INTRODUCTION

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The Collaboration Project between Engaging With Vietnam and the Journal of Vietnamese Studies

This set of articles inaugurates a new collaboration between the Journal of Vietnamese Studies and Engaging With Vietnam—a special issue devoted to work from contributors involved in the annual Engaging With Vietnam: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue conference series. Founded in 2008, Engaging With Vietnam (EWV) is an annual multidisciplinary conference that examines issues of knowledge production and knowledge mobility concerning Vietnam (in the broadest and most inclusive sense of that term). The conference series is the brainchild of Dr. Phan Lê Hà, a scholar of the sociology of education and language, international education, and globalization studies, formerly a faculty member at Monash University in Australia. Currently a senior professor at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, she leads the International and Comparative Education research group and is a professor at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. Since 2011, Liam C. Kelley, an associate professor of Southeast Asian Studies at the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS) at Universiti Brunei Darussalam and formerly an associate professor in the History Department at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, has been assisting as co-organizer.
Each EWV conference focuses on a theme and welcomes scholars from any field to address the theme and engage with each other’s work. The first two conferences were held in 2010, one at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, and the other at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University in Hà Nội, which examined the core issues of knowledge production and knowledge mobility with regard to Vietnam. In moving from Australia to Vietnam, these first two conferences also established a distinct feature of the EWV conference series, which is that it generally alternates between locations in and outside of Vietnam. Such mobility has enabled the conference to reach a wide and diverse range of scholars.

Wherever the conference has been held, its core mission of investigating issues of knowledge production and knowledge mobility has remained constant. This has included examining East-West binaries in knowledge production in and about Vietnam (EWV conference #3, Hà Nội, 2011), how knowledge production in and about Vietnam has been affected by Vietnam’s integration into the global world of academia (#5, Thái Nguyên University, 2013), the role that the mobility of knowledge has played in this transformation (#7, Hà Nội University of Business and Technology, 2015), and dichotomies in knowledge production (#10, USSH VNU, Hồ Chí Minh City, and the University of Phan Thiet, 2018).

At the same time that the EWV conference has investigated issues of knowledge production, it has also sought to question certain ways of knowing Vietnam. For instance, by looking at “Vietnam beyond the boundaries” (#4, The East-West Center, Honolulu, 2012) and by investigating the “frontiers and peripheries” of Vietnam (#6, University of Oregon, Eugene, 2014) in both the literal and symbolic senses of these terms, the conference sought to examine the forms of knowledge about what constitutes Vietnam that are often taken for granted. Finally, this examination of Vietnam from different perspectives was again highlighted at the most recent conference (#11, 2019), held in Leiden, the Netherlands, which focused on the theme of “Vietnam in Europe, Europe in Vietnam: Identity, Transnationality and Mobility of People, Ideas and Practices across Time and Space.”

Although the conference has always included participation from people working outside of academia, in 2016 a deliberate effort was made to
include the work of artists by focusing on “scholarship and the arts” (#8, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, Honolulu, 2016) and by examining the intersections between these two forms of knowledge production. Since that conference, the arts have continued to be featured at EWV. A similar effort to engage with the world of tourism, development, and sustainability was at the center of the following conference (#9, USSH VNU HCMC, Thủ Đậu Một University–Bình Dương, and An Giang Province, 2017/2018).

The papers included in this special issue were presented at this ninth conference on tourism, development, and sustainability. As is always the case with the conference, participants have considerable leeway in how they address the conference theme, and the three papers here reflect that fact. The first paper, by Ngô Thị Điểm Hàng of the Hanoi National University of Education, examines “place-making” activities at the Hùng Kings Temple in Phú Thọ province. Recognized as a national heritage site in 1962, this temple complex honors the supposed founding kings of the Vietnamese nation. In her paper, Ngô Thị Điểm Hàng examines the way that the construction and layout of the temple complex, as well as the way in which visitors are guided through the site, are designed to promote a certain form of state nationalism. Further, by examining place-making activities over time, she documents how changes in state nationalism have manifested in place-making activities at the Hùng Kings Temple. In clearly documenting an intent behind the design of the Hùng Kings Temple, the author establishes a solid foundation for future researchers to examine how the growing number of tourists and members of state delegations to this site process the information and experiences that place-making activities have produced.

The second paper, by Hoang Minh Vu of Cornell University, is a pioneering study of Vietnamese literature on what he refers to as the “Cambodian Decade,” that is, the period of direct Vietnamese involvement in Cambodian affairs from 1978 to 1989. Literary writings about this period have appeared over time, and at the most basic level Hoang Minh Vu seeks to offer a representative survey of the types of works that have appeared at particular times. On a deeper level, however, the author identifies two main trends in Vietnamese literature about the Cambodian Decade. On the one hand, he sees some writings as serving the propagandistic purpose of
justifying Vietnamese intervention by documenting the horrors of the Khmer Rouge period and the support for the Khmer Rouge regime from the People’s Republic of China. On the other hand, he also finds that other writings present an exoticized image of Cambodia as a land that is sensual, mystical, and violent, a phenomenon he refers to as Cao-Mienism, a Vietnamese form of Orientalism in representing “Cao Miên,” a former Vietnamese name for Cambodia. Hoang Minh Vu concludes by noting that this negative discourse about Cao-Mienism “can breed prejudice and distrust, and negatively affect present-day Vietnamese engagement with Cambodia if it continues to permeate through Vietnamese society,” and in so doing he ties this literary survey to the larger themes of the ninth Engaging With Vietnam conference.

Finally, the third paper here, by Phạm Hồng Thái, Vũ Công Giao, and Nguyễn Anh Đức of the School of Law at Vietnam National University in Hà Nội, relates to the issue of development that was part of the ninth conference’s theme, since it looks at efforts to counter corruption through the court system in Vietnam. The authors are members of a new generation of Vietnamese legal scholars publishing in English and Vietnamese, and over the years it has been a pleasure to see their active participation in the Engaging With Vietnam conferences, as their panels have always led to lively and informative discussions. While foreign scholars have undeniably produced a solid and comprehensive body of scholarship on legal reform in Vietnam, the fact that these Vietnamese legal scholars are immersed in, and in constant contact with, the changing legal world in Vietnam does lead to novel insights and perspectives. In this paper, for instance, the discussion by the authors of the ways in which foreign trade agreements affect the ability of courts to fight corruption represents one such novel contribution to our understanding of legal reform in Vietnam today.

The papers in this special issue are part of an initiative that Engaging With Vietnam established with the Journal of Vietnamese Studies as a means to publish the strongest papers from the conference. After the ninth Engaging With Vietnam conference held in Hồ Chí Minh City and Bình Dương in late 2017 and early 2018 concluded, we the organizers identified authors who had written promising conference papers and invited them to a workshop in July 2018 at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Hồ Chí Minh City. Six junior and upcoming scholars participated in this face-to-face three-day workshop, while several others participated in online sessions and face-to-face consultations with the organizers at a later stage. At the workshop, the participants’ manuscripts were presented, discussed, and given feedback. Three manuscripts eventually passed the first rounds of review, and the authors worked on more revisions under the guidance of the three of us until they were ready to be submitted to the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* for consideration. Each paper was then peer reviewed using the same procedures and criteria as with all submissions to the journal. Of these initial submissions, all were accepted for publication in this special issue.

We would like to thank the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hồ Chí Minh City for providing the venue and support for both the conference and the publication workshop. We would also like to thank the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa for its support of the conference and this publication initiative. We extend our thanks to enthusiastic former editors Peter Zinoman and Liam Kelley and current editors Christina Schwenkel and Charles Keith for shepherding the project through to publication. We are committed to making sure that the EWV special issue appears regularly as a place for Vietnamese authors to celebrate their contributions to our field.