

Digital Nationalism during the COVID-19 Outbreak in Vietnam: Collective Forgetting and Domestic Xenophobia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the mechanism of nationalism that has emerged from Vietnam's entrance into the state of emergency, lending grounds for the employment and exacerbation of war metaphors, xenophobic discourses, and the elite's capture of the public forum surrounding COVID-19. Though egalitarian values were supposedly embedded in the state's rhetoric in response to the pandemic, there was a strange absence of coverage of the working poor, the homeless, and urban street workers who struggled for shelter amid the disease. As the government urged its citizens to fulfill their civic duty by staying home, thereby shifting the collective responsibility onto individuals, the need and the vulnerable situation of these cohorts went unheard. But if the poor are neglected in the national discussion, the overseas upper-class has been explicitly subject to public outrage as they are deemed 'privileged children' who carried the disease back to the homeland. Nonetheless, these elites managed to impose a constant state of forgetting among the public, eliminating the public's domestic xenophobia towards them by their act of raising funds to help the government combat the disease, sending them instead onto the pedestal as national heroes. This article aims to suggest a digital formation of the country's border through the continuous modification of public opinion about the disease.

Keywords: COVID-19, digital governance, digital nationalism, domestic xenophobia, neoliberalism

INTRODUCTION: A TALE OF TWO PATIENTS

On March 6, 2020, Vietnamese officials released an emergency notice about “N,” a 26-year-old woman who was the seventeenth officially identified COVID-19 patient (P17) in Vietnam. “N” was the first recognized case of infection after the country had not recorded any new patients for 22 consecutive days from 14 February to 5 March 2020. (Chi Le et al. 2020). Allegedly not having reported her flight journey honestly after returning from a luxury fashion festival in Milan, the patient succeeded in leaving the airport unchecked, in effect infecting multiple cases, which ultimately led to a national shutdown. Spontaneously, the media witnessed an outbreak. From state-run newspapers to social media, journalists and social media users were sent into a craze over the news.

After her full name was mentioned by Hanoi’s former chairman Nguyen Duc Chung during an urgent virtual press conference which was recorded and broadcasted on the VnExpress Official YouTube Channel (VnExpress Official 2020), people searched for and spread her personal information, including her family background, personal photos (many of which were later found out to be of her sister or simply of someone else), and posted offensive comments about her on various online platforms. The news media, the social media users, and some pro-state bloggers did not hesitate to mention her name on their news coverage (Le Phuong 2020) or to publicly humiliate and insult her for her recklessness and disregard for the public wellbeing (Tifosi 2020a). Some even suggested she should be fined, made criminally liable, or, figuratively, “shot dead at the spot” or “burned at the stake” for what she did (Luong Anh Quan, March 7, 2020, 12:36am, comment on Tifosi 2020a; Duyen Bui, March 7, 2020, 11:47am, comment on Tifosi 2020a; Chuan Nguyen, March 8, 2020, 6:42am, comment on Tifosi 2020a; Ha Linh, March 8, 2020, 12:13am, comment on Tifosi 2020a). P17, as it were, not only became a public representation of individualistic vices spoiling national collective efforts, but also drew public attention laced with hostility towards a class of socialites within Vietnam’s society.

Contrast this with the case of the twenty-first patient (P21), a 61-year-old male who was rumored to be a member of the Central Theoretical Council of the Communist Party of Vietnam. On March 8, 2020, two days after P17 had been detected, the case of P21 was declared. P21 boarded two flights to India and Britain, respectively, before returning to Vietnam where he boarded the same plane with P17. He was reported to have sat next to a British man with COVID-19 symptoms in one of the flights mentioned above. After leaving the plane where he sat close to P17, P21 went to many places, making close contact with 96 other people before being hospitalized, which qualified him epidemiologically as a super spreader. Another report also revealed that P21, a communist official who is supposed to be a model of asceticism, travelled like a billionaire—playing golf and eating dinner at a five-star hotel, spreading disease in the process (BBC 2020). Criticism was immediately hurled towards the official and his extravagant lifestyle. The irony seen in the contrast between the state’s call for solidarity on the one hand and the display of wealth by a privileged state official in the midst of a national crisis on the

other, might prompt one to expect the same ordeal to fall upon P21 just as it did on P17. However, that was not the case. Unlike “N,” only the initials of P21’s name was revealed (Tran Thuong 2020). Rumors around P21 soon circulated. In at least one incident, the official allegedly went to his mistress’s house right after his arrival, but unlike the previous case with P17, the state was immediately on the scene to stifle the drama. Two people were fined for “spreading fake news and instilling mistrust in the authorities among the public” (Danh Trong 2020). The state later mandated that some information about future patients be kept confidential. Enthusiastic nationalist voices stayed silent on the case. As daily epidemic updates came out days and months later, rumors surrounding P21 fell into oblivion. Whenever one looks back, it is solely P17 who stands out as the major cause of the COVID-19 spread consequential to the class grievance that erupted, which eventually subsided.

The different treatment of the two cases and the shift of focus away from P21 in the digital sphere testified to a phenomenon that emerged from an intense pandemic period: a constant state of collective forgetting, with the discourse surrounding the pandemic being a site of ceaseless digital negotiations where different social agents participate, co-produce, and destabilize the established agenda.

Though the slogan of the anti-COVID-19 campaign stayed consistent throughout, its subject matter underwent a seismic shift as many factions within society vied for control over the public discussion. It is worth noting here that Vietnamese audiences are not sheer submissive subjects of propaganda from the state or anti-state entities but rather active participants who always read official statements with critical and playful reservations (Harms 2016). However, as the pandemic unfolded, the formation and re-formation of the public discussion were increasingly engulfed by nationalistic discourses which lent themselves easily to elite capture. This is not to suggest that nationalism serves only the elite but that it proves compatible with, if not complementary to, the interests of many factions of the elite class, either of neoliberal capitalist or communist governments. Through time, the interplay among top-down media feeds, bourgeois news coverage, the digital network of citizen journalists, and bloggers constantly shifted ground, producing a state of collective forgetting mediated through the lens of nationalism.

This article examines these phenomena by using the methodological tools of discourse analysis coupled with a reading of nationalism as understood by Benedict Anderson.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vietnam's Mediascape and the COVID-19 Outbreak

The media landscape in Vietnam after the importation of the Internet is characterized by the heterogeneity of public opinions. After the Doi Moi renovation in 1986, journalists and creative writers gained more freedom of expression and publication. Instead of attaching only to the state's agenda, writers were also influenced by the forces of the market so that the representation of ordinary people – the primary audiences of newspapers and news agencies – gradually came into sight (Ho 1998). Tran (2019) even states that the Internet helped create a sense of resistance against authority during the golden age of online literary magazines in the early years of the 21st century. Nonetheless, the influence of two ideological gatekeepers – the Ministry of Information and Communication (Bộ Thông tin và Truyền thông) and the Central Propaganda and Education Commission (Ban Tuyên giáo Trung ương) – should not be ignored whenever authors express their opposition to the Party's agenda. The power of the censorship mechanism expresses itself in two major forms: the external suppression from the authority and the internal suppression from the default mode of self-censorship that is taught from journalism schools to the editorial department of newspapers (Nguyen 2018). The Internet since the beginning of the 2000s has played an important role in letting oppositional voices be heard by the public. According to Bui (2016), the advancement of the Internet in Vietnam has led to the expansion of the independent cyberspace of discussion and deliberation. It has given rise to independent blogs such as *Talawas* in 2001, *X-Cafevn* in 2005, *Bauxite Viet Nam* in 2009, and *Danlambao* (Citizen's journalism) in 2010 to significant public attention.

The rise of social media – for example, *Yahoo! 360*, which was launched in 2005 or Facebook, which has gained a tremendous response from Vietnamese audiences – is a momentous opportunity for the anti-state branch. *Yahoo! 360*, a platform that gained more than 2 million users before it was closed in 2009, contributed to the establishment of a number of blogs, such as *Anh Ba Sam* (founded in September 2007 by Nguyen Huu Vinh and associates), *Dieu Cay* (founded in September 2007 by Nguyen Van Hai), *Anh Ba Sai Gon* (founded by Phan Thanh Hai) and *Osin* (founded by Huy Duc). After the closure of *Yahoo! 360*, from 2009, Facebook became a prominent platform for anti-communist bloggers, such as Nguyen Quang Lap (founder of *Que Choa*), Truong Duy Nhat, Me Nam (Mother Mushroom), and Nguoi Buon Gio (Wind Trader) (Bui 2016).

This landscape in Vietnam is, nonetheless, not as simple as the dichotomy of pro-state vs. anti-state. Teurlings (2013) implies that the 'network' in 'social network' is not pre-given but it is established. In other words, users on social media proactively create their own network of humans, information sources, and ideologies. This radical subjectivism results in numerous social discussions in Vietnam, for example, the online debates surrounding the alphabetical reform proposed by the Vietnamese linguist

Bui Hien in 2017. People tend not to start their arguments on collective rationality toward a social phenomenon (Nguyen Trong Binh 2017). Instead, as pointed out by Freeman (1979), audiences' opinions are formed inside their own network clusters – some of these clusters find no common ground. The heterogeneity of public opinions on social networks leads to the fact that Vietnamese social media users seem to read between the lines – a state in which people blend both state-leaning and alternative information to create their independent point of view while skepticism can occur from both sources (Nguyen 2018).

The media outbreak in Vietnam in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed not to follow the same script of previous media surges. One thing that can be observed is the unification of audiences inside the border of the country to fight the virus. This consolidation was constructed by three means:

First, the media in Vietnam widely emphasized the danger of the virus and gave practical information to the people on how to protect themselves. The Ministry of Health cooperated with artists and entertainers to compose songs and pieces of propaganda to calm the public as well as to give universal advice on how to wear a mask and how to wash hands correctly (Phan Anh 2020; Le Cam 2020).

Second, the collective consciousness of how this virus could affect the human body created fear among the people. It was rational to obey the established rules of social distancing, collective quarantine, and self-quarantine because at that time, while governments in other countries seemed not to prevent the disease and protect the people effectively, the situation in Vietnam was under control. A collective agreement was made from both the ordinary people and anti-state bloggers: obeying the state of exception would ease the fear. Bach Hue, a well-known dissident voice, spoke out on her Facebook page in support of the government's "war-time intervention," saying "These days the nation is in an all-out war with the Wuhan virus. Every citizen must be a soldier." Frequently finding herself in disagreement with some factions of the state, Bach Hue (2019) eagerly sang praises to the government's approach to the pandemic, from restriction on rice export in order to safeguard the national food supply to a ban on facemask supply speculation (Bach Hue 2020a).

Third, as the discourse of fighting the disease like an enemy came to show, more people were gradually listed as collective antagonists. Initially, only the virus was explicitly called an 'invader'. Then came those who brought COVID-19 to the country from abroad, followed by those who spread the virus among their communities through their supposed failure to adhere to the social distancing orders. The hostility toward these groups was expressed in an article published by The Communist Party's online press on April 2nd, 2020. Trying to articulate the slogan "Fighting against COVID-19 pandemic as fighting against invaders!", the author went on to ascribe the title of "enemy collaborators" to "those who hide their infection, report their health condition dishonestly, those who disobey and flee their quarantine, those who participate in mass gathering, [and] spread fake news" (Ha Son Thai 2020).

"N" (patient P17) was one of many cases who suffered from public insults. She was slandered on the Internet famous key opinion leaders' fan pages and was cursed by thousands of online users. A clear example of this is a post from Tifosi – a pro-state blogger on Facebook – who discussed patient P17 as follows: "This is an illegal, selfish act that devastates the credit of many people. She leaves millions of people in anxiety. [...] Patient 17 is like a punch to the face of the people in Hanoi in particular and people across the country in general" (Tifosi 2020a). This post received more than 30,000 reactions on Facebook. In the comment section, Tifosi continued: "Is she mad? Just bring my girlfriend to Hai Phong to meet my parents. Now maybe I will be stuck in Hai Phong for another 2 weeks. I salute to you! It's midnight and I still have to be online to curse you!" (Tifosi, March 6, 2020, 11:41 pm, comment on Tifosi 2020a). P17's father moved between Hanoi and Haiphong as a part of his job; if he was infected by the COVID-19 from his daughter, the city of Haiphong would face the possibility of having a social distancing (Dang Luan and Mai Chi 2020). Tifosi's comment received 2,500 reactions.

We have coined the term 'domestic xenophobia' to describe the online practice of humiliating fellow citizens who came back from overseas during the pandemic. Following Philippas' (2014, 7275-6) definition, "[x]enophobia can also manifest in several ways which involve the fear of one group toward another one, regarding its identity, its activities, its aggression, and the desire for a presumed purity." We have found a hidden logic of the idea of 'domestic' in 'domestic xenophobia'. In early cases, when Covid-19 patients' private information was uploaded to newspapers' platforms, they could be removed from their community and labeled as "aliens" even though they were still Vietnamese. Tifosi's (2020b) second post on these "aliens" clearly exposed this logic. He smeared study-abroad students with words such as "superior fellows" and "uneducated":

When you are rich and leisurely, you go to the West to enjoy yourself and see your hometown with an attitude of superiority. Now, in the midst of tribulation, you come back to your country but still see yourself as superior and see your fellow countrymen as "trash". You have been familiar with being served since you were born and now you want our soldiers and volunteers to be your servants. (Tifosi 2020b)

This hostile prejudice separated people into dichotomies of insiders and outsiders, the people and the rich, the patriots and the traitors. Due to this simplified dichotomy, social media users created a sense of fraternity and unity against the nearest enemy. Social media is not innocent in the process of creating this hostile environment. According to Lima et al. (2020), social media turned the pandemic to an "infodemic" wherein people not only suffered from the pandemic but also faced misinformation and hate speech. By creating a collective self for social media users, especially during a crisis, social media becomes a potential sphere where people spread the distinction between this collective and the individual others (Oyedemi 2015).

"P," a 17-year-old overseas student who came back from the United States on March 25, 2020 told us in an interview that while she was on her campus in the US, she saw that news from Vietnamese sources, including Facebook, were more truthful than the West's such as *CNN*, *Reuters*, *Fox News*, and *Now This* where pandemic news were often politicized. Receiving stories from her parents and especially her uncle who at that time was working for the *Vietnam News Agency*, "P" knew that Vietnam was a much safer place than the US. She planned an urgent trip to Vietnam, which started from Maine, then to Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Tokyo, and finally arrived at Noi Bai Airport in Hanoi, Vietnam. On August 4, 2020, she reported the feeling when leaving the territory of the US: "Then I felt like I could not die anymore, I was safe!" That feeling only lasted for a few moments before she turned on her phone and read her Facebook News Feed:

I opened my phone to check whether my family members had any messages for me or not. Then I began to encounter some Facebook posts. One post said that overseas students should not come back home. Others said that we were traitors; we would bring more cases to our hometown. I really asked myself then if the place where I was heading to was my home or not. I felt like if I was positive to the COVID-19, my own stories would be told by others, and I would be judged like a Western-worshipping dog. I started to believe that I should have stayed in the US, even when I could die.

Tifosi was only one of many sources of domestic xenophobia "P" encountered while surfing Facebook at that time. To be more specific, she could not distinguish between different sources, users, and fan pages as all posts and articles just shared the same hatred toward aliens. Users even copied the whole posts and pictures from others and reposted them on their walls and pages. There was neither a beginning nor an end in this infinite tunnel of information. The only originality was the anger that incurred from between the lines, a state in which – as Nguyen (2018) implies – people show their cultural intimacy. Intimacy in the situation of this infodemic could be understood as a key element that authorized bloggers to school their younger fellow Vietnamese. "A child is not allowed to decry one's parents because of their difficulty, as a dog does not decry its master because of his poverty" – Tifosi quoted this old Vietnamese idiom to attack overseas students with a more subtle metaphor: the authority were the parents, the infamous blogger was the big brother in the house with a mission to command the youngers (i.e., the students) to listen to their parents.

"P's" anticipation is relatable to many other study-abroad students, especially those who came back right before P17. "H," a 22-year-old student who flew from Germany on February 26 (10 days before "N's" arrival date), expressed his sympathy with "N" and others on March 12, 2020:

I could be "N." Anyone who entered the airport in late February and early March could be her. When I left the airplane and passed through the entry gate, they only checked

my temperature, otherwise, no one asked for my schedule. I told nobody that just a week earlier, I was having a part-time job as a hot dog seller in a stadium, and also at that time in Cologne, there was a huge festival and no participants cared about the pandemic.

Similar to “P,” “H” passively received updates about the pandemic via Facebook news feed, where “hate speeches were ubiquitous, the only way not to perceive them is to turn off the app.” According to Gibbs (2002), “the media function as amplifiers and modulators of affect which is transmitted by the human face and voice, and also by music and other forms of sound, and also by the image” (338). His fear of xenophobic narratives arose when he realized that it only took a slight effort to acknowledge all personal information of a COVID-19 patient, including, as Gibbs mentions, faces and personal pictures of the patient. In the case of “N,” her selfie images were spread throughout the Internet, some of them were even monitored, distorted in order to create satire contents. “H” was enormously concerned about the threat of the decline of privacy during the pandemic, especially of the worst-case scenario in which “H” would be infected with COVID-19. He decided to stay inside his home without any contact with the outside world from March 7 to April 23, 2020, the day the Hanoi authorities decided to end the social distancing policy.

Imagining the Nation

This section reviews some literature on nationalism and the nation that inform our analysis. Following Anderson (1983), we treat the nation not as a primordial entity whose essence is fixed for eternity but a “constructed” or “imagined” category constantly subjected to historical conditions in which it is embedded. Anderson (1983, 15) writes:

[...] the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them; yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, ... has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.

A key insight coming out of Anderson’s analysis is the emphasis on the imagined aspect of the nation. Involved in this process of imagining is a set of social practices, not the least of which is the inculcation of a national founding myth, which gives the modern nation-state its legitimacy. This is achieved not necessarily through a full exposition of the myth, but rather by implied allusions to a national essence that is assumed to run through a nation’s history. In addition, the national consciousness is discursively solidified through the creation of a shared presence, which according to Anderson is “simultaneity” (1993, 22-24). In Anderson’s analysis, the national membership among a group of people is rooted in

its members finding themselves immersed in a shared singular calendrical date and located in a community as they read the newspaper, a product of modern print-capitalism (Anderson 1993, 33-35).

Equally to the point, the solidity of the national body will result from the evocation and maintenance of an “us vs. them” dichotomy. This requires an emphasis to be placed on the sameness of in-group members and the differences they have with supposed outsiders (Hjerm 2001).

Lastly, national identity is not “unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiple-constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions” (Hall and du Gay 1996, 4). In short, “national identity” is not a coherent entity. Under it might lie various, potentially contrasting qualities. Therefore, it is possible if not expected that in analyzing the nationalist discourses in the media, we will come across many different and contradicting concepts of nationhood.

In this article, we are not concerned with the actuality of any of these accounts. What interests us are the rhetorical and social practices that gave these discourses legitimacy and, equally important, their social and political implications.

METHODOLOGY

We analyze the media outbreak by examining the state’s media campaign and the events surrounding it using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). As defined by Foucault (1972, 80), discourse can be treated as “a regulated practice which accounts for a number of statements.” This definition was interpreted by Mills (2004, 6) as a “rule-governed nature of discourse.” In other words, discourse is not only a specific way of looking at and structuring the world through discursive means such as concepts and vocabulary, as well as non-discursive means such as social institutions (in this case, hospitals, quarantine camps, and flights from abroad). It also determines what sort of knowledge is considered legitimate.

By considering the FDA as our primary lens to break down online phenomena that appeared in Vietnam during the pandemic, we consider mainly the role of power in the society that determines what can be thought and said, as well as who can speak, when, where, and with what authority (Maguire and Ball, 1994). As can be seen from the media outbreak in Vietnam, the discourse of fighting the virus has divided the society into a dichotomy of “us and them.” Nonetheless, due to the constant change of the definition of “us and them” through time due to the ceaseless production of information in 48 days of social distancing (that we will discuss in the next part of this article), we need to answer one of the

fundamental questions that Kendall and Wickham (2003, 42) asked: “What are the rules that create the spaces in which new statements can be made?” We wish to examine how discourse was created and changed in the ‘space’ of temporality – the state of being temporal, or the state of existing within or having relationship with time.

In order to single out sources from both newspapers and social media sources for the FDA, we adopted a qualitative method based on ethnographic interviews with study-abroad students who came back home in the middle of the pandemic between February 1 and March 31, 2020. These were conducted between March and August 2020. According to Kramer and Adams (2017), ethnography is a research method where researchers actively participate in the social/cultural group they follow in order to gain an insider’s viewpoint of the group and have understandings similar to the group members. Rooted in cultural anthropology, this research method requires ethnographers to invest a considerable amount of time in getting to know members of a group and their practices while participating in those same practices (Munz 2017). The uniqueness of ethnographic interviews is that they happen spontaneously between researchers and participants after they have gained trust in one another; thus, this type of interview can be called informal conversational interview or situational conversation (Munz 2017).

Our ethnographic interview process shared the same characteristic: we spoke first to one of our friends who was an overseas student in Ohio, USA. She was involved in an intense online debate with Tifosi when this blogger first attacked the overseas student community. We chose the students of this community who were prompted to go back to their respective countries and who were eventually blamed for bringing the pandemic home. To gather more respondents, snowball sampling, or referral system was used in this study. After the first conversation, we encountered 10 participants returning from many countries and made more than a dozen of ethnographic interviews. The data reduction required us to focus on fewer participants, so we focused on three significant interviewees: “P” – a student who returned from the US in March, 2020; “H” – a student who came back from Germany in February, 2020; and “T” – a student who flew back to Vietnam from Japan in January, 2020. The significance of these three students is that they shared different viewpoints on the pandemic: while “T” was a patriot willing to sacrifice her personal information for the sake of fighting against COVID-19, “P” panicked coming home, thinking that she would be portrayed as a national traitor, and “H,” who even protected “N” (i.e. P17).

Based on the responses of the 3 participants, including news sources that influenced their worldview during the infodemic, we picked relevant domestic online newspapers (*Vietnam Communist Digital Press* – the voice of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP), *Tuoi Tre* – the most prominent critical voice of the Vietnam media, and *VnExpress* – the most read digital newspaper in Vietnam) and Facebook blogs (Tifosi, Government Portal Fanpage, etc.) to conduct our textual analysis. Using the interpretative paradigm as our approach enabled us to provide a historical account. The reason for the qualitative

method is that the texts to be analyzed are contextually bound and the due relevance given to each part of the text can only be reestablished by focusing on specific situations. These dimensions (framing, complexity, causes) will be lost if the constitutive parts of the text and interview involved are isolated and measured accordingly. (van Esch and van Esch 2013, 218). Researchers who applied critical methods prefer qualitative over quantitative research because the qualitative method “employs the perspective of a particular identity (e.g., race, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation) as a basis for understanding communication” (Allen 2017, xxxix). It focuses more on the context of what happened rather than providing concrete proof of what phenomenon really happened, in a positivist way.

FINDINGS

The Pandemic as the Enemy: Discursive Formation of the Nation through Wartime Metaphors

To examine the discursive function of the rhetoric concerning the pandemic in the formation of the national consciousness in Vietnam, let us return to the recurring official anti-disease slogan: “Fighting against COVID-19 as fighting against invaders!”

First mentioned in the state’s urgent meeting by the Prime Minister at the beginning of the national COVID-19 containment campaign on January 1, 2020, the slogan immediately found resonance among the public, the authorities, as well as the news media, as seen through the recurrence of the same rhetoric with slight modification in the media. The slogan featured repeatedly in state’s meetings, on government’s department portals, state briefings, the news, as well as various media outlets. With the virus being ‘the enemy’, ‘the collaborators’ are found in “those who hide their infection, those who report their health condition dishonestly, those who disobey and flee their quarantine, those who do not abide by the order against mass gathering... in short, those who spread the disease” (Ha Son Thai 2020) or doctors and nurses are “storm-troops in the frontier against the disease” (Duc Tuan 2020). After Vietnam’s first 16 COVID-19 cases had fully recovered, Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam declared Vietnam’s “victory in the first battle” (Ministry of Health Portal 2020).

The employment of war metaphors in public health communication had been a prevalent phenomenon around the world since the beginning of the pandemic. Political leaders such as Xi Jinping in China, Macron in France, Boris Johnson in the UK, and Donald Trump in the USA have been consistent in their usage of the metaphorical description of the pandemic as a war. For example, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

Yes, this enemy can be deadly, but it is also beatable – and we know how to beat it and we know that if as a country we follow the scientific advice that is now being given, we

know that we will beat it. And however tough the months ahead, we have the resolve and the resources to win the fight. (Johnson 2020)

On one hand, the prevalence of this rhetoric can be accounted for by its communicative effectiveness. Metaphors, as a cognitive and communicative tool, help us understand abstract 'target' conceptual domains (e.g. life, pandemic, time) in terms of more concrete, corporeal, image-rich 'source' ones (e.g.: journey, war, money). It is not surprising, therefore, that they are often utilized to persuade others of messages that might otherwise be too complex and abstract. However, metaphors do not represent reality in a neutral way, as they highlight aspects in target domains that are similar to source domains, while hiding others, which in effect produces differing evaluations and connotations (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The framing effect of war metaphors, in this light, has the strength of drawing people's attention to the seriousness and urgency of the described categories as well as eliciting positively connotated images of heroism (Flusberg et al. 2017). Nevertheless, in its use to describe the pandemic, the metaphor also faces multiple criticisms for promoting uncritical submission to authority and undermining pro-social values such as solidarity and empathy (Sabucedo, Alzate and Hur 2020; Semino 2020). Going further in the critical direction with the tool of discourse analysis, we would specifically posit the metaphor in the historical and social context of Vietnam and bring the embedded nationalist ideology to the surface for inspection. Conceptually, it is not impossible to imagine the pandemic being described in other terms. As Elena Semino (2020) suggested, though we can and should not abolish metaphors in our communication, we can widen the range of possible metaphorical expressions for the pandemic (the pandemic as a fire or as a marathon). However, as the pandemic progressed in Vietnam, war metaphors became frequent and conventional. The reason for a given metaphor being a socially favored representation is that it draws on an underlying system of ideas, as Charteris-Black taught us. And in this case, the war metaphors testify to one of the ruling ideologies in Vietnam: nationalism.

In contemporary Vietnam, the dichotomy of 'insider/invader' and any allusion to wars, metaphorical or otherwise, have a particular appeal as political rhetorical devices because of their close association with the official narrative of Vietnam as a nation whose essence lies in a tradition of constant struggle against foreign invaders.

Despite its natural and eternal garb, the narrative is a recently constructed product of official Vietnamese historians and bureaucrats. Starting from the 1950s, there was an urgent demand from the VCP to rewrite a new history whose function is to legitimize its ruling position. To establish the continuity between the past and the present in a new light, these historians resorted to reducing complex historical relationships from Vietnam's alleged founding father Hung King to the present day to a national essence consisting in a "pattern of Vietnamese resistance to a foreign power" (Pelley 2002, 145), a tradition of which VCP is the direct inheritor.

With the promise of a prosperous socialist utopia losing its ground as global socialism waned, the VCP managed to install in place of the old historical telos of socialist utopianism a revisionist narrative with an emphasis on the pantheon of national heroes (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001). Dead soldiers, once a threat to the VCP's leadership legitimacy, are incorporated in this new narrative as martyrs for the nationalist cause (Marlaney 2001). Therefore, the language of armed warfare, instead of invoking grievance and disillusionment, often served to articulate the mythologized national past and excite patriotic eagerness in the public consciousness. Consider this example on the Government Portal Fanpage which gained 16k reactions, 1.8k shares, and 499 comments (Thông tin chính phủ 2020):

The nation officially enters the 'state of war'.

[...]

The last week of March is determined to mark the beginning of the *"2020 Spring all-out assault"* on COVID-19, which is expected to last for 2 weeks. In it, instead of *"holding our breath"* in anticipation of the next turn of events, the Government *"carried out an ambush"*, leaving no stone unturned chasing down this virus.

[...]

The leader of the Government called upon the whole army, the whole nation to readily enter the war, with a familiar rallying cry *"When enemy reaches through the door, women will also ward them off"* (*giặc đến nhà đàn bà cũng đánh*). The same night, every mobile phone of the citizens received the message from the Government: *"Every citizen is a soldier in the frontier against the disease."*

The coinage of "Spring all-out assault" and the framing of COVID-19 as an invader is not accidental. It is especially reminiscent of the triumphant '1975 Spring all-out assault' waged by the Liberation Army of South Vietnam which, at least according to the official accounts, liberated the South from the American-backed government of South Vietnam. It is possible here to see a potential risk in drawing the comparison. For despite the moral superiority consistently associated with the 1975 "liberation" movement in the official account, the public perception of the war is seriously divided. For some, it is the cause of celebration, for others, who had enjoyed a better life under the Republic of Vietnam, it marks the date of separation, invoking the nostalgia for a lost past. Attempts to navigate and reconcile conflicting public memories varied, from commemorating the war dead to producing new senses of nostalgia (Ho-tai 2001). Here the imagery invoked by the passage not only affords the current anti-pandemic campaign for a historical grandeur but also grants its reference point an unquestioned legitimacy and authority. In this framing, an interesting phenomenon took place. Not only is the seriousness of the 'target' domain (i.e. campaign against COVID-19) highlighted, but the 'source' domain (i.e. the 1975 war) also 'gains' its legitimacy from being compared to a campaign so popularly approved. Drawing an implicit comparison between the COVID-19 and South Vietnam regime, the passage presumably detached the latter of its historical complexity and controversy, positioning it

unproblematically alongside the obvious threat of disease, and in effect, legitimated the war waged by 'the nation', with VCP as its representative, against either of them.

Moreover, mentioning the two mantras "every citizen is a soldier" and "When the enemy reaches through the door, women will also ward them off" is also effective precisely in these two respects. On one hand, by way of metaphors, they insisted on the role of every individual's responsibility in stopping the pandemic. On the other, they reminded the readers of the People's War strategy employed in the First and Second Indochina War by North Vietnam (DRV), which was also used to describe, if not refashion, various ancient feuds in the region that is now called Vietnam in a nationalist light by pro-revolutionary writers from the 1950s (Pelley 2002, 189-192). Throughout history, 'revolutions' and 'upheavals' required peasants at the forefront of the struggles and consequently acquired democratic, national, and popular characteristics. This genealogy of these 'people's struggles' found its most recent descendant in the two major First and Second Indochina War, with the DRV on the people's side.

By interweaving the threatening crisis of the present with a constructed memory of victorious people's revolutions, this article is a practice of retelling an official version of the national history, which emphasizes the continuation from the past to the present of the national body, with the unchanging essence of 'the constant struggle against foreign invaders.' Immersing the whole nation in a shared past, the discourse also created a shared presence among its members, setting the stage for the outpourings of nationalism that followed. Lastly, with this rallying cry, the VCP not only called upon the citizens to cooperate in the fight against the disease but also emboldened its status as the inheritor of 'national tradition.'

The Constant State of Collective Forgetting and the Victory of the Elite

The discourse that separated the public into two opposite groups constantly changed during the first wave of the pandemic, and it continued to become something else throughout the duration of the implementation social distancing protocols in Vietnam. Even though the motto stayed the same, the next invader after P17 was then neither a study-abroad student nor an overseas Vietnamese, rather, it was P21 – a senior member of the VCP. While pro-state bloggers kept silent, their opposition began to spread a P21-fabricated schedule after he arrived at Noi Bai airport. Due to the new conspiracy theory, the public simultaneously forgot about the case of P17. This collective forgetting continued to be a mental state of the audiences in successive cases such as the 34th and the 100th.

To Lundborg (2009), the event functions as a sign or a symbol that refers to what has happened in a particular moment in time. He operates the concept of event through two interrelated sides: (1) an event is something that happens immediately without being linked to any present moment in time;

thus, it can be analyzed as unlimited movements from past to future that consist in becoming; (2) in order to translate a becoming process into a state of affairs, an event can be seen as a potential force that disrupts common sense. This state of becoming can be seen in the case of “H” when he observed his 55 days of social distancing adherence after returning home from Germany. In our personal communication with “H” on July 16, 2020, he said he constantly surfed his Facebook News Feed in order to receive information about new COVID-19 cases nationwide. He checked the Government Portal Fanpage, and he checked it repeatedly. “H” could neither remember nor recognize what the time was. He only remembered the number of COVID cases and how it changed through time. The event, according to “H,” was not the basic unit of time such as minute, hour, or day, but it was when the officials released a new number of cases. At 6:00 pm the next day, when the official announced a new number, “H” forgot the old one, as well as all the events before the pandemic.

The flow of information on new cases from the authority created a sense of unlimited movement to social media users who were at home for a long period of time. Perceiving the change of new numbers from their mobile devices’ screens as well as from TV was the only way to witness the movement of reality. Nonetheless, the adjustment of updated numbers was a series of events in an on-going process, and it was also actualized into a single event each day due to the way the authorities summarized the total new cases on a daily fixed time slot – 6pm, as “H” mentioned. In Vietnam, the government implied that the 99 days of recognizing no new cases after the first wave and before the second wave of the pandemic was “the new normal” (*Tuoi Tre* 2020a); thus, the reason why each time they provided a summary about the total new cases each day could be understood as an event was that they declared a state of constant abnormal. This disrupted the common sense of the normalcy before the pandemic.

The continuous production of new events was the primary reason that led to a constant state of collective forgetting among the public. The spread of the COVID-19 in Vietnam and the world formed an event that blurred previous remarkable events such as the land dispute in Dong Tam – suburban Hanoi – or the law on preventing the consequences of drinking alcohol while driving vehicles. In the middle of the pandemic, ordinary people hardly remembered every state of affairs. In consequence, as May (1991, 29) describes political life, a singular event is not eternal, but nevertheless: “Each one has a form of death that comes to it when it undergoes an incorporeal transformation to become something else. This form of death is not a death instinct; in no way does life seek its own death. Rather, it is a death that occurs by transformation.” This “death” is the forgetting of the public about a passing state of affairs as any “new” normalcy sets in, and this “transformation” happens on the dimension of discourse. The constant varying structure of the Internet led Beck and Gleyzon (2016) to point out that to break the State’s grip on the Internet, a continued disruption of digital space – which is the alteration of the dominant discourse through the becoming of events – is necessary. This

continued disruption arose in a subtle way amid the pandemic in Vietnam: The antagonists (i.e., the rich study-abroad students and the overseas Vietnamese) then became the protagonists.

On March 20, 2020, headlines about Johnathan Hanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese American businessman, became the subject of a nationwide news coverage. Mostly known as the father-in-law of the Vietnamese actress Tang Thanh Ha prior to the pandemic, he soon became a national hero after his VND 30 billion (approximately USD 1.3 billion) donation to the National Front committee in support of an anti-COVID-19 campaign. Previously, at the beginning of March, Nguyen's family also stepped into the national spotlight after he boarded a private jet to deliver his daughter, patient 34, back home from England. This effort, which is believed to have cost him over USD 350,000, was to "prevent the possible spread of the disease" (Cong Trung 2020).

Almost simultaneously, on March 25, 2020, Pham Nhat Vuong, Vietnam's first dollar billionaire, also donated 100 ventilators and 20 testing machines, costing him approximately VND 100 billion (approximately USD 4 million) (Thu Ha and Lan Anh 2020).

What previously came close to a class antagonism soon gave way to profound admiration for these nationalist philanthropists. Concerns about the elite's extravagant lifestyle and society's blatant inequality soon subsided. In its place, we see praises heaped toward these businessmen for their supposed patriotism and "readiness to shed their blood for the country" (Bach Hue 2020b). Bach Hue (2020c) eagerly expressed this sentiment: "The day will come when many other Vietnam companies mature into national companies, businessmen into national capitalists. For the glorious Vietnam." Johnathan Hanh Nguyen was lauded for "putting his faith in the Vietnamese medical staffs" (Tuoi Tre 2020b).

Chau Bui, a fashion model and influential youth personality, who had also broke protocol the same way P17 did, also managed to detach herself from public outrage against 'socialites' with a series of vlogs and Instagram stories documenting her 14-day quarantine after her return. These documentaries, which captivated the popular interest, often describe the condition in the quarantine site as hospitable, cozy, and loving. This is in stark contrast with the "superior countrymen" so condemned for expressing their grievance for "minor inadequacy in hygiene conditions" (Tifosi 2020b). Chau Bui, as a result, became ever more endeared by her fans and the public. In short, the nationalistic energy that fueled the hostility towards the elite groups was soon recaptured to their advantage.

CONCLUSION

The aforementioned characteristics of the media outbreak in Vietnam during the pandemic – xenophobia and collective forgetting – are fundamental conditions to form nationalism. It is clear that the incivility of online debates amongst Vietnamese was the fertile material for the rise of nationalism in a late-socialist country. Nevertheless, when it comes to the digital sphere, incivility and chaos were amongst many aspects that form characteristics of a new public sphere, including the urge for freedom of expression.

For Bašić (2019, 11), nationalist discourses can be actualized at the expense of other nations, and xenophobic attitude can help to amplify this detriment of the others because it leads to “prejudice and disdain for ethnic differences at best.” Xenophobia can lead to brutal actions of the majority group against other minorities. For example, the discrimination of the Kinh group (the major ethnic community in Vietnam) against other minority groups in terms of culture, scientific approach, and policy making (Nguyen Cong Thao 2010). As we have mentioned, during the pandemic, the categorization had become different: fellow citizens inside and outside the country. Ernest Renan’s foundational framework for the study of nationalism posits that forgetting is a crucial factor for the construction of a nation because it helps to erase people’s memory about violence acts that shaped unity: “Unity is always brutally established” (Renan 1990, 11). For the sake of the unification during wartime and during the pandemic, the hatred of social media users aimed at overseas students were often forgotten.

Schneider (2018, 3) poses the question of “what happens to nationalism when it goes digital?” Through the case of China, Schneider highlights the “bottom-up” aspect of the nationalist ideology in the digital era. Instead of employing a “top-down” indoctrination, digital nationalism in China is created in an interplay among politics, media and netizens’ psychology (Zhan 2020). Despite the presence of communication technologies that enabled discourses on nationalism to go beyond the regulation of one single actor, there are still ways on how the Chinese state administers the public worldview surrounding nationalism. For example, search engines in China can produce national biases and domestic social networks create an echo chamber to shape public discussions into the agenda of nationalism (Zhan 2020). Despite its limited capacity in monitoring social media platforms, the Vietnamese government has managed to create a somewhat similar effect during the pandemic with its wartime rhetoric.

To Alonso (1994), nationalism discourses are about intervening in the idea of space and time for the audiences. In terms of spatiality, she implies that the concern of nationalism should be on how social boundaries result in the inequality between different groups, especially between different ethnic groups. In terms of temporality, the simultaneity of time is now universalized on a global scale; thriving

from this phenomenon of modernization, national narrators turn the continuity between invented traditions and future national visions to a kind of fatality. These characteristics of nationalism are accelerated through the development of digital technology. The social boundaries created in the case of Vietnam during the pandemic were not the split between different ethnic groups anymore, but the distinction between different opinions and ideologies. At first, you became a traitor by advocating “wealthy” and “greedy” overseas students; then, you became a traitor by criticizing gigantic corporations that performed philanthropic activities for the nation when it needed them and saved the economy after the crisis. Temporally speaking, on the digital sphere, collective forgetting and memorizing become constant states that are always on an on-going process. According to “H,” after the end of the social distancing order, friends who insulted overseas students on Facebook with harsh words suddenly forgot their hatred. They became friendly to “H” as they used to be before the pandemic even though they knew that “H” came back from Europe. As the idea of the nation continues to flourish after the pandemic, nationalist discourses are now embedded into other online debates.

We also agree with Schneider’s argument about the bottom-up approach to nationalism in the age of the Internet. Nonetheless, the personalization of nationalism discourses in Vietnam is more radical. We want to provide an antithesis to Nguyen Thu Giang’s notion which implies that the personal body becomes a working site of nationalist discourse (Nguyen 2018), or in short, the personal is national. However, in the digital sphere the national is now personal. For the study-abroad students we interviewed, the reason why they promoted nationalism in a time of crisis, including insulting “N,” was to send an unofficial notification to their overseas universities that Vietnam was controlling the COVID-19 well so that foreign authorities should not be concerned about them when they come back. “T,” a student who came back from Japan, told us on March 12, 2020: “If we do it [fight the virus] well, I won’t meet any problem when setting foot at the airport in Tokyo at the beginning of my autumn semester. Now I’m so angry because “N” destroyed everything we’ve done!”

This personalization clearly demonstrates how digital technology gives citizens the power to shift nationalist discourses to their own agendas. It would be oversimplified to say that nationalism discourse abuses the freedom of each civilian. From the insider’s viewpoint, we believe that between the props of the dominant discourse, there were spaces for liberation and self-fulfillment. Under the interweaving strings of words, people still spoke for their own as they aligned with the nationalist discourse to weigh the point that they were not virus containers. The reason why COVID-19 was controlled in Vietnam was not only the strict state-of-emergency rules that the state established but also the subtle way in which Vietnamese people sought their freedom.

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