point about neighbourhoods being best understood through spaces and events that resonate with local people, the area comprising the three wards in which I conducted this ethnography was referred to locally as the burning house area (*khu nhà cháy*) after an infamous conflagration decades earlier. Indeed, a hotpot restaurant named *Lẩu Bò Khu Nhà Cháy* (burning house area beef hotpot) on the site of the disaster itself was one of the most significant spatial reference points for residents. Unlike the ever-shifting, somewhat arbitrary ward boundaries of district 4, an event that had affected the local area decades earlier remained meaningful and stable in the eyes of my interlocutors and city dwellers from further afield and continued to shape their mental maps. In 2018, Chế Thị Nương, my landlord's 60-something mother, explained the popular eatery's backstory to a state news outlet:

> *In 1987, a couple were arguing and then knocked over a stove and their house burned down. Many people saw a lot of smoke and flames, so they ran to extinguish the fire, but the couple would not let anyone in. In the end, people had to break down the door to put out the fire and save the couple. Although there was no loss of life, the fire spread to many other houses. Afterwards, the term 'burnt house apartment' (chung cư nhà cháy) was coined. Then when I opened a beef hotpot shop, people also called it 'burnt house beef hotpot' (lẩu bò khu nhà cháy). The restaurant attracts more customers because of its name. Most are students and manual workers, partly because I sell at affordable prices, partly because people come here to eat and hear about the fire. They find learning about it interesting.*

Thanh Nien Online, 2018

In a December 2022 interview, the 30-something street food tour guide mentioned earlier in this chapter recalled living nearby as a young child, watching the fire burn for days. After it had been extinguished, the authorities eventually cleared the debris and *Chung Cư Đoàn Văn Bơ* was built there, he said. Upon its completion in 1990, he moved into an apartment with his parents and brother, as did many other locals, and the tenement remains occupied to this day. That the fire broke out just one year after Vietnam's landmark *đổi mới* economic reforms in 1986 and led to the first modern housing block being built in the area seemed, along with the execution of infamous district 4 gangster Năm Cam in 2004, to feature prominently in local narratives of development and progress.

Figure 17: One section of Chung Cư Đoàn Văn Bơ (Chung Cư Khu Nhà Cháy) as viewed from scooter parking area. Credit: Lê Thái Hoàng Nguyên, 18 November 2022.

Alleyway life

Alleyways are renowned as centres of quotidian action and an estimated 85 percent of Ho Chi Minh City residents live in such settings (Gibert-Flutre, 2020) although master-planned residential developments such as those mentioned in the previous section are increasingly popular places to live for those who can afford it (Harms, 2016a). I lived in three different alleyway locations in close proximity to each other during fieldwork: in a five-storey tube house in a very narrow section of alleyway close to where it joined the local main street (Number 5), in a four-storey tube house in a wider, more pleasant section of the same alley around 100 metres further along and not situated close to where it joined a main street (Number 35), and in a rented room (*phòng trọ*). The room and several others were located above a tube house the ground floor of which had been converted into an overspill seating area for *Lẩu Bò Khu Nhà Cháy*. Traditional tube houses (*nhà ống*) are typically around four metres wide, three times as deep, and up to six storeys tall, although several properties in my field area such as Ngọc's pharmacy remained just two storeys tall. Relative to the multigenerational households on the alleyway, my partner and I drastically under-occupied the two tube houses we lived in, as frequently commented upon by our neighbours.

The need to move house twice arose from the poor state of repair of Number 5 and conflict with the landlord of Number 35 as well as its cockroach infestation. Living in three different locations enabled me to understand the hyperlocal perspective of many alleyway residents. When catching up with former neighbours from the first and second locations, either by design or through chance encounters around the neighbourhood, several seemed to consider a location I had moved to a mere minute's walk away as akin to another planet (Field notes 6 September, 2022; field notes 18 November, 2022). In a context of very high population density, there is plenty of movement, gossip, buying and selling in one's local patch to remain abreast of without concerning oneself with what is happening a few minutes' walk away. For although each section of alleyway is plugged into a wider network, each is its own self contained place. Gibert-Flutre (2020) describes alleyways as part network, part territory, occupying a conflicted, liminal position.

Cultured families, cultured neighbourhoods

Living in close confines can be a stressor so attempts to instill 'civilised' behaviour were necessarily institutionalised in everyday interactions between community members. Before my housemate Hồng, who I introduce in subsequent chapters, moved away we would spend evenings in the alleyway talking to neighbours, like most households. One evening, water began splashing down on both sides close to where we were sitting on the stoop. Hồng said that technically people should not be washing down their balconies ready for the next day at this time. If someone happens to be walking underneath, it will cause a dispute. She said they should do it later at night when most people would be in bed and described this practice as uncivilised. Expectations around desirable neighbourly behaviour were codified in large public information signs mounted in public places (figure 18). One requirement within the 2017-2021 list of standards for cultured families urges citizens to implement a new urban-rural lifestyle and a civilised culture (*thực hiện nếp sống và văn hóa văn minh mỹ quan đô thị - nông thôn mới*). Civility, a major organising concept for social life in Vietnam, is discussed further in chapter six.

Figure 18: Standards for cultured families (second-from-right) and cultured neighbourhoods (far right), nearby Xóm Chiếu market, district 4. Author's photo, 19 December 2021.

While there were certainly many multigenerational families who had lived in the area for decades, there were also many temporary residents from outside of Ho Chi Minh City who had few relationships with their neighbours. A large property on the corner opposite my regular coffee hangout and Duy and Hồng's house with no ground floor windows seemed to house a variety of mainly young people who did not stay living there for very long. Just as I moved house three times within a year, there was a relatively brisk turnover of businesses shutting down and being set up and properties being bought, sold and renovated, moved into and out of in the alleyway. Between some neighbours, such as those discussed in the following example, politely suppressed animosity seemed to simmer under the surface. After noticing that house numbers next to my first alleyway home, unlike elsewhere on the same alleyway, jumped straight from 7 to 11, I went to Thắm's house opposite to ask her father if he could explain. He said plainly that my landlord's family had an extra house. After Vietnam's reunification, the former inhabitants had fled to Germany and had sold it to them at a low price. To give a generally rose-tinted view of alleyway communities as close-knit environments where everyone gets along would be misleading.

Although not living in the neighbourhood, residents' ancestors nevertheless shaped social interactions within it in a very perceptible way. Festivities to mark relatives' death anniversaries took place regularly. I attended these events both within neighbours' houses when living at Number 5 where the alleyway was too narrow to do this outside and around a collapsible metal table out in the alleyway when I lived at Number 35. For important anniversaries or other occasions, neighbours would hire a metal-framed structure with a vinyl roof to be delivered and installed across the width of the alley, preventing traffic from flowing through but shielding attendees from sun or rain. Drivers did not appear to mind the inconvenience, they would simply turn around and find another way to get through. These multi-hour events were overwhelmingly attended by men. Female relatives in nearby tube houses would ferry ice, cans of beer, ingredients to be used in a hotpot (*lẩu*), beef stew (*bò kho*), vegetables (*rau củ*), spring rolls (*chả giò),* sesame crackers *(bánh tráng mè)* and so on. These happenings tended to end with drawn-out, drunken goodbyes and huge piles of crushed beer cans, discarded prawn shells and cigarette packets on the floor and non-local participants weaving their way home on their scooters.

Given that tube houses are not spacious, have belongings and vehicles stored inside them, and often host many occupants including elderly relatives for whom beds or bunk beds may be installed on the ground floor, much of life is lived outdoors, in scenarios such as the one described above. If receiving a visitor, residents may place a fold-out chair in the alleyway for them or if walking a few metres to visit your neighbour, you might bring along your own. There was a concrete bench of unclear origin a few doors down from Number 35. As well as a place for older people to sit and chat in the daytime, when local children wanted a break from rampaging around the alley, they would bring a plastic stool and their homework or a colouring book and use the concrete bench like a desk. For those who have adequate free time to frequent them, coffee shops and coffee stands are key spaces of repose. Sundays are usually the busiest days. Coffee chats in pairs or groups can last many hours and it can be hard to find a seat anywhere. A local cafe a minute's walk from my rented room - a smoke-filled, male space next to the community altar - had dated pictures of Western women in states of undress, a large cabinet from which various brands of cigarettes were sold, and basic fold-out chairs. The husband and wife couple who ran it were very friendly. A couple of older women did frequent the place and smoked and played cards with a couple of men. Another similarly *bình dân* (average, popular) coffee shop occupies a unit on the corner of the housing tenement. Wires hang down from the ceiling and everything is old. The place feels like an extension of street life, given that it is not hermetically sealed behind glass like most air-conditioned coffee shops. Drinks are not available to take away, making this a place you go to specifically to wind down, although the owner's three-year-old daughter often had other

ideas, swinging a multicoloured lightsabre at customers and any cockroaches that made an appearance.

The cashless revolution taking place across the wider city has not generally reached these kinds of establishments nor the itinerant sellers who traverse the local streets daily, although some trendy 'destination' eateries on nearby 20 Thước street had set themselves up on MoMo or other online payment platforms. When I frequented the cafe, its patrons were usually men aged from their 20s to their 50s enjoying iced black coffee and using their phones while taking a break from app-based driving. These and other customers would often jump on their scooters and disappear to run an errand, returning a few minutes later.

Figure 19: Corner of housing estate with spartan coffee shop on ground floor. Red banner warns of impending new traffic control policy. Credit: Hoang Nguyen Le Thai, 18 November 2022.

Figure 20: Preparing coffee in anticipation of mid-morning customers. Credit: Hoang Nguyen Le Thai, 18 November 2022.

In many ways, the processes involved in preparing, transporting, advertising, and selling food set the rhythm of life in the area. Immediately opposite Number 35, for example, the ground floor of a tube house was given over to the production of *mắm* in several huge red bins. *Mắm* is a liquid base ingredient used in many different meals and sauces. To make *mắm,* seafood - usually fish - is fermented for several months in large containers. Once fermentation is complete, the seafood is disposed of and the liquid retained. A male trader would come on a scooter to help empty and refill the bins periodically, before taking the *mắm* up to *Xóm Chiếu* market for sale. On the days the bins were switched, a pungent smell pervaded the alleyway. And just around the corner, a home-based *bún mắm* ('Vietnamese gumbo') kitchen would receive deliveries of bean sprouts and vegetables throughout the day. Around 11am and 5.30pm they would wheel their wares up to 20 Thước street to be sold.

Several neighbours not employed in food production worked in relatively affluent district 7 as security guards or in light manufacturing within the Tận Thuận export processing zone. Many 'residential' properties are almost entirely given over to business operations with only small, spartan sleeping spaces for the live-in worker(s) on one of the upper floors. My neighbour Khang, for example, lived in a property used to store sacks of chicken feed for onward distribution and to rear chicks in several hatcheries. Once fully grown, he would pack the birds into cardboard carriers and ship them to customers. They were usually purchased to

participate in cock fights in district 8 or in Bến Tre province in the Mekong Delta, he said. The subsection to follow hones in on neighbourly acts of economic support.

Figure 21: Ground floor of tube house used to store animal feed. On other floors are egg hatcheries, cages for raising fighting cocks and a small bed space for Khang. Author's photo, 28 June 2022.

Everyday acts of economic solidarity

While expressions of traditional values underpinning economic activity became more apparent amid the scarcity of coronavirus lockdown, examples of resource sharing to support the poorest can be observed in Ho Chi Minh City local communities daily. My regular visits to Thủy's coffee stand, which features again in chapter seven, enabled me to witness and document these acts. Her stall was purposively set up at the intersection of two busy alleyways connected to a large arterial route to attract passing trade. Occasionally, an overheated, exhausted app-based driver would pull up next to her serving area and politely ask her to fill their large plastic drinks flask with ice. She would always oblige. I did not see money change

hands and, given these drivers often asked Thủy or her customers for directions, they did not seem like a local known to her.

Thủy would also try to smooth sales between myself and the itinerant sellers who came past, for example by somewhat unnecessarily helping me to count out enough small bills to buy lottery tickets or *bánh cam* (doughnuts). Nods of acknowledgement would be exchanged between the two economic actors after these transactions. In another low-key example of economic solidarity, at the conclusion of boozy alleyway gatherings, one of the *bún mắm* kitchen workers would usually quietly appear with an empty sack and gather up the used beer cans strewn all over the ground. He would be able to exchange these for a small amount of cash when the waste trader came around the neighbourhood the next day. I observed his neighbours helping him to increase his potential earnings by filling the sack, sometimes finding a couple of empty plastic bottles inside their homes and throwing them in too rather than saving them to exchange with the trader themselves. Establishing local norms of economic cooperation at this relatively early stage in the thesis provides important context for chapter five in which city dwellers' economic behaviour during coronavirus lockdown is discussed in detail.

Now I share a few reflections on being a Western researcher living in an overwhelmingly Kinh Vietnamese neighbourhood. The problem of finding suitable accommodation locally prompted some interesting reflections about foreigners from local people. When I asked Thắm's father Hoàng for tips on where I might find a smaller, better-maintained tube house, she intervened and said forcefully that the area is not suitable for foreigners and that it would be better for my partner and I to go and live in a hotel in district 1 (Field notes, 17 February 2022). This statement may, however, have been connected to her previously being paid commission by my aged landlord for recruiting students from out of town whom she spied wandering around looking for a room for rent from her vantage point at the top of the alleyway. She had been denied her finder's fees since my partner and I moved into the house in question.

In another incident, a Vietnamese-Canadian photographer living in the tenement building saw me in the scooter parking area and asked me if I was a lost tourist.[26] When I replied no, I live here, he exclaimed "Wow! Next thing they'll be building a Starbucks around here!" And in another example of being likened to a tourist, as I took photos with neighbours

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[26] In the first few months of fieldwork (Dec 2021 - Mar 2022) when Vietnam's border was still closed to tourists, I only saw a dishevelled American man of retirement age sometimes walking past Ngọc's pharmacy, apparently en route to a local internet cafe. It took a while for tourists to return to the area once the national border reopened but by the end of my fieldwork in January 2023, there were usually some Western people walking down the main street most days. I was not aware of any other Western people who lived in the immediate area though and elderly locals such as Xuân, 74, said that no foreigner had lived in the vicinity of Chung Cư Đoàn Văn Bơ before.

when preparing to end fieldwork and return to the UK, a man saw me posing for a photo with Vy, the *mì hoành thánh* (wonton soup) seller and yelled "*Năm chục đô la!*" ("Fifty dollars!") holding out his palm as if to demand a cash payment for this 'souvenir' photo I was getting from my time in Vietnam. In these different ways, people suggested the local environment was not really a suitable or natural place for a Western person to be. As has happened intermittently during my engagement with Vietnam since the early 2000s, I was also referred to as *Việt Kiều* during fieldwork.[27] 74-year-old egg seller Xuân did this the most often, especially after I had been talking to her with a British Vietnamese friend who also stayed in the area for a while.
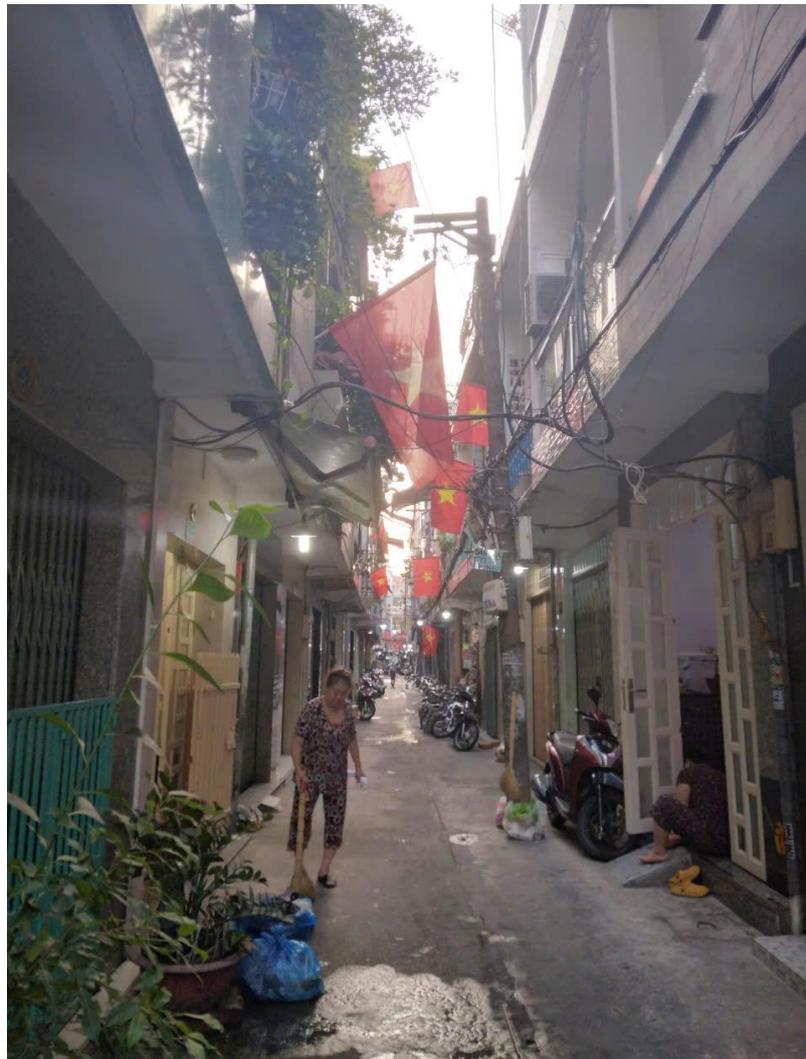
Figure 22: Most properties in the vicinity of Number 35 have displayed a flag to mark Lunar New Year. Flags were also widely displayed to mark National Day (2 September). Author's photo, 30 January 2022.

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[27] In Vietnam, the term *Việt Kiều* is used to describe Vietnamese people living abroad, though it is not commonly adopted as a term of self-identification. Many overseas Vietnamese use other terms, for example *Người Mỹ gốc Việt* (Vietnamese American, literally American with Vietnamese roots).

Regulation

When it comes to the actual day-to-day functioning of the ward, Koh argues, "the ward local administration, set up for effective mobilization of people to follow the leadership of the state and the party, is also a daily tool of mediation that allows society to negotiate state policies and laws." (2006: 32). I now explain how figure 23 which shows the intersection of the alleyway on which I lived and the local main street visually depicts Koh's concept of mediation space (2006). A lottery ticket sales point (left) and an electronics shop (right) flank the alleyway and a mobile recycling collector is pushing her fully loaded trolley towards the main street. The tube house (Number 5) that I rented is on the left just beyond the white sign of a home nail shop where a scooter is parked outside. In the afternoons, the collapsible tables and red plastic stools lining the alleyway provide overflow seating for customers of the low-priced eatery opposite from which this photograph was taken. Earlier in the day, this equipment caters to customers of the cart (just seen, chained up on the right hand side) from which my neighbour Thắm sells fried rice flour cakes (*bột chiên*).
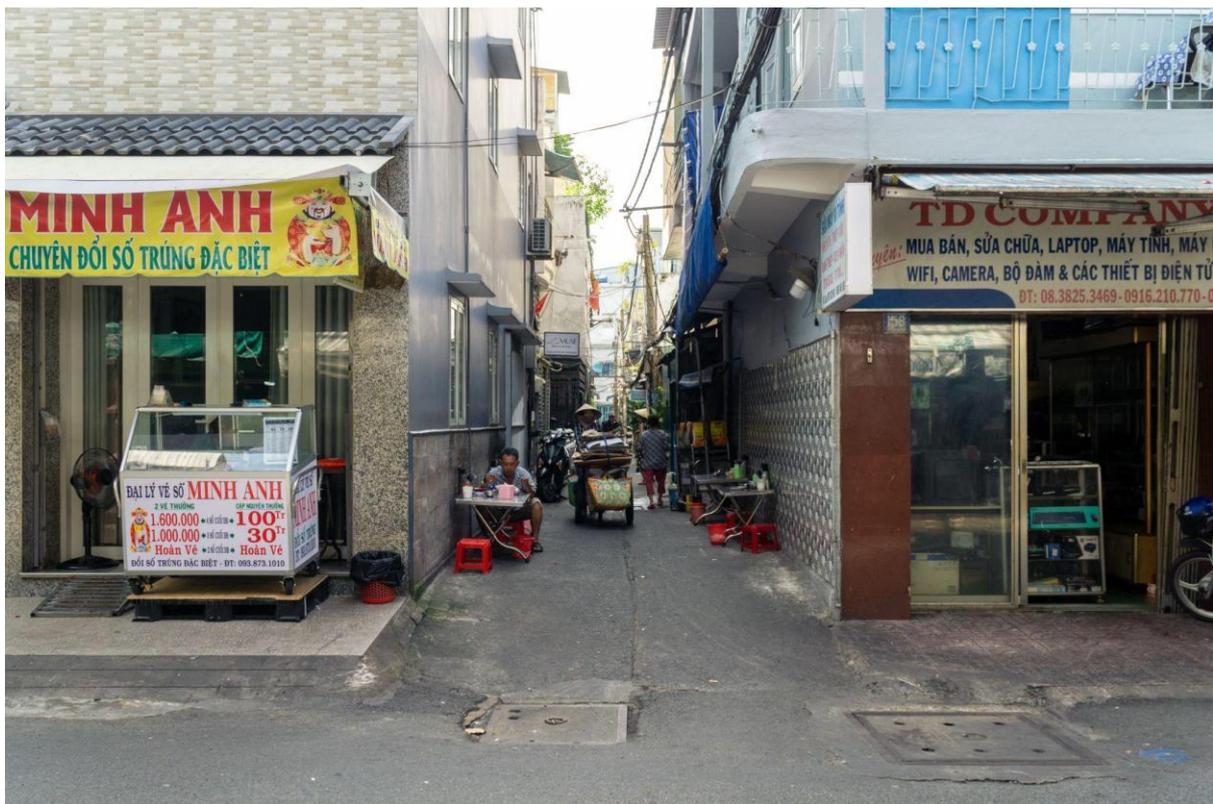
Figure 23: A space of day-to-day mediation in my local neighbourhood (on a relatively quiet day). Credit: Lê Thái Hoàng Nguyên, 18 November 2022.

In the evenings, space on both sides of the alleyway entrance is used for scooter parking for the eatery's customers. And a teenage Tây Ninh native traverses this space dozens of times a day ferrying equipment and foodstuffs from a tube house mid-way down the alleyway to a

cơm tấm (broken rice) stall on the main street. As such, this small space almost constantly plays host to a wide range of vending activities. This is despite it being a mobility pinch point and recognised locally as a potential accident site, likely subject to the kind of campaign to reinstate 'pavement order' that Koh discusses in his Hanoi neighbourhood (2006). At the location in figure 23, I observed public space in reality to be negotiated between business owners and community members within the framework of the law and the rather relaxed leadership of the ward. These negotiations sometimes took the form of loud arguments between local women apparently around how the space at this location was being used (Field notes, 15 March 2022; field notes, 22 March 2022). Living very nearby, I had heard and seen these disputes.

Figure 24: The establishment of a bustling food production outfit close to a mobility pinchpoint at the head of the alleyway required intricate compromises between the many regular users of what was a very contested space. Author's photo, 10 May 2022.

In April 2022, the situation worsened when a nearby property once occupied by several Cambodian youth who made money doing fire breathing stunts on nearby Vĩnh Khánh street was renovated. Its ground floor took on a new life as a furniture-less space in which five or six women used mobile hobs to prepare spring rolls, soups, *bánh xèo* (stuffed rice pancakes), and *quẩy* (dough sticks). While trying to pass through en route to my new house, there was space given over to parking for the eatery opposite, my neighbour's *bột chiên* stall chained up, ingredients being delivered from the main street to the cooking ladies at intervals, people trying to pass through on foot or scooter, shippers collecting orders from the fresh spring rolls outlet on one side of the alleyway, and the home-based foreign dental products dispatch place on the other. These few metres of contested space became almost entirely impassable, chaos ensued, and tempers flared. That the frontage of my former landlord's property protruded almost a metre further out into the alleyway than most others exacerbated problems here (Field notes, 9 May 2022).

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced some particular characteristics of district 4 and the three sub-district wards in which I collected the most ethnographic data for this thesis. As such, it enables the reader to better understand the research context and appreciate some of the economic and spatial constraints that local people would have been under when trying to comply with physical distancing regulations in cramped properties or make a living when *Xóm Chiếu* market was closed for several months during lockdown, for example. The chapter has also shown how locally-meaningful spatial markers such as the infamous 'burning house' area provide continuity in a context of ever-shifting ward boundaries and the top-down administrative reordering of urban space in a fast-developing city. It confirms that Ho Chi Minh City's ward system is, in the words of well-known critic of state planning James Scott, "a grid of administrative order imposed over what is, in fact, always a far more complex and disorderly reality." (2021: 507). As ward-level governance in Ho Chi Minh City continues to evolve in line with the demands of urban development, ward governance will be subject to further change, hence the need for further ethnographic studies of the city's alleyway communities.

4. Conceptualising state-society relations in contemporary Vietnam

Room to manoeuvre

Most residents in the alleyway community described in the previous chapter agreed that something needed to be done about the disorderly mass of motorbikes coursing up and down the local main street every day. As well as the morning rush from 6am to around 8.30am, there was a further frenzy late at night when hospitality workers finishing their shifts in the city centre would race through, keen to get back to their homes in districts further south. Other surges would follow events such as the festivities on Lunar New Year flower street (*đường hoa*), pop concerts, and wins by the national football team that prompted many to jump on their scooters and go 'storming' (*đi bão)*. The boisterous traffic was especially hazardous for the old and the young, caused daily life on the main street to become stressful (*căng thẳng*), and made crossing the road a time-consuming task, people would say.

Figure 25: Warning to drivers on main road approaching junction with my local street. "From 22nd November 2022 no right turn" Author's photo, 20 November 2022.

In mid-October 2022, large red vinyl banners began to appear, announcing a new one-way system for traffic management (figure 25). The morning of its imposition, I observed a regular police officer and a member of the militia (*dân quân*) stationed where the main street meets the larger, arterial route. They were enforcing the regulations by waving batons at drivers approaching the red traffic signals, encouraging those travelling up into the city to occupy the entire width of the previously two-way street (Field notes, 20 November 2022). Later in the day, once the officials had left, drivers reverted to using the street in a two-way fashion, disobeying the notices that the authorities had strategically positioned at intervals to catch their attention. As my fieldwork reached its conclusion in mid-January 2023, the new traffic control regime was still being widely flouted.

When I returned to the community several months later, permanent signage had been mounted at the top of the street in an attempt to reinforce the policy. Adherence remained patchy, however. If officials did happen to appear in the area, approaching drivers would 'comply' with the one-way system by proceeding along the arterial route for a few more moments before hurtling down one of the many alleyways on their left, popping out on the main street a few hundred metres beyond the officials' gaze. Although they did not enter the main street at a point where compliance was monitored and therefore avoided potential punishment, drivers nevertheless ended up travelling in the wrong direction on what was now a one-way street. Just as these citizens insincerely performed compliance with the policy, local officials half-heartedly enforced it. For even though those hundreds if not thousands of drivers contravening the new rules daily were liable to be fined up to 2,000,000VND and have their driving licences revoked for up to three months, none of my interlocutors had heard of anybody being penalised in these ways (Field notes, 16 April 2023). That is not to say that penalties were not issued, but as with the fines threatened for moving around outdoors during Ho Chi Minh City's coronavirus lockdown that were rarely enforced locally, they did not seem to be levied in anywhere near enough cases to act as an effective deterrent. Both drivers and officials appeared to have considerable room for manoeuvre when it came to the enforcement of the ostensibly uncompromising mobility management policy.

This account of the implementation of new traffic regulations in my local neighbourhood is an apt entry point for this chapter's conceptual discussions. This is because it exemplifies the kinds of informal, day-to-day negotiations that take place between locals and officials around contentious issues in Vietnam as part of an active dialogue between state and society. Political scientist Benedict Kerkvliet argues that this dialogue is best explored through "particular arenas in which boundaries, rights, jurisdictions, and power distribution between state and societal agencies are debated, contested, and resolved (at least temporarily)…These arenas may be problems and controversies that are not confined to a particular institution." (2003: 28). While other researchers have analysed Vietnam's state-

society relations in detail through the arena of traffic control (Koh, 2006; Truitt, 2008) and these kinds of negotiations are also raised in the literature on itinerant vendors (Harms and Labbé, 2022), this chapter and the wider thesis will instead study these relations in the arena of Zero-COVID policy implementation.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide important theoretical grounding for the subsequent empirical chapters. In the sections that follow, I raise some important considerations for thinking about state-society relations in general, and introduce the three most prominent schools of thought in the literature on state-society relations in post-reform Vietnam: the dominating state approach, mobilisational authoritarianism, and dialogic relations. This thesis shows how these schools of thought, in fact, reinforce each other. Researchers do not agree as to whether state-society interactions in the domain of Vietnam's civil society best reflect mobilisational authoritarianism or a dialogical relationship, so civil society is discussed separately immediately after those two schools of thought have been covered. Thereafter, the chapter concludes. Published works on the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam and ethnographic insights from my fieldwork that reflect the three main schools of thought are also woven in at relevant points.

Main schools of thought

Introduction

Three main interpretations are generally employed in analyses of state-society relations in Vietnam corresponding to the degree to which the public can influence decision-making: dominating state, mobilisational authoritarianism (sometimes termed state corporatism), and dialogical relations. Political scientist Benedict Kerkvliet has developed and refined these three interpretations over the years in response to changes in state-society relations in the post-reform period (1995, 2003, 2005, 2018, 2019) with numerous others (Dixon, 2004; Heng, 2009; Kleinen, 2015; Koh 2001a, 2006; Luong, 2003a; Wells-Dang 2012, 2014) employing his rubric in their work. These three schools of thought, Kerkvliet argues, correspond to the domains of official, advocacy, and everyday politics respectively (2005: 22), although these domains feed into each other, as briefly discussed in this chapter's penultimate section.

In the sections that follow, all three interpretations are discussed. As will become evident, these schools of thought diverge when it comes to how they conceptualise the extent to which the state dominates society. But important areas of agreement exist between them. First, they all agree that the Vietnamese party-state does not tolerate alternative political parties nor social movements outside its political management structure. Second, they concur that the country's human rights record is poor, free elections are not held, and freedom of

speech and assembly are curtailed. They also agree that any independent, organised social activity outside the party-state's control risks being branded anti-state, the political security apparatus suppresses dissidents, and the government's administrative structure allows the party-state into individuals' private lives (Koh, 2006; Kerkvliet, 2014, 2019). A dialogic conception of state-society relations is not inconsistent with these realities if, as Luong suggests, we "understand dialogue in a broad sense of the word to include indirect and nonverbal communication, and do not assume dialogue partners to have equal power vis a vis each other." (2003: 24).

An example in chapter seven of a policy change being quietly reversed following a public outcry demonstrates that the state *does* listen and change tack. But unpopular measures taken under Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy such as separating children from their parents and sending them to quarantine camps alone continued to be implemented despite public disquiet. To give an idealised view of dialogical engagement between state and society would be to fall into the same trap as state-centric analyses. As Kerkvliet puts it "We can recognize that dialogical engagement involves authorities listening and responding positively to people's concerns while at the same time acknowledge that authorities often act without input from citizens and frequently dismiss, even repress, citizens' criticisms and protests." (2019: 146).

Before proceeding, it is also important to note warnings that, while using the shorthand state-society relations is convenient, this phrase can create a somewhat artificial opposition between institutions and actors of governance and citizens who are subject to that governance (Kerkvliet, 1995b: 41; Koh, 2006: 21). In reality, it is effectively impossible to determine where the state ends and society begins. Furthermore, the state-society relations shorthand implies that the Vietnamese socialist state is a legible, unified whole even though this notion has been widely problematised. Gainsborough (2017), for example, argues that the degree to which there is a coherent central state directing the country is a myth fuelled by a statist bias that permeates political science and public life. The shorthand also overstates the extent to which state representatives operating at the lowest level can and do execute state policies. As chapter six shows, vertical compliance can be stymied by local officials who stand on the side of their neighbours and do not follow through with the enforcement of unpopular or punitive policies. Luong (1993) found evidence of such behaviour in Bát Tràng pottery village outside Hanoi. Furthermore, ward officials have tended to lack sufficient qualifications to fully understand top-level instructions, limiting their ability to implement policies effectively. Having briefly introduced the three dominant interpretations in the existing literature, noted some basic areas in which they agree, and raised some cautions when using the state-society relations shorthand, each school of thought will now be explained in more detail.

Dominating state

The dominating state approach regards the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) as the most powerful and pervasive institution. Historian Gareth Porter (1993), political scientist Carlyle Thayer (1995), and international relations scholar Brantly Womack (1992) were instrumental in developing this school of thought. Its main contention is that all rules and programmes governing Vietnam are executed by and within the state. Society can assert a very limited influence through approved channels only. According to this approach, Vietnam is a "vast and coordinated party-state which pre-empts alternative and autonomous societal organizations from the national center down to the grassroots of the village and the workplace." (Womack, 1992: 180). Decades have passed since the aforementioned analyses, however, and subsequent studies have shown that the dominating state approach is not only an outdated, inaccurate way to consider Vietnam's state-society relations but never was a truly appropriate interpretation. Economist Adam Fforde (2013), for example, has disputed Porter's contention (1993) that policy deliberation and decision-making is engaged in solely by top VCP bureaucrats. Fforde maintains that the national level of the party-state has become paralysed, unable to resolve corruption or make badly-needed reforms. This means that the real governing now takes place at the provincial and sub-provincial levels.[28]

As Harms has highlighted, "Vietnam scholars have increasingly turned to 'bottom-up' approaches that challenge state-centred views of economic, political, and social processes…Work like this offers important correctives to a previous generation of scholarship, which, largely because of restrictions on fieldwork access, focused on macro-sociological processes and top-down analyses that assigned inordinate importance to state policies." (2012: 418). Vietnam's two-year closed border policy during the global coronavirus crisis blocked fieldwork access for most international researchers, somewhat reversing this trend towards field-based research that had been ongoing since the 1990s. Partly as a result of these access difficulties, analysts seeking explanations for Vietnam's successful early response to COVID-19 have reverted to state-centrism. Luong (2022) has highlighted studies suggesting that Vietnam's authoritarian regime enabled a quicker response and the faster mobilisation of public resources than democracies could achieve (Hartley, Bale and Bali, 2021; Hayton and Ngheo, 2020; Mai and Cuong, 2022), for example.

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[28] Some provincial leaders have made names for themselves. More recently, however, the government's 'burning furnace' anti-corruption campaign , launched in 2016 and intensified following widespread, well publicised graft during the pandemic, has seen government officials mainly working at the provincial level disciplined and removed. This anti-graft freeze has restored some power to the centre (Nguyen, 2024a) while the administrative paralysis it has entailed has led Vietnam to forfeit billions of dollars in overseas aid (Reuters, 2024).

Works such as these also discuss the function of Vietnam's political ideology in repressing city dwellers into following the strict Zero-COVID policy while failing to acknowledge ways in which the people redirected ideological discourse back towards the authorities in order to push for policy changes. Chapter seven examines the operation of ideology in Vietnam during the pandemic in more detail. Party-state representatives, meanwhile, have enumerated bureaucratic instruments (Nguyen, 2022), presenting the huge number of edicts issued by the state's various organs as evidence of effective pandemic control. And Truong (2020) pointed out that the embattled VCP saw a decent pandemic response as a chance to make up for recent scandals including land grabs and environmental damage. These articles and many others suggest that authority operated in a far more unilateral, top-down manner during the pandemic than my ethnographic research suggests. As a consequence, they miss major parts of Vietnam's COVID-19 story, representing merely partial accounts.

This is not to say that no analytical attention should be paid to the government decisions, resolutions, laws, and directives through which the nationwide Zero-COVID policy was enacted. Some of these were discussed in the Introduction chapter. These bureaucratic instruments do, however, depict the "hegemonic aspirations of the public transcript" (Scott, 1990: 22), connoting a level of order that does not exist on the ground, and exaggerating the extent to which there is vertical discipline among those executing the state's agenda. As Migdal has argued (2001), while the state is the most powerful at policy-making, the local level has the most power when it comes to policy implementation. Fixating on what Kerkvliet (2005) terms the domain of official politics would be to ignore "evidence from public life in communist states in which the chasm between official ritual and the offstage political culture is often so large" (Scott, 1990: 18). The ethnographic examples in this thesis show how the state's coronavirus control policy was in fact adapted and contested at the everyday level. Analysing those examples contributes to a more accurate understanding of how power really operates in Vietnam.

Gainsborough (2017) describes the idea of a unified Vietnamese state as a myth that developed in part due to an historic tendency for foreign analysts to group Vietnam with other countries with socialist heritage such as China and the Soviet Union.[29] These days, the grouping tendency has reduced, although it has not disappeared entirely as is evident in political analyses of COVID-19 control policies that consider countries including Vietnam, China, Cuba, and Venezuela as a bloc (De la Calle, 2024; Greer et al. 2020, 2021; Martens, 2023; Wallis and Zhuo, 2020). Gainsborough maintains that "the myth endures because of the

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[29] Thayer (1995, 2010) for example described the lack of scope for activities independent of party-led structures in Vietnam as 'mono-organisational socialism', a term borrowed from Sovietologist T. H. Rigby (1976).

power of the state to colonise our minds such that even when the empirical data does not fit with the idea of the state, we make it fit." (2017: 138). In reality, he argues, the Vietnamese state is a collection of networks made up of interpersonal relationships in which policy matters play second fiddle to patronage and personal benefits (2010a). Evidence from the coronavirus crisis appears to support the contention that, rather than behaving like a coherent entity, the state is fragmented with different parts of its apparatus engaging in contradictory practices. For example, provinces "acted like sovereign states" interpreting viral control measures more strictly than the national Zero-COVID policy mandated, explains Luong (2022: 775), leading to regional variations which badly disrupted the supply of essential goods around the country.

Mobilisational authoritarianism

Unlike the dominating state approach, the mobilisational authoritarianism interpretation of state-society relations maintains that social forces *can* influence policy but only through authorised, state-dominated, nationwide social organisations. As political scientist William Turley put it, the state "invites intensive, preferably voluntary citizen participation in state affairs through formal institutions dominated by a single party exercising a constitutional monopoly of power." (1993a: 269). Through their participation in mass organisations under the umbrella of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), the state mobilises citizens to support its policies, maintains channels of communication with different sectors of society, and manages social and economic groups that might otherwise become problematic.[30] The VFF works parallel to the state system, from the centre down to the village level, linking the VCP and the people. Other researchers have adopted slightly different mobilisational corporatist (Jeong, 1997) and soft-authoritarian corporatist (Dixon, 2004) interpretations of state-society relations.[31] Corporatist arrangements often emerge in settings where economic development is rapid and where governments seek to maintain stability by building close relations with new social forces resulting from modernisation. Businesses recognise embeddedness within the state as crucial for their success in such contexts (Stromseth, 2003).

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[30] These mass organisations are the 'Fatherland' (or 'Ancestral') Front *(Mặt trận Tổ Quốc)* which is non-gender specific in Vietnamese, the Vietnam Women's Union *(Liên hiệp Hội Phụ nữ Việt Nam),* Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union *(Đoàn Thanh niên Cộng sản Hồ Chí Minh),* Vietnam Farmers' Union *(Hội Nông dân Việt Nam),* Vietnam General Confederation of Labour *(Tổng Liên đoàn Lao động Việt Nam),* and the Vietnam Veterans' Association *(Hội Cựu chiến binh Việt Nam).* NGOs can be set up but must be affiliated with state-sponsored umbrella organisations.

[31] Schmitter provides this widely-used definition of corporatism: "A system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organised into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports." (1974: 94-95).

In the decades since the mobilisational authoritarianism school emerged, mass organisations have become relatively depoliticised. They now enjoy more independence over their management and finances but still do not promote accountability for local government actions, with some exceptions (Oxfam and OPM, 2012). While Kleinen (2015) has argued that the popularity of mass organisations is declining vis-à-vis the various new voluntary and non-governmental organisations, mass organisations played a leading role in distributing provisions during the pandemic (see figure 26). The trade union federation, for example, provided personal protective equipment, information and financial support to workers, while the Women's Union helped small and medium enterprises run by women to access loans (Centre for Development and Integration, 2021). The Vietnamese party leadership has termed its pandemic response a 'people-based, state-led' approach built on strong state direction and popular mobilisation through authorised organisations (Nguyen, 2022). While state representatives have since acknowledged that the authorities' rationing system during citywide lockdown was not entirely successful, the extent to which citizens' basic subsistence needs ended up being addressed through *ad hoc* volunteer initiatives has been downplayed by some senior officials. Nguyen maintains, "The needs created by the impact of the pandemic were, at certain times and in certain places, too great for central and local governments to meet. This was particularly true during the fourth wave. Volunteers filled gaps in government provision." (2022: 859). The next chapter discusses food shortages and community coping strategies during lockdown in more detail.

As well as distributing, for example, rice from the national rice reserve (*kho dự trữ gạo quốc gia*), mass organisations handed out supplies gifted by philanthropists, businesses, and other non-state donors. Under the government's socialisation agenda (*xã hội hoá*), some aspects of Vietnam's development are devolved to a range of social entities while the authorities retain overall control (Wells-Dang, 2012; Nguyen, 2018). It has been argued that the COVID-19 crisis has expanded acts of giving in Vietnam to a broader segment of the population (Son, Doan and Sidel, 2022). Individual and corporate donors had contributed US$400 million to the government's COVID-19 prevention and control fund by mid-January 2020 (Vietnam Government Portal, 2020), for example. The period of dearth in Ho Chi Minh City during lockdown certainly increased the number of people whose subsistence needs went unmet, as discussed in chapter five. But suggestions that welfare burden-sharing is a novel phenomenon linked to the influence of neoliberalism in post-reform Vietnam rather than part of a long-standing compact between state and society have been contested (Luong, 2023). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis, there is much to be learnt about the government's agenda of socialisation (*xã hội hóa*) by analysing how it was instrumentalised during the COVID-19 crisis.

Figure 26: Community support activities conducted by Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union members during the coronavirus pandemic. Sign reads "Củ Chi district reception point. Supplies, medical equipment, necessities to support COVID-19 epidemic prevention." Credit: anonymous submission to chuyenthoidich.vn archive.

A dialogical relationship

A dialogical interpretation of Vietnam's state-society relations recognises that the party-state's capacity to coordinate programmes and implement policies is considerably weaker than the interpretations discussed so far in this chapter would maintain. Historic field access restrictions mentioned in previous sections meant that the impacts of reform in Vietnam that so intrigued overseas researchers were long examined "primarily through the macrocosm of national economic policies and their political framework" (Luong, 1994: 79) when it was actually in the local arena where authority relations were "constantly and dialogically re-structured" (1994: 80). Luong conducted ethnographic research in this local arena, specifically in two villages in the north and south of Vietnam, to further develop the notion of a dialogic process and, a decade later, reinforced the point: "It is the dynamic and dialogical relationship between Vietnamese state and society that has shaped not only the economy but also other domains of life in Vietnam in the past few decades." (Luong, 2003: 2). Although political

scientist Benedict Kerkvliet had also recognised the need for a third conceptualisation of state-society relations, he did not use the term dialogic, maintaining "...state and society are interactive and…the state can be responsive to pressures from society. What label to put on such a state-society relationship in Vietnam is unclear, we need more material on a range of issues." (1995: 414).[32]

Subsequent studies have developed our understanding of the nature of this dialogue. Political scientist Joel Migdal's 'state in society' approach (2001) has informed discussions of Vietnam's dialogic state-society relations (Luong 2003, 2022; Koh, 2006). This approach critiques Weber's notion of 'ideal-type' states monopolising legitimate force and rule through rational law (1978). In reality, authority is more fragmented, contested and contingent than that. Considering state-society relations through the prism of land clearance cases, for example, Harms concludes that "contests over fairness involve a wide swath of social actors at all levels of social life. The state, we learn, is not always diametrically opposed to the diversity of interests that make up society, and the state itself is a more complex network of actors than we often imagine." (2013: 66).

As discussed in chapter six, local officials retain a primary role in determining the extent to which the state dominates society in the everyday urban environment. In that chapter, I introduce my alleyway neighbour who also serves as a ward official. Rather than being merely an agent who executes the commands of a monolithic state, he is a sociable community member who considers supporting other locals to overcome bureaucratic difficulties in their day-to-day lives as a key part of his role. He is just one of thousands of individual officials through whom state power is mediated. On the theme of mediation, another influential approach within the dialogic relations school is that of David Koh. In his ethnography *Wards of Hanoi* (2006), Koh focuses on the day-to-day negotiations between citizens and officials around policy implementation at the basic urban level. These negotiations take place in what he terms 'mediation space' and effectively limit the dominance of the party-state, he argues.

Koh advances a state-disaggregation approach, focusing on three particularly active arenas of state-society dialogue around policy implementation, namely traffic order, housing construction, and elections (2006). This enables him to move beyond scholarly preoccupations with the relative strength of the Vietnamese state and society, and advocate coherently for a more complex "composite reality" (2006: 1) that reflects the dynamic, shifting

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[32] Kerkvliet later stated (2019: 216) "The earliest depiction of this dialogue that I have located is in Post (1989). Relations between national authorities and villages in northern Vietnam in the 1960s, Post wrote, involved "a kind of dialogue in which ideas and the policies which seemed to follow from them would be enunciated from above and people would react below, not with public utterances nor with wide-scale collective action independent of the Party and the state, but in a multitude of acts of private comment and individual response." (14; see also 212)."

nature of state-society interactions in relation to state policies. In some arenas, society has considerable perhaps even overwhelming strength. As they direct their battery-powered Vinfast scooters around the local streets in the manner of their choosing, for example, my neighbours certainly appear stronger than the local officials who, by half-heartedly enforcing the new mobility management regime, tacitly acknowledge the futility of attempts to restrict their movements. Koh adapts Migdal's 'range of ideal results' of state-society interaction to demonstrate the relative strength of state and society in the arena of traffic control. I follow suit in figure 27 by applying Migdal's approach to the implementation of the directive 16 social distancing order, explained in the Introduction chapter. At various points in the pandemic, each of these 'results' were in evidence, as the ethnography shows.

	Total transformation of society by the party state	Party-state incorporates social forces	Party-state is incorporated by social forces	Party-state fails to direct or even influence society
Traffic policies	The party-state controls traffic planning. Periodic campaigns obtain good results, but only initially.	Party-state uses social groups to achieve its policy requirements i.e. volunteer groups, self-regulation.	Shop owners, food operators use various sorts of motivations to urge officials not to apply policy. These forces are disorganised.	At certain times of the day and year, pavement activity suggests defiance of party-state rules.
Directive 16	Human movement prohibited. Party-state interpellates citizen-subjects to comply by invoking powerful ideological discourse of civility. Fines and shaming for failing to comply.	Volunteer groups, and celebrity philanthropists co-opted into the effort to keep citizens at home during citywide lockdown. Social opprobrium in alleys/buildings as a form of self-regulation.	On social media, badly impacted populations e.g. migrant workers urge officials to stop restricting domestic movement and parents decry separation from quarantining children. Policy changes ensue.	Lockdown rules are patchily enforced but many people find ways around them anyway. Policy is effectively over before state catches up and formally ends it. Contrary to media threats, vaccination is not forced.

Figure 27: Migdal's range of ideal results (2001: 126-128), adapted from table 1.1 in Koh (2006: 11).

In what Koh terms "the penumbra of state-society dominance" (2006: 2), local officials do not base their interactions with people only on laws and rules. Residents, while sticking

within the boundaries set by officials, are given much latitude over neighbourhood matters and state policies thereby often end up being fine tuned for smoother implementation. In addition to the 'mobility pinchpoint' example that I introduced in the previous chapter, Thai's (2024) study of public space in Hanoi wards during the COVID-19 crisis suggests that such mediation space continues to exist. Local officials under pressure from superiors were obliged to more stringently manage public spaces in Hanoi to reduce the risk of viral spread and allow street cleansing teams to disinfect them. Vendors, desperate to maintain an income, went fully mobile or sold from their private homes. As in the case of the rogue drivers in my neighbourhood, officials issued warnings rather than fines. This shows local officials continuing to use the mediation space still available to them to not punish local people, even when that space had shrunk under pressure from above to control viral spread.

To appreciate the political significance of citizens' day-to-day choices and actions recorded in the ethnography, the thesis adopts an expansive conception of politics. Conceiving of politics broadly rather than as limited to formal political structures enables mundane adaptations and transgressions of state policies to be conceptualised as political acts that accrete and force the Vietnamese authorities to change their approach. This is how political and policy shifts tend to eventuate in contemporary Vietnam. In *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (2005), Kerkvliet argues that peasants' everyday political behaviour under Vietnam's national policy of collectivisation - tilling communal plots half-heartedly, secretly rearing their own livestock, fabricating land use records - peacefully brought down collective farming, paving the way for a nationwide programme of economic reforms. Similarly, citizens' indirect everyday acts of dissatisfaction with the Zero-COVID regime, although not overtly oppositional, pushed the Vietnamese authorities to end the policy more quickly than they would have otherwise done. Scott underlined the importance of this level of politics but also its shiftiness, recognising "a subterranean world of political conflict which left scarcely a trace in the public record…I realised not only that this was a genre of politics but that it was *the prevailing genre of* day-to-day politics for most of the world's disenfranchised, for all those living in autocratic settings…a diagonal politics, a careful and evasive politics that avoided dangerous risks" (2012b: 113). Some everyday acts of dissatisfaction that I documented during ethnographic fieldwork are discussed in chapter six.

Digital communication technologies are changing the nature of state-society dialogue. In *Speaking Out in Vietnam: Public Political Criticism in a Communist-Ruled Nation* (2019), Kerkvliet contends that, with such technologies, the dialogical aspect of state-society relations has become especially visible and includes citizens actively influencing authorities' actions and policies. Civic organisations now influence many aspects of governance and many lower-

level officials are responsive to people's concerns. When the one-way traffic management system mentioned at the start of this chapter was implemented in my local neighbourhood, for example, residents reported snags and pinch points to the ward leadership on a dedicated Zalo chat group, with officials responding to the feedback promptly (Field notes, 12 December 2022). On the contentious matter of COVID-19 support payments, different households within one housing block compared the support that they had received in a Zalo instant messenger chat group. Those who had received less than their neighbours angrily demanded that the ward authorities explain the disparities (Research partner field report, 08 December 2021). Some ward leaders resigned following such confrontations (Nguoi Lao Dong, 2021b), as discussed in chapter six. The crisis pushed some, however, to adapt and incorporate new digital communication technologies into ward-level governance, creating vibrant digital mediation spaces that many still rely on in their work today.
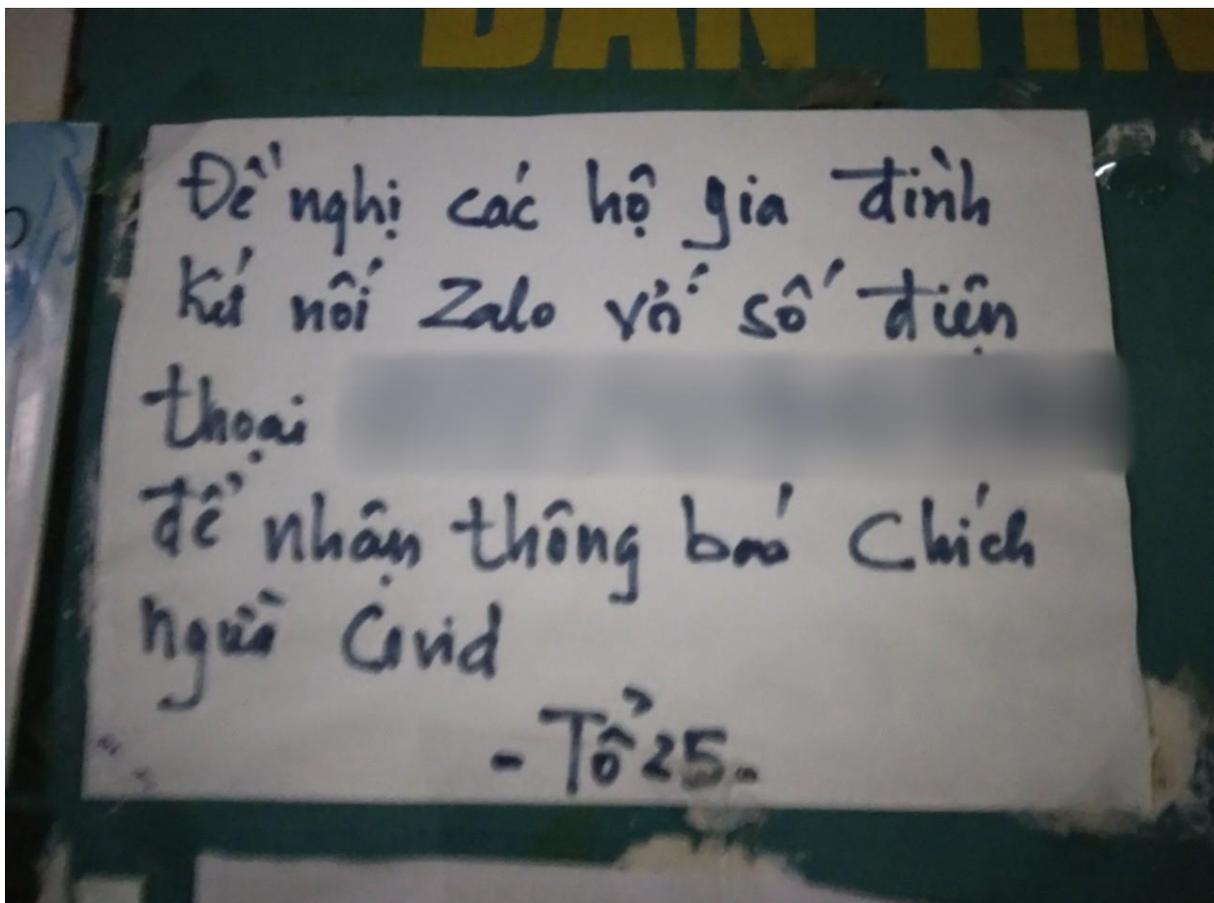
Figure 28: Sign pasted on sub-ward level noticeboard. 'Request for neighbourhood group 25 (*tổ 25*) families to connect with group leader on Zalo instant messenger to be notified of upcoming COVID-19 vaccinations.' Author's photo, 7 January 2022.

Mr Long, a district 1 ward leader on duty during citywide lockdown, discussed how these groups became essential means of sharing information. When asked whether the district

and city authorities had come up with ways to listen to opinions and share experiences among different localities to be better prepared next time, Mr Long said:

> *Yes. In many cities, from districts to wards and communes, officials listened and gathered all kinds of information, understanding the actual situation, to better serve the people. They collected experiences from various processes. In the residential communities, groups were formed on social media, even down to specific alleys, neighbourhoods, and apartment buildings, each having their own group and connection. Through this, the government could understand specific needs of households, what they lacked, what they needed to eat, and this approach proved to be very effective. After Covid, we realised that this approach is very effective, so we have continued to maintain it until now.*

> Mr Long interview transcript, 2 November 2022

Civil society

With the VCP's grip on society weakening after the *đổi mới* reforms, various kinds of civil society organisations have been allowed to be established. Independent civil activity has been tolerated, albeit to a limited extent, with NGOs and civil society groups somewhat able to influence social, economic, and even political change. Despite these shifts, the term civil society, defined as "the broad range of organized groupings that occupy the public space between the state and the individual citizen" (Kleinen, 2015: 34) has remained largely unrecognised in the official state discourse.[33] Some argue that the operation of civil society in Vietnam reflects the mobilisational authoritarianism school of state-society relations (Kleinen, 2015; Salemink, 2006) while others such as Wells-Dang (2012) emphasise its independence, construing it more as part of state-society dialogue. Wells-Dang argues that informal and virtual citizen-initiated networks, rather than corporatist associations or autonomous NGOs, are the real foundations of Vietnam's civil society.

Understanding the growing role of what historian Daniel Hallin would term a 'sphere of legitimated controversy' (1986) requires examining Vietnam's semi-authoritarian politics and the expansion of grassroots civil society networks. Andrew Wells-Dang emphasises informal networks as a benchmark for measuring the changes in state–society relations over the past three decades. He contends that the one-party state does not have the resources to control and quite often overlooks the spread of 'informal and virtual networks' that have crept into the

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[33] For a detailed discussion of how civil society in Vietnam is best defined, see Wells-Dang (2016).

state-run 'civil society' giving it a more popular mandate outside of state institutions. In his examinations of what he calls 'rice-roots democracy', Wells-Dang backs this assertion by pointing to the increasing number of public demonstrations (what he calls the 'literal' form of political space) and dissenting media and blogging activity (the 'virtual' arm), which are both tolerated as long as they do not attack the rule of the Party itself (Wells-Dang, 2012). He acknowledges paradoxical viewpoints - a gap between enthusiasm and gloom - arguing "this negative picture belies the vibrant reality of civil society in Vietnam….online and social media are booming and attracting a wide audience in spite of (or perhaps because of) halfhearted restrictions by the authorities." (2014: 163). Use of the internet, for instance, is common among social and political activists worldwide. It takes on a particular salience in Vietnam, however, due to a high rate of literacy combined with state ownership and censorship of print and broadcast media.

Just as the assumptions within Weber's notion of ideal-type states have been problematised (Migdal, 2001), ideal-type conceptions of civil society have been deemed unhelpful for understanding empirical reality in Vietnam and elsewhere (Dixon, 2004; Wells-Dang, 2014). Vietnam's informal civil society is not, for instance, oppositional by default. Political opposition makes up only a small fraction of all civil society activity in Vietnam, argues Wells-Dang (2012). More recently, the burning furnace anti-graft campaign, rebooted in response to major corruption scandals during the pandemic, has brought a crackdown on civil society. Even officially-registered nonprofits that operate within state-sanctioned spaces but have close ties with foreign donor governments have been investigated and had their leaders arrested (Vu, 2024), leading to an uncertain picture for civil society groups in years to come. And the impacts of Vietnam's recently-enacted Internet Law (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2024b) that requires internet users to register their name and address when signing up for social media accounts are yet to become clear.

Conclusion

To provide essential conceptual grounding for the subsequent empirical chapters, this chapter has outlined the three main approaches to conceptualising state-society interactions in contemporary Vietnam in the anthropological and political science literature: dominating state, mobilisational authoritarianism, and dialogic relations. In part due to restrictions on field access, many analyses of Vietnam's COVID-19 experience dwell on formal political structures and regime type, reflecting a dominating state or mobilisational authoritarian understanding of state-society relations. But a fixation on formal politics and regime type occludes what actually matters to people, namely how resources are produced, used and distributed in society, the

state's general character, and its competence and its commitment to policies that benefit society (Leftwich 1993, 1996). These matters were especially important to city dwellers at a time of widespread shortages when this study was conducted. This thesis represents an ethnographically-informed counterpoint to state-centric analyses of Vietnam's pandemic performance, revealing state-society relations under Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy as resembling an active dialogue rather than top-down control. Deliberations about what state-society relations should look like are always ongoing. Those relations are not ossified. Rather, as this thesis shows, they are dynamic and adaptive to unfolding and unforeseen events. The next chapter focuses on day-to-day negotiations about resource distribution during the coronavirus crisis.

5. Saigon is bleeding: subsistence struggles and social solutions during a citywide shutdown

Living on the edge: Linh's story

Like most women who work outdoors in the daytime, Linh, 35, was enswathed in long gloves, heavy shirt, conical hat (*nón lá*), and a wraparound face and neck covering when I encountered her at her roadside drinks stall. It was late December 2021 and the city's strict four-month coronavirus lockdown had been lifted around two months earlier. To get to this spot on the border of Ho Chi Minh City's district 9 and Bình Dương province, my research partner and I had taken a bus from the central terminus on Hàm Nghi street towards the New Eastern Bus Station (*Bến Xe Miền Đông Mới*). Along the highway, shuttered small businesses and deserted low-paid worker housing plastered with 'for rent' signs came into view. As well as witnessing the materiality of economic atrophy, we wanted to learn from locals what life had been like in the outer city under lockdown. After explaining the research, Linh agreed to an interview. Her husband Mạnh stepped away from their excavator dealership next to Linh's stall and manoeuvred a plastic table and chairs into the shadow of the yet-to-open metro overpass running alongside the road. I purchased some iced drinks and we went and sat down. With dust swirling around us in the downdraught from passing trucks, I asked Linh about her experiences during lockdown.

> *I started my drinks stall at the beginning of the year. People said that small businesses would get 1.5 million [Vietnam dong] in state aid, right? I have had not a single dong in business support, household support, rent package, or anything. These five or six families from here to the crossroads got nothing. At that time, people either couldn't*

afford the prices or just didn't have any money. I wished everything would return to normal so that I could earn money again. When things were really bad, I divided one meal into two portions. I had to forage for wild vegetables (đi hái rau dại). Because of the rain, there were a few (roadside) plants that could be eaten with melon seeds. What else could I do? I went past an amaranth plant. I didn't know if it was edible. I picked some and took it home, tried it, and decided it was edible so I kept collecting it. Then I urged the authorities for urgent help (gọi cầu cứu, cầu cứu riết) and I got a support package. It was meant for someone else, but that person gave it to us unexpectedly so we got two bags of vegetables. My husband also knew some office workers near here so we asked them for help. They gave us a bag of rice and two bags of vegetables. But when we had something, we shared with another household. We didn't eat alone.

Linh interview transcript, 23 December 2021

Introduction

A lack of necessities, state abandonment, and community relations of reciprocity were prominent themes not only in my conversation with Linh but in discussions about life under lockdown that I and other researchers had with a variety of low-paid workers in Ho Chi Minh City.[34] Nowhere else in Vietnam had suffered such widespread food shortages. The phrase 'Saigon is bleeding' (*Sài Gòn đổ máu*) came into popular usage to express this period of dearth that most city dwellers with whom I conversed, accustomed to life under a vibrant market economy, scarcely believed could unfold in peacetime. Living in Ho Chi Minh City in July 2021 as ever-stricter provisions within the government's Zero-COVID policy were implemented and lockdown approached, I myself faced problems obtaining basic foodstuffs, something I had not experienced during my engagement with the city since 2003. At that time, onerous COVID-19 testing requirements were deterring truck drivers from delivering produce to Ho Chi Minh City from surrounding agricultural areas as they usually would and quarantining by infected truckers depleted the driver workforce. With businesses closed and workers in the informal economy laid off, the city economy contracted by almost a quarter between June and September 2021.[35]

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[34] Linh and Mạnh are migrants from Phan Thiết on Vietnam's southeastern coast. Between November 2021 and June 2022, final-year undergraduate anthropology students at Ho Chi Minh City's University of Social Sciences and Humanities, under the guidance of Senior Lecturer Phạm Thanh Thôi, interviewed numerous migrant workers who had been living in boarding houses near export processing zones and industrial parks in districts 2, 9, 12 and in Thư Đức municipal city during the citywide lockdown. Within the students' final report (Huynh, Luong and Duong, 2022) are many examples that confirm Linh's account to be far from one extreme example.

[35] For the July-September 2021 period, Hồ Chí Minh City's gross regional domestic product contracted by 24 per cent to minus 6.7 per cent, the worst economic performance recorded since 1986 when Vietnam was emerging
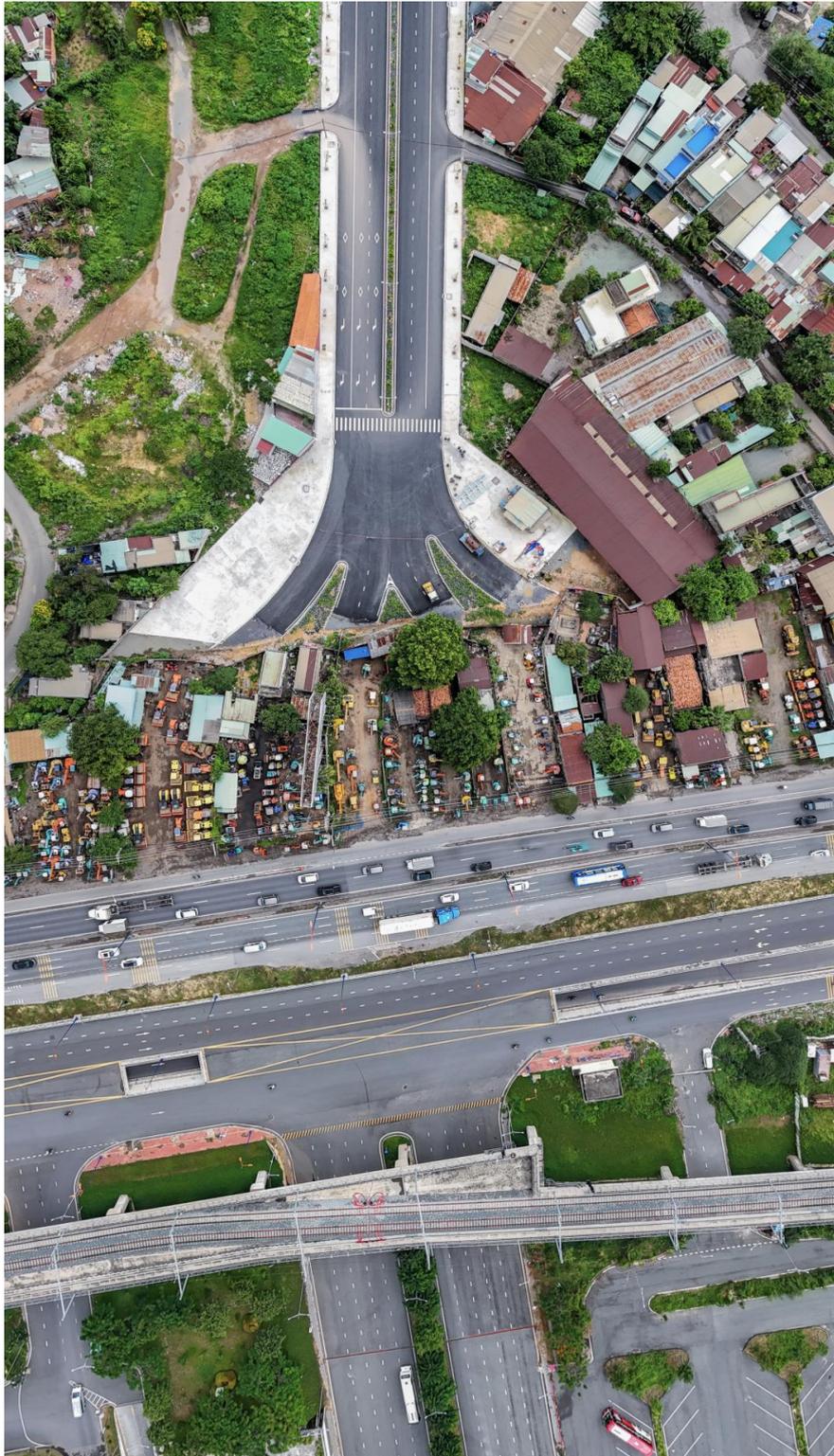
Figure 29: Dĩ An - New Eastern bus station connecting road and excavator dealerships to be cleared to enable its completion. Linh's stall is around 100 metres along the highway from the bus station parking area (bottom right). Credit: Tuoi Tre.

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from the so-called 'subsidy period' (*thời bao cấp*) of post-reunification rationing and U.S.S.R. subsidies (VNExpress, 2021). The pandemic cost the city over VND273 trillion (US$11.8 billion) according to the municipal people's council (Tuoi Tre, 2021c). Over the same period, Vietnam's gross domestic product dropped 6.17 per cent on the previous year - the first quarterly decline since 2000 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2021).

Without employment contracts, social insurance or savings, informal economy workers had no income once they had lost their jobs and were rarely able to switch to online working. The state-run emergency food distribution system, which relied on army troops unfamiliar with the city's geography, struggled to deliver supplies to residences efficiently, leaving some people hungry (Nguyen and Johnson, 2021). Moreover, civil society organisations were flooded with tens of thousands of requests for food every day and could not cope with the demand.[36] I discussed these days of dearth with a local pharmacist. She said:

> *Lockdown was hard. Even if you had money, you couldn't buy anything. My daughter and my granddaughter had to isolate at home. They could not get food, they went hungry. I went to church on Sundays. We prayed for the government to quickly change the situation.*
>
> Ngọc interview transcript, 01 October 2022

This chapter analyses ethnographic data showing how Ho Chi Minh City's low-income residents coped with economic hardships during the city's coronavirus lockdown. Earlier periods of scarcity in Vietnam were analysed by James Scott in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976). In today's Vietnam under market socialism there are rarely shortage events to which the theory of moral economy that Scott popularised can be applied. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of one such event. I apply that theory to show the norms and morals that city dwellers adhered to when it came to the appropriate distribution of resources during times of dearth.

In the first of the following sections, I explain why informal workers were the most affected by the lockdown's disruptive impacts on the city economy and by the authorities' failed social assistance policies. I then trace the origins of Scott's theory of moral economy and some of its present-day usages through a review of relevant literature. Thereafter, I discuss various non-state initiatives that emerged to plug gaps in the official provision of food supplies to city dwellers during lockdown that reveal the moral dimensions of economic life in Ho Chi Minh City. I then look at how violations of the moral order such as profiteering were resolved as citizens collectively set a 'fair value' for in-demand goods. I conclude by summarising the contribution that the chapter makes to our understanding of state-society relations in Vietnam.

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[36] Food Bank Vietnam, a social enterprise run by Nguyen Tuan Khoi, supported 10,000 people per day with basic food supplies (Food Bank Vietnam, 2025). During lockdown, its website and social media channels received two or three times as many requests daily from Ho Chi Minh City residents than it could fulfil.

Distributional failings

As explained in the previous chapter, some state representatives have acknowledged that central and local governments were unable to meet citizens' subsistence needs when lockdown was imposed during Vietnam's fourth wave of coronavirus cases. Some have admitted that volunteers ended up supporting a proportion of those facing food shortages (Nguyen, 2022). Inefficiencies in the distribution of different sources of state support have been blamed. During Vietnam's short nationwide lockdown the government set up a displaced workers' fund via resolution 42/NQ-CP and decision 15/2020/QD TTg. Research by the Center for Development and Integration (2021) concluded, however, that many low-paid workers found it difficult to access support under this scheme. This was because they lacked appropriate documents to demonstrate their eligibility, the fund was not adequately publicised, and the rules were strictly interpreted leading those in need to be denied support. In July 2021, the Vietnamese government launched a social assistance package of 26,000 billion VND (US$1.15 billion) but restricted its funding primarily to poorer provinces. Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi were required to contribute their own funds.

Cách ly

Mấy ngày dịch bị cách ly, siêu thị tiện lợi đến mì cũng không còn để mua :(

Figure 30: Local residents survey barbed wire rolled out across a street during Ho Chi Minh City's coronavirus lockdown in mid-2021. Caption reads: Quarantine. Even (instant) noodles aren't available in convenience stores during days of quarantine :(Source: anonymous submission to chuyenthoidich.vn archive.

While the city government did launch its own social assistance initiative in September 2021, this was unevenly delivered due to fund shortages. And while the central government also authorised the use of about 30,000 billion VND (US$1.3 billion) in the unemployment insurance fund, this programme excluded those in the informal economy. An October 2021 report by Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee estimated that, while state support had been provided to 1.2 million freelancers and 1.2 million households in difficulty during lockdown, the total number of city dwellers in need was likely to have been more than 3.6 million people (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2021c). This chapter focuses on low-income residents who most needed and often failed to obtain support from the state to survive during lockdown. It should be noted, however, that not all city dwellers faced significant problems obtaining food, especially those whose localities had been labelled green zones under the city's colour coded COVID-19 risk assessment system, discussed in the next chapter, or who had the money or the connections to obtain supplies privately.

Christophe Robert, an anthropologist living in Ho Chi Minh City in the wake of Vietnam's short nationwide lockdown in April 2020, speculated as to the likely consequences for food distribution if stay-at-home orders were to be imposed on Vietnamese cities while surveying a local market:

> *An actual lockdown in which, as in Europe, people could not leave the house would have been utterly impossible to enforce in Vietnam. It would have precipitated an economic crisis much worse than the current enormous economic devastation, and would have completely disrupted food distribution in cities. It simply has to do with ways in which the great majority of the population purchases food, the extremely complex social organization of the informal sector, and the millions of livelihoods that depend on arrangements displayed here.*

Robert, 2020: 18

The subsistence crisis he hypothesised came to pass. Under directive 16, the city's three large wholesale markets at Thủ Đức, Bình Điền, and Hóc Môn were closed on coronavirus control grounds. Some smaller, local markets remained open but struggled to cope with the demand. When I met Mr Tây, an elderly motorbike taxi driver living close to Calmette Bridge in district 1, in December 2021, he described visits to his local market situated at the intersection of Ký Con and Võ Văn Kiệt streets in August 2021. At that point in the lockdown, city dwellers were only allowed out to a market or supermarket in their own ward to buy food on the days per week listed on the market ticket (*phiếu đi chợ*) they had been issued:

You could only go to the market from 6am to 9am. However, many people started to queue at 5am so that when you arrived at 6am, there was only lard (thịt mỡ) left. To be honest, I just had to endure and accept that hardship. It was wicked in there (the market). I arrived at 6am or 7am and just saw fat and slime (anh bước vô mỡ bầy nhầy). All I could do was go home and eat nothing. My god! That's how it was!

Mr Tây interview transcript, 20 December 2021

Having set out the main reasons why certain residents faced food shortages during coronavirus lockdown in mid-2021 and some city dwellers' subjective experiences of those shortages, I now introduce the theory that will be applied to the ethnographic material later in the chapter.

Moral economy

Origins of a concept

Cultural historian E.P. Thompson extracted the term 'moral economy' from pamphlets distributed by Chartists and other critics of capitalism during food riots in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He went on to use the term merely incidentally when discussing skirmishes linked to grain hoarding and rocketing bread prices in his seminal text *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). "(A food riot) was legitimized by assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering from the necessities of the people." (1963: 67-68). In a subsequent article 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century' (1971), Thompson developed the term, defining it as "a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of various parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor." (1971: 79). In sum, the moral economy encapsulates the "total socioeconomic context within which the market operates." (1971: 125).

In his article, Thompson identified two conflicting models of economy, namely the moral economy of artisans, colliers, and the poor and what the Chartists and other critics of laissez-faire capitalism called the 'political economy'. Scott then popularised the moral economy concept and introduced its complimentary concept of subsistence crisis in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976). Scott applied these theoretical resources to understand the different norms and values at play in two contexts where peasants were forced by their colonisers to transition from pre-capitalist into capitalist economies: the Saya San rebellion in

Burma and the Nghệ Tính movement in central Vietnam. This enabled Scott to theorise about peasant notions of social equity and economic justice that, once violated, drove them to revolt.

In *The Rational Peasant* (1979), political scientist Samuel Popkin mounted an influential critique of Scott and his fellow moral economists Eric Wolf (1969) and Joel Migdal (1974). Popkin argued that villagers strove not just to stabilise but to raise their subsistence level through long-term and short-term and public and private investments. From Popkin's perspective, norms of reciprocity were less important to rational individuals than their belief in the benefits that might accrue to them through market participation. This ran counter to Scott's view that an individual whose subsistence hung in the balance was "more than a statistical abstract of available calories and outgoing rent and tax charges - more than a mere consumer whose politics may be deduced from his daily food intake…his sense of what is just allows him to judge others as morally responsible for his predicament and allows him to act, not just to restore his subsistence, but to claim his rights." (1976: 189). Thompson likewise rejected what he saw as Popkin's depiction of individuals as "rational actors, shrewdly adjusting to the market economy in a satisfactorily self-interested and normless manner." (1993: 342). And in a critical examination of the theoretical literature on moral economy and the Nghệ Tĩnh movement, Luong (1985) criticised Popkin's rational choice model for its failure to attend to the roles of normative, ideological, environmental, and ecological factors in individuals' decision-making processes. Drawing on empirical data from his ethnography of Sơn-Dương village in the north of Vietnam (2010), Luong further problematised Popkin's rational choice framework for its failure to consider the historically and socioculturally specific values that had informed villagers' behavioural choices over the years. In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate that a rational choice model *mainly* fails to explain city dwellers' behavioural choices during Ho Chi Minh City's coronavirus lockdown.

The 'Vietnam War': a conceptual catalyst

As the 'Vietnam War' had escalated in the 1960s, the social science community had been hurled into turmoil. A scholarly preoccupation with understanding the causes of peasant rebellions like those seen in Vietnam saw a distinct field of peasant studies develop. Anthropologist Eric Wolf's *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969) which emerged from the 'Vietnam War' teach-in movement examined popular revolutions in North and South Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria, China, Russia, and Mexico. In his quest to understand the causes of peasant rebellion, Wolf was influenced by sociologist Barrington Moore Jr. (1966) who had emphasised the role of traditional arrangements and the accustomed institutional context in reducing peasants' risks. If these elements were subverted by social dislocations caused by

the widening market, psychological, economic, social, and political tensions could erupt and, given the right conditions, lead to rebellion, he maintained.

Another influential text in the field was *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (1966 [1925]) by Russian economist Alexander Chayanov. Following its rediscovery and translation into English, the text was employed by Wolf (1969), Scott (1976), and others focused on the 'peasant question' across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, including in China's cultural revolution. Scott sought to move beyond Chayanov's focus on family units that neglected other social relations such as village-based networks of solidarity and mutual support, while still examining the implications of Chayanov's insights into household economics and psychology for larger political transformations.[37] And Scott augmented Wolf's historical-structural approach with a greater consideration of subjectivity in political contention. Scott thus bridged the scholarship on states and agrarian structures, on the one hand, and the scholarship concerned primarily with the peasant family, labour allocation, and household budgets, on the other.[38]

Beyond peasant politics

In the closing chapter of *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976), Scott acknowledged that the connections peasants were forging with the outside world through 'makeshift migration', employment, and friendship were transforming their subsistence-oriented villages, making it increasingly inappropriate to speak of a distinct realm of peasant politics. The expansion of global capitalism meant "rude shocks…linked to the world market" (1976: 85) began to impact life in even the most rural places anthropologists had long studied (Vincent, 1990). "Along each dimension of change, then, the social and economic content of 'peasantness' is gradually stripped away so that rural life, and hence rural politics, qualifies less and less as a special category." (Scott, 1976: 213).[39] Hinting at the wider application of moral economy theory, Scott rounded off the book by saying "At this point, it does not seem justifiable any longer to speak of peasant politics, for the political and economic life of such villages has more in common with that of the proletariat, or rather the lumpen-proletariat, than with that of the peasantry." (1976: 214). Today, moral economy has become a "polysemic category with multiple genealogical strands and contemporary interpretations." (Edelman, 2012: 59).

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[37] For a fuller appraisal of the shortcomings of Chayanov's analysis see Donham (1999).

[38] Luong, however, drawing on a careful analysis of French colonial records of agricultural product prices in Vietnam (1985), reveals Scott's suggestion that the Great Depression fuelled the rise of the Nghệ-Tĩnh resistance movement as unsupported by relevant archival data. For other detailed analyses see Brocheux (1983) and Moise (1982).

[39] Rural-urban binaries, however, have continued to be used even as the political and economic fortunes of villages and urban economies have become intertwined under globalisation. Anthropologists have shown how such binary categorisations continue to be invoked as opposites indicating social difference, thereby obscuring certain aspects of social life (Ferguson, 1997; Harms, 2011).

As data cited earlier in this chapter confirm, Ho Chi Minh City's economy declined rapidly during the coronavirus lockdown in 2021. But this is not the first period of swift, discombobulating change in Vietnam for which researchers have found the concept of moral economy analytically useful. The imposition of market and state under colonialism, McElwee argues, 'telescoped' a process that had taken centuries in Europe into a matter of decades, creating an "unbearable and inflexible burden on local moral economies" (2007: 93). She notes a similar 'telescoping' during Vietnam's rapid accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). What had taken decades to implement in neighbouring countries had been compressed into a relatively short period in post-reform Vietnam, bringing rapid changes in local moral relations.

In recent years, the concept of 'moral economy' has entered mainstream usage. United States presidential candidate Bernie Sanders called for a moral economy to reduce wealth disparities (MSNBC, 2016). Then in 2020 Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador published *Toward a Moral Economy* (*Hacia una economía moral*) featuring a 'code of conduct' against corruption and the excesses of neoliberalism. Moral economy theory has also enjoyed something of a renaissance in anthropological analyses of economic life in former socialist societies (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Humphrey, 2001, 2018; Humphrey and Mandel, 2002; Kwon and Chung, 2012; Müller, 2007), in the burgeoning vein of precarity studies (Galvin, 2021), and to consider how neoliberal norms and values exist within a broader moral landscape in Africa under capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000; Monteith and Camfield, 2024; Whyte and Wiegratz, 2016), to highlight just a few areas.

Theories of both moral and political economy have also been constructively criticised by feminist scholars who claim that a gender analysis is lacking in both theories and that, within village communities and families, interests between sexes and the generations do not necessarily converge (Joshi, 2024; Tufuor et al., 2015; Waylen, 1997). Having introduced the concept to be applied, I now present ethnographic examples that show communities dealing with dearth in ways that reflect the local sociocultural norms. In the following sections, I focus mainly on hyperlocal forms of self-help, seeing as much of the data I collected relate to how such strategies took shape in an alleyway community. However, data collected from further afield through the participatory archiving project introduced in appendix 1 suggest that such neighbourly sharing was commonplace across the city.

Neighbourly sharing

Linh and Mạnh, introduced at the start of this chapter, were living in a 'non-place' (Augé, 1995) on the city's outer fringes. But it was not only those living in out-of-the-way locations who were overlooked in the state's food distribution efforts. My neighbours in inner-

city district 4 had also faced food shortages. In the next chapter, I explain how my housemate was able to leverage her status as a white-collar worker to go and obtain groceries during lockdown by taxi. But blue-collar workers who did not enjoy this privilege tapped into their social networks to source supplies and then engaged in *ad hoc* acts of hyperlocal food redistribution instead, often involving just a few households. Take, for example, Mr Nguyễn, introduced in chapter two. He and his wife, their two teenage sons and his father-in-law, undergoing cancer treatment at a city hospital, were living in their three-storey tube house throughout lockdown. As mentioned earlier, his household had a connection to foreign residents of a luxurious housing development in foreigner enclave Thảo Điền through his wife's work as a cleaner there. In a Whatsapp message, she told the expats there of her family's subsistence struggles in a poorer part of the city and on three occasions, they paid for a van loaded with fruit and vegetables to drive the five miles over to nearby Hoàng Diệu street late at night. Mr Nguyễn crept out to meet the van and ferried plastic bags of produce back to his immediate neighbours, rattling the gates of their properties to get their attention before passing them the goods (Field notes, 15 January 2022). These were not financial transactions, he confirmed. Nods of appreciation rather than bank notes were exchanged.

Mr Nguyễn's capacity to earn had been eliminated by the pandemic. Concerned about bringing the coronavirus into his home and infecting his cancer-stricken father-in-law, he had stopped engaging in app-based motorbike taxi work months earlier. His other source of income came from repairing broken appliances in foreigners' apartments and had also been nullified by the authorities' stay-at-home order. But rather than prioritising the benefits that might accrue to him from selling his vegetable shipment on one of the informal marketplaces for basic goods that emerged on Zalo messenger, discussed later in this section, he engaged in a low-key distributive act, adhering to the norms that underpin day-to-day economic activity in local communities in Ho Chi Minh City. Just like the ethnographic examples in chapter three showing those practical norms in action at and around the coffee stand, Mr Nguyễn's sharing sorties reflect an "operating assumption of the 'right to subsistence' that all members of a community have a presumptive right to a living so far as local resources will allow." (Scott, 1976: 176).

My housemate Hồng, living a few doors down from Mr Nguyễn, described digitally-mediated donation initiatives. Some of those seeking help attempted to cement the veracity of their claims by livestreaming their plight on social media, a practice also observed by Huynh, Luong and Duong (2022) in their study of destitute migrant workers' survival strategies during lockdown. Hồng said:

> *At that time there were some 'helping situations' online involving Momo [e-payment] services. I read some of their descriptions. It was sad… [becomes emotional]. There*

was a situation when a man and his wife who are low income labourers did not have savings, lost their jobs, and had a newborn baby to care for. Some students were trapped in their home. They were calling for help because they were trapped in the city with no access to food and they were vulnerable because they were young. They posted their bank details and asked for donations. Quickly someone invented a support website for people who have money or food and want to send it to others. When I opened the site, I saw many red dots in different locations meaning there is someone in need of help. I checked some of them out and sent li xi [lucky money].

Hồng interview transcript, 30 December 2022

Such digital donating initiatives extended to high-rise apartment buildings as well as alleyway settings. A 35-year-old Vietnamese language teacher for staff at a diplomatic mission said:

At our apartment complex in district 1 we had a Zalo app group. Building staff bought food for us one or two times a week. All we needed to do was register on the Zalo group the items we wanted to buy. Then, they would buy them and bring them to us. I also received a permission slip to go out once a week but I never used it.

Cô Hoa interview transcript, 25 March 2022

Thoi, Nguyen and Harms (2023) confirm that city dwellers in apartment buildings would not have been covered by the state's food distribution system in the first place since they could access ground-floor pop-up shops in their buildings. Nevertheless, some high-rise residents still ended up short of food, having run out of money, and their neighbours stepped up to support them. Cô Hoa explained:

People also shared their news and anti-epidemic experiences on our Zalo group. Sometimes those who could afford it bought food to donate to the remaining apartments. It gave us joy when the pandemic brought us closer together.

Cô Hoa interview transcript, 25 March 2022

Numerous such acts of generalised reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) emerged in the city during lockdown and have continued during the new normal period of lessened restrictions. For example, years on, dispensers of free iced tea were still being placed on the pavement in front of Ho Chi Minh City shops for passing app-based drivers and others to avail of (Field notes, 20 February 2024). These had not been a common feature in Vietnamese cities before the pandemic but emerged during a time of need and have endured. Such arrangements have

been spontaneously implemented by citizens rather than initiated by the state but, as discussed later in this section, the state keenly incorporated such altruistic acts into its own post-pandemic messaging.

Figure 31: Photo labelled '*Mua rau và chia sẻ với hàng xóm lúc khó khăn*' (Buying vegetables and sharing them with neighbours in times of difficulty), July 2021. Source: anonymous submission to chuyenthoidich.vn archive.

Under the participatory archiving project described in appendix 1, city dwellers submitted photos of their visual memories from the pandemic period. The bulk of the approximately 400 submissions show respondents engaged in voluntary work. Around half of those images show volunteering in medical settings. The remainder show people distributing food or preparing supplies to be distributed shortly, mainly in community-driven initiatives. Although the number of submissions only represents a small proportion of city dwellers, the different locations depicted in the images suggests community efforts to distribute food took place across the city. That city dwellers chose to submit images of community support activities rather than other items or scenarios suggests that engaging in voluntary work was deemed meaningful to many and worth documenting and sharing with a wider audience. Seeing as contributors' names were not shared on the archive webpage, they could not benefit from any public association with the charitable initiatives depicted, unlike 'Queen of Eggs' Phạm Thị Huân, discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Some districts did receive significant food supplies from the authorities, however. I spoke to one ward official who worked in tandem with local residents to hand the provisions

out. Neighbourhood group leader Mr Long discussed undertaking this task with volunteers in a district 1 alleyway community:

> *I saw the dedication of individuals who are adaptable and serve the community. People who selflessly engage in charity work without thinking about their own families. They do it selflessly, without any demands. There are many stories like that. During the pandemic, we truly witnessed the strong bond between people at the grassroots level of society. I remember there was a photo of a group of women sitting in the yard surrounded by vegetables and fruits. It was already 10pm and they hadn't gone home yet. Their husbands and children were not taken care of. They had to finish distributing those tonnes of vegetables and fruits to the people before I could also go home. This pandemic brings out many aspects that are not seen in normal life and we see things from various angles that we wouldn't normally notice.*

Mr Long interview transcript, 2 November 2022

These volunteers, Mr Nguyễn, and other city dwellers involved in community food distribution all think beyond their own families to the wellbeing of the wider community, giving up time and resources that they could be using to support their own households through the difficulties of the pandemic. Popkin's rational actor theory which depicts "Hobbesian men who act in an environmental and sociocultural vacuum and who, beyond family circles, engage in a war of all against all for maximum personal gain." (Luong, 2010: 14) cannot account for their community-minded economic behaviour.

Non-state community support initiatives featured heavily in the state's own pandemic-related narratives in the post-lockdown period. For example, a large section of Nguyễn Huệ Lunar New Year 'flower street' (*đường hoa*) organised by the city authorities to welcome the Year of the Tiger (*Năm Nhâm Dần*) featured the rice ATMs that first appeared on some city streets during Vietnam's first coronavirus lockdown (BBC News Online, 2020b). These inspired many other philanthropic initiatives around the city such as zero dong fridges and markets from which those in need could take free produce. Their inclusion in a prominent state-sanctioned outdoor exhibition on a central boulevard, discussed further in chapter seven, suggests that the state wished to align itself with the moral behaviour shown by ordinary citizens, even as or perhaps specifically because numerous state officials contravened these norms by enriching themselves at the expense of others through the repatriation flights racket.
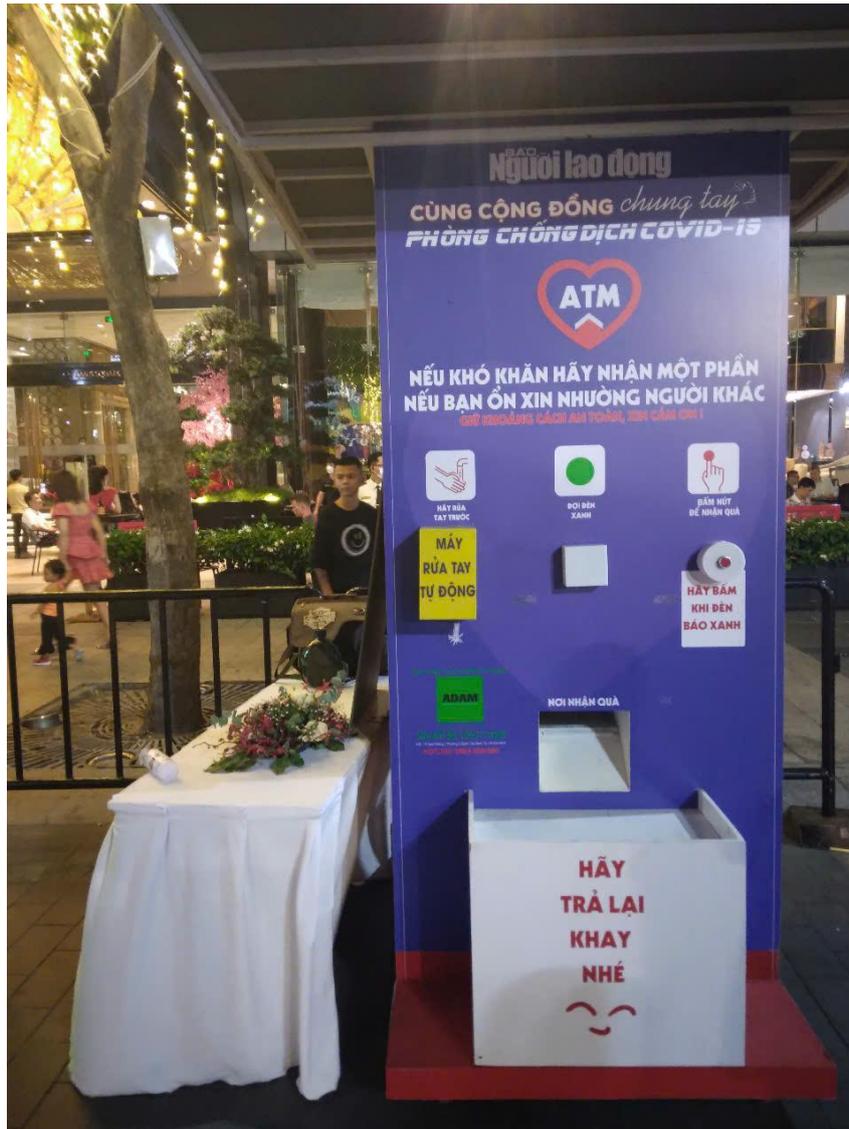
Figure 32: Rice 'ATM' on 'flower street' (*đường hoa*) - an integral part of the city's official Lunar New Year celebrations. Author's photo, 31 January 2022.

Thompson emphasised "a *consistent* traditional view of social norms and obligations" (1971: 79) in his theory of moral economy (emphasis added). Legal scholars Phạm Duy Nghĩa and John Gillespie (2005) have recognised the consistent, ongoing importance of traditional Confucian principles in providing moral values that bind Vietnamese society together. These principles determine the social relevance of policies and laws, they argue. To appreciate the above-described pandemic-era community support activities in Vietnam in their proper context, we must consider how Vietnamese society is governed according to longstanding beliefs and values. Nghĩa (2005) draws on the scholarship of Kim Định (1970), in particular his work to clarify the contribution of Vietnamese people in establishing Confucian values, to ruminate upon which traditional characteristics of agricultural life may have played a part in the establishment of these values. How some of the characteristics that Nghĩa identified (2005:

80-81) may have influenced city dwellers' to engage in altruistic acts to support their neighbours will now be briefly discussed.

Collectivism

Under a collectivist system, Nghĩa argues (2005: 80), humans "live in natural connection with other members of society, as an integrated part of one organic body. Under such a system, the collective interest of society is supreme over individual interests…" Nghĩa describes this as a 'natural' mindset developed through the common effort required to cultivate crops. From early in the pandemic, the government appealed to the existing collectivistic norm in Vietnamese society through its war-focused anti-epidemic propaganda campaign. As chapter seven illustrates, those violating this norm by displaying individualistic behaviour were sanctioned. Several submissions to the chuyenthoidich.vn archive introduced in appendix 1 of this thesis show locals in suburban *huyện* or in other provinces preparing vegetables in large groups to be shipped into Ho Chi Minh City during lockdown. And as Mr Long's earlier testimony demonstrated, the distribution of vegetables inside the city also constituted a considerable collective effort. The norm of collectivism appears to have permeated both spontaneous non-state initiatives like digital donating and state-sponsored local food distribution efforts such as that overseen by Mr Long.

Nhân nghĩa (benevolence, righteousness)

Trần Trọng Kim (1971) has defined *nhân nghĩa* as an unwritten ethical rule that sets standards by which the educated can be distinguished from the uneducated. While the ethical values of this rule may shift, this rule stresses behaving well towards others and towards society generally. In chapter three, I mentioned a 30-something local who takes foreign tourists on street food tours along 20 Thước 'food street. Over coffee one day, he began scrolling through photos of the charitable work he undertook during the pandemic. He told me that he and his celebrity friends paid hundreds of U.S. dollars to obtain the right documentation to be able to engage in vegetable distribution in outer city districts. Beyond straightforward altruism, he appeared by the large number of videos and photos he showed me and the livestream he shared at the time, keen to evoke the spirit of *nhân nghĩa* through his actions and cultivate a positive image as a benevolent individual at a time of need.

Fear of censure

Nghĩa points out that the collectivistic norm tends to incentivise face-saving and relationship-maintaining behaviours (2005). This study lacks data from which any conclusions may be drawn as to whether city dwellers chose to support others at a time of need out of fear of bad public opinion. However, in informal discussions that I had with migrant workers who

decided not to even try and quit Ho Chi Minh City and return to their hometowns before coronavirus lockdown and similar conversations engaged in by my research partner, a recurrent factor the migrants cited was their preference for the relative anonymity afforded to them by city life at that unstable time. They contrasted this with the gossipy women (*bà tám*) in their home villages in distant provinces who, during a time of scarcity, would be on the lookout for any individualistic behaviours or coronavirus unaware acts that they might highlight. Even though the risk of infection was higher in the city, several migrant workers decided to stay put for this very reason (Research partner field report, 5 November 2021).

Having discussed informal mutual support activities that city dwellers engaged in during the pandemic and suggested how traditional Confucian values may have underpinned them, I now describe how city dwellers' actions regulated the local economy at a time of shortages, demonstrating their consideration of the "total socioeconomic context in which the market operates" encapsulated by Thompson's notion of moral economy (1971: 125).

Fair value

In every society and in all ages, there exists a vague but lively sense of the value of the various services used in society and of the values of things that are the subject of exchange. This 'true' price very rarely coincides with the real price, but these [real prices] cannot go beyond a certain range in any direction without seeming abnormal. The existence of a 'fair price' or 'true value' is implicit whenever bargains that have been made under duress give offence.

Durkheim, 1957: 209-210

I now discuss how profiteering was countered and a fair value for essential goods was established. As will be shown, the normative and ideological factors that Luong has consistently maintained (1985, 2010) are central within individuals' decision-making processes in Vietnam were very much in evidence in this process.[40]

Mr Tây, introduced earlier in this chapter, explained what happened when some delivery drivers attempted to charge exorbitant delivery fees during lockdown:

At first I did not know whether it was the delivery costs or the cost of the food itself that was to blame, but the shipper charged me 100,000VND in delivery fees from district 4

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[40] In a different context, Monteith and Camfield (2024) have shown how Kampalan market traders invoke moral principles from the past, including the obligation to 'feed' others, when faced with neoliberal reforms.

[just over the river] to here. I had only ordered seven or eight kilograms of meat. 100,000VND is excessive (nặng lắm). In normal times, to deliver from district 4 to here costs only 20,000VND. Those delivery guys took advantage of the situation (lợi dụng thời cơ). They said that other delivery people were also doing it, so why shouldn't they do it too. But eventually, they couldn't carry on like that. There were some people working in storehouses, like seafood storehouses, meat storehouses, and so on. They did not charge delivery fees and their products were reasonably priced. Those overcharging shippers could not carry on as before.

Mr Tây interview transcript, 20 December 2021

My housemate Hồng described similar extortion tactics being used by sellers in a local Facebook group attempting to market foodstuffs to district 4 residents at inflated prices. The online community's response suggests the threat of censure was weaponised against those behaving in an individualistic, profit-driven matter. Hồng spoke of collective anger being directed at those sellers in a public conversation thread and their being boycotted by local residents until they lowered their prices:

I went on the Facebook group but it was like they were tricking people. The price of everything was much higher. But I think that it was just a few people who were short of money doing that. People did not use them any more and it stopped.

Hồng interview transcript, 06 December 2022

In shortage situations, Thompson maintained, the needs of the weaker party allow the stronger to impose an exchange that upsets the true value of things, creating unjust and extortionate arrangements. But the unethical actions of a minority of profit-minded economic actors, discussed further in the subsequent section, were regulated by social and cultural values guaranteeing a right to subsistence that emerged in the stricken city. Just as Scott raised moral indignation and regulators 'setting the price' for bread when faced with taxation populaire and hunger riots in France and England (1976: 165), in the alleyways the people decided what constituted a fair value and stabilised subsistence arrangements somewhat through their united action, underpinned by a collectivist ethic.

In a different case, anticipating the opprobrium she would have attracted were she to have hiked prices, egg corporation boss Phạm Thị Huân known as 'Queen of Eggs' (*nữ hoàng trứng*) proactively pointed out through her celebrity networks and TV appearances that she had decided not to increase the cost of her products despite other companies doing so

(VNExpress, 2021). Her actions recall examples given by Thompson of "crowd pressure resulting in 'prudential self-restraint' on the part of farmers and dealers who hoped to preclude more injurious popular actions..they sought a medium between a soaring 'economic' price in the market, and a traditional 'moral' price set by the crowd" (1971: 126).

When it came to profiteering during lockdown, city dwellers were able to take advantage of the fact that alternative provision existed and found ways to get their supplies through other means at more reasonable prices. Consequently, the profiteering ended organically. And for Phạm Thị Huân, the threat of bad public opinion, raised by Nghĩa (2005) in the previous section of this chapter, deterred her from attempting to profiteer in the first place. However, corrupt officials and travel companies had a monopoly over the price of tickets for repatriation flights, and citizens could not avoid being ripped off. Although Phạm Thị Huân was lauded on state media for her actions to support the community to overcome the pandemic (*hỗ trợ cộng đồng vượt qua dịch bệnh*), suggesting the authorities were keen to be seen as part of the general moral consensus on the fair distribution of essential goods, the simultaneous existence of an immoral economy under which officials were enriched by the coronavirus disaster indicates that they were not.

While moral economy theory has arguably drifted towards a Maussian (1967) emphasis on the obligation to give and to receive and away from its initial concern with rebellion, the potential for citizens' anger about state abandonment to destabilise society was something about which the authorities were concerned. The next section therefore shows the theory's continued relevance to situations where crowd anger may erupt.

Quiescence and revolt

The control, allocation, production, and use of limited resources and the values and ideas underlying those activities, Scott theorised (1976), become acutely political during periods of dearth. In Scott's conceptualisation, peasants rebelled only when a certain moral threshold was crossed, or when a just distribution of assets, resources and opportunities, or what he calls the peasant's 'notion of economic justice' (1976: 3), had been violated. Rather than mass riots, only a handful of small-scale, localised protests about distributive injustice occurred during the pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City, such as one in Thủ Đức city over missing COVID-19 support payments (Tuoi Tre, 2021a). While mass unrest is a rare occurrence in Vietnam given the pattern of political opportunities and constraints (Kitschelt, 1986; Tarrow, 2012), occasionally citizens do venture beyond the authorised channels to raise their concerns and protest, most notably in land disputes.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, after lockdown Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee recognised many city dwellers' subsistence needs had not been addressed by its policy measures (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2021c). One of Scott's main contentions was that rebellion grows out of threats to subsistence and that the undermining of the local moral economy can have unpredictable consequences for states. His recognition of a "spectrum between apparent quiescence and open revolt" (1976: 177) speaks to the possibility that explosive crowd situations can develop rapidly and unpredictably. Scott had, of course, been influenced by Thompson's argument (1971) that the moral economy of the crowd retained 'an ideal existence' that could be mobilised in times of emergency.

A feature in state media suggests that the authorities were aware of widespread anger about a lack of government support and the potential for public mobilisation during the coronavirus emergency. The article, illustrated with photos of police officers in riot gear being threatened by a mob wielding wooden sticks and pelted with burning projectiles, describes an elaborate 'anti-terrorism' drill organised in Vietnam's Central Highlands during the new normal period (figure 33). During the exercise, the article states, "the (extremist) group raised disputes in land issues, site clearance and compensation, and payment of COVID-19 support, while enticing protestors to flood Buôn Ma Thuột airport." (Tuoi Tre, 2022b). Of course whether violence or rebellion occurs depends to an extent on the power of the authorities to repress. Their show of strength in Buôn Ma Thuột and other drills that are publicised frequently in state media are a reminder that the state holds this power.[41]

Considering the state's failure to satisfy the population's subsistence needs in the context of Vietnam's political settlement helps to explain why that failure fed into a potentially febrile situation. In earlier writing, Kerkvliet (2010), echoing Leftwich's analysis of development across the 'third world' (1993), argued that while democratic institutions have not been required for Vietnam's rapid economic development, this has assigned great importance to the relationship between the Vietnamese state and society. Put simply, people in Vietnam generally tolerate political repression as long as living standards are rising. In *Political Anthropology*, Georges Balandier recognises authority as necessary for the performance of collective social tasks (1970). But the legitimacy of that authority, he argues, is "contingent upon the performance of obligations for which it is held responsible. Failure to meet these obligations necessarily undermines the normative basis of power.

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[41] When I asked some traditional motorbike taxi drivers (*xe ôm*) about several large metal barricades placed on a street corner outside Ben Thanh Market in December 2022, they stated in a matter-of-fact way that while these had been used to control vehicles movements in the area during the 2021 lockdown they remain here permanently to prevent a group of citizens from attempting to travel up to the Peoples' Committee building nearby, a material reminder of the state's readiness to suppress protest if necessary.

Figure 33: During a police training exercise in Vietnam's Central Đắk Lắk province in November 2022, 'terrorists' protest about delayed COVID-19 support payments and land issues. Credit: Tuoi Tre.

It is largely by reference to its contribution to the welfare of the group that power seeks to become authority - to legitimise itself." (1970: 181). With the state having established economic growth as the normative basis for the population's continued support since reforms of the mid-1980s and having therefore provided a criterion against which it could be judged, it was problematic when economic growth stalled and the state's emergency welfare plans fell short during the pandemic, hence the need for an eye-catching 'anti-terrorist' drill to remind the population of the state's repressive power. Just as excluding lower-class participation in political and civil processes added moral weight to the subsistence claims of peasants on the elite and their adherence to a sense of *noblesse oblige* (Scott, 1976), the price for the Vietnamese state of citizens' political non-participation remains the fulfilment of their material needs.The chapter now concludes by reflecting on the contribution it has made to furthering our understanding of state-society relations.

Conclusion

The needs for survival, sexual reproduction, and material well-being are always refracted to a certain extent by a historically situated and socioculturally constructed matrix of meanings. To reduce the rich texture of the native system of rules and meanings to a supposedly universal grid of material costs and benefits is to fail to explain a wide range of historical events and human acts.

Luong, 2010: 262

This chapter has contributed fresh ethnographic data from a recent serious shortage event to ongoing debates around moral economy. By showing how economic values interacted with Confucian moral principles during the coronavirus pandemic, the chapter confirms that the theory of moral economy Scott developed to analyse Vietnamese peasant notions of justice in relation to the appropriate distribution of scarce resources holds true for an urban setting in contemporary Vietnam. The chapter has furthered our understanding of Vietnam's state-society relations in the following ways. Firstly, through stories of neighbourly sharing in alleyways and in high-rise housing, the chapter has highlighted an ongoing rich tradition of mutual assistance founded on horizontal relations of reciprocity between community members. The ongoing strength of this tradition suggests that citizens perhaps do not expect the state to solve their resource-related problems or they at least have their own alternative strategies, unlike in other contexts where such networks are less important or do not tend to exist.

Secondly, by showing how normless economic behaviour such as pandemic profiteering was stamped out by city dwellers turning to more ethical suppliers, the chapter supports Luong's argument (2010) that Popkin's rational actor theory largely fails to account for individuals' behavioural choices in economic matters. However, by turning their noses up at profiteering delivery drivers and switching to other suppliers, city dwellers also behaved in a rational way, but to enable them to feed their families rather than generate profit. It is also important to note that switching suppliers was only possible where alternatives existed. Where the state held a monopoly, such as in the provision of repatriation flights for stranded overseas nationals, extortion was able to continue. Unlike the case of rip-off delivery fees, the state's normless economic behaviour could not be tackled, giving the appearance of a disconnect between the values held by the state and those held by the people.

Thirdly, as Scott and Thompson contended, subsistence shortages go hand-in-hand with protests or at least raise the spectre of them. The state's 'anti-terrorism' drill involving rioters angry about delayed COVID-19 support payments attests to this continued link. And even though the propensity for people to riot is generally low in Vietnam because of the political constraints, the state's inability to deliver the material security that some argue is the price the population pays for a lack of political freedom left it vulnerable to public anger. The next chapter considers the role of local officials as mediators of state-society relations through the lens of Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy.

6. Mētises meet metrices: knowledge frictions in the local implementation of Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy

The bánh mì controversy

One lunchtime in Vĩnh Hoà near the coastal city of Nha Trang, welder Trần Văn Em took a break from working at the Libera construction site, venturing out on his scooter to buy bread. It was July 2021 and although a Zero-COVID policy was in force throughout Vietnam, requiring citizens to stay at home to slow the spread of coronavirus, going out to buy essential goods was still allowed. However, as Em reached a COVID-19 checkpoint on the coastal road leading towards Nha Trang city centre, he was pulled over by a group of police officers, local militia, and the Vice Chairman of Vĩnh Hoà People's Committee, Mr Trần Lê Hữu Thọ. Cameraphone footage filmed by Thọ depicts an increasingly tense situation as he rebukes Em for buying an item not listed in the government guidance on essential foods, snapping "Bread is regular food! Bread is not a 'provision', a 'foodstuff', or an 'essential commodity'! What is essential about this bread you are buying?" ("*Bánh mì là đồ ăn chứ! Không phải lương thức, thực phẩm hay đồ thiết yếu. Ông mua bánh mì mà thiết yếu gì?"*) As the Vice Chairman confronts him, Em's facial expressions are hidden by his mask. But his glaring eyes and the scuffle that ensues when the militia seize his scooter and detain him make his indignance at the unfolding situation clear.

In further footage recorded at Vĩnh Hoà People's Committee headquarters, Em sits opposite Thọ who reads out the permitted food items one by one from a printed copy of directive 16, the bureaucratic instrument through which Zero-COVID measures were imposed across the country. Once the official finishes admonishing him, Em is fined 2,000,000VND (£60/US$80), equivalent to ten days' wages, and his scooter is impounded. When his employer heard about the controversy, Em was also suspended from work indefinitely without pay. Later that day, Thọ posted his clips online and they went viral. His overzealous enforcement of the provisions of directive 16 upon a low-paid welder buying bread sparked anger among ordinary citizens sympathetic to the labourer's plight. Workers and peasants, after all, are the constituencies on which the VCP was built and on which it still relies for support and approval. Thọ was attacked for his cold communication (*lạnh lùng trong giao tiếp*), insensitivity (*vô cảm*), and uncultured behaviour (*cư xử thiếu văn hóa*). In response to the furore, Thọ's superiors instructed him to visit Em at his construction site, his employer having agreed to a request from the authorities that he be allowed to resume work with better pay and conditions.

Figure 34: Vice Chairman's phone footage shows Trần Văn Em's vehicle and provisions being seized in the 'bread is not essential food' case. Credit: Thanh Niên

A staged photo published online that day by workers' newspaper *Người Lao Động* and by other state media outlets shows Em in work apparel holding a gift bag that Thọ has just given him while the official places a conciliatory hand on his shoulder (Nguoi Lao Dong, 2021a). Shortly afterwards, Thọ was dismissed from his position.

Technically, Thọ was correct, in noting that bread did not feature on the list of legitimately purchasable foodstuffs under directive 16. But the majority of citizens who contributed to online discussions on the topic found Thọ's literal interpretation of the directive's provisions problematic. "Taking a salary from the people but not handling them properly and rationally. Not worthy of being a public servant for the people!" (*Ăn lương đồng bào mà xử lý không thấu tình đạt lý. Không xứng đáng là công bộc cho nhân dân!*) fumed one. The Khánh Hòa Provincial Party Committee quickly recognised the incident as paradigmatic, terming it "a profound lesson from which it is necessary to learn about the implementation of public duties in general." (Tinh uy tinh Khanh Hoa, 2021). Before his dismissal, the Committee concluded, "Mr. Thọ was not fully aware, leading to rigid handling that was not in accordance with the spirit (*tinh thần*) of directive 16…causing public opinion to be frustrated; violating regulations on the ethics of cadres and civil servants; violating the culture of communication with the people." (2021). This reference to the 'spirit of directive 16' acknowledges the role of officials' informal know-how when it comes to the implementation of ostensibly uncompromising state diktats. This socially-embedded practical knowledge is not codified in directives, training manuals or guidance documents as to acknowledge it would be to tacitly endorse patchy policy implementation and reveal state power as equivocal. Long after the Vice Chairman had been let go, the episode was still being raised by this study's interview participants and in my
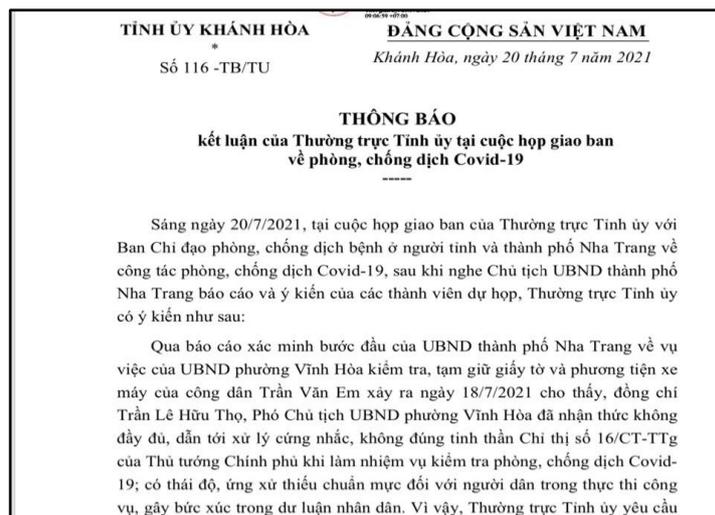
Figure 35: Excerpt from notice issued by Khánh Hòa Provincial People's Committee listing Vĩnh Hoà People's Committee Vice Chairman Trần Lê Hữu Thọ's shortcomings in implementing directive 16 locally, 20 July 2021. Source: Tinh Uy Khanh Hoa (2021)

conversations with locals about life under Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy, such was its resonance. A 35 year old who teaches Vietnamese language to staff at a diplomatic mission alongside her doctoral studies said of the controversy:

> *There was a very silly statement by an official that "bread is not an essential food" since perhaps only rice and things related to people's cooked meals were essential for him. After the appearance of many articles arguing about "What are essential goods?", our government issued a guideline document in which the concept was understood in a broader sense.*

<div align="right">Cô Hoa interview transcript, 25 March 2022</div>

Figure 36: Thọ apologises to welder Trần Văn Em and gives him a gift bag before resigning from his job, 22 July 2021. Photo: Nguoi Lao Dong

Introduction

Vice Chairman Thọ's botched approach to enforcing directive 16 led exasperated online commenters and the authorities to come out and declare the practical skills that a decent local official should apply in their work. Focusing on what I term 'knowledge frictions' like those described above that emerged when Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy was implemented at what Sovietologist Harry Rigby terms the 'action level' of everyday bureaucracy (1976), this chapter considers those skills in more detail. distilling the qualities expected of 'competent' Vietnamese

officials into a new concept of *có lý có tình* (being right but reasonable). To do this, I bring the ethnography into dialogue with James Scott's groundbreaking critical analysis of bureaucratic planning and its epistemological basis in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998). In particular, I focus on the concept of *mētis* that the book popularised, and Herzfeld's critical engagement with that concept (2005). The chapter reveals the little-understood role of low-level bureaucrats in smoothing relations between state and society in Vietnam.

Scott argues that the book's modified view of early modern statecraft provides "a distinctive optic through which a number of huge development fiascos can be usefully viewed." (2005: 3). The paradigmatic examples he discusses - collectivisation in Russia, China's Great Leap Forward, Nyerere's villagisation in Tanzania - had more severe, prolonged, and wide-ranging negative impacts than the Vietnamese state's Zero-COVID policy. But that policy was nevertheless a far-reaching state-led initiative incompatible with life as lived in Vietnam's alleyways and high-rises that lost public support. Scott's 'distinctive optic' is therefore judged as useful for thinking about the Zero-COVID regime as a failed scheme. Luong urges researchers of Vietnam to take an historical perspective on policies (2023). I therefore also consider Kerkvliet's research on officialdom during collectivisation in North Vietnam (2005, 2009) and scholarship on local bureaucratic mediation (Koh, 2006) in the analysis that follows.

In the first of the subsequent sections, I summarise the anthropological debates about bureaucratic agency to which this chapter contributes and establish Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy à la Scott as a high modernist 'legibility project' that suppresses local forms of knowledge. I then introduce the five key characteristics of *có lý có tình* - morality, reasonableness, neighbourliness, mitigating harmful policies, and following precedent - derived from the ethnography and look at how each one undermined the high modernist ideology within the Vietnamese state's Zero-COVID policy. I then raise some important caveats for thinking about the actions taken by local officials during the coronavirus pandemic so as to avoid giving a uniformly positive depiction of their qualities. I conclude the chapter by depicting the state as more amenable to transformation by *mētis* than Scott had acknowledged.

Knowledge frictions and Vietnam's Zero-COVID legibility project

High modernist ideology, according to Scott, is characterised by an "imperial or hegemonic planning mentality that excludes the necessary role of local knowledge and know-how." (1998: 6), stemming from unprecedented progress in science and industry in Western Europe and in North America from around 1830 until World War I. Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy, this section argues, betrays the hallmarks of high modernist thinking. Scott describes

officials' urge to standardise complex local social practices in order to centrally record and monitor them as their quest for 'legibility' (1998). In later work, Scott emphasised that legibility projects such as those enacted to control harmful phenomena are often well-intentioned undertakings:

> *It is perfectly clear that modernist schemes of imperative coordination can, for certain purposes, be the most efficient, equitable, and satisfactory solution. The control of epidemics or of pollution requires a center staffed by experts receiving and digesting standard information from hundreds of reporting units. Where such schemes run into trouble, sometimes catastrophic trouble, is when they encounter a recalcitrant human nature, the complexity of which they also poorly comprehend.*

Scott, 2012a: 36-37

Through its particular epidemic control approach involving extensive testing, contact tracing, and mandatory quarantining of the infected and their close contacts (Nguyen et al., 2021), Vietnam sought to standardise social practices to an extreme degree. As this chapter illustrates, the Zero-COVID legibility project encountered significant difficulties when socially-embedded forms of practical knowledge were excluded and 'worked' much better when those forms of knowledge could be exercised.

Classicists Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1978) rehabilitated the concept of *mētis* - often thought of as know-how, *savoir faire*, common sense, knack, or experience - after it had been suppressed as a legitimate form of reasoning by ideals of systematic, expert knowledge advanced by Plato and Aristotle. Inspired by their work, Scott popularised *mētis* as a way to think about the practical skills that underwrite complex activities and to distinguish the embodied knowledge that people rely on *to get things done* from formal, deductive, epistemic knowledge codified in guidance documents and training manuals that set out how things *ought to be done*. Scott emphasises *mētis* as a reflexive, responsive mode of reasoning, stating "the subtleties of application are important precisely because *mētis* is most valuable in settings that are mutable, indeterminant, and particular" (1998: 316). As well as "skills for adapting to a capricious physical environment, the acquired knowledge of how to sail, fly a kite, fish, shear sheep, drive a car, or ride a bicycle" (1998: 314) *mētis* applies to human interactions and incremental processes of social change initiated by subalterns. Despite the importance of the local, Scott employs the term *mētis* rather than 'local knowledge' to emphasise *mētis* as practiced skill and to defamiliarise a concept with which readers may already feel acquainted, inviting them to rethink its importance and its ambit.

This chapter's conceptualisation of Vietnamese officials' socially embedded practical knowledge as *có lý có tình* (being right but reasonable) is informed by an exchange between Herzfeld and Scott around Scott's understanding of officials' agency. This featured in a special issue of *American Anthropologist* journal devoted to Scott's work (Sivaramakrishnan, 2005). Herzfeld (2005) maintains that, by relying on an overgeneralised notion of resistance and by focusing on the *mētis* of subalterns while neglecting the *mētis* of officeholders, Scott neglects the collusion between bureaucrats and local populations that, in actual practice, leads to bureaucratic schemes being adapted. This collusion increases their acceptability and, at times, their longevity. Herzfeld also calls for more ethnographic specificity in the analyses that feed into concepts of unofficial, practical knowledge. He maintains that, as an ancient Greek term, *mētis* occludes modern Greeks who pride themselves on being able to "slide under all sorts of barriers set up by authority." (2005: 374) in a tricksterish way. He suggests *poniria* (the modern Greek equivalent of *mētis)* as an alternative concept that avoids sustaining Western cultural hegemony in the way that *mētis* does.

Herzfeld calls on anthropologists to "pursue still further the path that Scott has laid out for us. It means inserting a critical ethnographic eye in (more) interactions between bureaucrats and both their clients and their legislative masters." (2005: 375). Scott himself conceded that the arguments in *Seeing Like a State* "lacked an ethnographic sensibility toward state functionaries equivalent to that afforded peasants." (2005: 399). This chapter responds to this discussion, focusing on processes of bureaucratic brokerage between officials and citizens under Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy. As Scott points out, the importance of informal knowledge is often downplayed. *Mētis* is "denigrated, particularly in the hegemonic imperium of scientific knowledge…its 'findings' are practical, opportune, and contextual rather than integrated into the general conventions of scientific discourse." (1998: 323). This chapter shows this kind of knowledge smoothing policy implementation and improving life in one neighbourhood in Ho Chi Minh City during Vietnam's coronavirus crisis and thereby contributes to the ongoing rehabilitation of *mētis.*

I respond to Herzfeld's appeal for ethnographic specificity by developing a version of *mētis* that attends to the particular cultural and social circumstances of Vietnamese officials that I term *có lý có tình* (being right but reasonable)*.* In this endeavour, I draw not only on this study's ethnographic record but on my own past encounters with Vietnamese officials at work since 2003. Until 2020, I had mainly been exposed to the *mētis* of subalterns - ordinary city dwellers without connections to powerful cadres. But the coronavirus pandemic brought about a unique regulation situation during which I, like other city dwellers, encountered officials and considered their roles in discussions with my interlocutors considerably more often.

The particular temporal and social context in which the coronavirus pandemic erupted in Vietnam meant that a utopian planning scheme like the Zero-COVID policy was, for a period,

quite appealing to some citizens and officials. City residents in particular frequently express concern that the city under a market economy with the frenetic human behaviour it engenders is going 'out of control' (Harms, 2014).[42] Some of the widely-held worries and uncertainties about contemporary life, particularly acute in rapidly-developing urban contexts, seemed to be addressed through the crafting of legible communities for coronavirus control purposes. Scott noted that high modernist schemes usually have a "tidying up" tendency (1998: 400). On the matter of dirt and pollution in particular, Douglas argues, "rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience…some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order" (1966: 3) and "if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order" (1966: 50). The coronavirus served as such an analogy and the controlling Zero-COVID policy, I argue, enjoyed an initially positive reception as it addressed an existing widespread desire for more planned order.

This study's ethnographic data confirm that the 'tidying up' impulse within the Zero-COVID policy saw a "strong language of mutual exhortation" (1966: 3) develop in which the state propagandised and citizens expressed support from the bottom up, at least until the restrictions became too onerous. For example, across the pandemic-stricken city, home-made signage appeared at usually passable thresholds. These effectively designated locals as insiders to be protected from potentially infected and dangerous outsiders. The alleyway in figure 37 and innumerable others are usually traversed by anonymous outsiders working for delivery and ride-hailing platforms in the hypermobile city. I often witnessed these drivers being grumbled at by locals as they waited to pick up an item outside one of the many home-based businesses on the alleyway, preventing others from passing unimpeded. "The transformations in the use of space and the corresponding dynamic city life that developed out of these spatial and economic changes have become too complex and uncontrollable to be disciplined by the police or the party in spite of ever-present directives and sanctions on street activities." anthropologist Mandy Thomas observed in her research on the changing use of public space in Ho Chi Minh City (2001: 322). Ordering them and all other strangers out of the alley may reflect a yearning for a more certain past, when neighbourhoods were more egalitarian and a lack of motorised transport kept people closer to the area around their home. Or they could just reflect a desire to get unruly alleyways back under control, to make life safer and more predictable. Partly out of recognition that barricades and roadblocks were preventing the supply of basic goods to some alleyway residents, the Zero-COVID policy was ended but

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[42] The perceived breakdown in order extended to the Vietnamese language classroom where discussion topics focused on anxieties about the decline in rectitude in modern Vietnam - apparently widespread, given they were presented in the textbook as facts. Examples used to teach us grammatical structures for comparing past times and modern times invariably suggested things used to be better. For example, yesterday's youngsters were courteous but modern youth were errant, the bicycle traffic of the past was bustling but civilised whereas today's motorised traffic is swarming, and dangerous. In the past, drugs were not a problem whereas now they were everywhere.

not until it had revealed a widespread public interest in 'tidying up' the city. As Scott put it, "Like all utopian schemes, it failed, but it did succeed in stamping society with the imprint of its designs." (1998: 19).

Figure 37: (L) Red sign at alley entrance near Xóm Chiếu market, district 4. 'Strangers, shippers: do not enter the alley' and (R) on its white reverse 'Broken rice - pork chop - shredded pork skin - sausage - fried egg. Welcome.' Author's photos, 19 July 2022.

Conceptualising Vietnamese officialdom

Having explained the conceptual task of this chapter, I now present evidence underlining the five key characteristics of *có lý có tình* - morality, reasonableness, neighbourliness, mitigating harmful policies, and following precedent - and look at how each one undermined the high modernist ideology within the Vietnamese state's Zero-COVID policy. Analyses of brokers and translators in aid agencies within the anthropology of development literature (Lewis and Mosse, 2006) have developed similar rubrics. Where an element of ethnographic evidence supports more than one characteristic it is discussed under the characteristic that it supports most convincingly. I bring all five characteristics together in the section immediately before this chapter's conclusion. At that point, I discuss how longstanding weaknesses in Vietnam's system of ward administration affect the extent to which officials can model those characteristics.

Đạo đức (morality)

In November 2022, I met 76-year-old tailor Mrs Ba in her small workshop, located in a multipurpose building on Trần Hưng Đạo street in central district 1. For the previous 25 years, Mrs Ba had been living alone in a mini apartment in a social housing block opposite. She crosses the street a few times daily to get to the workshop in the early morning, head home to have lunch and a nap at 11am, return to work around 2pm, and then go home for the evening. Mrs Ba explained:

> *As a worker, I can't stay idle. I have to work and if I don't work, it's even worse for my health. Those elderly who don't work, they get even sicker than those who do. My son is a doctor and he's far away. I don't know how to use a mobile phone (laughs). When I'm sitting here (in the workshop), there are people coming and going who chat with me. But when I'm at home, the door is closed tight. Nobody could bear staying inside alone like that. I have two TVs at home. They both play different shows at the same time. At 8 pm, I watch two channels with two different shows and I sit in the middle. My son says he has seen houses with three or even four TVs but he has never seen one person use two TVs at the same time like I do.*

> Mrs Ba interview transcript, 02 November 2022

The daily routine that Mrs Ba describes enables her to leave her mini apartment, do the tailoring work that gives her life purpose, and encounter other people socially, all of which help to alleviate the loneliness to which she alludes. Her routine depends on mundane acts of mobility that were banned during coronavirus lockdown in Ho Chi Minh City. Recounting life under directive 16, Mrs Ba said:

> *In general, at that time, people were advised to stay home as much as possible and to avoid unnecessary outings to prevent infection. So I closed my shop here and stayed at home. But as a hardworking person, being confined at home for even two or three days was very challenging for me. Staying at home was tedious. During that time, there were a few police officers guarding the area, not allowing anyone to pass through. I talked to them and asked them to let me move around freely as I couldn't bear being confined at home. I told him that my workplace was here on this side of the road, this tiny place. That police officer was easygoing (dễ). He allowed me to move around normally.*

> Mrs Ba interview transcript, 02 November 2022

Mrs Ba's individual circumstances as an elderly person living alone at risk of becoming isolated by the stay-at-home order were taken into account by the official who responded sympathetically to her plight and allowed her to resume her usual routine, thereby making a difficult situation somewhat more bearable for her.

Figure 38: Mrs Ba in her tailoring workshop, Trần Hưng Đạo street, district 1, Ho Chi Minh City. A local police officer permitted her to move between her nearby home and this space during citywide lockdown. Photo: Diana Lê, 02 November 2022.

Local officials also displayed leniency motivated by morality when it came to locals' strategies for sourcing food at a time of widespread dearth, according to my neighbours' testimony. When I asked my housemate Hồng about living in the alleyway during Ho Chi Minh City's citywide lockdown, like many others with whom I had become acquainted locally, she confirmed that ward officials and the volunteers they recruited appeared to enforce the prevailing coronavirus control rules only selectively. Various terms can describe these informal neighbourhood security guards in the Vietnamese language: *tình nguyện viên* (volunteers); *nhóm tự quản* (self-managed group); *bảo vệ dân phố* (resident protection); *dân phòng* (watchmen).[43] She said:

> At that time I was working for a bank's subsidiary so I had a certificate to go out (*giấy đi đường*). That was because of my job being on the 'essential' list which meant I got a taxi card provided by my company. At that time, you should only use a taxi to get to a medical centre or essential workplace but I was bored so I used work's taxi card to go and buy milk tea (laughs). The police and the community regulators [local volunteers] would rarely stop you. Really, the rules were quite flexible for taxis.

<div align="right">Hồng interview transcript, 6 December 2022</div>

When I asked Hồng why the regulators enforced Zero-COVID policy provisions 'flexibly', her reply implied that their approach was morally motivated:

> I could get out of district 4 quite easily and get back in quite easily but for other areas I think it was a little bit stricter. District 4 had more relaxed rules and the regulators were more flexible than in other districts because normally we have fresh markets and at that time, they were all closed. There are no supermarkets in district 4 - none of the big ones like Co-op mart - so people had to get their food from over in district 1 or had nothing.

<div align="right">Hồng interview transcript, 6 December 2022</div>

Living within the community, the regulators had a passionate interest in supporting their neighbours in their time of need. Their fine-grained knowledge of district 4's economic geography drove their decision to adopt a light touch approach to enforcing the stay-at-home order. As locals could not visit the local fresh markets and as the area had none of the large supermarkets that remained open in other districts the regulators understood that residents' subsistence struggles could become severe if flexibility were not shown. Many therefore turned a blind eye to residents' trips to get food and by doing so ensured that residents got

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[43] This interview was conducted in English and Hồng's use of the term 'regulator' likely stems from her work as a financial analyst in which regulation is routinely discussed.

just about enough to eat. In the previous chapter, I explained how Mr Nguyễn took receipt of a small van's worth of vegetables on three occasions late at night. He distributed the produce to his alleyway neighbours. He indicated that, even if caught out of doors by local officials, he would not have faced punishment. "We might reasonably think of situated, local knowledge as being *partisan* knowledge as opposed to generic knowledge. That is, the holder of such knowledge typically has a passionate interest in a particular outcome." maintains Scott (1998: 318). These examples speak to the non-neutral nature of *mētis,* emphasising its function as a conduit for compassion during times of need. By ensuring locals didn't go completely hungry, the regulators also prevented an outright rebellion against the Zero-COVID policy. Their embodied knowledge thereby quietly helped to extend the longevity of a policy founded on systematic, expert knowledge in which practical know-how is not supposed to exert any influence.

The example above shows how values and morals *do* inform officials' everyday bureaucratic decision making and that they are in fact often crucial to the continuation of contentious policies. This reality is acknowledged most commonly after an official has failed to display those values and morals in a sensitive situation and a furore makes the headlines. Khánh Hòa Provincial Party Committee publicly invoking the 'spirit of directive 16' in response to the bánh mì controversy is an illustrative example. Gillespie notes that Vietnam's leaders have turned to traditional values in their efforts to develop a national identity (*bản sắc dân tộc*) suitable for today's market socialist economy. Gillespie recognises those values as "'well-established' historical values, especially patriotism, national independence, collective values that tie individuals, families, communities and the homeland, kindness, tolerance, appreciation of Confucian values (*nghĩa tình, đạo lý)*, diligence, creativeness, elegance, and modesty." (1999: 150). More recently, Gillespie has noted how Vietnam's Supreme Court judges "use 'reason and sentiment in applying the law' to soften sharp legal distinctions and make their decisions more socially relevant." (2013: 113). Judges that he interviewed said that over decades a tacit practice evolved to deal with 'hard' cases: superior level judges in public would stress strict compliance with statutory law, but allow lower level judges to smuggle *giá trị chung* (community values) and other non-legal narratives into courtrooms.[44]

However, morality has been used to justify authoritarianism in Vietnam since a far earlier time. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Gillespie argues, "revolutionary morality vilified neo-Confucianism as rigid and hierarchical - an impediment to socialist modernization. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the party is increasingly appealing to

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[44] See also Salomon and Vu (2010) for a discussion of the various ways in which reason and sentiment impact the execution of the law in Vietnam.

neo-Confucian essentialism to legitimize authoritarian government. The moral images promoted by the party have changed, but not legitimacy through morality." (2004: 151). As his approach to enforcing directive 16 locally appeared to embody authoritarianism without morality, Vice-Chairman Thọ risked undermining the legitimacy of the party at a potentially explosive moment when people were suffering. Consequently, he had to be dismissed from his position.

Sự Hợp lý (reasonableness)

Vice Chairman Thọ was branded "too mechanical and rigid" (*máy móc, cứng nhắc)* in his implementation of directive 16 by Nha Trang People's Committee (Lao Dong, 2021). This specific criticism suggests that flexibility and good situational judgement are qualities that Vietnamese officials are expected to bring to their work. The importance of officials' reasonableness (*sự hợp lý*) in resolving difficult situations is recognised within the Vietnam studies literature, for example in the contested domain of land and property rights (Gillespie, 2013; Harms, 2013). In the realm of state-society relations at the everyday urban level, the extent to which an official is willing to cooperate with local residents to resolve mundane policy implementation dilemmas determines whether or not that official is thought of as reasonable. David Koh's concept of mediation space (2006), introduced in chapter four, is useful for considering how local officials created leeway for Zero-COVID measures to be negotiated with local residents.

Examples of flexible enforcement of the stay-at-home order in mid-2021 from my local neighbourhood show local officials creating this leeway and thereby demonstrating reasonableness at a difficult time. My landlord lives with his wife and two children in an apartment on the ground floor of the local housing tenement (*chung cư)* approximately fifty metres from his elderly parents' hotpot restaurant on the local main street. He reported the two households being allowed by the local ward official to treat the section of alleyway separating their properties as an extended family footprint without being reprimanded. This enabled them to move back and forth and maintain intergenerational bonds at a difficult time, in particular allowing the younger generations to fulfil their duty of care towards their elders. In a similar case, my housemate Hồng confirmed that the ward official living opposite turned a blind eye to local children - including his own grandchildren - racing up and down the section of alleyway outside our house on their scooters during lockdown. With schools closed and children otherwise facing days crammed inside small properties hosting multiple generations, this was the only compassionate thing to do, the official had said to Hồng. Like other locals, ward officials have a sophisticated knowledge of the morphology of their alleyway neighbourhood and of their neighbours' living conditions. This knowledge is a key component

of their *mētis* and, during the pandemic, it influenced the way they regulated or did not regulate local space.

As well as being flexible, being a reasonable official can also entail giving up on attempting to implement a policy altogether. I experienced this first hand when the requirement to self-isolate for seven days was not enforced by local officials on my release from quarantine in December 2021. I arrived at what would be my fieldwork home for the next five months. After being shown around the shabby tube house by the owner, my partner and I took a seat around the kitchen table with our elderly landlords and their oldest son Quang. As a group, we pored over the documentation I had been given on completing hotel quarantine a few hours earlier (appendix 4). This suggested that seven days of home isolation would now be necessary. After passing the document around and conferring as a three, they all agreed *'xong rồi'* (finished). It would only be necessary to register as a new resident at the local police station the next day. Given we had both been vaccinated several times, had produced three negative coronavirus tests within the preceding ten days, and could be returned home by the police the next day if there had been a misunderstanding, it seemed OK to not self quarantine. Nods of acknowledgement and deference were exchanged and Quang ushered his parents back to their own home next door to go to bed.

In this interaction, the kitchen table served as a physical mediation space in which a written text specifying a cut-and-dried set of codified rules was the subject of an oral dialogue. Scott reminds us that such dialogues are "alive and responsive to the mutuality of the participants, reaching a destination that cannot be specified in advance." (1998: 323). Our kitchen table conversation was informed by the family's intimate understanding of the ward's mediatory function in policy implementation. The fruits of our discussion effectively constituted the local coronavirus control regime, not Zero-COVID policies writ large in bureaucratic diktats that were not aligned with a course of action that might actually be realisable at grassroots level. For one thing, there were no additional resources assigned to enforce the written commandment to self-isolate. Quang's elderly parents were not up to the task, he was busy running his business affairs elsewhere in the city, and neighbours were either hard at work or not motivated to surveille the property. The mediation process in this instance did not require the ward official to even get involved - it was indirect. The policy measure was deemed impractical to implement locally - well beyond the capacity of the lowly-paid, ageing official - and so it was not followed. That officials can tailor their enforcement approach in ways such as those outlined above without causing undue upset to the community suggests that the state's codified rules and regulations are understood on both sides to be more like broad principles to be used as guideposts in day-to-day regulation situations. At this time, signs and

posters likening every ward a fortress (*pháo đài*), and every citizen a soldier (*chiến sĩ*) were still visible around my neighbourhood but this was not the case in reality.

Figure 39: Red sign reads "Every citizen is a soldier, every family, residential group, quarter is a fortress against the epidemic." Author's photo, 21 December 2021.

Tình hàng xóm (neighbourliness)

Another of the criticisms levelled at Vice-Chairman Thọ in reader comments beneath the previously-mentioned article was his "authoritarian, bureaucratic and bossy attitude towards the people" (*có thái độ cửa quyền, quan liêu, hách dịch với dân*). He was also called "a cadre cold in communication" (*cán bộ lạnh lùng trong giao tiếp*). Although he occupied a senior position relative to a ward official, these criticisms of Thọ's behaviour towards a low-paid local reflect a widespread expectation that officials should identify with the local community rather than with the party-state that employs them. The following ethnographic extract demonstrates one ward official's neighbourly spirit in action.

Figure 40: Sub-ward official (*tổ trưởng tổ dân phố*) Mr Trọng and promotional signage for *Thuốc Gà Đá USA* on neighbouring property. Author's photo, 22 February 2024.

While living at my second fieldwork home, my partner and I became friends with the family living opposite who sold groceries from their property and the patch of alleyway immediately in front of it. 60-something Trọng, 36 year old Hiếu, his wife Yến and their two young sons lived together, with Hiếu supplementing his security guard salary by selling imported supplements for fighting birds online, using the brand name *Thuốc Gà Đá USA*. Trọng who had once been a police officer served as a local official, specifically a neighbourhood group leader (*tổ trưởng tổ dân phố),* a now-abolished role introduced in chapter three. In the alleyway where gathering to watch the national football team and engage in boisterous beer-drinking and hot pot sessions was the norm, Trọng's household was no exception. At these events in which we often participated, Trọng's family made as much noise and mess as everyone else. Living nearby, I observed that Trọng enjoyed good relations with all of his neighbours and played an important role in bringing up his grandchildren. Scott suggests that *mētis* requires the 'art of locality'. This brief illustration shows a typical local official's embeddedness in alleyway life and their sense of belonging to the immediate area that deeply informs how they go about their bureaucratic work. The importance of officials'

local knowledge is underscored through the following case of failed food delivery during Ho Chi Minh City's citywide lockdown.

I first encountered Mr Tây shortly after completing quarantine on my return to Vietnam in December 2021. Mr Tây was aware of the bánh mì controversy, joking about the errant official's name evoking Old Man Thọ (*Ông Thọ*), a famous brand of condensed milk. I was exploring beyond my immediate neighbourhood on foot, keen to learn about what life under lockdown had been like for the area's low-paid residents. I walked from district 4 to district 1 via Calmette Bridge and met Mr Tây and his similarly elderly friends drinking iced black coffee at Ông Chín Cà Phê, a scrappy establishment consisting of a few faded blue plastic chairs around a collapsible metal table. Mr Tây was born and raised in the immediate area. He has worked as a traditional non app-based motorbike taxi driver (*xe ôm)* for decades and lives in a nearby alleyway with his wife and daughter, his other grown-up children having moved away. He spends his days at this cafe waiting for his regular customers to text him, asking to be collected from the shops or from a relative's house in exchange for cash.

In August 2021 as the pandemic raged, Mr Tây claimed that over ten days, thirty alley residents became infected with COVID-19 and five subsequently died. With the spectre of death looming, citizens also struggled to meet their subsistence needs. Our conversation turned to the state-run rationing system. Starting on 24 August 2021 during the city's strict 'shelter in place' order, 132,000 soldiers were deployed to go and purchase provisions on behalf of households and to distribute government rations to needy city dwellers, with 34,000 northern troops travelling south to join the 'pandemic fight' (Vu, 2021). Mr Tây found the state-run distribution system ignorant of local realities:

> *The military had so many problems trying to distribute food here. Why? They come from the north. They couldn't even find main roads, let alone find individual houses in alleys. The government asked the military to go to the market for us. They might locate the market fine but then they would not know where to deliver our food. They are not local! You have to be local to be able to find those addresses. I hadn't received my food from them by nightfall even though I asked for it in the morning. That's why they stopped not long after that. We only had the civil defence (militia) or people from the ward then, and then later the shippers.*

> Mr Tây interview transcript, 20 December 2021

Figure 41: Soldiers of 88th Regiment, 302nd Division, 7th Military Region go shopping in Big C Mart, Nguyễn Thị Thập street on behalf of Tân Thuận Tây ward residents, 24 August 2021. Credit: Nguoi Lao Dong.

The labyrinthine alleyway network inhabited by Mr Tây and his friends stopped the heavily propagandised official food distribution effort in its tracks. Like the Zero-COVID policy more generally, the proxy shopping system was a state simplification (Scott, 1998) that, through a lack of local knowledge, failed in its implementation. In recognition of the system's inability to meet citizens' urgent subsistence needs, local officials came to the rescue to distribute provisions to addresses in the neighbourhood.[45]

Cắt giảm chính sách chưa phù hợp với thực tế (Mitigating harmful policies)

Part of the *mētis* of officials is their ability to make strategic use of the rules. In his ethnographic study of Bát Tràng pottery village near Hanoi (1993), Luong found that local officials employed by the party-state refused to obey commands to increase taxes because this would have caused village enterprises to fail, creating unemployment. In seeking to avoid this situation, village officials instead cut taxes to increase business revenues and to favour those families facing the greatest hardship. In a similar way, officials used their power to blunt

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[45] Also underlining the importance of local knowledge in crisis situations was the rapid reinstatement of app-based delivery drivers who, once pilloried in state and social media as vectors of disease and banned from operating under directive 16, were allowed to operate once again albeit under onerous testing conditions initially. They were even given the epithet 'professional delivery army' (*đội quân giao hàng chuyên nghiệp*) on social media.

some of the more potentially harmful measures within the Zero-COVID policy. Or citizens and officials jointly and subtly defined an acceptable level of compliance with the policy. This section looks at how local officials and citizens challenged the administrative ordering of their neighbourhoods during the pandemic by choosing which COVID-19 data they made available to the city. It also makes a link with similar activities during collectivisation in North Vietnam.

Vietnam's early success in controlling the spread of COVID-19 eventually came to an end and case numbers rose. With an intensified testing drive generating additional data, city dwellers found their communities increasingly quantified, audited, and metrified. Vietnam's COVID-19 legibility project came to rely on increasingly sophisticated metrical infrastructures.[46] Moreover, a positive test result could lead to the imposition of red zone status and contribute to one's neighbours encountering even more serious problems obtaining food. If red zone status had attracted significant additional support or resources then people may have been less reluctant to divulge their viral status. According to an interlocutor, some ward leaders made a one-day spike in recorded coronavirus cases 'disappear' by distributing those new cases across an entire week, thereby avoiding stricter anti-epidemic measures being imposed on locals. This denied the coronavirus counting machine the full fix of raw data it would need to develop a complete picture of infection in each ward and alley. Porter (1992) regards quantification as a 'technology of distance' that connotes objectivity, and elides the complexity of human experience but these ward officials' care for their neighbours and friends brought subjectivity and closeness into COVID-19 quantification practices, uniting the epidemiological and the moral. Their tactics did not always work, however. When case numbers in one area became so high that they could not be hidden, a red zone would be imposed (Field notes, 13 December 2021).

Numbers had also emerged as a site for negotiation and resistance during collectivisation in North Vietnam. "'Falsified reports' on land, expenses, and production, one informed observer wrote years later, "became 'an art form' among cooperative leaders. Areas reported as having been eroded by rivers or inundated by rains were found instead to be producing crops." recounts Kerkvliet (2005: 125). Local investigations at the time concluded that the main motive for such false reporting was economic necessity as the availability of staple food was decreasing. Ward officials engaging in 'strategic accounting' to report a lower number of COVID-19 cases can be seen in the same vein. In both contexts, explicit and implicit negotiations and understandings between ordinary citizens and local officials saw them

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[46] By August 2021, the state's enumerative capabilities were outstripped by fast rising cases, and its orderly labelling system became moot as its capacity to ingest the infected and their contacts in quarantine facilities and guard them at home ran out. See appendix 3 for an excerpt from a publicly available pdf document listing Ho Chi Minh City locations blockaded due to confirmed cases of COVID-19. The list is 124 pages long and lists 5,286 locations in total.

engage in the strategic sharing and withholding of information to protect the people from the imposition of economically damaging measures. I maintain that the strategic sharing or withholding of information from the higher authorities is one longstanding aspect of Vietnamese officials' *mētis*.

In recognition of the potentially negative implications for human wellbeing of the ongoing trend of metrification, an increasing number of ethnographic analyses focus on monitoring and evaluation practices in the health domain. This thesis does not attempt such an analysis.[47] Nor does it make an argument against metrics *per se* (a dangerous thing to do in a post-truth world). Instead, the state's exhaustive efforts to accumulate and sort COVID-19 data are understood as part of an admirable attempt to accurately estimate the coronavirus phenomenon that involved a period of intensive numerical surveillance which led to ideological judgements. How local residents and officials subtly undermined and resisted the state's enumerative efforts is discussed in subsequent sections. The first of these sections focuses on the state's use of coronavirus data to support its ideological agenda and on how its very data collection exercise was thwarted through collaboration between local officials and residents.

With the eventual escalation in coronavirus cases came the proliferation of coronavirus-related tables, maps, charts, and lists creating "new forms of power and governance, and new kinds of subjectivity, with individuals assumed to be appropriate entities for external audit and governance *through* numbers." (Shore and Wright, 2015: 22). On 31 May 2021, the National Steering Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control issued decision 2686/QD-BCĐQG (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2021a) which set out revised risk levels and alert colours to be applied to outbreak areas depending on their case numbers: at very high risk (red); at high risk (orange); at risk (yellow); COVID-free (green). The risk level determined the stringency of epidemic control measures to be imposed. A digital map launched by the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Information and Communications on 7 June and re-launched in upgraded, interactive form on 21 June presented the data visually (Bao dien tu - Dang Cong san Viet Nam, 2021). Generally, the more densely populated inner-city districts suffered higher case rates than their less densely populated counterparts in the outer city.

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[47] Such ethnographic studies of metrics require a methodology that examines the history of an indicator's creation and its underlying theory, observes expert group meetings and discussions where the indicator's terms are debated and defined, interviews experts about the meaning and process of making indicators, observes data-collection processes, and examines how indicators affect decision making and public perceptions. For one such study see Camfield (2002).
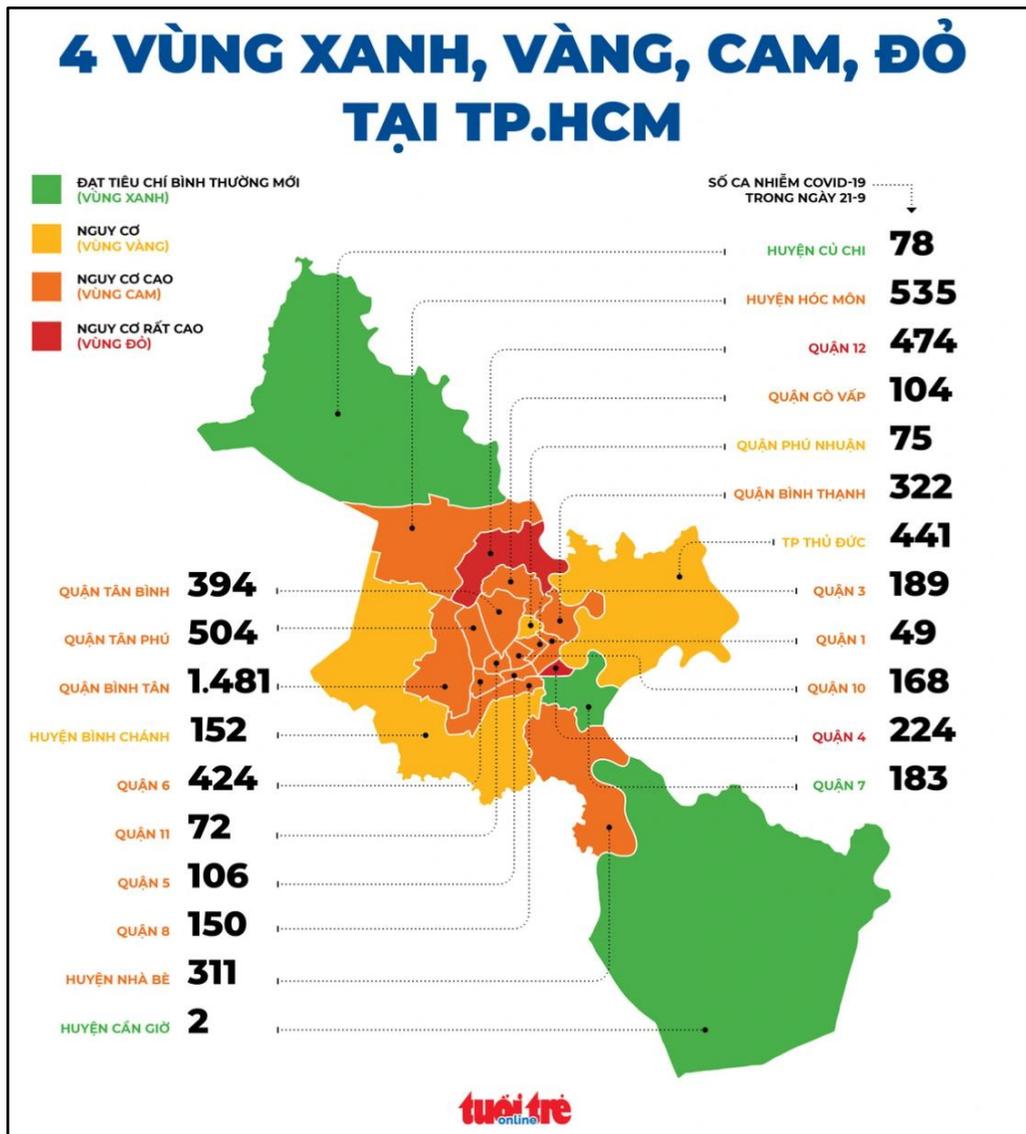
Figure 42: Green, yellow, orange and red zones in Ho Chi Minh City. Numbers indicate serious cases logged on 21 September. Source: Tuoi Tre.

Vietnam is an exemplary society in which the public's attention is frequently drawn to individuals and groups who excel or fall short compared to the expectations placed on them. Kerkvliet's discussion of collectivisation in North Vietnam describes a divisive taxonomy of households created to inform land redistribution and points out that "national and local officials praised successful cooperatives, criticised errant ones, and issued pronouncements and directives on improving collective farming." (2005: 20). Similarities to Vietnam's collectivisation legibility project can be seen in local authorities' COVID-19 maps that, as well as straightforwardly informing city dwellers about the spread of the virus, served as taxonomic guides to infection around the city, inviting speculation about the comportment of residents and officials in particular areas. As the extensive discussion of these shareable, eye-catching maps in state and social media demonstrates, the zoning exercise was a provocation that created "discursive space for deliberation about ideals (inviting) alternative conceptions of how

one ought to conduct oneself." (Humphrey, 1997: 42). These discussions often featured appeals for citizens to behave in more 'civilised' ways, as explored in the next chapter, showing the maps as interpellations rather than merely depicting the distribution of coronavirus case rates.

Vy, a 20-year-old chemistry student at a public university, suspected that the colour coded COVID-19 risk assessment system may, in some cases, have also been used to justify the less strict imposition of restrictions on more affluent areas, thereby making life easier for their residents:

When I was in Saigon for eight months during lockdown, I felt very chilled. Maybe it was because I was lucky. I lived in district 7. Back then, Saigon was divided into green areas, red areas, yellow areas, orange areas. My area was green - forever green with no outbreaks, no problem at all. Maybe as we have so many foreigners. I could still go out to buy things, I just had to wait in line for a bit longer. The newspaper said that the situation in Saigon was intense like it was bleeding, people were at risk, that kind of thing. It was true that Saigon was bleeding, but our area wasn't bleeding.

COVID conversation group transcript, 30 July 2023
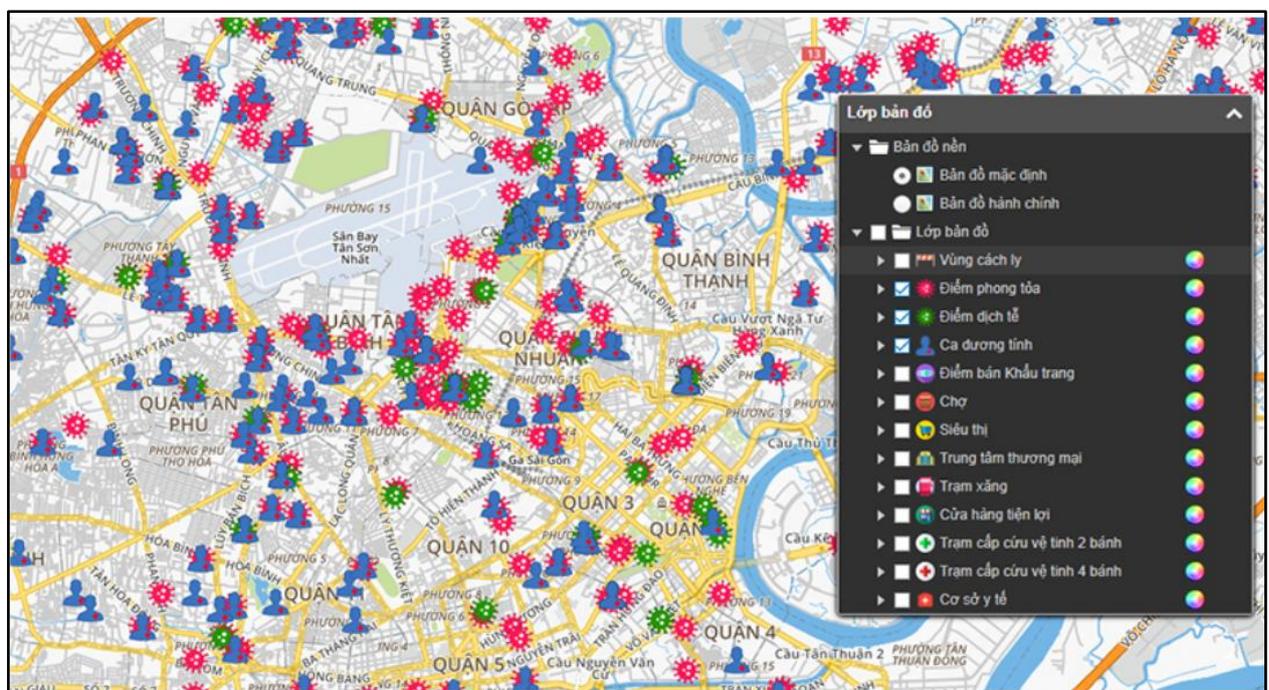
Figure 43: COVID-19 map with following filters applied on 23 Jul 2021: locked down location, confirmed case, outbreak location. Source: Trung tâm Công nghệ thông tin và Truyền thông thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (2021).

Others suggested the system was instrumentalised to draw negative attention to particular ward officials and accuse them of being lax in persuading the local population to adhere to the government's 5K campaign to slow viral spread (Field notes, 13 December 2021). Meanwhile, local residents were also subject to the public judgements of officials regarding their area's case rates.[48] For example, two days before I moved to my fieldwork neighbourhood, against an overall declining rate of cases across the city, district 4 became the city's only 'orange zone' as cases there resurged. The Vice Chair of District 4 People's Committee blamed "...some subjective people who believed because they had received two inoculations would not suffer seriously if they caught coronavirus. Thinking like that, they then went out and interacted in the community, causing the epidemic to worsen." (VNexpress, 2021). On more than one occasion, district 4 locals employed the Vice Chair's terminology to attribute causality for a fresh uptick in coronavirus cases. As 29-year-old hotpot restaurant worker Bảo told me during a December 2022 interview, "That is subjective behaviour from people who have received the vaccine already. Subjectivity first and foremost."

Foucault (2001) argues that ranking and separating of entities and institutions through evaluative indicators always reflects far more than mere 'common sense'. Clearly the colour coding system had additional shame-related functionality that could be deployed to rebuke certain groups for ideologically unsound and individualistic thinking, embarrass one's rivals or enemies, or settle old scores. Conversely, securing green zone status and being able to mount its associated signage in prominent public places was a reward which seemed to bear no relation to actual case rates. This signage was still widely displayed around Ho Chi Minh City in November 2022 when a COVID-19 antibodies survey conducted by the city's Hospital for Tropical Diseases and the Oxford University Clinical Research Unit concluded that 98 percent of the city population had already been infected with COVID-19 (HCDC, 2022). And within the apparent boundaries of a green zone I often observed red signs denoting properties with infected residents isolating inside them. These inconsistencies suggest that the colour coding system was at least partially a politically motivated fiction, albeit one that locals and officials still appreciated as it could bestow prestige.

The coronavirus pandemic was an especially unpredictable time. I suggest that the development of increasingly eye-catching maps communicating the extent of infections across the city represents an administrative attempt to impose a sense of control over the otherwise uncertain situation. As Scott notes, such moves are typical of states seeking to establish their control, as they "reformulate systems of knowledge in order to bracket uncertainty and permit

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[48] In her ethnographic study of HIV/AIDS affected people in Miami (2012), Thurka Sangaramoorthy uses the term 'numerical subjectivities' to express how identity and subjectivity become entangled in numerical considerations.

logical deductive rigor." (Scott, 1998: 321). This section has described coronavirus counting and representation practices, their role in shaping what was formally known about the pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City, and their secondary, ideological functions in Vietnam's exemplary society. The social facts depicted in eye-catching maps and the very numbers that fed them, however, will not have matched lived experience in the ward or sub-ward concerned. This chapter's maps (figures 42 and 43) are, to use Scott's words, "thin, abridged maps…that failed to represent the actual activity of the society they depicted." (1998: 3).

Figure 44: Sign reading 'Steering group to prevent and control the epidemic - Da Kao ward, district 1. Self-managed alley "Protect the Green Zone" (Zone without epidemic)' Photo: Minh Triet Lam. 5 March 2022.

Tuân theo tiền lệ (follow precedent)

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the coronavirus pandemic as a period when knowledge of all kinds was severely lacking. The unprecedented COVID-19 context meant officials and citizens did not have 'rules of thumb' to draw on - noting that these are "codification(s) derived from actual practices" (Scott, 1998: 318) - to navigate the new reality they now faced. That so many people faced so much uncertainty around rule enforcement and compliance contributed to the high levels of fear in society during the pandemic. Like in China (Ling, 2023), some people were more scared of falling foul of the Zero-COVID policies than health impacts of the virus itself. The 50-something owner of a newly-opened store selling imported foods on Bùi Viện street in the city's backpacker enclave said:

Regarding the government's response, they showed great concern for the people. They cared deeply and tried everything they could. However, since such a situation had never occurred in society before, naturally there were challenges and a lack of experience in dealing with it. An issue during the pandemic was the strictness of the government's measures. There were instances when local authorities did not understand the regulations, resulting in excessive actions that caused people to suffer.

Mrs Lê interview transcript, 5 December 2022

Mrs Lê may have had Vice-Chairman Thọ and his excessive actions in mind when making these comments. His tone as captured in his cameraphone footage was unquestionably impolite. He also made slurs about 'mountain people' upon reading Trần Văn Em's identity papers, his name identifying him as a member of the Êđê ethnic minority. These factors suggest that Thọ was, unlike Trọng, a fundamentally unsuitable representative of the state and ill-suited to interacting with the public. But one could make the case that during Zero-COVID, the usual rules of engagement that keep Vietnamese officials and the citizens they regulate on an even keel collided with urgent, unfamiliar diktats emanating from the centre. The stipulations around legitimately purchasable foodstuffs enshrined in directive 16, for example, represented government intervention in the very minutiae of daily life.

The bánh mì controversy likely occurred in part because the forms of knowledge embedded in local experience that Scott terms *mētis* relied on by officials in their day-to-day work threatened to be overridden by "the more general, abstract knowledge deployed by the state and its technical agencies" (Scott 1998: 311) vested in the draconian Zero-COVID policy. This led to several regulation situations that proved fraught for officials, who, in an unprecedented crisis, were not sure if the new rules prevented them from employing their usual know-how to smooth successful interactions or whether they would get in more trouble for failing in their mission to suppress COVID-19 transmission. *Mētis*, as Scott points out, is "denigrated, particularly in the hegemonic imperium of scientific knowledge…its 'findings' are practical, opportune, and contextual rather than integrated into the general conventions of scientific discourse." (1998: 323). Given they were charged with implementing a high-modernist scheme predicated on the belief that science and technology would conquer the coronavirus, it is perhaps unsurprising that officials were unsure whether the folk 'findings' they had developed through daily practice and experience were commensurate with Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy.[49] Citizens likewise found it hard to second guess officials' interpretations

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[49] Scott points out that the development of rules of experience is aided by things going wrong at least once. He gives the example that, in order to follow a recipe's instruction to heat oil to a point where it is almost smoking, one must have got the oil right up to smoking point on another occasion to know what it looks like just before it smokes.

of the new rules but, as complaints about Thọ demonstrate, they still expected empathy and an overall moral approach.

In another example of officials being forced to operate without past precedent to refer to, a farcical 'reverse bank robbery' took place in Ninh Thuận province whereby a truck transporting money to a bank was detained by an official at a roadside checkpoint who deemed money a 'non-essential' item. The truck drivers filmed and later shared online their remonstrations with the official, pointing out that the cash-stuffed truck is not supposed to linger along its route in case it gets hijacked. One netizen's quip that the official's uncultured and disturbing behaviour (*cư xử thiếu văn hóa và rất càn quấy*) was "spreading the epidemic of 'bread is not an essential food' even further" (VTC News, 2021) hints at the business-not-as-usual nature of interactions between Vietnamese officials and citizens under the Zero-COVID policy.

Có lý có tình: being both right and reasonable

In this section, I re-state the five key characteristics of Vietnamese officials but first I raise some important caveats. Firstly, we must entertain the possibility that rather than opening up mediation space entirely agentively, institutional inefficiencies and officials' lack of necessary skills played a role in creating spaces that were part mediation, part disorganisation during the pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City. Working under intense pressure during a national emergency, ward officials were charged with many unfamiliar tasks such as food distribution, supporting residents to apply for government financial aid and rent relief, and scheduling vaccinations and testing.[50] Locals enjoying latitude to move around during lockdown may have been just as much to do with officials' lack of capacity to enforce the rules as moral reasons. I asked my former housemate Hồng how strict the regulators - who include the ward leader or report back to him - had been in ensuring alleyway residents stayed indoors during lockdown. Echoing similar comments made by my other neighbours over the preceding year's fieldwork she said:

> *It was easy for people to move around within the alleys. There are a lot of connections. Nobody came to check within the alleys. They rarely walked around inside because they were thinking the most about stopping people entering from the outside. The regulators are not professional at stopping people anyway! Those regulators should*

In order for directive 16 to go on to be implemented in a way that enjoyed "practical efficacy - the litmus test for *mētis*" (1998: 323) officials and citizens needed to evaluate the practical inefficacy that was seen in Vĩnh Hoà.

[50] Although the vaccination rollout which supported those without personal connections with hospitals or private companies to get their jabs did encounter some snags - mainly with underskilled ward officials - the local presence of a concerned community figure did ensure that most alleyway dwellers received their vaccinations and had someone local with whom to raise concerns if needed.

be sitting next to the barrier [at the top of the alley] but they were not always there. Sometimes they would go inside their house and take a rest or something like that and then the barrier was not being monitored and people could sneak in and out and come and go.

<div align="right">Hồng interview transcript, 6 December 2022</div>

Officials are locals too and would have shared this knowledge but either did not have the capacity to investigate every avenue, checked at particular times that became known to locals, or deliberately turned a blind eye. They also no doubt had in mind the overcrowded nature of the multigenerational properties nearby, that staying locked inside would make those living alone sad (*buồn*) and that local children needed some kind of outdoor play to use up their excess energy, schools having been closed for months. As Scott points out, (1998: 324) "local officials' practical knowledge depends on an exceptionally close and astute observation of the environment." Given they knew the discomfort that staying indoors all day would bring, they decided to allow some limited transgression of the stay-at-home order in the local area.

Hồng's comments about a lack of professionalism and personnel reflect Koh's (2006) argument that inherent features of the party-state effectively stymie its ability to control society. For example, the reluctance of competent but ideologically ambivalent residents to stand for election as ward officials as they know they stand little chance of winning in a contest where demonstrable party allegiance is paramount. Koh also identifies institutional weaknesses behind the inefficient running of the ward system: a lack of training for officials, quality of the applicant pool, officials' old age, and low remuneration levels. These ward-level weaknesses reveal how unlikely it is that directive 16 could be implemented to its fullest effect in my local neighbourhood, confirming that state-society relations reflect a form of bartering akin to a dialogue rather than a top-down arrangement. While the government has passed laws requiring local officials to possess basic digital capabilities (LawNet, 2014) and ultimately wants them to hold university degrees (LawNet, 2019), a lack of skills and capacity among local officials to fulfil their assigned tasks remains a barrier to the enactment of state policies.

The consequences of ward officials struggling to simultaneously fulfil their responsibilities to enforce physical distancing, administer COVID-19 vaccination records and distribute support payments for residents in a timely fashion greatly inconvenienced some city dwellers. Some of my interlocutors blamed their ward officials' shortcomings for their families enduring a significant wait to be vaccinated, for certain family members not receiving assistance payments from the government's COVID-19 support fund, or for being given sub-standard emergency food supplies during lockdown. Having faced intolerable pressure and unrealistic expectations from their neighbours and superiors during the pandemic, many Ho

Chi Minh City ward officials quit their positions as soon as lockdown was lifted, some even posting resignation notices outside their homes (Nguoi Lao Dong, 2021b).

It is also important not to give a rose-tinted view of local officials. Some are suspected of using their positions for personal gain during the pandemic. For example Mr Tây and his neighbours welcomed an offer from local officials to obtain baked goods from Như Lan bakery on Hàm Nghi street but were disappointed to be charged up to 20,000VND each in delivery fees per trip when they were effectively a captive audience. Mr Tây and others also claimed that when taking receipt of vegetable deliveries, ward leaders took the best items for themselves and their families before distributing the remaining lower quality produce to local residents. He said:

We lacked vegetables. It's not that I am being mean but those vegetables were sent from the ward to the ward leader (tổ trưởng). The ward leader chose all of the good items for themselves. They would say "Come and get some vegetables, kinfolk!" We came but only saw bruised, low quality vegetables left. That was another wicked thing.

Mr Tây interview transcript, 20 December 2021

Having provided some important context for using the *có lý có tình* (being right but reasonable) concept, I now re-state the five characteristics of 'competent' Vietnamese officials.

Firstly, through their work officials should fulfil their *moral* obligations to their fellow citizens. This means prosecuting the government's agenda in a compassionate way, being aware of the hardships faced by locals, and not taking decisions that may exacerbate those existing hardships. It means carefully using their discretionary powers to decide whether and how to apply rules, and giving residents' requests for leniency a fair hearing. Supporting families to meet their subsistence needs is not only a moral matter but also contributes to political stability and therefore supports the state's broader agenda. Secondly, officials should display *reasonableness* in their dealings with locals. This entails showing flexibility and good situational judgement when implementing policies in specific scenarios. Being willing to open up mediation space in which their method or manner of policy implementation may shift according to local needs and preferences is core to this characteristic. Thirdly, local officials more readily *identify with their locality* than the party-state. By positioning themselves on a par with their neighbours and not overexerting their authority, local officials manage to prosecute the state's agenda in a manner deemed acceptable by ordinary people and by their bureaucratic masters. Local knowledge derived from being physically present in the area long-term allows officials to fulfil logistical tasks in the area competently and to understand the lived experiences of their neighbours. Fourthly, by partially fulfilling tasks, withholding information,

stalling, or interpreting policy prescriptions in particular ways, officials can *blunt some of the potential negative impacts of harmful policies* for local people. Finally, by *relying on their accumulated knowledge of past contentious cases* and how they were resolved, local officials find ways to navigate sensitive emerging situations. When the state's abstract outside knowledge abuts their embodied knowledge as was the case under directive 16, what I term 'knowledge frictions' can emerge leading to inappropriate or overzealous policy implementation and community anger.

Conclusion

> *Mētis intervenes at moments when the divine world seems to be still in movement or when the balance of the powers which operate within it appears to be momentarily upset…her intelligence operates in the realm of what is shifting and unexpected in order the better to reverse situations and overturn hierarchies which appear unassailable.*

<div align="right">Detienne and Vernant, 1978: 108</div>

Whether or not Zero-COVID was the *most* restrictive policy imposed on Vietnamese people in human memory, it was unquestionably a controlling scheme in which state power reshaped the operation of society for an extended period. In such a situation, the state's and citizens' expectations around officials' desirable qualities, usually obscured, became more available for analysis. As the totality of these qualities is not formally codified in training materials or directives, they are little understood. This chapter has therefore responded to an appeal for anthropologists to focus more carefully on how local officials deploy their embodied knowledge when implementing high modernist plans, developing a Vietnam-specific version of Scott's notion of *mētis.* This concept is *có lý có tình* - being both right and reasonable - and is informed by this study's ethnographic data that capture the knowledge, skills, and values that Vietnamese officials brought to the innovative bureaucratic work they undertook in their communities during the coronavirus pandemic. Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy has been conceptualised as a utopian scheme, a coherent plan to instil order and legibility in a local context where the perceived absence of these qualities has been of great concern to both the authorities and citizenry.

As Scott noted, the most fertile soil for an authoritarian state willing to enact high-modernist plans has been times of war, revolution, depression, and struggle for national liberation. The COVID-19 pandemic shared qualities with all of these times of tumult, leading Vietnam to impose a panoptic pandemic control scheme. Scott maintained that "contexts of coherent, unitary authority are most amenable to the analysis in *Seeing Like a State."* (2021:

507). I have employed Scott's analysis in this chapter to consider how authoritarian Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy was implemented and suggest that it could be fruitfully applied to analyse the implementation of coronavirus control policies of capitalist democracies too, given that states of all stripes necessarily became or tried to become contexts of coherent, unitary authority to plan and enact top-down viral control schemes.

This chapter has also shown that the Vietnamese authorities want to be seen admitting that they get things wrong and that the imperative to be seen as 'on the side of the people' trumps the ambitions of any particular high-modernist scheme they may be trying to implement. In this way, I depart from Scott, showing how states may be more amenable to being transformed by *mētis* than he might otherwise have acknowledged. As Vietnam specialists like Kerkvliet, Luong and Koh have shown via concepts like everyday politics, dialogic relations, and mediation space, and as this ethnography demonstrates, *mētis* can in fact demand that state officials see the world in less reductive terms. As Cô Hoa mentioned, revised Zero-COVID guidelines were issued in response to the bánh mì controversy. Although accommodating citizens' concerns in state policies was not always so prevalent, it has become much more common in recent decades. Official recognition of the 'spirit of directive 16' constituted an admission that the state's plans and ambitions are only likely to be realised to the extent that officials can persuade people to accept them, suggesting that plans are more akin to visions of ideal outcomes than realisable blueprints. Policy enforcement has been shown to be very much a kind of two-way dialogue. But because of the need to maintain the appearance of state control, most of the negotiations under this dialogue are subterranean. Only in exceptional circumstances and when studied ethnographically do they become apparent, making it important to analyse them when they do. The next chapter discusses the operation of state ideology during the coronavirus crisis.

7. Interpellation by infection: sick citizen-subjects under Vietnam's coronavirus control policy

Ở đây không có văn minh (It's not civilised here)

I became friends with Duy, 25, while living in Number 35. He had just completed military service in his native province of Bình Thuận. He then moved into a spartan tube house two doors down with his older sister Hồng who worked in finance in a nearby office building and their younger cousin Chiến, a final-year agriculture student at Bình Dương University and part-time Baemin driver.[51] Duy and I often sat at a plastic table and chairs opposite a seller's cart positioned strategically at the intersection of two alleyways. We would chat while I had iced black coffee and Duy drank Sting energy drink and smoked Craven 'A' cigarettes. A faded, homemade *mang đi* (take away) sign attached to the cart looked like it had been there since mid-2021 when sellers were banned under coronavirus control policies from serving sit-in customers. A dispute with their landlord saw Duy, Hồng, and Chiến vacate their rented house. Hồng moved in with my partner and I for several months while Duy and Chiến moved back to La Gi town on Vietnam's southeast coast where they helped out at Duy's parents' haberdashery shop while looking for full-time work.[52]

Duy returned to Ho Chi Minh City intermittently, to accompany his father to the heart clinic and to fulfil bureaucratic tasks linked to his university graduation that had been delayed due to the pandemic and his military service. After a random Zalo message early one morning telling me he was in town, I invited him to the basic coffee outlet near the rented room that I had since moved into above a hotpot restaurant. A local single Mum living in an especially narrow tube house put out five or six collapsible tables with lime green plastic chairs every morning alongside the large apartment building (*chung cư*) on the alley I lived on, leaving them in place until around lunchtime. We had never frequented this coffee stand before and as Duy turned up and we took a seat, he seemed uncomfortable. Surveying the immediate area, he said candidly "*Em không thích ở đây. Ở đây không có văn minh. Quán đó thoải mái hơn.*" which translates as "I don't like it here. It isn't civilised here. The other place (coffee stand) is more comfortable." I did not point out that this modest pavement cafe had been neatly swept and featured none of the cigarette ends that he himself used to discard around our old coffee haunt and in the alleyway outside his former home, but which he seemed in this case to associate with a lack of civility. That Duy did not hesitate to make civility-oriented judgements

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[51] Baemin, South Korea's largest food delivery app, operated in Vietnam from 2019 to 2023. Bosses cited the difficulty of making profit within Vietnam's competitive food delivery market as the reason for the withdrawal.

[52] La Gi town should not be confused with La Gi New City, a masterplanned seafront development around 5 kilometres from La Gi town centre - dubbed *Đô thị thịnh vượng bên vịnh biển* (Prosperous metropolis by the bay) by its developers. See La Gi New City - Giới Thiệu (2024).

about other working-class people despite his own patchy adherence to so-called civilised standards of behaviour hints at the complex, contradictory dynamics of Vietnam's civility discourse.

Figure 45: Duy surveys the 'uncivilised' coffee stand. Author's photo, 20 September 2022

Introduction

Civility is a major organising concept for social life in Vietnam and appeals for civilised comportment feature prominently in day-to-day situations (Drummond, 2004; Harms 2009, 2011, 2014a, 2016a, 2016b, 2023; Leshkowich, 2005; Lincoln, 2014; Luong, 2003, 2005; Nguyen and Locke, 2014; Rungby and Harms, 2023; Schwenkel and Leshkowich, 2012; Sidnell, 2023; Taylor, 2001). During the coronavirus pandemic, compliance with Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy was quickly established as a civility matter (Luong, 2020; Thoi, 2020). In this chapter, I examine the operation of state ideology in Vietnam during the coronavirus crisis through the country's powerful discourse of civility. For my interlocutors, one of the most affective elements within Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy was the stringent contact tracing and quarantining regime, explained in the Introduction chapter. By applying Althusser's theory of ideology (2001 [1971]) to ethnographic examples of city dwellers' encounters with that regime, I conceptualise it as a classic manifestation of interpellation from above which reflects the

dominating state school of state-society relations introduced in chapter four. By engaging with critical works that have explored emancipatory dimensions within Althusser's theory (Butler, 1997a; Butler, 1997b; Martel, 2017), however, I also show city dwellers simultaneously interpellating the state and their fellow citizens, suggesting interactions between state and society are akin to a conversation, and fit the dialogic school of state-society relations. By arguing that civility discourse operates in ways that reflect those two different interpretations of state-society relations, this chapter echoes studies that caution against binary understandings of civility ideology as either repression or resistance (Rungby and Harms, 2023).

In the sections that follow, the roots and current uses of Vietnam's civility discourse are explained. Thereafter, I present examples that show how civility discourse was mobilised against individuals who did not respond in an appropriate way when infected or potentially infected. Having discussed those discursive mobilisations, I then provide the ethnographic material and critical analysis to support my conceptualisation of COVID-19 as an interpellation and the testing and contact tracing regime in force under Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy as a particularly powerful form of state hailing. Given that ideology is defined by its function of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects (Martel, 2017), I argue that the assignment of 'confirmed case' (F0), 'close contact' (F1) or other such labels under Vietnam's sophisticated testing and contact tracing regime made for a type of hailing backed up by scientific data.

Nevertheless, the ethnography shows this power being subverted by citizen-subjects, suggesting that the hegemonic control exercised by dominant ideologies remains less powerful than it may at first appear. The chapter harnesses the new analytical potential that philosopher Judith Butler opened up within Althusser's theory of ideology to demonstrate how pandemic-era interpellations functioned in a multidirectional manner rather than in a straightforward top-down way. By introducing the concept of *interpellation by infection* I offer a new tool for thinking about processes of subjection that take place during responses to infectious disease outbreaks, particularly in responses that aim for viral elimination in exemplary societies. And by advancing the concept of *de-interpellation*, I offer a means for thinking through the discombobulation when an all-powerful subjection process suddenly loses its potency.

Văn Minh (Civility)

Văn minh (civility) is a major organising concept for social life in contemporary Vietnam, operating both at practical and ideological levels. With many potential meanings, *văn minh* defies any single English translation. A complimentary concept *ý thức* (consciousness) is often used simultaneously. In *Becoming Văn Minh* (2004), historian Mark Bradley charts the

introduction of civility discourse in Vietnam by the Reform Movement that dominated anticolonial politics in Vietnam in the opening decades of the twentieth century. The radicals blamed Vietnam's failure to withstand French colonisers in the late 1800s on the inadequacy of the Confucian principles of the ruling elite. As they associated Western-type civilisation with social change and dynamism in contrast to traditional Confucian values such as propriety, deference, and harmony they strove to create a Vietnamese version of civilisation in the national struggle towards independence.

The marriage of the personal and the political was one of the chief characteristics of the radical movement, according to Hue-Tam Ho Tai (1992) and individual behaviours and obligations towards society needed to be reimagined in light of this new configuration. Tran goes so far as to say that "attempts to cultivate self-knowledge and self-realisation assumed that national liberation required a new model of personhood." (2015: 487). Putting the development of civilisational thought in Vietnam in historical perspective, Bradley understands radical visions of the Vietnamese self to be "an instantiation of a larger transcultural phenomenon in which the global circulation of civilisational discourse was appropriated and transformed by local actors." (2004: 66). Civilisational debates took place in other colonial and postcolonial locales such as Siam (Winichakul, 2000), India (Geetha and Rajadurai, 1993; Hodges, 2002), South Africa (Hansen, 2012), and Taiwan (Weller, 2018) and the evolution of civilisational thinking in Vietnam should be considered within this wider context.

As an existential threat, COVID-19 prompted fresh civilisational debates in Vietnam. While Duy was doing his military service in Bình Thuận, the province's school of politics published an article entitled 'Eliminate uncivilised thoughts and behaviours in perceptions of masks and mask wearers' (Truong Chinh Tri Tinh Binh Thuan, 2020b) highlighting incidents of Vietnamese university students in Western settings being attacked or anticipating being attacked for wearing masks. "Inherently in countries that often pride themselves on representing civilisation and progress, respect for human rights is very discriminatory against those who wear masks", its author said. This critical comparison of 'civilised' coronavirus-aware behaviour in formerly-colonised Vietnam and 'uncivilised' coronavirus unaware behaviour in countries that historically pursued a *mission civilisatrice* reveals the power of tumultuous events to bring to the surface the "stark and occluded durabilities of imperial effects…the psychic weight of colonial processes." (Stoler, 2013: X).

Although Vietnam's turn to collectivisation frustrated radical visions, 'civilisation' entered popular domestic usage. As well as a continued focus on higher order concerns of culture, modernity, development, and progress, civility discourse came to encompass individuals' behavioural choices. While its anticolonial instantiation was emancipatory, the

current discourse of civility can function as a means of exclusion and stigmatisation akin to *kul'turnost* (culturedness) in Stalinist Russia (Volkov, 2001). Civilisation now implies middle class urbanity, while accusations of 'backwardness' are levelled at social groups of limited economic means and social power who are often rural dwellers. This unfolds within a context of increasing socioeconomic inequality and growing consumer choice which enables the wealthy to differentiate themselves from less prosperous others and sees class distinctions become increasingly fine-grained. However, nascent 'alternative civilities' in the form of local associations based on kinship, religious and communal ties have emerged in postwar Vietnamese society (Luong 2003, 2005). Althusser has been criticised for depicting ideology as hegemonic. The question of counterhegemony is returned to later in the chapter when discussing interpellation from below.

Civilising rhetoric has been invoked in many campaigns to remove those deemed undesirable from urban places subject to redevelopment. I experienced a major urban civility drive while living in Ho Chi Minh City in 2003. Ho Chi Minh City People's' Committee declared this the 'Year of Order, Discipline and Civilised Urban Lifestyles' ('*Ủy ban là 'Năm trật tự, kỷ luật và lối sống đô thị văn minh'*) to coincide with Vietnam hosting the Southeast Asia (SEA) Games. I noticed street vendors having their equipment confiscated, cleansing of the public realm, flower-planting and crackdowns on poor driving on the streets of district 3 and district 1 where I spent the most time. In his detailed analysis of this campaign and its evaluation in the news media, Harms (2011) discerns an idealised notion of urban living envisioned as emerging from the order and discipline that the campaign aimed to foster. And even though some commentators ridiculed some of the acts punishable under the campaign, they seemed to concede that city dwellers needed to be better controlled.[53]

Leshkowich (2005) and Lincoln (2008, 2022) have shown how informal women sellers have often been targeted while Nguyen-vo (2008) has demonstrated how sex workers have periodically been driven away from public spaces. In long-term research into the development of the Phú Mỹ Hưng urban zone in Ho Chi Minh City, Harms (2016a) engaged ethnographically with its prosperous residents to understand why the 'urban civilisation' being built there appeals so strongly to them and to many other city dwellers who invoke civility in the idealised visions of community that they espouse. Other examples of official appeals to civility include online instructions for taking civilised holidays published by the digitally savvy ward leadership of Ho Chi Minh City's Tân Phú district (Phuong Tan Son Nhi, 2022) and exhortations in state media to end relationships in a civilised way (Tuoi Tre, 2017). In post-reform Vietnam, private businesses also urge citizens to behave like civilised consumers in the market economy.

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[53] See Broudehoux (2012) for a discussion of how expectations around civility (*wenming*) were promoted through the staging of the 2008 Beijing Olympics in China.

Popular online marketplace Shopee offers livestreamed 'Building Shopee seller civility' classes (Tuoi Tre, 2022a). And in the Family Tips section of its website, a popular grocery chain emulated Tân Phú district's civilised tourism initiative by identifying 'Eight things you need to know to become a civilised traveller' (Bach hoa Xanh, 2024). Most recently, enforcement of traffic violations as 'uncivilised' behaviour has been stepped up in Ho Chi Minh City (Tuoi Tre, 2025a; Tuoi Tre 2025b).

Requests for civility are often adopted in messaging initiated by ordinary citizens and private businesses and disseminated in non-state fora. During the coronavirus pandemic, mainly for logistical reasons, groups of residents in apartment buildings and alleyways formed community groups on the Zalo instant messaging app. During fieldwork, I observed these groups to have endured during the 'new normal' period and beyond. For example, a laminated sign in an elevator in a private apartment building in February 2024 encouraged residents to scan a QR code and join the building's Zalo collective to build a "friendly, warm and civilised community" (*một cộng đồng thân thiện, lành mạnh, văn minh*). Having briefly reviewed the origins and current uses of Vietnam's civility discourse, the next section explains how that discourse was invoked during the coronavirus pandemic.

Civility shaming during COVID-19 in Vietnam

Supposed civility infractions committed by citizens at a time when a dangerous virus was circulating widely were harshly criticised. This is perhaps unsurprising, given their potential to spread illness, thereby negatively impacting others to an even greater degree than the usual 'uncivilised' acts like honking one's horn too much, spitting, or dumping rubbish in the street. As Althusser argues, a ruling ideology in its pure state is civic instruction, along with ethics and philosophy (2001 [1971]). In Vietnam, civic instruction involves messaging being disseminated via various text genres such as slogans, signage, and banners that connect ongoing societal 'problems' such as consuming spoiled fruit, littering, the spread of infectious diseases like dengue fever, improper dress, and noisy and/or drunken behaviour with people's low consciousness (*ý thức*). At a time when an indiscriminating, invisible threat was menacing the whole of society, appeals to civility were especially urgent and all citizens were implicated. The Ministry of Health's COVID-related communications urged society to be cognisant of the coronavirus threat. For example, in the pop song *Ghen Cô Vy* cartoon medics and regular citizens sing "let's raise society's consciousness together" (*cùng nâng cao ý thức của xã hội*).

Figure 46: Still from Ghen Cô Vy (Jealous COVID) pop song, released in February 2020 as part of a COVID-19 control communications project by Vietnam's Ministry of Health. Copyright 2020 MIN.

In observations from a Saigon café in the earliest months of the pandemic, Luong (2020) recounts young people sharing videos of a Vietnamese social media influencer who voluntarily entered quarantine after flying back home from Europe, praising the individual as having awareness (*có ý thức*). These local youth then evaluated an affluent individual who became known as patient N17, allegedly the daughter of a Vietnamese billionaire who returned to Vietnam from Paris Fashion Week, who had eschewed quarantine on re-entry: "The individual lacks awareness and thus affects the effort of the whole country and the government." (*vô ý thức, làm ảnh hưởng đến công sức của cả đất nước và chính quyền*). Attention was also drawn to N17's uncivilised comportment in state media (Thanh Nien, 2020). N17 was still being discussed at this research's COVID-19 conversation event over three years later. Công, a 29-year-old catering worker, recalled attending a community art exhibition in 2021:

> *At that time, people in that community art group, they were afraid that they would be labelled as someone who harmed the community. There was the case that the media often mentioned involving a girl who infected many people with COVID-19. So everyone was afraid.*

Công interview transcript, 31 July 2023

This example of civility shaming involves regular citizens unconnected to state institutions or wealthy elites exhorting the super rich to moderate their 'objectionable' behaviour when

working class people are usually those derided for lacking awareness and civility. That the appeals emerged organically on social media and then came up spontaneously in two day-to-day conversations years apart demonstrate that civility discourse is routinely and effectively employed by individuals to critique each other without state mediation. City dwellers have previously explained that having a well-cultivated sense of consciousness is not merely a matter of being materially wealthy but involves educating and disciplining oneself (Harms, 2016a: 110-111).[54] Criticism of patient N17's behaviour confirms that acting in a civilised way during the pandemic meant showing awareness of others' health. COVID-19 was an interpellation and being a willing interpellate involved proactively engaging in the infection-suppressing actions required by the HCDC. By not taking a coronavirus test upon landing at Hanoi's Nội Bài airport, patient N17 acquired the problematic status of a 'failed hail'. This status was time-limited, however, as she was obliged to submit to home coronavirus testing shortly after her return to Vietnam. Thereafter, her infected status was confirmed by the authorities.

Infection did not start to become widespread in Vietnam until approximately 18 months after the global coronavirus pandemic had been declared by the WHO. These circumstances made it possible for the details of individual transmission scenarios to be speculated about for an extended period. Vietnam's particular pandemic trajectory meant that for a long time, the country had what I term 'knowable numbers' of infected people with infected individuals attracting a high personal 'stigma load' (Trinh et al., 2022). As the case of patient N17 illustrates, powerful and highly publicised civility-shaming narratives were then attached to the infected and especially to those accused of spreading the virus. These circumstances help to explain why Vietnam-style *interpellation by infection* was so potent compared to other contexts where case numbers were high from the pandemic's very start. The country also followed the saga of Patient 91, a Vietnam Airlines pilot from the UK who caught COVID-19 in a downtown bar and spent 68 days on a ventilator in *Chợ Rẫy* hospital before returning home (Guardian, 2020). Coming after a long period when the public could 'get to know' particular cases, the shift to large, 'unknowable numbers' was disconcerting for many. How local officials massaged coronavirus case rates to offset negative perceptions of their patch and reduce the likelihood of adverse material consequences for residents was discussed in the previous chapter. Demonstrating the longstanding impact that COVID-19 positive status exerted on many citizens' psyches, an image submitted to this research's online archive even shows the window

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[54] A Vietnamese friend who lives in a luxurious housing development in An Phú ward, Thủ Đức municipal city reflected on the pros and cons of living in an alleyway or in an apartment building. When I raised the loud karaoke and dog fouling that many dislike about living in alleyway communities, she replied that even in her upscale apartment complex, some people would drink heavily, sing karaoke until 2am and allow their pet dogs to foul the ornamental gardens. An individual's civility quotient does not depend on neighbourhood type or social class, she said, rather it relates to personal qualities (Field notes, 11 August 2022).

of an office building in which a homemade sign commemorates the one year anniversary of one or more employees being confirmed as F0 (see figure 47).

Figure 47: Poster and balloons in office building window reads "First anniversary of being declared F0. Back from the line between life and death." Source: Anonymous submission to chuyenthoidich.vn online archive.

In Ho Chi Minh City in mid-2021, being declared F0 was considered a personal disaster akin to 'social death', a term coined by Gomez-Temesio (2018) in relation to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. My interlocutors expressed extreme fear at the prospect of themselves or their family members getting infected and being removed to collective quarantine (Tough, 2021a). The emotional toll of the civility shaming apparatus was recounted by a 22-year-old University of Social Sciences and Humanities Student at a COVID-19 conversation event in July 2023:

> *I don't like when people talk about COVID..like that we have to stay away (from COVID-19), like barriers or slogans, things like that. At that time, I was sick of it. Everyone in the family was stressed and didn't know what to do. I think everyone should have connected with each other normally, accepted that "whatever happens, happens" and we just need to deal with it when it comes. We shouldn't make a big deal out of it or*

have many slogans like that for COVID control purposes or something… it affected my family a lot. When I look back, I have still found it very unpleasant.

<div align="right">Minh interview transcript, 31 July 2023</div>

Even confirmation that an individual had been several steps removed from an infected person brought anxiety:

Later (in the pandemic) we understood that F3s and F4s were not necessarily infected with any COVID. But at that time (2021) people were so afraid…back then people thought being infected with COVID was a very terrible thing.

<div align="right">Công interview transcript, 31 July 2023</div>

While tracing was presumed to indicate linear blame in earlier stages of the pandemic in Vietnam, as case numbers grew the imagined linearity of infection was disrupted and lower levels of civility shaming were experienced by the infected and their close contacts. COVID-19 transmission was gradually reframed as an environmental risk rather than a question of whether one had comported oneself in a civilised manner or not. While this meant that coronavirus infection became less of a stigmatising experience from late 2021 onwards, instances of civility shaming like those described above created the conditions for an especially potent form of *interpellation by infection* - a concept introduced in the next main section - to develop and to operate for a time-limited period. Having explained the social consequences of infection, the next section shows how masking was implicated in the state's ideological agenda.

Masking: the material manifestation of civility

Masks are habitually worn for a variety of reasons in Vietnam: to guard against dust, air pollution, sun and smells, and to protect the respiratory system. This study's fieldwork was conducted at a time of infectious disease transmission meaning that masks were especially widely worn. Their ubiquity saw them being put to many alternative uses in the neighbourhood such as to hold together the motor of a faulty fan in my fieldwork home, to tie back long hair, to shield delivery drivers' phones from the sun, and as a blindfold for people sleeping in public places. Beyond their practical function, masks are also a material manifestation of civility, a material ritual practice of ideological recognition in everyday life (Martel, 2017). During the pandemic, this connotation became pronounced in ways that it had not been before. Failing to mask was labelled uncivilised behaviour (*ứng xử kém văn minh*) which, according to state media, was "difficult to accept on a normal day, becoming even more offensive in this (coronavirus) moment." (Vietnamplus, 2021).

After morning coffee with local pharmacist Ngọc, I would attend Vietnamese language classes at a city university. Masking was an active issue in the classroom at that time, partly because masks make teaching and learning a tonal language more difficult but also because the university's mask policy appeared to be spontaneously eroding as expectations about acceptable COVID-19 behaviour were shifting in the wider city. Teachers described the state of limbo as a sensitive (*nhạy cảm*) situation. As part of their role, teachers were expected to introduce elements of Vietnamese society and culture to the assembled group of international students. One instructor close to retirement age embraced her rapporteur role enthusiastically, informing us sternly about the Vietnamese population's low level of COVID-19 consciousness. The failure of double-vaccinated adults to continue to universally mask while children remained unvaccinated, for example, demonstrated Vietnamese peoples' low consciousness (*ý thức*) of others.

Figure 48: One of many spontaneous mask stalls that could be found around the city including on 20 Thước 'food street'. Author's photo, 25 March 2022.

In late June 2022, I met Mi at a vintage-themed cafe in Phú Nhuận district to discuss a film we had both recently watched about popular 1960s musician Trịnh Công Sơn. As she collected her scooter from the parking area at the end of our meeting ready to drive back to her student lodgings in Thủ Đức City, I asked Mi if she still wears a mask, given that regulations around masking had become somewhat unclear at this stage in the new normal period. She replied in the affirmative but said that unlike earlier in the pandemic, the government wasn't currently propagandising one way or the other about mask-wearing, out of fear of pitting people against each other. Mi's comment acknowledges the exemplary nature of Vietnamese

society whereby 'proper' behaviour is defined and promoted through official channels. It also recognises the potential for the authorities to stimulate civility shaming among the public at will, and by referencing the decision not to do this for the time being shows how this tactic is deployed strategically at particular moments when encouraging behavioural change is deemed helpful in achieving the state's goals.

Thus far this chapter has established COVID-19 as a bona fide civility matter. I now describe a mundane act of coronavirus control in my local community and use this to weave the concept of interpellation into the analysis. I apply that concept and some of its critiques to theorise Vietnam's coronavirus contact tracing and isolation regime as *interpellation by infection*. By reacting according to the stipulations of that regime when hailed, city dwellers could demonstrate civility. Failing to respond in the prescribed manner when hailed or seeking to avoid being hailed would result in civility shaming, as examples so far have shown.

Ideology and subjection

In an October 2022 interview, my neighbour Ngọc the elderly pharmacist recalled an unpleasant interaction with a neighbourhood security volunteer at the height of the city's lockdown in mid-2021. She had been venturing to the top of the main street to collect provisions from a delivery driver when she was admonished for leaving her property. "*Bà muốn chết hả?!*" ("You want to die, huh?!") yelled an unknown man.[55] Pointing towards Hoàng Diệu street from her shop's worn front stoop, Ngọc showed me the spot where the incident had happened. The watchman's warning signals the fear that had been circulating in Ho Chi Minh City the previous year as coronavirus casualties mounted. But Ngọc being yelled at for failing to display coronavirus-aware behaviour also recalls the classic example of interpellation that philosopher Louis Althusser gives of a policeman calling 'Hey you!' towards a passer-by, thereby transforming them from an individual to a subject through the act of hailing.

Althusser advanced the concept of interpellation as part of his general theory of ideology (2001 [1971]). He developed this having recognised that the Marxist theory of the state focused on political practices and lacked a corresponding ideological basis. Althusser defined ideology as "a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" ((2001 [1971]): 100) i.e. their position in society. Invoking Freud, Althusser notes that "ideological discourse is the discourse of everyday life and the discourse

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[55] In Vietnamese, kinship terms are used across diverse contexts and with persons to whom the speaker is not genealogically related. As Luong (1990) explains, terms used in interlocutor reference in Vietnamese do not merely designate the speaker and addressee or describe a sociocultural reality, they also structure interactional situations. Although the watchman uses the pronoun *bà* thereby indexing the age difference between himself and the older Ngọc, by yelling he fails to provide the deferential display of respect due to a senior party. Proper interactional ethics are captured by the popular expression, *kính trên, nhường dưới* (respect those above, yield to those below). See Sidnell (2023) for a recent discussion of social hierarchy in Vietnamese interlocutor reference.

of 'experience.'" (2003: 56). Earlier sections of this chapter demonstrated the role of Vietnam's ideological discourse of civility in everyday life. Althusser found accurately designating the elements of ideological discourse challenging because "these elements are (at the most abstract levels) representations, or even concepts, and, at other levels, gestures, modes of behaviour, or, again, prohibitions and permissions, or, yet again, elements borrowed from other discourse, and so on" (2003: 66). Through "slowly developed ethnographic insights" (Stoller 2023: 155), however, the elements that eluded Althusser *can* become perceptible to researchers of ideological discourses, as the ethnography in this chapter illustrates.

The link between civility discourse and Althusser's theory of ideology has been explored by Rungby and Harms (2023). Drawing on theoretical insights from anthropological fieldwork in Malaysia and Vietnam, the authors employ a novel comparative approach to study the workings of civility discourses in Denmark and the United States. Harms observes similarities between Althusser's description of the ideological state apparatus (ISA)[56] and Vietnam's discourse of *văn minh* (civility): "Like ISA, the exhortations about *văn minh* make demands on the bodily habitus of urban citizen-subjects in order to urge them to comply with state interests in fostering orderly behaviour." (2023: 11). When ethnographic data for this thesis were being collected, Vietnam's tracing and quarantining regime enforced by the Vietnamese ISA demanded that citizen-subjects submitted to testing, accepted labels (F0, F1, F2 etc.) and obeyed their corresponding commands i.e. to self-isolate or enter collective quarantine or a hospital. These commands impinged on their bodily habituses significantly.

Ideological discourse, Althusser argued, "'produces' or 'induces' a subject-effect" (2001 [1971]: 52). While he came to question the role of the subject in most types of discourse that he had identified, Althusser maintained that 'the notion of subject seems […] to pertain to ideological discourse alone, of which it is constitutive" (2003 [1966]: 77) and continued to consider the category of the subject as "absolutely fundamental to ideological discourse, that it is one of its central categories" (2003 [1966]: 47). The next section hones in on the subject-effect produced by state ideology during the coronavirus pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City and conceptualises subjection during COVID-19 in Vietnam as *interpellation by infection*, justifying this conceptualisation with ethnographic data.

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[56] Through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA's) rather than outright repression, Althusser maintained, ruling regimes produce consent among the governed. Althusser termed these ISA's "a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions." (1971: 92). These include the communications ISA, political ISA, educational ISA, legal ISA, and cultural ISA among others. Each of these ISA's were involved in transmitting the Vietnamese government's Zero-COVID policy to the public.

Interpellation by infection

In Ho Chi Minh City in mid-2021, the detection of new coronavirus cases within the community brought drama. I was living in the city then and described such scenes, playing out in neighbourhoods across Ho Chi Minh City:

> *The detection of new community cases brings its own spectacle - citizens blockaded inside apartment buildings without warning while personnel in hazmat suits, their individuality obscured by gas masks, fumigate the locality. Images showing barbed wire barricades and signs reading 'Quarantine area - do not enter' ('khu vực cách ly - không vào') with worried captions and tearful emojis underneath often circulated on social media during and soon after these events.*

Tough, 2021a: 8

One of Althusser's main contentions was that, for interpellation to be effective, it must be materially performed (2001 [1971]). Political scientist James Martel echoes Althusser's thesis, recognising "a process of theatricalisation inherent in material performances of interpellation." (2017: 52). I argue that *interpellation by infection* had such a powerful subject effect not only because getting infected connoted behavioural failings rather than succumbing to an environmental hazard, as discussed earlier, but also because of its highly performative nature. In Vietnam's exemplary society in densely populated urban environments and in the context of a public health emergency, moments of hailing such as those described above unfolded. These were highly charged, near-theatrical scenarios involving PPE (costumes), fumigation (special effects), and local residents (audience), the small window of time in which to track and quarantine contacts before they became infectious adding to the urgency. Moreover, the hail was incontrovertible, determined as it was through quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) testing. In *The Misinterpellated Subject*, Martel maintains, "There is always a built-in lack of certain knowledge of who is being called; the subject in question is more of an assumption than a fact…thus, there is always an element of randomness and unknowingness at the heart of the interpellative pro-cess." (2017: 7). A positive test result was an unequivocal hail with material consequences for the infected person, not least being removed to centralised quarantine. Unless tests were faulty or mis-read, becoming an accidental subject was far less likely to happen than in the situations discussed by Martel such as being called to sacrifice or called to participate. As such the hail was hard to refute.

Another of Althusser's main theses was that ideology has a material existence, that it always exists in an apparatus and in its practice: "Ideology is nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning." (2001 [1971], 116). Vietnam's stringent coronavirus testing, tracing and isolation regime constituted a tangible apparatus to which the

infected and their close contacts were subject. It had wide-ranging material consequences for those in its sights: home isolation, compulsory removal to institutional quarantine potentially without one's dependents, exposure to high viral load, inadequate food, and overcrowding in state quarantine (Radio Free Asia, 2021a), civility shaming from the community, loss of earnings, and medical bills. The material consequences of ideology as enacted in this way were immediate and disruptive. It is hard to imagine how any of the other interpellations that city dwellers experience in 'normal' times would have such a wide-ranging impact on their and their families' lives. In the following example, a low-paid worker in the outer city discusses the process of being hailed as F1.

Shortly before I had encountered Linh at her drinks stall on the city's edge in December 2021, I had met Mrs Hai, a 50-something assistant in a budget eatery (*quán bình dân*) on nearby Nam Cao street. She described her experience of being ordered into centralised quarantine six months earlier as a close contact of a confirmed infected customer. Although Mrs Hai did not name the facility where she had been quarantined, when sharing her story she had gestured towards the Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City 'University Town' on the horizon in Linh Trung ward, Thủ Đức city. Multiple institutional buildings there had been requisitioned as the city's fourth wave of COVID-19 escalated (Bao Dien Tu Dan Cong San Viet Nam, 2021; Kinh Te Do Thi, 2021). The moment she was confirmed as F1 was significant for Mrs Hai. She said:

> *The medical personnel (from the HCDC) asked me to go home, lock the door, and prepare my belongings. They told me they would come back to collect me and take me to quarantine at 2pm on that same day, 30 June. When I was waiting, I was scared but I tried to keep calm because worrying too much would make me unwell. I knew I should go to quarantine to stop others getting infected. I stayed for fourteen days on the seventh floor with four other women [points towards student halls at the international university - Ký túc xá khu A Đại học Quốc Gia]. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner always arrived on time. Staff left the food on a chair outside.*

Mrs Hai interview transcript, 23 December 2021

As Vietnam's fourth wave of coronavirus cases escalated in mid-2021, food became difficult to source in the locked-down city. Others with whom I discussed institutional quarantine actually expressed relief at having been confined to one of these facilities at that time as they believed they stood a better chance of getting a meal than they did in the outside world. This included Mr Tây, sent to the Thu Dung makeshift hospital on Lương Định Của street in district 2 who said "The food was great. Better than on the outside and (provided) three times a day!"

We should therefore consider the potential material benefits of being hailed as an infected person or a close contact as well as the negative material consequences discussed above.

Turning to how ideology manifests in material form through its practice, it is relevant to consider the high number of potential interpellates under a Zero-COVID policy. Vietnam's extensive 'shoe-leather epidemiology' community testing effort involved HCDC personnel going door-to-door to hunt down and eliminate the coronavirus far more proactively than in other settings where a Zero-COVID policy was not in force and some viral spread was effectively considered inevitable. The following autoethnographic example describes this huge Zero-COVID dragnet in operation. In July 2021, a parent of one member of catering staff working at the district 1 hotel in which I was staying had returned a positive result on a rapid coronavirus test. Regardless of whether they may have had any contact with the staff member, hundreds of guests were instructed to stay in their rooms until HCDC personnel could attend. Rapid tests were hung on each room's door handle and occupants were required to test themselves and send a photograph of the result to the hotel management via Zalo or Whatsapp instant messengers. Even for those who had tested negative, the impromptu detention endured for over 36 hours without the HCDC attending and without any information about when the situation might be resolved. Eventually, frustrated guests gathered their belongings and fled the hotel on foot, ride-hailing services and public transport having been suspended and taxis now only permitted to transport people to hospitals (Field notes, 8 July 2021).

In the *mises en scènes* of interpellation described above, discrete instances of hailing or attempted hailing unfolded. But as an ongoing and fluid mechanism, *interpellation by infection* is about more than those single moments. After HCDC personnel had removed the interpellates to collective quarantine, the 'failed hails' had fled the city centre hotel and the "drama of interpellation" (Martel, 2017: 20) had subsided, the material performance of interpellation continued via anti-epidemic loudspeaker announcements and public signage and by hailing spectacles from around the city being amplified and circulated on social media. And for those in quarantine or self isolation using qPCR tests, thermometers and oximeters to confirm or disprove their infected status, ideology continued to have a material existence in apparatus and in practice. This section has used ethnographic data and relevant literature to explain why being confirmed as infected with coronavirus in Vietnam meant much more than getting a medical diagnosis. The next section takes Scott's warning about the tendency "grossly to overestimate the power, weight, and cohesiveness of any dominant ideology" (1985: 318) as its point of departure, demonstrating how *interpellation by infection* was in fact a multidimensional process in which city dwellers simultaneously interpellated the state and their fellow citizens even as the state interpellated them.

Figure 49: Quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) test cassettes with testee given names added in black pen. Some companies required employees to test together daily. Source: Anonymous submission to chuyenthoidich.vn online archive.

Resisting subjection

Building from his first major work on hegemony (1977), in his seminal study of class relations among Malaysian peasants *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), James Scott argues that it is at the level of ideology that resistance is actually the strongest, stating "Much of the ethnographic material supporting the notion of 'ideological hegemony' is, I suspect, simply the result of assuming that the transcript from

power-laden situations is the full transcript…behind the facade of symbolic and ritual compliance, (we find) innumerable acts of ideological resistance." (1985: 304). In subsequent writing (1990), he took his critique of ideological hegemony further, arguing that hegemony, as an explanation of power and how it is understood by those subject to its workings, fails the test of thick description. Indeed, anthropologists who have engaged in careful ethnographic research in socialist settings have penetrated this facade to show how ideology is subverted. Luong, for example, has argued that the hegemonic control exercised by neoliberal ideology in contemporary Vietnam is less powerful than has been suggested (2023). Meanwhile, Harms has shown Vietnamese media consumers as skilled subverters of official messages that reflect state ideology (2016a) while Rungby and Harms (2023) have problematised the notion of civility as a fixed ideology with a stable meaning. And in her study of state ideology in socialist Cuba, Katherine Gordy (2015) depicts ideology as contested rather than monolithic. Instead of being owned or operated by any one group, it is a dynamic, a strug-gle, and a contest that also binds -people together, she argues.

Considering the act of hailing discretely opens up ways to think about interpellation as resistance to a dominant ideology. Butler, while recognising the ongoing importance of Althusser's theory of interpellation in structuring contemporary debates on subject formation (1997b), argued that the practical act of hailing should be separated from the wider interpellative structure. Rather than necessarily coming from state apparatuses, Butler maintained, interpellative practices could emanate from different sources and be directed at a range of actors. When the neighbourhood watchman hailed Ngọc from across the street, for example, that interpellation did not emanate directly from the state. In the next section, I introduce ethnographic evidence that reveals discursive interpellations during COVID-19 in Vietnam being refused and redirected by city dwellers. I begin with an account drawn from my field notes that describes crowds ignoring the state's ideological exhortations during a festive city centre outing to celebrate the arrival of the Year of the Tiger (*Năm Nhầm Dần)*.

Refusal

On 31st January and 1st February 2022, I spent two half days observing city dwellers navigating the new normal on Ho Chi Minh City's Lunar New Year 'flower street' (*đường hoa*) on central Nguyễn Huệ street. This was a highly choreographed performance. Unusually for Vietnam, people were only allowed to move in one direction and not double back, making participation a common one-way journey through COVID memories undertaken by all. The atmosphere was frenetic, people appeared comfortable to be in a crowded place once again, and happy that the worst of the pandemic was over. Several of my interlocutors said that this was the first outing that they had been able to persuade elderly relatives, who had spent more than a year hiding at home from the coronavirus threat, to join in. Between the huge model

tigers, flowers, and vendors' stalls were loudspeakers mounted on poles, directed at the crowd. On a loop but barely audible amid the hubbub of excited children shouting and the logistics of family photos being noisily negotiated, an officious voice urged visitors to download the government's PC-Covid app and complete health declarations when visiting public places.

Figure 50: One small section of Ho Chi Minh City's lunar new year 'flower street' (*đường hoa*) on central Nguyễn Huệ street. Author's photo, 30 January 2022

In *Politics and the Study of Discourse* (1978), Foucault urges a consideration of which individuals, groups, or classes have access to particular kinds of discourse. In this example, through its interpellative technology the state made its ideological discourse accessible to everyone assembled. Nobody was listening, however. By simply having noisy fun, posing for photos and taking in the vibrant surroundings, visitors to flower street rendered themselves inaccessible to the state's hegemonic practice, refusing to acknowledge COVID-19 as an interpellation in general nor to make themselves available for hailing as F0, F1 and so on by sharing their details via the government's PC-Covid app. They refused interpellation in a passive and inaudible way but also in a highly visible way, dressed in new clothes as is traditional at new year and in a large, bustling crowd. In a similar vein, visitors avoided submitting health declarations to police officers, stationed at the official entrance points, to scan. Instead families entered the area demarcated as 'flower street' through gaps in its perimeter fence and faced no consequences.

Also exemplifying routine refusal during my fieldwork was the repurposing of the city's ubiquitous vinyl propaganda banners in ways that obscured their slogans and signalled their exhortations as irrelevant or at least secondary to their practical functions like protecting

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personal property from sun or rain (figure 51). There follows an example of refusing the state's hegemonic practice in a more assertive yet still non-confrontational way.

Figure 51: Vinyl banner produced by ward 13, district 4 near the study's field site denoting a locked down area (*khu vực phong tỏa*), now repurposed as a protective overnight cover for a noodle shop's collapsible tables. Author's photo, 23 May 2022.

In mid-June 2021, my partner was working in Bitexco Financial Tower (*Tháp Tài chính Bitexco)* in Ho Chi Minh City's central district 1. An email was circulated to company employees advising them that, in a 68-floor building with 38,000 square metres of office space, one cleaner had received a positive result on a rapid COVID-19 test that morning. There was no attempt to ascertain whether employees had been in direct contact with the cleaner or not. Management were mainly working from home but regular employees without suitable home working spaces and those seeking collegial interaction were still attending the office. Management's urgent email instructed staff to reply immediately to confirm whether they had been in the office on that day or the previous day. Vietnamese colleagues hastily packed up their belongings, rushed to their international colleagues' desks, urged them not to answer the email, and to leave the building before epidemic control officials arrived. The HCDC being

overstretched meant that, in those days, there was often a long wait before their personnel arrived to seal off an area and begin testing those inside. This lag gave people an opportunity to disappear and thereby avoid the various restrictions on bodily freedom that infected or close contact status entailed. A strategy for ideological resistance that is predicated on invisibility seems innocuous but was a way to exert significant agency in the face of a powerful interpellative apparatus.[57] This section has detailed several low-key ways that city dwellers refused *interpellation by infection*, the next section focuses on the redirection of discursive interpellations.

Redirection

In reader comments beneath an online article published during Vietnam's short nationwide lockdown in April 2020, joggers in the Phú Mỹ Hưng new urban zone, reputedly a 'civilised' urban environment, were criticised by other city dwellers for apparently failing to respect physical distancing guidelines. Thôi highlights one reader's barb "Maybe you have a bit more civility within you, you are just living selfishly in the community, and might try living a little bit less for just yourself!" (2021: 12-13). In this instance, the city's supposedly educated, wealthy residents are interpellated from below by ostensibly less civilised people who live outside their enclave who invert the popular opposition between civilised urbanity and uncivilised rurality. The incensed online commentators make a spontaneous, non-state appeal to civility. But seeing as the Vietnamese state trumpets urban civility narratives on propaganda billboards and hands over tracts of land for exclusive new developments that epitomise its vision of a civilised metropolis, the commentators' attacks on fellow citizens still address the goals of the state. By proactively invoking state-sanctioned civility discourse the netizens arguably do the work of the authorities for them, demonstrating that they have already been successfully interpellated by the state's apparatuses. The example of the Phú Mỹ Hưng joggers even suggests that private interests are better able to promote behaviours stipulated in official messaging than the state itself as these organic appeals give the impression of being counterhegemonic alternatives to state messages.

This example suggests interpellation works in a circuitous manner rather than as a top-down process. In situations where interpellation is especially powerful, materially performed and institutionalised in sophisticated apparatus, as under Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy, 'pushing back' necessarily takes unusual forms. Thinking about ideology as a set of -human actions rather than as a mechanical force opens up possibilities for seeing resistance even in

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[57] Another interlocutor claimed only to have realised that they had shared an elevator in their apartment building in Thảo Điền with a person later confirmed as infected *after* they had driven 100 kilometers to a family member's apartment in Vũng Tàu. Their non-presence meant they avoided being detained in their locked-down building for weeks, subject to daily qPCR testing.

highly charged situations where that may seem highly unlikely. The refusal examples provided in the previous section have all been extracted from this study's ethnographic record. They concern mundane human actions that do not feature in Vietnam's public transcript of pandemic and are not considered in state-centric analyses that dwell on Vietnam's political regime and control structures. Although none of those examples feature officials taking action to push back against the various forms of refusal, officials could easily have done so by insisting that visitors to flower street make health declarations or by putting repurposed anti-epidemic banners back in place, for example. Turning a blind eye, as chapter six discusses, is part of how officials informally dialogue with citizens around policy implementation and is how incremental policy change comes about in Vietnam. The next section seeks to explain the societal discombobulation that ensued when *interpellation by infection* suddenly lost its potency.

De-interpellation

One of the most significant material impacts for city dwellers of the end of Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy was the collapse of the stringent coronavirus testing, tracing and isolation regime through which interpellation was performed. As discussed earlier, this had hailed citizen-subjects to behave in particular ways according to the level of risk to society they were deemed to pose. In the following example, an interlocutor describes the moment when he realised the Zero-COVID regime had collapsed. Vũ, 31, works evenings in a popular district 10 eatery selling fried fish balls and lives alone in a nearby rented room (*phòng trọ*). I have known him since 2005, having lived with his paternal uncle's family in a tube house (*nhà ống*) in an alleyway off Trành Bình Trọng street, district 5 for six months. We have since remained in contact via Facebook. In August 2021 as coronavirus cases skyrocketed in Ho Chi Minh City, he was required to continue working in his old logistics job which he says caused him to get infected. In a March 2022 interview which my research partner partially translated he shares how he approached the authorities when he caught coronavirus, seeking interpellation by invitation (Prasse-Freeman, 2023).

> **Vũ:** My best friends, in general, all had it (COVID-19). But that time I'll say… Well, the time when I caught Delta, I called up the quarantine number. They said they are overloaded and I have to treat myself (*tự chữa đi*).
>
> **Phuong:** So the first time you got COVID-19, you called your local authority (*liên hệ phường*)?
>
> **Vũ**: I did.
>
> **Phuong:** But they said you've got to treat yourself?

Vũ: They didn't even pick up. I called them so many times. When they did finally pick up, they told me to treat myself because they were overloaded (*quá tải rồi*).

<div align="right">Vũ interview transcript, 30 May 2022</div>

Vũ's experience represents the system of societal control that had been Vietnam's testing, tracing and quarantining regime definitively rupturing. Unable to process the huge numbers of cases now emerging, that system could no longer fulfil its hailing function and coronavirus infection could no longer be couched as a societal problem caused by aberrant behaviour. Rather it became an environmental problem that defied ideological control. "We can see the operations of ideology most clearly by focusing on those moments when it is ripped asunder." (Martel, 2017: 16). This section examines the afterlife of the Zero-COVID policy's interpellative infrastructure through ethnographic examples that show citizens *de-interpellating* during the new normal. How the intensity of interpellation was ratcheted down from October 2021 is recorded in the public transcript. As the authorities readied Ho Chi Minh City to exit lockdown, the phrases *bình thường mới* (the new normal) and adaptable and flexible (*chủ động và linh hoạt*) began to be spoken on state TV and featured on new public signage.[58] The Vietnamese government began a major policy shift with resolution 128 (128/NQ-CP) issued on October 11, 2021 (Thu Vien Phap Luat, 2021b). This resolution, citing vaccination progress and available COVID-19 medications, emphasised the need for flexible and safe adaptation (*thích ứng an toàn*) in this new phase of pandemic. This resolution no longer mentioned the tracing of the contacts of coronavirus-infected people.

Ethnographic data collected in the months following the implementation of resolution 128 show intensive indirect negotiations between citizens and state and citizens and other citizens taking place as civilised comportment was redefined in the new normal period. Observations that I made during meetings with students during a participatory photography project reflect group members grappling with emerging social norms around how city dwellers should behave if they suspected they had been exposed to the virus. Should one turn up to an engagement but remain masked throughout, attend online instead, message other people in advance to gauge their views, cancel or meet for a shorter period? All of these approaches were used by different members at different times, some of whom also spontaneously assigned themselves one of the labels from the redundant classification system, usually F1 or

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[58] Harms suggests (2014b: 48) that "the concept of 'the new' in Vietnamese has appeared in so many iterations that it is itself, for lack of a better word, old." He highlights the modernity of the 1920s and 1930s (*tân thời* - "new times"), 1946 campaigns to build socialist character in the north framed around building a "new cultural life" or *đời sống mới* and renovation policies of 1986 known as *đổi mới* or "change to the new." Aside from *bình thường mới,* uses of this concept documented during fieldwork include the command on rural dwellers to build "*nông thôn mới*" or 'new countryside'.

F2. I suggest that this approach of using or dropping whichever aspects of the former Zero-COVID regime that reflected one's level of comfort in social scenarios during the new normal period reflected the official exhortation to be adaptable and flexible (*chủ động và linh hoạt*) while also demonstrating that city dwellers' have an impulse to behave in a considerate way towards others without feeling obliged to do so just to avoid civility shaming. *De-interpellation* did not mean citizens were no longer hailed at all. As the new normal period got underway, Covidian interpellations were edged out by the regular ideological exhortations that emanate from the socialist state. Figure 52, for example, shows one propaganda banner urging citizens not to gather in crowds to avoid being infected by COVID-19 next to another reminding citizens to actively educate themselves about legal principles and practice.

Figure 52: Blue sign instructing citizens not to gather in crowds in order to avoid being infected by COVID-19 abuts red sign reminding citizens of their responsibility to actively learn about legal principles and practice. Nguyễn Duy Street, district 8. Author's photo, 12 January 2022.

De-interpellation, like *interpellation by infection*, was also performed. At another showpiece event on Nguyễn Huệ street on 8 May 2022, a large crowd gathered in a semicircle in front of screens showing Vietnam versus the Philippines in the South East Asia games football tournament. After the tedious 0-0 draw had ended, the crowds shifted to a live music

area, sponsored by Tiger Beer, further along the street. Overlooked by another huge screen showing South Korean footballer Son Heung-Min drinking beer in various leisure scenarios, hundreds of people jumped around in a boisterous crowd waving plastic wands being handed out by event staff. Incongruously attached to two nearby trees, meanwhile, was a 'we live safely with the virus' propaganda banner while yet another electronic screen overlooking the street displayed the government's 5K public health messaging. With city dwellers comfortable gathering closely in crowds after years of being reluctant to do so, the economy returning as a powerful interpellation, and a willing audience of consumers, this chaotic scene speaks to the potential for *de-interpellation* and not only interpellation to be dramatic.

The process of *de-interpellation* was dramatic in other ways, sometimes involving a terse dialogue between state and society. In March 2022, the Ministry of Health announced that citizens confirmed as infected with coronavirus (F0) no longer needed to quarantine at home until they could produce a negative qPCR test result. As long as they wore a mask and maintained a safe distance from other people, they could attend work, shop, and travel normally. At that time, staff absence from work because of self-isolation was a significant problem in factories in the south of Vietnam. However, shortly after the announcement, a public outcry ensued on social media on the grounds that F0s roaming the city freely would cause cases to spike again. Some netizens speculated that this relaxation of self-isolation requirements was a deliberate strategy to bring about herd immunity or maybe a way for the authorities to get out of providing support payments to state workers isolating at home. Following the furore, the policy change was quickly reversed, put down to a 'misunderstanding' (*hiểu nhầm*) based on the use of the ambiguous phrase "F0 can exit their place of quarantine" (*F0 được ra khỏi nơi cách ly*). Supposedly, the announcement had only been referring to the infected being permitted to leave their own bedroom while remaining confined to their property. Several commentators doubted the unclear language explanation, however, given that the Ministry of Health would not have known about people's movements within their own house anyway (Tuoi Tre, 2021).

This example represents state and citizenry indirectly negotiating the speed with which life returned to 'normal' in Ho Chi Minh City following the ending of Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy. While participatory photography group participants and others were now engaging in a form of self-interpellation by ascribing themselves F0 or F1 status when these labels had no concrete consequences and were enjoying visiting flower street and other city places out of bounds during lockdown, they were not ready for confirmed infected people to be given approval to wander the city at will - the entire interpellative performance could not be scrapped in this way. Objections were raised on social media, and the policy was clarified. As state media blamed unclear language in a Ministry of Health public communication, there was no

need for any official acknowledgement that a policy out of step with public opinion had been mooted. In the end, the policy was changed, public opinion was listened to and the authorities were seen to be responsive to public opinion, demonstrating dialogic state-society relations in action.

Conclusion

The chapter has drawn on this study's accumulated ethnographic insights to examine the operation of state ideology in Vietnam during the coronavirus crisis. I have introduced the concept of *interpellation by infection* and argued that this had such a powerful subject effect because of its highly performative nature and because it had a material existence in a tangible apparatus - the methodical coronavirus testing, tracing and isolation regime that was central to Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy. Elaborate public performances are important means through which state institutions try to exercise their authority and gain acquiescence (Geertz, 1980). During the coronavirus crisis, the usual parades, ceremonies, and uniforms that can be seen in Vietnam during national anniversaries were switched for disinfection rituals, hazmat suits and symbols such as incident tape, components of a highly choreographed performance of state policy. As has been shown, compliance with that policy was quickly established as a civility matter. Failure to respond to being hailed under this system in the required manner by accepting being designated a sick citizen-subject or a close contact of one brought social opprobrium in the form of civility shaming. During a process that I have termed *de-interpellation,* once the aforementioned testing, tracing and quarantining infrastructure was no longer active, state and citizens engaged in indirect negotiations around acceptable forms of bodily comportment during the new normal, exemplifying how dialogic state-society relations worked in Vietnam during the coronavirus crisis. In contrast to analyses of that fixate on the role of the state and its institutions of control in stimulating compliance with COVID-19 control measures, this chapter has drawn on ethnography to demonstrate how Ho Chi Minh City residents resisted ideological control, often in very subtle ways that are skipped over in state-centric analyses. I have also described how the economy returned as a powerful interpellation after having been subsumed by coronavirus-themed calls.

The chapter also discussed the introduction of civilisational discourse to Vietnam in the early twentieth century by the Reform Movement. I drew attention to a fresh wave of civilisational debate that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, quoting an article by Binh Thuận provincial school of politics that compared 'civilised' coronavirus-aware behaviour in Vietnam and 'uncivilised' coronavirus unaware behaviour in former colonising countries. Debates around civility that emerged during the pandemic should be considered within the longer trajectory of civilisational discourse in Vietnam throughout the postcolonial period. They

demonstrate that "the postcolonial self imagined in Vietnamese radical civilisational discourse remains in the process of becoming." (Bradley, 2004: 83). In the next chapter I draw together the specific contributions of this thesis in supporting the development of a better understanding of state-society relations in contemporary Vietnam.

8. Conclusion

Even if the moment of the event is radically unlike that which it precedes, to think of the moment of rupture as special and unique—-that is, to think of the moment of time itself as bearing some special quality that makes it dif-fer-ent from -every other moment in time prevents us from appreciating what lessons we can learn about the way society works.

Martel, 2017: 22

As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, the concept of a state of exception commonly applied to theorise emergencies and interventions was ill-suited to analysing the coronavirus disaster. For controlling a highly transmissible virus would require society's full-scale mobilisation, through practices such as isolation and distancing. Under what Appadurai termed the 'COVID exception' (2020), victory would not result from the national sovereign seizing excess powers, as under a regular state of exception, but from intensified cooperation between state and society. This study commits to the ethnographic record data, obtained primarily through extensive face-to-face fieldwork in a coronavirus-affected community in Ho Chi Minh City between 2021 and 2023, that show that intensified cooperation between the Vietnamese state and society as they jointly negotiated the pandemic response.

Anthropologists (Henig and Knight, 2023), philosophers (Martel, 2017) and disaster recovery experts (Few et al., 2020) all maintain that to bracket social and political events as 'crises' has an isolating effect, presenting them as out of the ordinary and disconnected from the context in which they emerged and developed, preventing lessons from being learnt. While the pandemic *was* a crisis, this thesis has avoided treating it as an isolated, once-in-a-lifetime event by considering it in the context of the longer-running discussions about the nature of Vietnam's state-society relations that were introduced in chapter four, and by considering the pre-existing structures and practices through which those relations are mediated. Historian Julie Livingston has urged researchers of the coronavirus pandemic to attend to "the prehistory and long aftermath rather than the discrete event" (quoted in Langstaff, 2020). Through interviews with elders like Uncle Tuấn, whom we met in the Prologue, and conversations with

elderly pharmacist Ngọc, this study has sought to understand the COVID-19 phenomenon in the longer trajectory of historical time. By being regularly present in Ho Chi Minh City between 2003 and 2005 and between 2020 and 2025, I have been able to consider the pandemic's prehistory and its aftermath with envisaged future research activities presenting opportunities for ongoing reanalysis. The rest of this chapter will summarise the study's contributions to knowledge and then highlight areas of research to which ethnographers could direct their attention.

Contributions to knowledge

While other researchers have analysed Vietnam's state-society interactions in detail through the arena of traffic control (Koh, 2006; Truitt, 2008) and these kinds of negotiations are also raised in the literature on itinerant vendors (Harms and Labbé, 2022), this thesis has studied these relations in the arena of Zero-COVID policy implementation.[59] By showing how that policy was adapted and contested by citizens and officials as part of a dialogic process (Luong 2003, 2023) in which dialogue is understood to include indirect and nonverbal communication, this ethnography contributes to developing a more accurate understanding of how power really operates in contemporary Vietnam.

As discussed in the Introduction chapter, many accounts of Vietnam's national response to the coronavirus fixate on regime type and on the apparent seizure of excess powers by the state through the government's Zero-COVID policy. But as scholars have pointed out, while political regime type *did* influence the success of states' responses, that influence must be understood in the structural context of the relationship between state and citizens (Harriss and Luong, 2022; Luong, 2022) or within an overall 'social compact' between state and citizenry as Jasanoff et al. (2021) have termed it. The present study has honed in on that relationship, producing an ethnographically-informed counterpoint to desk-based analyses of Vietnam's Zero-COVID policy.

The ethnography shows how that policy was subverted and reworked by citizens and officials, often with the tacit support of the state. By providing examples such as the rapid reversal of plans to allow confirmed infected patients to leave their homes, this study has shown that, in Vietnam, the parameters of policy acceptability are determined through an often-indirect dialogue between state and citizenry rather than dictated from on high. The findings support Kerkvliet's contention that "If governance in Vietnam ever was solely or

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[59] Kerkvliet has argued that state-society dialogue is best explored through "particular arenas in which boundaries, rights, jurisdictions, and power distribution between state and societal agencies are debated, contested, and resolved (at least temporarily)…These arenas may be problems and controversies that are not confined to a particular institution." (2003: 28).

primarily national party-state authorities imposing their will on citizens in a top-down manner, it no longer is and has not been for decades." (2019: 144). I will now summarise the contributions to knowledge made by this thesis, including the three ethnographically-informed concepts that I have developed, each of which bolster the dialogic school of thought for considering Vietnam's state-society interactions. These concepts may be employed by political anthropologists and others researching state-society relations in Vietnam.

The moral economy beyond peasant politics

Chapter five presented ethnographic data that depict the hardships suffered by many city dwellers, especially low-paid workers, under Ho Chi Minh City's strict lockdown under directive 16. Committing those stories to the ethnographic record represents an important contribution to knowledge in itself, given that field access was extremely limited at that time. In particular, data collected in December 2021 relatively shortly after lockdown had been lifted capture the memories of people like Linh, forced to forage for plants to survive and Mr Tây who returned home from the market empty-handed, while they were still fresh. The chapter is defined mainly by its empirical contribution. Conceptually, the chapter confirmed the theory of moral economy that James C. Scott applied to analyse Vietnamese peasants' subsistence ethic fifty years earlier can be applied in an urban setting in contemporary Vietnam. City dwellers did not generally behave like rational actors (Popkin, 1970), the chapter showed, and Confucian principles such as those identified by Nghĩa (2005), drawn from Kim Định's concept of 'Vietnam's Confucianism' (1970), acted to deter and regulate any individualistic, profit-seeking economic behaviour at a time of scarcity.

The workings of ideological discourse

In chapter seven, I applied philosopher Louis Althusser's theory of ideology (2001 [1971]) to ethnographic data concerning city dwellers' encounters with Vietnam's comprehensive contact tracing and testing regime in force under its Zero-COVID policy. This enabled me to conceptualise that regime as *interpellation by infection*, a particularly powerful form of state hailing whereby citizens are transformed from citizens to subjects. This can be seen as a classic manifestation of interpellation from above which reflects the dominating state school of state-society relations introduced in chapter four. However, my ethnographic data show citizens eschewing ideological messaging during the coronavirus pandemic, for example by having boisterous fun on Nguyễn Huệ street while ignoring a public tannoy system urging them to download the government's PC-Covid app (refusal) or turning official exhortations for civilised behaviour back onto their fellow citizens or the state (redirection). Anthropologists have questioned the extent to which ideologies such as neoliberalism have pervaded

sociocultural life in Vietnam in recent decades (Luong, 2021; 2023) and have depicted Vietnamese as skilled subverters of state ideology (Harms, 2016a; Rungby and Harms, 2023). Taking a cue from studies that have explored emancipatory dimensions within Althusser's theory (Butler, 1997a; Butler, 1997b; Martel, 2017), *interpellation by infection* can also accommodate the many ways in which city dwellers displayed their resistance to the state's ideological exhortations during the coronavirus pandemic. Refusal and redirection, discussed in chapter seven, are just two of many ways in which this unfolded. As the concept can accommodate negotiations between state and society as well as top-down manifestations of ideological control, it straddles both the dialogic and dominating-state interpretations of state-society relations. It therefore shows how different schools of thought on Vietnam's state-society relations mutually reinforce each other within the same arena.

De-interpellation provides a means for thinking through the disorientation when the state's interpellative apparatus suddenly loses its ability to impose a subject-effect on a population. The societal discombobulation as that apparatus was overwhelmed and ceased to function leading to the new normal phase of lessened restrictions post-lockdown remains little understood. The concept of *de-interpellation* represents a way to try and make sense of that period. When COVID-19 spread widely among the city population, morphing from a social problem to an environmental one, its suppression could no longer be presented as an ideological matter. Due to a lack of HCDC resources, the material performance that Althusser recognised as pivotal to the transmission of state ideology could no longer be enacted through spectacles of testing and tracing. But *de-interpellation*, like *interpellation by infection*, was also performed, notably by citizens themselves in crowd situations during which the assembled participants enjoyed leisure activities without fear of the virus or the ramifications of being hailed F0, F1 and so on. And as the new normal period got underway, Covidian interpellations were edged out by a resurgent economy, another powerful interpellation, and less successfully by the regular ideological exhortations that emanate from the socialist state.

These two complementary concepts of *interpellation by infection* and *de-interpellation* may be of use to researchers keen to understand how state-society relations were mediated through ideological discourse during the coronavirus crisis in Vietnam and in other exemplary societies where a policy goal of viral elimination was pursued.

Bureaucratic brokerage

Local officials were on the front line of Vietnam's war on COVID-19, charged with implementing the government's coronavirus control strategy locally. This implementation required intense negotiations between low-level government representatives and citizens as both tried to interpret the unfamiliar and highly restrictive provisions of the Zero-COVID policy.

Many of the skills and qualities that local officials rely on in their work as bureaucratic brokers do not feature in training materials or on government websites and are often at odds with official depictions of competent officialdom, meaning they are little understood. As state-society negotiations intensified as the pandemic worsened, ward officials relied on their know-how and practical acumen to support their communities to obtain food and vaccines and even commit some minor policy infractions that enabled them to tolerate and broadly adhere to the highly restrictive Zero-COVID policy for an extended period.

This study has applied theories of bureaucratic agency to consider the embodied knowledge that Vietnamese officials brought to their work in the community during the pandemic. It has thereby responded to an exhortation for anthropologists to "insert a critical ethnographic eye in (more) interactions between bureaucrats and both their clients and their legislative masters." (Herzfeld, 2005: 375). An ethnographically-informed, Vietnam-specific version of *mētis,* a concept popularised by Scott (1998) for differentiating between embodied knowledge and formal, deductive, epistemic knowledge, the concept of *có lý có tình* (being right but reasonable) developed in this thesis distills the oft-overlooked traits and behaviours of Vietnamese officials who have an important mediatory function between state and citizenry in local communities. For the ethnographic evidence that informs this concept confirms that these officials not only prosecute the state's agenda but also shape that agenda in ways hitherto under-acknowledged in the literature on bureaucratic planning and state simplification. Ethnographic research with Vietnamese officials working in various capacities levels may generate findings that can further refine the *có lý có tình* concept. Additionally, the concept may be adapted to address the mediatory work undertaken by non-state actors in the everyday urban realm, such as the self-appointed regulators of busy public spaces, markets, and transport interchanges in Ho Chi Minh City. The state often leaves such locales to be regulated by locals as they see fit, within the framework of the law.

The abolition of the role of neighbourhood group leader (*tổ trưởng tổ dân phố*) in January 2025, partly spurred by a perceived need to address ward-level administrative inefficiencies that were exposed by the pandemic, represents an inflection point for the lowest level of urban governance in Ho Chi Minh City. The account of low-level Vietnamese officials provided in this thesis therefore also contributes to remembering what were reassuring figures for many Ho Chi Minh City alleyway residents during the pandemic and in neighbourhood life more generally.

Accidental anthropology

In terms of its methodological contribution, this thesis has connected the resurgent debates on how to ethnographically research the unforeseen with the existing body of

accidental anthropology literature which comprises serendipitous studies of emerging empirical phenomena, conducted in unstable and uncertain contexts. As book-length ethnographies of the COVID-19 pandemic are published, considering that scholarship as part of the accidental anthropology literature will encourage comparisons to be drawn between the coronavirus phenomenon and past tumultuous events, enabling a richer, historically-contextualised understanding to develop. The contributions to knowledge about an historic event vested in those ethnographies will also support calls for serendipity-based norms to be reasserted within the academy.

Directions for future research

I now introduce three topics for further ethnographic enquiry that have emerged from the conversations that I have had with city dwellers over the course of this research.

Environmental justice

The coronavirus pandemic was a period of profound existential uncertainty. As well as engaging in various self-improvement activities focused on protecting their health and wellbeing, some of my interlocutors came to consider the urgent environmental sustainability challenges that Ho Chi Minh City and the wider country face. Air pollution fell to a significant degree in Ho Chi Minh City during lockdown (Dang and Trinh, 2022), for example, leading many locals to yearn for a cleaner, more liveable city post-pandemic. Duy, a Vietnamese undergraduate studying at the University of Toronto, shared the biggest lesson that he had learnt from the coronavirus pandemic at this research's COVID conversation event in July 2023 in Ho Chi Minh City:

> *This may sound a bit strange but after COVID happened, I realized that everything does not just revolve around humans…I find humans arrogant when we think that everything revolves around humans. After COVID, I realised that humans are just a part of nature. I think that is a big lesson we learned from COVID.*

> COVID conversation group transcript, 30 July 2023

In recent years, attempts to manage the urban environment in Vietnamese cities have proven deleterious to nature. Mature trees have been removed en masse for road widening projects and public realm 'beautification' schemes in Ho Chi Minh City, for example. Official narratives around creating a more civilised urban environment have been deployed to justify the environmental vandalism. But by worsening urban heat island effect and contributing to flash

flooding, these practices degrade the urban environment and accelerate climate breakdown, rendering local surroundings less civil while threatening civilisation itself.

After COVID happened, I realized that
everything does not just revolve around humans.

Figure 53: Participant Duy discusses lessons he learnt from the pandemic at this research's COVID-19 conversation event, July 2023. Author's photo.

In chapter six of this thesis, I discussed Vietnam's powerful discourse of civility and its prominent role in public debates around appropriate behaviour during the coronavirus pandemic. Harms has shown through an analysis of ethnographic conversations about sustainability (2014) how contemporary notions of civility among residents of masterplanned developments are linked with environmentally damaging behaviours that do not show consideration for others as civility discourse demands. And more and more Vietnamese seeking a 'good life' through a so-called civilised urban lifestyle are turning to cars, air conditioning and air travel, making environmentally deleterious choices that hasten climate breakdown (Nguyen, Wilcox and Lin, 2024). As is the case in many settings, schemes seeking to address environmental challenges in Vietnam currently fail to take into account the sedimented knowledge of local people that may help address those very challenges. Building from these important studies, engaged ethnographic research with Ho Chi Minh City residents impacted by top-down, expert-led regimes of environmental control may generate findings that disrupt current urban civility narratives and spur conversations that ultimately influence more environmentally sustainable behaviours in rapidly-developing Vietnam and beyond.

Liminality

Within the anthropological literature, liminality is characterised as the quality of ambiguity and disorientation and also by the rites and rituals of separation and re-incorporation that begin and end a liminal period (Turner [1969] 2008). Ethnographer and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep originally coined the term in 'Rites de Passage' [1960] (2019). When it comes to the ongoing task of theorising the coronavirus pandemic, this concept has significant analytical potential that anthropologists and political scientists could exploit. It befits the all-encompassing state of limbo city dwellers were incorporated into as the normal structures of life were suspended under the Zero-COVID policy with no clear end in sight. Anthropologists have already applied liminality to think through various pandemic-related uncertainties (Bell, 2021). Works cited in this study have used the concept to conceptualise collective quarantine as an in-between experience (Nguyen, 2021) and have employed its complimentary concept of communitas to consider the ethic of mutual support that emerged in migrant worker housing during citywide lockdown (Huynh, Luong and Duong, 2022). Researchers keen to analyse the societal discombobulation of the coronavirus pandemic more systematically may find anthropologist Bjorn Thomassen's dimensions of liminality (2015: 48-49) useful.[60] Such studies could make valuable contributions to political anthropology.

Sino-Vietnamese comparisons

The Vietnamese authorities ended the Zero-COVID policy in late 2021. Although the state had been alive to the potential for civil unrest caused by delayed COVID-19 support payments, as discussed in chapter five, widespread protests did not materialise. In China, however, the authorities only ended the nation's Zero-COVID regime approximately one year later than Vietnam, following nationwide protests following a fire at an apartment building in Ürümqi, in the western Xinjiang region that led to several deaths. Allegedly, fire exits had been sealed to prevent residents going outdoors during Zero-COVID lockdown.[61] In the context of this fire and in other day-to-day conversations, my alleyway neighbours often raised the neighbouring countries' divergent approaches to enacting what was a major policy change. I suggest that a comparative analysis of the ending of Zero-COVID policies in Vietnam and in China could teach us much about patterns of political change and the respective political systems of those two countries.

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[60] This rubric considers types of subject who can experience liminality, spatial and temporal dimensions of liminality, and some basic subdivisions. These different dimensions can function together in various combinations. The intensity of a liminal moment (scale) is also important. The COVID-19 pandemic represents a liminal experience intensified "…as the personal, group and societal levels converge(d) in liminality, over extended periods of time or even within several spatial entities" (Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra, 2015: 50).

[61] The protests were described as the White Paper Protests (白纸抗议) or the A4 Revolution (白纸革命). Young demonstrators held up sheets of white paper, a metaphor for critical social media posts, news articles that had been wiped from the internet as the authorities looked to silence voices critical of its Zero-COVID policy.

As anthropologists Minhua Ling and Juan Zhang have noted, Zero-COVID entailed "a partial revisiting of the challenges of the past" (2023: 265) in China. The comparative analysis that I call for should carefully consider historical parallels between the ways in which collective farming ended in Vietnam and in China and how these nations ended their Zero-COVID policies, for example. While in China the shift away from collectivisation occurred only after leadership upheavals within the Communist Party, no such upheavals occurred in the Vietnamese context. The same national leaders who had launched the campaign to enlarge collective cooperatives in the 1970s were also the ones who supported economic reform in the form of a new product contract system in the early 1980s, reports Kerkvliet (2005: 171). Such analyses should draw on existing comparative explorations of processes of political change in Vietnam and China (Gillespie and Nicholson, 2005; Luong and Unger, 1998; Wells-Dang, 2012) and could hypothesise about the longevity of the two nations' respective political systems. Having discussed the contributions to knowledge made by this thesis and identified three areas for future research that have emerged over the course of this research, the chapter now concludes by calling for further studies of the pandemic.

Conclusion

The consequences and meanings of the coronavirus pandemic for Vietnamese society and politics will not become clear for many years. This thesis represents part of what must be an ongoing effort on the part of social scientists with an interest in Vietnam to research the pandemic's impacts so that the phenomenon can be understood from a *longue durée* perspective. Analyses of Vietnam's pandemic experience that draw only on publicly available sources of information like case and death numbers and government directives assign excessive importance to state policies and provide merely partial pictures of a far more complex reality. They also provide cool retrospective accounts of what was a highly unstable and uncertain situation. Those detached analyses cannot speak to the subjective experiences of city dwellers caught up in the phenomenon they seek to explain. By drawing on extensive field data that reveal subtle and often unspoken negotiations and accommodations that unfold between state and citizenry in Vietnam on a day-to-day basis, this thesis has provided a human-centred alternative to those analyses, contributing new knowledge pertaining to one of the most significant events in Vietnam's recent history to the ethnographic record.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

This appendix describes a rapid response, participatory archiving project *Archiving COVID-19 Heritage in Ho Chi Minh City* through which city dwellers have documented everyday experiences of the coronavirus pandemic. This project has been supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council through the Imagining Futures Programme [grant number AH/T008199/1] and the University of East Anglia's Impact Acceleration Account [grant number AH/X003442/1]. This collaborative project has employed participant observation, semi-structured interviews, life history interviews, group conversations, and participatory archiving. In the sections that follow, I set out the archiving project's origins, rationale, and influences before offering methodological reflections on conducting 'fieldwork on foot' and engaging city dwellers through participatory archiving during the three phases of data collection. The research team's novel approach of archival metadata co-creation is then evaluated. I conclude by discussing forthcoming project activities.

<u>Project origins</u>

Forced into a five month break in fieldwork in mid-2021, I returned to the UK. As it was uncertain whether going back to Vietnam would be possible, I had considered alternative thesis topics. I became aware of ongoing efforts within British-Vietnamese communities to restore and re-archive a collection of rare documents and artefacts pertaining to the work of the An Việt Foundation that had been vandalised. Anthropologists engaged in postcolonial studies increasingly adopt historical perspectives and use archives in their research (Stoler, 2009; Trundle and Kaplonski, 2011; Zeitlyn, 2012). Inspired by this burgeoning vein of scholarship, I had discussed the possibility of engaging ethnographically with the An Việt Foundation's archive with Diana Lê who was working on the restoration project. Ultimately it became possible to return to Vietnam so I took the opportunity to document the unfolding pandemic instead.

I stayed in touch with Diana, however, and in early 2022 we joined with Nguyễn Tăng Quang, a Ho Chi Minh City-based artist who had published an iconic picture book (Nguyen 2020) depicting his stay in government quarantine *Con Đã Về Nhà* (I'm Home). We secured funding for a project that fused our interests in archives, art, and ethnography. The project commenced in September 2022 and has since attracted further funding and several additional collaborators at different career stages and of different ages, genders, and backgrounds. Each member of our team of British, British-Vietnamese, and Vietnamese researchers has engaged

with Ho Chi Minh City throughout their lives and is able to conduct research in Vietnamese, meaning the project is ethnographically grounded in the local context. Ethical approval was received from UEA's School of Global Development Research Ethics Subcommittee (ETH2223-2587; ETH2324-0219). City dwellers whom we encountered provided verbal informed consent to participate in interviews and where identifying images have been shared publicly, signed a release form allowing their personal likenesses to be used in this way.

Project rationale

In early 2022, as the most acute phase of pandemic receded into the past, Ho Chi Minh City residents debated how the extraordinary pandemic period would be remembered. Pop-up exhibitions, public art, and propaganda banners promoting narratives of sacrifice and resilience began to appear in public spaces, transmitting official narratives about the country's collective epidemic experience. In February, I met a recent sociology graduate to discuss some COVID-19-themed exhibits that we had both noticed when visiting flower street (*đường hoa*). This annual installation on a prominent central boulevard is a key part of the city's Lunar New Year celebrations and attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors over the several weeks that it is in place each year.

During the citywide coronavirus lockdown there were widespread food shortages as the state-run rationing system failed to meet citizens' subsistence needs (Nguyen and Johnson, 2021). Sơn, who had been living with his parents and younger brother in their middle class home in central Phú Nhuận district during lockdown, repeatedly raised the lack of bottled water in a necessities ATM (*ATM Nhu Yếu Phẩm*) display seemingly inspired by the free rice ATMs funded by a local entrepreneur that had appeared on some city streets (BBC News Online 2020b). Drinking the city's tap water is not advised and Sơn's family had struggled to obtain this essential item while locked down. The number of supermarket delivery slots did not meet local demand and the family did not receive water from the authorities. Sơn was incredulous that officials had forgotten to include in their necessities display something so basic to life. In the conversations I had with many other city dwellers during my doctoral fieldwork in 2022, dissonances between official memory narratives about the extraordinary lockdown period and their own subjective experiences became increasingly clear.

Figure 1: Temporary exhibition on Ho Chi Minh City's Lunar New Year flower street (đường hoa) conveys themes of patriotism, sacrifice, and resilience through images of medical workers, army personnel, and children during the previous year's coronavirus lockdown. Author's photo, 31 January 2022.

Project trajectory

Inspired by other innovative, citizen-centered examples of archival practice including the Pandemic Journaling Project (Willen and Mason, 2024) and recent research demonstrating the reparative function of archives in Vietnam (Were, 2022), the project team aimed to address these epistemic exclusions by designing a participatory archiving initiative through which city dwellers could record in words and images their own experiences of pandemic. By using a participatory methodology designed to generate a range of views, we also sought to challenge the various exclusionary assumptions within authorised heritage discourse (Smith, 2006) and further the emerging co-productive agenda for heritage studies (Harrison, 2015). As the project name *Archiving COVID-19 Heritage in Ho Chi Minh City* suggests, the project eschews the modernist trope of the past as something buried and hidden and focuses instead on heritage 'in the making' (Harrison, 2011).

Data collection took place in three phases. In phase one, before soliciting city dwellers' submissions, the research team conducted eight extended data collection sessions in various

city districts during October and November 2022. This enabled the two team members who had not engaged in fieldwork before to develop ethnographic research capabilities while helping us all to gain knowledge of the phenomenon under study that informed the next phase of data collection. For example, when considering categories to be used in the archive's metadata schema, because we had already spoken directly to people about their pandemic experiences, we had a sense of which temporalities and affects might be the most meaningful ones to include. In phase two we built our project website including its repository, ingested our accumulated audiovisual data, and from February 2023 onwards began collecting new data through public submissions. Phase three involved a video-recorded 'COVID conversation' event in a cultural space in Ho Chi Minh City in July 2023 at which local youth shared their memories of the pandemic and discussed the images that had been submitted to the archive by that point. The resulting transcript was subject to thematic analysis and emerging foci of self-improvement, fitness, wellness, and human-nature relations will inform future research activities. As participants' likenesses were captured in the event footage, an enhanced consent process was followed and participants were informed how to request that their likeness be removed from the short ethnographic film arising.

Figure 2: Poster advertising 'COVID conversation' event. Credit: Bui Nguyen Anh Hao.

Mentioned at the start of this appendix, a two-year impact award from the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council is enabling new audiences to engage with the existing project data through to May 2025. The exhibition and knowledge exchange activities it funds will, as a by-product, generate additional archival submissions and field notes that will support the continued analysis of the city's pandemic experience from a longue durée perspective. Furthermore, the archive will continue to grow as new data derived from a one-day workshop in Ho Chi Minh City in June 2024 is added. During this workshop, Fulbright University Vietnam students and alumni joined with local anthropologist Phạm Thanh Thôi to begin to categorise and digitise items within one of Vietnam's largest collections of COVID-19 objects belonging to amateur collector and television personality Huỳnh Minh Hiệp.

Fieldwork on foot

In phase one of data collection, the project team pursued fieldwork during the daytime in central districts 1, 3, and 10, data collection having deliberately been scheduled during two of the city's coolest, driest months. We typically met at the intersections of major city boulevards and walked for several hours engaging in serendipitous encounters with refreshment vendors, motorcycle taxi drivers, security guards, people engaging in odd jobs for cash, and local officials, all of whom demonstrated knowledge of the phenomenon we were interested in. Data were collected in field notes and through informal conversations, and in audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. Part of the richness of 'fieldwork on foot', anthropologists Jo Lee and Tim Ingold (2006) point out, is that moving in such a way enables the researcher to notice details in local environments to a much greater degree than in other ways of getting around. While the dominant way to travel about Ho Chi Minh City is on the back of a motorcycle, in terms of the ability to see in different directions and to discover the minutiae of the urban surroundings, it is the walker who has the real mobility.

In each fieldwork session, we used this method over several hours, lingering when we happened upon interesting social scenarios. For example, at a bandstand in a medium-sized park we encountered a middle-aged, mixed-gender group who meet here every weekday morning for an hour of ballroom-style dancing. As they rested between songs, the dancers told us that being denied their daily dose of exercise when Zero-COVID restrictions were in force had given them a fresh appreciation of the role of this activity in maintaining their mental health. The hiatus had, however, strengthened their social bonds. When they attempted to recreate the dance sessions on Zalo video calls, these descended into casual chats which gave group members the opportunity to discuss topics in more detail than they usually could amid the movement and music of the dancing sessions.

As Luong asserts, "Carefully coordinated collaboration presents a major opportunity for team members, ideally of different genders, generations, and ethnic/racial backgrounds, to gain access to different corners of the local social universe." (2015: 13). Our different demographic characteristics and gendered habituses helped us to strike up conversations with city dwellers of different positionalities. For example, that two team members could be identified through their clothes and comportment as not being local supported us in asking questions about life in the post-lockdown city that may have seemed strangely obvious to a permanent resident. Our outsider status also led some we encountered to spontaneously offer us their reflective, retrospective summaries of how Vietnam had handled the epidemic vis-à-vis other nations.

A participatory rapid response archive

Phase two of data collection involved crowdsourcing city dwellers' photos and written reflections about the lockdown period. Over ninety percent of Vietnamese have access to the internet through a smartphone (Luu, 2024) so, to facilitate the easy sharing of photos, we created the *Chuyện Thời Dịch (Stories from the Time of Pandemic)* archive online.[62] Public deposit to the archive is supported via an intake form mapped to the collection's metadata template, discussed in the next section. We deliberately set up an archive foregrounding visual knowledge not only because the pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City with its eye catching signage, public realm disinfection, and hazmat suits has been a visually arresting phenomenon but also in recognition of the burden that participatory methods can place on the community (Haberstock, 2020). Requesting photos with a brief commentary rather than mandating lengthy written submissions made participation easier for city dwellers with multiple demands on their time. And to attract contributions to our website's archive from city dwellers from different educational backgrounds and with varying viewpoints, we made participation as easy as possible. For example, we did not require contributors to meet minimum word limits when describing their image and we avoided using pandemic-related jargon on the archive's intake form in case it appeared officious and deterred potential contributors. Instructions on the archive's intake form requested that people's faces not be visible and documents showing personal information not be submitted without anonymisation. Submissions to the website were checked by a member of the research team and, if necessary, redacted before their publication online. Otherwise, they were returned to the contributor with a reminder of the original instructions, a request for them to resubmit, and an offer to discuss any outstanding concerns via email.

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[62] https://www.chuyenthoidich.vn/

After raising awareness of the archive through word of mouth among our own contacts with limited success, we enlisted a local advertising company to place invitations on the news feeds of Zalo social media app users. People living in central district 4 interested in photography, art exhibitions, or community life in the vicinity of a popular local market were targeted. This yielded far more submissions. As in the participatory photography initiative introduced in chapter two of this thesis, citizen archivists were asked to focus on materiality and not to share photos of themselves or others. As most people chose to submit memories from the lockdown period, human faces were almost always covered with a mask which obscured their personal likeness. By reviewing photos stored on their smartphones and selecting, labelling, and submitting what they deemed to be the most meaningful images, city dwellers engaged in a reflective process, reappraising their visual memories of specific times and places during citywide lockdown in light of subsequent events. Most of the data I have drawn on in my doctoral thesis relate to pandemic experiences that were shared with me during the 18 months that I was living in the community. But by engaging in secondary analysis of city dwellers' archival submissions, I have been able to draw out different narratives from the ethnography, some of which have influenced the arguments of my doctoral thesis. Similarly, the anthropologist Erik Harms (2020) has discussed new perspectives brought to his years of ethnographic research on urban development in Ho Chi Minh City by reflecting on archival images from past fieldwork on the Thủ Thiêm peninsula before it was turned into a new urban zone.
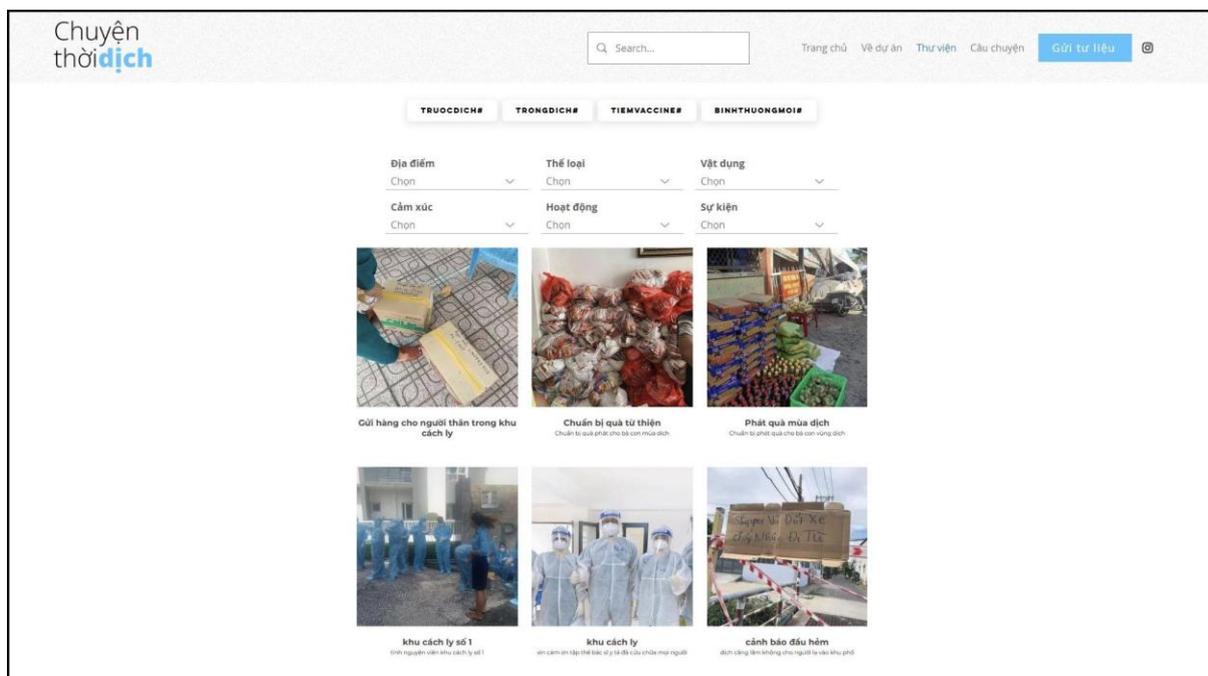

Figure 3: Screenshot of website library page showing filters that can be applied to sort the data by time period (before the pandemic, during the pandemic, getting vaccinated, new normal), location, submission format, COVID-19 object, official pandemic-era slogan, activity, emotion. Source: Chuyenthoidich.vn

<u>A co-created metadata schema</u>

Categorising and describing data are core aspects of any archiving project but, as Stoler notes (2009), categorisation and description processes risk silencing local knowledge and imposing outsider frames of reference and value on local realities. The digitisation of ethnography increases the risk since large amounts of data can be ingested and archived relatively quickly. However, emerging flexible, culture- and society-focused tools such as the British Museum's Material Culture Ethnography Metadata Schema (MCEMS) (Petek-Sargeant, 2020) are supporting researchers to capture information that is meaningful to local communities in digital collections.[63] For the purposes of the *Archiving COVID-19 Heritage in Ho Chi Minh City* project, the term metadata refers to information that describes the contents and context of a digital image or a short written account submitted to our archive or to a collection of such submissions. In an effort to avoid structuring the present project's archive around the research team's perceptions of pandemic instead of around city dwellers' subjective experiences, we adopted a participatory approach to metadata creation.

Initially, project team members discussed and agreed on 25 hashtags reflecting pandemic materialities, temporalities, and affects that archivists could select and apply to their images themselves. It could be argued that by pre-selecting hashtags, the project team undermined the intent of democratic description inherent to a cooperative approach to metadata creation. However, giving citizen archivists free rein to categorise their own data in a 'folksonomy' is known to prevent distinct themes from emerging (Barrett, 2021). If multiple archivists use different words for the same object - barrier, blockade, and barricade, for example - or make typographical errors during data entry, the number of unique terms increases, data shareability and discoverability declines, metadata become difficult to synthesise and share, and the archive becomes less navigable and useful overall. While it was necessary to use a somewhat controlled vocabulary to enable a working taxonomy to emerge, we also added an option for archivists to create and apply their own hashtags (*hashtag khác*). This generated a record of popular themes that were not captured by our taxonomy, allowing us to add new labels to meet public demand.

All archivists were required to assign a time period to their submission: before the pandemic (*trước dịch*), during the pandemic (*trong dịch*), getting vaccinated (*tiêm vaccine*), or new normal (*bình thường mới*). The majority of submissions received were labelled 'during the pandemic' and each individual submitted on average one image. Over half of archivists chose

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[63] Several members of the project team also collaborate on a separate project documenting endangered cultural heritage in Ho Chi Minh City in which we use this schema: https://www.emkp.org/documenting-the-knowledge-skills -and-practices-of-the- last-remaining -sign -painters-in-ho-chi-minh-city/

to apply one or more optional, pre-defined additional hashtags to their submission. A third of archivists chose to add their own, self-devised hashtag but over half who did so neglected to use a hashtag symbol or entered full sentences not having understood the purpose of that box. This field was later revised to add a hashtag by default and a note to clarify its purpose.

Figure 4: Metadata schema used by contributors to tag their photos according to time period (compulsory field), location, submission format, COVID-19 object, official pandemic-era slogan, activity, emotion. Source: Chuyenthoidich.vn

The main themes emerging from the archival submissions have been community support, gifting, separation and isolation, the function of the countryside in feeding the coronavirus-stricken city, bureaucracy including bureaucratic artefacts such as vaccination certificates and quarantine paperwork, health monitoring including testing and medicines, defence including personal protective equipment (PPE), the performance of state epidemic

prevention activities, and the solidarity and teamwork involved in those performances, cleanliness and disinfection, signage and semiotics, and novel, adaptive ways of fulfilling daily tasks during the new normal phase of pandemic such as paying for goods in a socially distanced manner.

<u>Future activities</u>

City dwellers who submitted content to the project's online archive have been invited to attend an in-person event in Ho Chi Minh City in March 2025 where they will discuss and debate their contributions with their fellow 'citizen archivists' and the project team. The longitudinal dimension of the reanalysis captures the intersection of biographical and historical change over time, enabling a rich multidimensional analysis to develop over its duration (Camfield and Palmer-Jones, 2013). Ultimately, the project team intends to share all of our research data openly, so that our archive acts as "a public good that could be productively re-analysed by future researchers." (Camfield, 2014: 8). Before its conclusion in May 2025, I will disseminate project data at invited talks at higher education and cultural institutions in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Appendix 2

Research partner field report 1

New normal life around the neighborhood – Ward 7 – District 11 [8.30am Oct 28th, 2021]

Walking up along the street, I felt familiar sounds and smells, but there was a difference. I was not sure what it was, maybe I myself was the one who had changed. A caveman illness or something like that. I had been hiding in my cave for too long. Now I was scared of socializing with people around me, even my next door neighbors. Every time I passed a person, I tried to walk fast, even holding my breath. Avoiding human contact has become a natural thing.

The street – Lý Nam Đế - was crowded again. The Tam Kỳ chicken rice restaurant opened but there were no seats for customers - perhaps as they are only allowed to take away or perhaps as the owners are afraid of F0s. Just heard last night that there were new regulations for sit-in restaurants. Those regulations might be too harsh for such small shop owners. Getting it right or having a fine ticket of 7.5 million VND, they might choose the former. Better safe than sorry. But I doubt other people would comply with the new rules.

Figure 1: Barber's shop, ward 7, district 11. Author's photo.

I decided to walk into a short alley. A barber's shop was opening its doors. An A4-size notice caught my eyes and made me laugh. 'Hớt tóc phục vụ tận nhà' roughly means 'Barber's to take away'. That was how this barber managed to survive during the peak of the pandemic. He must have been brave to visit a customer's home and do his job, or maybe he was desperate due to the long ban on haircut–related activities?

The alley seemed to be quieter than normal. I remember people always kept their doors open, but not now. Most doors are closed, and I could vaguely see the figures who were inside. Not a single child. Now, I figured out what the difference is. There were no children on the street or in the alley. Where were they? It was 9:00 AM now, they should wake up.

They have to study though - online lessons. Did you know the school keeps teaching physical education/gymnastics? To do the exam, students record their presentation and send the videos to the teacher! What a world!

Around a turn, I saw a family shop which serves many kinds of take-away breakfast. This shop must have been working non-stop despite the strict lockdown. They provided many kinds of meals for the neighborhood. The menu is not to my taste. I might try it another day to check if the price was reasonable. A few people were sitting in front of their house. This narrow alley was their front yard and they were observing me – a stranger trespassing their 'garden'. It really was a garden because there were trees and bonsai trees scattered around.

At the end of the alley, a broken-rice shop [cơm tấm] on the right caught my attention. The sellers were really busy. It must be their rush hour in the morning. It was a take-away shop so there were no seats. On the left, a shabby man was sitting on the ground without a face mask. At first I thought he was a local, but then he kept mumbling about the lottery. Ah, he was a lottery ticket seller. I was going to ask him how he was during the last five months but I kept walking across the street. I was afraid to talk to him. I didn't feel safe.

At the corner of Lê Đại Hành and Tân Phước street, I saw a pop-up shop which sold dry food. This place used to be empty. The owners of the shop might live in the nearby alley or in the house behind the shop. They occupied the pavement and set up a temporary shop. This place was rather near the Ward Authority Office. I was wondering why those gate-keepers let this shop open. Ah, perhaps they were too busy to worry about this small thing. They were fighting a total war.

After buying two kilograms of beef, I walked toward the Thiếc Market. There was a check-point in front of the market's entrance. Two gate-keepers (officials) with red bands on their arms were sitting behind a military-style fence. I didn't know if I had to show my 'green card' to get into the market. Could the checkpoint prevent the virus sneaking in? A question which is too difficult to answer! I didn't have my vaccine certificate (with two red stamps, showing I had got two jabs) with me, so I decided not to go into the market.

Figure 2: Thiếc Market, district 11. Author's photo.

There were a lot of motorcycles on the pavements, mostly elderly men waiting for their wives who were shopping inside. A guy in a security uniform kept asking people if they wanted to use the parking services, but there were no replies. Looking from the outside, I didn't know if all the kiosks in the market

had opened as usual but one thing was clear: all the jewelry shops were opening. The poor need to liquidate their last resort, in order to buy food.

At the corner of Trần Quý and Phó Cơ Điều, I saw a familiar shop owner who was selling sticky rice – the cheap breakfast for the poor. I walked across the street to buy a packet of sticky rice with peanuts [xôi đậu phộng]. Before the pandemic, at this time – around 9:30 – the owner and her husband would sell out of food. The sticky rice, which was around 10,000 VND per packet, was quite popular back then. But now there were still lots of packets on the shop counter. I asked the owner when she started selling again, and how she managed to live during the lockdown. She told me that she sold vegetables for a living during July, August and September. And she got financial aid of 1,000,000 VND. She looked healthy and happy. Her husband was a bit anxious. Maybe, for this couple, the hard days had passed.

To complete my morning journey, I went to a noodle shop to buy my breakfast. This shop and its dining tables occupy half of the alley, which causes some trouble for commuters. But the locals probably get used to this inconvenience. At the end of the day, most of the shop's customers are dwellers from nearby neighborhoods, so how could they complain? Or maybe the owners – an elderly Cantonese couple – lived in this alley, and they had some local connections (as they were able to block the alley). I talked to the husband – a typical Chinese descendent – while his wife prepared the food. They just resumed their business four days ago. He said that they experienced a hard time during the peak of the pandemic. This shop was the family's main income. Due to the closure, his family had to eat vegetables to survive. His wife received financial aid three times, he only got one.

Looking around, I saw a few residents enjoying their meals. Yesterday there were no tables for sit-in customers. But today, the shop arranged four small tables and a few plastic chairs.

Research partner field report 2

The Barber's Story   [11.15am Oct 28 2021]

I decided to go to Tân Phú district to get a haircut. This is kind of a habit, when you get used to a barber, you don't want to change to another one. It's been almost five months since the last time I got my hair cut properly. During the lockdown period, my wife managed to 'shorten' my hair, but now it's the professionals' task.

When I arrived, the barber was in the middle of his lunch, or his breakfast I couldn't tell. He was eating a cheap meal contained in a white disposable box. It was definitely not a decent meal. I didn't want to disturb him so I said I would go around and come back later.

Moving around the neighborhood, I saw some coffee shops are opening. Lots of Grab drivers are enjoying their free time. Their green uniforms were easy to recognize. It seems they are not busy at this time. Along the streets, many shops were closed with a 'for rent' notice hanging on the door or stuck on the wall: 'cho thuê mặt bằng'. This can be seen as an economic thermometer. Grocery stores were the most common shops which popped up everywhere (in this case they were once fashion outlets). I passed a familiar hairdresser which was closed. A handwritten notice stuck on the main door: 'sang tiệm tóc gấp' [urgent sale]. The owner must have been in a desperate situation.

When I came back, the barber had finished his lunch. He looked a bit scared at first since I was wearing a face mask, he could not figure out who I was, or maybe he's just like me, afraid of strangers. I went forward and told him that I am an old customer. This made him relaxed. Ah, maybe he was smiling under the face mask but I could not tell. This was the first time I got my haircut after the new normal time, so I didn't know if I could keep my mask on. I asked him about it and he asked me whether I needed to shave or not. I always shave at home and rarely have the barber shave my face, so I told him that I just needed a very short hair cut – the military style. Then he said I could keep my mask on, he got some 'technique' to complete the task. Two minutes later, I knew what the technique was: when he was about to taper off the hair near my left ear, he asked me to use my fingers to press on the left side of my mask – on my left cheek, then he released the loop which had fastened behind my left ear. Ah, now he could shave the hair zone around my left ear. After he finished, I fastened the loop again. How intriguing! This way, both he and I felt safe and comfortable.

As he was working, we had a chat about his daily life during the lockdown. He told me that it was the worst time in his life. It seemed he lived alone here. I was not sure if his wife was with him. He managed to send his kids to his hometown – Phú Yên province – right before the lockdown. He was lucky because the distance between Ho Chi Minh City and this region is over 500 km, too far to travel by motorcycle. He kept saying that he was glad because his children were safe, and Phú Yên is a green zone, which means there were few cases. But there were a few inconveniences. His children had to attend online classes, which was quite difficult considering the poor internet connection in that rural area.

During the lockdown, he just stayed at home with the shop's doors fully closed. He dared not go outside. I asked him why that was. "Was that because of the strict regulations or the pandemic?". He answered that it was the latter. He was scared to death every time he heard a wailing siren or saw those guys in white astronaut suits. Those are signs of death. He was not afraid of the police or gatekeepers. He was afraid of being infected. He told me that his neighborhood was better than the neighborhood across the street, which had fatal cases. 'Hủ tiếu ĐK' - a famous noodle restaurant in Tân Phú district – is located in that neighborhood. This shop has been strictly closed since May. We joked that the owner must have been very rich or they were too scared to open it again. Before the pandemic, once a month I would go to Tân Phú, get my haircut and then have lunch at this restaurant. At 25.000 VND per bowl, noodles at this place must be the cheapest in the district. The food is not that delicious but I enjoy it somehow, perhaps due to the secret Cantonese recipe. The owners and his wife are Chinese descendants and they had around 12 children. Now is the fourth generation, so basically this large family has around 50 members. Their dwelling occupies the whole corner of the street. Talking about food, I asked the barber how he survived during the lockdown months. He told me that he ordered take-away food via the internet. There were tough days – at the peak of the fourth wave - when the Bách Hoá Xanh chain [grocery shop] closed and he could not order the food. He said he mainly relied on the Grab drivers to get the groceries.

Figure 3: The famous DK Restaurant with a small notice showing that they will open again on November 2nd.

And he got some 'shares' from his neighbors who got vegetables delivered from their hometowns. I asked him about the restrictions and he showed me locations of the local checkpoints. Technically, he could travel around this alleyway neighborhood, but he dared not go outside before he got the second jab. Even some long-time customers asked him to visit their houses for a 'take-away barber', he refused them all. He was scared stiff. Ah, he mentioned that the barber's shop opposite Hủ tiếu ĐK were F0 - the whole family. 'But now all of them are OK,' he said cheerfully.[64]

My haircut was rather fast. It was grade 1 – military style so I couldn't expect more. '50,000 VND' he told me the cost. It was nearly a 25% increase. Well, after the lockdown, everything rocketed. I took out the 50k cash, sprayed some disinfectant [ethanol 70%] on it before handing it to him, to show that everything was all right. Ah, ' better safe than sorry ' has become our motto.

Cảm ơn bạn! Tôi mong cuộc sống của thợ hớt tóc này bắt đầu tốt hơn.

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[64] Analysing these findings during a Zalo instant messenger discussion, we both remarked for one of the first times on the lack of opprobrium the barber attached to his neighbours' F0 status compared to the high stigma level before and during lockdown.

Research partner field report 3

Pop-up stores and e-market at Tân Phước Apartment, District 11 [Oct 31 2021]

Background

On July 7th, Ho Chi Minh City started new restrictions to prevent new infectious cases. Residents were not allowed to go outside except in emergency situations. Each family got a shopping voucher for special dates of the month. In theory, when residents passed a checkpoint, they had to show this paper to prove their travelling purposes. In practice, due to a large number of commuters, officers at the checkpoints rarely checked or they randomly stopped a 'suspicious' individual according to the time of the day. These strict and uncertain measures made people feel anxious and uncomfortable, some even didn't want to go outside their home. On August 23, the unofficial curfew began and residents were no longer able to go to the markets. A few households managed to stuff their fridges right before the total lockdown but those raw foods and vegetables didn't last long. Several days after the curfew started, when all the shops and supermarkets were closed, residents were desperate to get their basic necessities.

Pop-up stores in Tân Phước Apartment.

People in Ho Chi Minh City had learned fast to adapt. At first, some noodle shops started to advertise special menus for their immediate neighbors. In two blocks of Tân Phước Apartment, which housed around 600 families, shop owners pinned leaflets and handwritten notices in the elevator's walls. Since residents could not go outside but they could freely move between 21 floors, these food sellers took this opportunity to keep their businesses open. Customers had to order their meals in advance because the owners wanted to be sure of not being misled. There were cases in which dishonest customers refused to pick up their meals, and the sellers waited in vain or had to beg old customers for help. Then came the online group using the ZALO medium – the most popular social app in Vietnam. Residents started a joint group for selling food and invited apartment dwellers to join in. The food came from many sources. Some residents received supplies from their relatives back in their hometowns. People could not travel between southern provinces but vegetables, meat and seafood could. When residents could not use up the food, they sold these surpluses via the online market. Others have close connections which help them to get the supplies. Soon enough, this internet forum with more than 300 members became a booming market.


Figure 4: Daily meal choices available from *Tân Phước Apartment pop-up store*. Author's screenshots.

A woman on the 21ˢᵗ floor repurposed her apartment into a mini store, which sells a wide range of groceries. Before the pandemic, she worked in an office and this one-bedroom flat housed four people. In August, she started this shop and its size had become bigger and bigger thanks to the strict measures which made it hard for people to locate food. During the peak of the lockdown, the whole flat became a warehouse filled with raw vegetables, packed cans, instant noodles, dairy, personal care items, cartons of milk and childrens' snacks. This female owner even occupied the 2-meter hall to display her goods.

Research partner field report 4

Eating out during the new normal – A restaurant in District 1 – HCMC [Nov 2 2021]

Needing a cozy space for a group meeting near the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, I tried hard to find a coffee shop with outdoor seating but all of my favorite ones had been closed due to the lockdown and its knock-on effects. There is a coffee boutique at the corner of Hẻm 18A, which is called LahaCafe, but there were neither tables nor enough spaces for sit-in customers. My friends didn't want to sit there so they invited me to a nearby restaurant – Nem Cua Bể. To be honest, I felt reluctant to get there since I was in post-lockdown trauma – caveman syndrome. For the last several weeks, I have been afraid of meeting other people or going to public places. But my friends kept insisting and under the pressure of Saigon's burning heat and sunshine, the air-conditioned space inside the restaurant was really tempting.

I parked my motorcycle and went in. In contrast with my expectations, the old security guard didn't do anything to 'hygiene' me as he did last time back in May 2021. I had to take out my own disinfecting spray and spray my hands. On the main door, I saw a large QR code banner, which is used as an electronic checkpoint. As far as I know, if you go to a public place such as a restaurant or a supermarket, you have to show your 'green card' or 'proof of having two jabs', and you have to fill in a medical form – Khai báo y tế - either by hand or via electronic means. These medical data then will be sent to the city's Disease Control Center, which might be used for contact tracing if there is an outbreak. I was a bit worried since I didn't have my electric 'green card' as well as a QR code. I really hate paperwork and these red-tape things. But to my surprise, I didn't have to do anything. No one asked me to do that. I went straight in!

People say there are two parallel worlds in my country: a fantasy world with perfect mitigating plans on paper, and a down-to-the-earth world here in practice. I couldn't agree more. I was just wondering what was happening at this restaurant. It might be that there were not enough employees to fulfill all the complex regulations, or perhaps this old guard was too lazy to do his duty, or he thought it was not necessary? Or he might think that it's the new normal, you have to accept the infection risk 'quên đi mà sống'? Later, during the conversation, my friends shared their stories and it seemed my hunch was right: people were too tired to continue those strict measures. They were going on and on to encourage me out of my face mask: "kệ đi, có hai mũi rồi, xui thì bị thôi", "có bị cũng không nặng lắm đâu" [forget the pandemic, you got two jabs already, you would be really unlucky if the virus broke through that], [even if you got the virus, it would not be that dangerous]. Ah, it is the new normal!

When I came in, I saw lots of Grab and Now drivers were waiting for their orders. Some were in full gear – Japanese ninja styles, others seemed relaxed. The restaurant was half empty. I didn't go upstairs

so I didn't know if there were more tables on the second floor, but it was rather quiet on the ground floor. A staff member showed us to a table near the cashier counter. There were yellow X strips on a few tables which showed that these tables were not used. A friend asked what those strips were for and the waitress said that these tables were left unoccupied so that customer groups could keep social distance. How funny! I don't think this measure is sufficient considering we are facing new variants. I observed the staff to see if they were nervous, just like me. But all of them seemed carefree with a normal face mask, neither a special one nor a plastic face shield. How could they be so nonchalant?

We sat in and my friends started to take off their face masks. I was scared and kept my mask on, but as time went by, I took it off eventually. I told my friends about how I had my hair cut without taking off my face mask. They laughed and told me that I could not do that here, keeping the mask and eating at the same time. And they went on to persuade me that I should climb out of my cave. Enjoy life man! Don't worry! It's the new normal!

A female staff member came to our table and showed us a small table sign which has a QR code on it. "We now have an electronic menu, please use your phone to scan the code and proceed your order. Thank you!" Ah, a QR code again which means a reduction in human contact. Is it because of convenience and efficiency or due to infectious prevention measures? We couldn't tell. A friend asked for the WIFI password and started to order our lunch. We had the famous dishes 'bún chả' and orange juice. Those vitamins in oranges are good for your immune system – a female lecturer who works for the University claimed and ordered a drink for me. While the group was going on with their stories, I looked around to see how other customers felt. A Korean boss and his secretary were slowly enjoying their meals. A group of young ladies were talking about their office tasks. Three old-style government officers on my right were looking at their smartphones waiting for the food. Near the entrance were four red and green figures - delivery men waiting to get their orders called.

Appendix 3

Excerpt from record of Ho Chi Minh City locations blockaded following confirmed COVID-19 cases. Individual addresses, districts, wards are shown. Updated 11am, 11 August 2021). Page 3 of 124 pages listing 5,286 locations in total (HCDC, 2021).

DANH SÁCH ĐỊA ĐIỂM PHONG TỎA TẠI TP.HCM (cập nhật 11 giờ, ngày 11/8/2021)

78	12 căn nhà số: 262/6; 262/6B; 262/8; 262/10A; 262/12; 262/14; 262/16; 262/18; 262/20; 262/70; 262/70A và 262/70B Tôn Thất Thuyết	4	3
79	Hẻm 368 Tôn Đản (từ số nhà 368/54 đến số nhà 368/54/7 và từ số nhà 368/58 đến số nhà 368/60	4	4
80	01 phần hẻm 183B Tôn Thất Thuyết (từ nhà 183B/22 đến nhà 183B/29A)	4	4
81	Từ số nhà 13 đến số nhà 27B đường số 42, tuyến hẻm 17 đường số 42 (từ số nhà 17/1 đến số nhà 17/5) và nhà số 20 đường số 40	4	4
82	01 phần đường số 16 (từ số 1X/7 đến số 10V), 01 phần đường số 20 (từ số 02 đến số 19), 01 phần hẻm 78/31/11 Khánh Hội (từ số 78/31/11/4B đến số 78/31/11/10), nhà số 368/37/10E Tôn Đản, nhà số 368/37/10D Tôn Đản và nhà số 183B/25/12C Tôn Thất Thuyết	4	4
83	Từ số nhà 16 đến số nhà 54 đường số 2 và nhà số 52 Vĩnh Hội	4	4
84	Từ nhà 20 đến nhà 61 đường số 16	4	4
85	01 phần đường số 9, 01 phần hẻm 53 đường số 9	4	4
86	01 phần hẻm 243/94 Hoàng Diệu (từ nhà 243/94/1 đến nhà 243/94/23)	4	4
87	01 phần hẻm 243 Hoàng Diệu (từ nhà 243/76 đến nhà 243/104)	4	4
88	01 phần đường số 6 (từ nhà 40A4 đến nhà 40I), nhà 78/27 và nhà 78/29 Khánh Hội	4	4
89	Từ nhà số 29 đến số nhà 56 Lô G Cư xá Vĩnh Hội	4	6
90	01 phần KP2 và KP3: hẻm 14 Nguyễn Hữu Hào (từ 14/15 đến 14/22); hẻm 275 HD (từ 275/1 đến 275/35); từ 277/11, 277/12; từ 277/16 đến 277/33 HD; Lô P CxVĩnh Hội (từ P33 đến P52; từ P2/2 đến P2/4); Lô L CxVH (từ L29 đến L36; L28/1 đến L28/5)	4	6
91	Lô G (G29 - G56, G30A), Lô K (K1 - K36, kế K2, K12A), Lô Y chung cư Hoàng Diệu, Lô I (I28, 183/40, 02 căn 170/81, 170/81/30), Lô J (J1 - J38, J10A, J43 - J48)	4	6
92	Từ số 137 đến số 150, số 137A, số 141 Bis Bến Vân Đồn; hẻm 137 Bến Vân Đồn (từ số 137/1 đến số 137/69 và các nhà 137/19A, 137/55A, 137/57A, 137/62A, 137/65A); hẻm 150 Bến Vân Đồn (các số 150/1, 150/2, 150/16, 150/17, 150/26; từ số 150/31 đến số 150/60; số 150/61A và 150/61B)	4	6
93	Từ số nhà 243/39 đến số nhà 243/53 Hoàng Diệu	4	8
94	01 phần tổ dân phố 20 (từ V1 đến V15 Cư xá Vinh Hội)	4	8
95	01 phần tổ dân phố 51 thuộc KP4 (từ nhà 184 đến nhà 186 TĐ	4	8
96	01 phần tổ dân phố 1A (tầng 8 Chung cư H2 Hoàng Diệu)	4	8
97	01 phần tổ dân phố 45 thuộc Khu phố 4 (từ nhà 266/40/9/25 đến nhà 266/64/24 Tôn Đản)	4	8
98	01 phần tổ dân phố 41 thuộc khu phố 4, P8 (từ nhà 148/12/17 Tôn Đản đến 148/12/8-10 Tôn Đản, P10) và 01 tổ dân phố 30, 31 (từ nhà 148/12/14/1 đến nhà 148/12/14/31B Tôn Đản), P10	4	8
99	Tổ dân phố 39, 01 phần tổ dân phố 38, 40, 44 thuộc khu phố 4	4	8
100	01 phần tổ dân phố 36 và 01 phần tổ dân phố 37 thuộc kp 3	4	8
101	Tổ dân phố 49 thuộc khu phố 4	4	8
102	01 phần tổ dân phố 33 và 01 phần tổ dan phố 34 thuộc KP 3	4	8
103	Tổ dân phố 14 và Tổ dân phố 15 thuộc khu phố 2	4	8

Appendix 4

Commitment letter received upon exiting quarantine, Dec 2021. This was not signed by the ward leader, nor the steering committee and nor was it inspected by officials.

CỘNG HÒA XÃ HỘI CHỦ NGHĨA VIỆT NAM
NAM SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM
Độc lập – Tự do – Hạnh phúc
Independence-Freedom-Happiness

Phường ..., ngày ...... tháng ..... năm 2021
Ward....., date...month.....2021

BẢN CAM KẾT
COMMITMENT
Thực hiện việc tự theo dõi sức khỏe tại nhà/nơi lưu trú
sau khi hoàn thành cách ly tập trung để phòng, chống dịch COVID-19
To perform self-monitoring health at home/accommodation after the period of
centralized isolation for prevention of COVID-19

Họ tên/ ....
Full name:

Họ tên chủ hộ/nhà trọ nơi đối tượng lưu trú:..
Full name of householder/motel where the concerned person stays:

Địa chỉ:...
Address:

Số điện thoại liên lạc:..
Contact phone:

Để chủ động phòng, chống dịch COVID-19, Tôi xin cam kết với Ban chỉ đạo phòng, chống dịch bệnh COVID-19 phường.......,quận .... sẽ tự giác thực hiện đầy đủ các quy định cụ thể như sau:

To proactively prevent and control COVID-19 pandemic, I commit with Steering Committee for prevention and control of Ward......, District ...... to voluntarily perform fully the following specific stipulations:

1. Thực hiện nghiêm các biện pháp phòng, chống dịch bệnh theo yêu cầu của chính quyền địa phương và hướng dẫn của ngành y tế.

Seriously conduct measures for prevention, control of epidemic in accordance with the requests of local authorities and instruction of medical agencies.

2. Chấp hành việc tự theo dõi sức khỏe tại nhà/ nơi lưu trú đúng thời gian quy định.

Comply with self-mornitoring health at home/place of residence within the stipulated time.

3. Thực hiện ghi nhật ký tiền sử tiếp xúc gần cho đến hết 7 ngày đối với người đã tiêm đủ mũi Vaccine và 14 đối với người chưa tiêm đủ mũi Vaccine, đối tượng cách ly (kể từ ngày có quyết định hoàn thành cách ly tập trung).

Writing log of close contact history until the end of 7 days with people vaccinated for enough Vaccine doses and 14 days for people have not vaccinated (from the decision date of centralized isolation completion)

4. Không tổ chức liên hoan ăn uống, hoạt động đông người tại nơi ở, nơi lưu trú.

No food festivals, crowded activities at the place of residence, accommodation.

5. Chấp hành nghiêm việc tự theo dõi sức khỏe, thông báo ngay cho nhân viên y tế, tổ dân phố khi có một trong các triệu chứng nghi ngờ mắc bệnh: sốt (nhiệt độ trên 37,5° C); ho; khó thở; sổ mũi, đau rát họng ....

Comply seriously with self-monitoring health, immediately inform medical staff, residential group if one of the suspected symptoms of disease: fever (temperature over 37.5 ° C); cough; shortness of breath; runny nose, sore throat ...

6. Cá nhân hàng ngày thực hiện các biện pháp vệ sinh phòng chống dịch bệnh theo thông điệp 5K (Khẩu trang, khử khuẩn, khoảng cách, không tập trung, khai báo y tế) và các biện pháp phòng hộ cá nhân khác.

Daily conduct sanitary measures for prevention and control of disease according to 5K message(mask, disinfection, distance, no gatherings, health declaration) and other personal protective measures.

7. Trong thời gian tự theo dõi sức khỏe tại nhà/nơi lưu trú thường xuyên liên lạc y tế địa phương để thông báo tình trạng sức khỏe của bản thân và gởi cho trạm y tế địa phương phiếu tự theo dõi sức khỏe, nhật ký tiền sử tiếp xúc gần khi hết thời gian theo dõi.

During self-monitoring health at home/accommodation, regularly contact your local health care provider to inform your health status and send them the self-monitoring health sheet, log of close contact history when the monitoring time is nearly ended.

Khi có triệu chứng nghi ngờ mắc bệnh thì cá nhân liên hệ với số điện thoại sau:
If any suspected symptom of disease, you should contact the following number:
....

Tôi cam kết thực hiện đúng các nội dung trên, nếu vi phạm xin chịu mọi trách nhiệm trước pháp luật.

I commit to perform the above contents and will bear full responsibility to the law for any violiation.

Người cam kết	**Tổ dân phố**	**Ban chỉ đạo PCD Phường**
The commitment person	*Residential group*	*Steering Committee for Prevention and Control of Ward*