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# *SOJOURN Symposium*

## *Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam* by Christian C. Lentz. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. xvi + 331 pp.

Review essays by Grace Cheng and Gerard Sasges, with a reply from Christian Lentz.

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### Review Essay I: Grace Cheng

Before it became Northwest Vietnam, the Black River region was home to various ethnic groups, including a Tai majority whose elites ruled through a local system of rule, referred to as *muang* in Tai language. It was a region characterized by thriving production of commercial crops, connected to trade networks that overlapped with areas of what are now parts of China, Thailand and Laos. Tai domination was premised on the control of land and labour, rather than territory. On the other hand, modern states, including those emerging in the postcolonial period like the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), premise their sovereignty on territory. In *Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam*, Professor of Geography at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Christian Lentz adopts a theory of territory as never a given but as a government project that seeks to control space, while eliminating competing claims to that territory. During "the long 1950s" (p. 2), such claims over the Black River region were asserted by not just Vietnamese anticolonial movements but also the resurgent French colonial state and the Tai Federation the state ruled through, as well

as other ethnic groups. This study of the territorialization processes that resulted in the incorporation of the Black River region into the modern Vietnamese state reveals such "hidden histories about a place often invoked but poorly understood" (p. 22).

In addition to a history of how the Black River region became a borderland of the modern Vietnamese state, *Contested Territories* also elaborates on an important dimension of the Vietnamese communist success in the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, a remote valley deep in a Tai-dominated region. Lentz provides a counterpoint to the focus in much of the existing scholarly literature on the military aspects of the famous military campaign, focusing instead on how the "success of battle/war depended crucially on local participation in everyday struggles over logistics" (p. 181). Examining the everyday work of territorial construction, the book brings to the forefront the experiences of communities in the region as well as of party cadres working there during and after the Indochina or Franco-Viet Minh War (1945–54). Campaigns to enlist local peoples laid the groundwork for the DRV's victory at Điện Biên Phủ. However, Lentz claims the entanglement of territorialization with the militarization of the space did not translate into the successful imposition of the state's rational administration over the region's people. After 1954 and the end of the Indochina War, the DRV exercised de facto jurisdiction over all of Vietnam above the 17th parallel. Further demands of its new citizens ignited popular protests in the Black River region, including a millenarian 'Calling for a king' (*xưng vua đón vua*) movement later that same decade. The book's narrative concludes with a discussion of the Vietnamese state's successful efforts to put down such resistance by force.

Lentz's description of the expansion of the DRV into the Black River region captures both the interactions of DRV cadres with local people as well as the violence inherent in the Vietnamese state-building project. Although Vietnamese institutions did not take hold in the region until the Điện Biên Phủ campaign in 1953–54, that place was already part of the modern Vietnamese state in the nationalist territorial imaginary, as proclaimed in the 1945

declaration of independence and reflected in "maps and reports that refer routinely to colonial space in terms of a 'zone still temporarily occupied by the enemy'" (p. 69). Interpreting this history through theories of territory from the discipline of geography challenges the nationalist historiography that dominates popular ideas about the history of Vietnamese wars for independence. One of the critical points of this book is that Điện Biên Phủ was not a territory to be defended, but part of the imagined space of a Vietnamese geobody—a term coined by Thongchai Winichakul (1994)—the DRV sought to fully secure.

In chapters 1 and 2, Lentz draws out the territorial telos that animated local cadres carrying out the DRV's drive to claim sovereignty over areas that were part of its nationalist territorial imaginary but did not yet control. Following the onset of the Indochina War, Vietnamese communists' strategy included efforts to educate the residents of the Black River region and present "a recognizable alternative to the increasingly unpopular Tai Federation" (p. 27) that the French had created and ruled through. Yet, securing local consent and bringing the population under DRV administration remained challenging, such that even in late 1953 state control remained contested and uncertain. Although 'radical' cadres and locals with revolutionary ideals hoped to transform the existing sociopolitical order, the Viet Minh and then the DRV ultimately prioritized the securing of the territory. Chapter 3 covers how communist authorities achieved this by exploiting the prestige of local elites to legitimize their state's territorial administration. Harnessing the cultural power of traditional authority, which still dominated over bureaucratic authority during the period in question, DRV institutions in the region rested on a hybrid legitimacy that reified Tai elite domination over other groups. As a result, this elite maintained control over land despite popular calls for land redistribution and the VWP (Vietnamese Workers Party) Central Committee's 1953 Fourth Plenum Resolution calling for the end of the united front strategy and the onset of class struggle, including land reform. The decision to withhold land reform in the Northwest Zone "both secured the logistical resources

necessary for the military victory at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 and set the course for political instability in its wake" (p. 102).

As the book moves from the earlier to the later years of the long 1950s its tone becomes increasingly critical of VWP policy. Statements in the book's introduction, such as that "during the military campaigns that went into making Northwest Vietnam, the local audience greeted the official performance with enthusiasm and anxiety" (p. 7), are contradicted by the tone and substance of later chapters. In that same introduction, Lentz writes that efforts to "[educate] peasants on the rights and duties of citizenship" in order to "[mobilize] their labor power to build roads and move an army" stressed "fairness and equality of democratic participation" (p. 8). However, his account does not otherwise indicate that rights were recognized in practice or that the participation of locals in the state-making process was democratic by any definition of the term. In chapter 3, Lentz addresses just what 'citizenship' in the DRV entailed for the people of the Black River region. Beginning in the early 1950s, citizenship (*công dân*) was tied to their moral obligation as *dân công* ('people's labourer'), whose contributions to the logistical effort were key in ensuring the success of the Điện Biên Phủ campaign. But that service took a tremendous toll on the *dân công* themselves, who were compelled to turn up during multiple waves of labour mobilization and serve the war effort, while elites were spared. Highlanders, exempted from corvée labour under the French, suffered serious health and other problems as a result of their displacement to a dramatically different environment, to say nothing of separation from their families.

While being subjected to the terrifying experience of bombardment by French aircraft, which destroyed villages and killed people and livestock, the people of the Black River region had to contend with ever-increasing DRV state and military claims on their resources. The mobilization of labour and other resources for the Điện Biên Phủ campaign, Lentz notes, resulted in hunger and starvation and destroyed the area's productive landscape. With an infrastructure built to extract rather than deliver agrarian resources, the DRV after

1954 exacted more, not less, from Black River communities in spite of conditions of resource scarcity and food insecurity. The Hmong, Dao and Khmu, who occupied weaker positions in the region's social structure, were further disadvantaged by the establishment of the Thai-Meo Autonomous Zone on 29 March 1955, securing Tai hegemony over them. These communities were called upon to build roads and irrigation facilities for wet rice production that mostly benefited Tai. The "Tai-Kinh [ethnic majority in Vietnam] unity" (p. 25), first promoted by the Viet Minh in the late 1940s to draw Tai elites away from the French side, was cemented in the postcolonial period through a shared chauvinistic attitude towards swidden cultivators, whom both groups regarded as less civilized Others.

Lentz contends that in the aftermath of the Indochina War, DRV authorities feared that members of ethnic groups with less command of the Vietnamese language would not be able to differentiate between colonial and postcolonial regimes. Accordingly, they dispatched so-called cultural cadres, accompanied by police and army patrols, to collect knowledge and disseminate propaganda. These cadres also conducted coercive political re-education. This borderland was further securitized as those fleeing from the civil war in Laos and the Great Leap Forward in China transgressed the boundaries of Vietnamese territory. In this context, General Vo Nguyen Giap delivered a speech in 1959 emphasizing the central government's priority of securing the territory and mobilizing the population for the state's first five-year plan. The plan called for enlisting labour to build massive irrigation works to water Điện Biên's plain and a road system to transport more Kinh to the upland region with a view to integrating the region into the national economy.

The lack of unity among local actors and the differentiated positions of the Tai, Hmong, Dao and Khmu groups in the postcolonial Vietnamese state is clearly an important takeaway from this well-researched history, which challenges the Zomian notion of a highland-lowland binary. The Black River region that is now Northwest Vietnam thus shares many characteristics with other

borderland regions on the margins of modern state territories, which are typically inhabited by groups made 'minorities' as a result of 'nation-state-making' (*kiến quốc*). Although the 1953 DRV ethnic policy mentioned autonomy for these groups, ultimately their self-determination was subordinated to the state's security concerns. By doing so, over time, this borderland became one of the main sources of the modern Vietnamese state's insecurity. Increasingly marginalized by state and local administrations dominated by Kinh and Tai, popular movements for self-determination called for an alternate geobody. In the end, it was to no avail. DRV security and military forces crushed such movements by 1960.

*Contested Territory* offers a welcome interdisciplinary approach to the study of this fascinating region's history. It provides critical background for understanding the DRV's victory at Điện Biên Phủ and the complex and ongoing challenges of territory during the period examined. The book's rich description based on extensive use of archival sources from Vietnam makes it a strong work of history. Its use of theories of territory to frame that history is original, but primarily limited to the introduction. Lentz provides valuable insights into what transpires locally, while pointing to the impacts of territorialization processes occurring at multiple scales, particularly shifts in wartime strategies and economic policies determined by the political centre. Fundamentally, this history underscores the hierarchies of territory. Lentz does an excellent job engaging readers to see Điện Biên Phủ as "a place not just a battle" (p. 1). Readers will remember well how this territory is a contingent outcome of powerful political processes subjected to ongoing social processes.

## Review Essay II: Gerard Sasges

In 1431, after defeating the Ming army and taking control of the Red River Delta, the founder of the later Lê dynasty—Lê Lợi—turned his attention to the west. There, Tai peoples, together with the Cham to the south, had contested Việt predominance in the region for centuries. When a Tai leader, Đèo Cát Hãn, refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of the new Việt dynasty, Lê Lợi led his army up

the tortuous course of the Đà River and its 'three hundred rapids', impressing labour and requisitioning supplies as they went. Reaching the area of modern-day Lai Châu, they met and defeated Cát Hãn's army, taking '20,000 prisoners'. Before returning to the lowlands, Lê Lợi had the following lines carved on a stone overlooking the battle site on the northern bank of the river.

> The gang of bandits madly dared to avoid punishment
> The people of the border have long wanted us to come and save their lives…
> The land full of obstacles and difficult to access is no longer.
> From now on, the rivers and mountains form part of the map.
> I write this poem and carve it on the mountain stone.
> To defend the Western part of our Viet country.[1]

The poem is notable for many reasons: the way it uses the term 'bandits' to depoliticize and delegitimize resistance to Việt rule; the way border peoples are 'othered' and yet clamour for deliverance by Việt armies; the new ability of Việt forces to overcome obstacles of distance and terrain; and the use of a symbolic site to mark the inclusion of this western region on to an imagined Việt map.

It did not work out quite as planned. Just four decades later, the fifth Lê emperor—Thánh Tông—organized another major campaign against the Tai. Over the next five hundred years, lowland invaders would return again and again, each time constructing ethnographic, geographic and statistical knowledge that in the nineteenth century allowed them to establish a veneer of bureaucratic control over the region and its people. And in 1954, they would do it again at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ. Clearly, the creation of national territory and its imagining as a 'geobody' is a long, contested and contingent process that continues to unfold in ways Lê Lợi could never have imagined: in 2012, authorities had to move his stele to higher ground so that it would not be submerged by the flooding of the reservoir for the Sơn La hydropower dam.

Christian Lentz's brilliant new book explores an important part of this process, which unfolded across what he delineates as "the long 1950s" (p. 2) between 1945 and 1959. The central feature of his

narrative is the battle of Điện Biên Phủ. But what interests Lentz is not the battle itself but rather the way it catalysed processes of state-building in Vietnam's Northwest and how the region's inhabitants experienced this emerging state through forms of governance such as propagandizing, surveillance and the extraction of labour and resources. Using the language of territory and the geobody as Lentz does, what he describes is the realization of a national space that had previously existed only in the imagination, or on the maps used by Lê Lợi's successors, at the 'centre' of Việt polities. Seen another way, what he describes is the construction of a modern state. And seen in yet another, it underlines how the 'Nam tiến' ('Southern Advance'; a problematic term used to describe a process of imperial expansion by Việt people and their polities) was—and is—accompanied by a 'Tây tiến', or 'Western advance'.

As the multivalent readings above suggest, Lentz has written a rich and detailed account of interest to readers from a wide range of disciplines and approaches, each of whom will find different points to like. Among the many insights that emerged for me, I will highlight three. The first is the description of what I might call 'actually existing socialist state-building'. What makes this story so remarkable is the way it was carried out at such speed and under such challenging conditions. In more than fifty years of rule, the colonial regime never dared—or perhaps bothered—to create anything more than a shoestring administrative presence in the region, with the result that its inhabitants were largely insulated from the social, economic, cultural, social and political transformations that swept lowland areas in the first half of the twentieth century. By contrast, the postcolonial regime would build a functioning state in just five years, all the while fighting a brutal war of decolonization. In this, Lentz follows Charles Tilly, or in the Vietnamese context, Christopher Goscha, in underscoring the link between war- and state-making (Tilly 1992; Goscha 2011). And by telling the story at the local scale, Lentz reveals how contested, contingent and incomplete it was. In this way, he deconstructs teleological accounts of the construction

of socialist Vietnam and at the same time he places its supposed periphery squarely at the centre of the process.

Another insight is the decision by the central authorities not to carry out the sort of radical sociopolitical restructuring in the Northwest that was a central feature of the land reform campaigns carried out in lowland areas. This decision was made despite the opposition of more radical cadres and their Chinese advisors. The work thus complements important new work on land reform in the DRV by Alec Holcombe and Alex-Thai Vo, who explore how geography and politics produced diverse experiences of communist rule after 1945 (Holcombe 2020; Vo 2019). In the Northwest, state policy reconfirmed the power of the local Tai elite, made Việt officials dependent on their Tai collaborators, and did nothing to address longstanding grievances of other ethnicities like the Hmong, Dao and Khmu. These grievances, Lentz shows in chapter 6, would be expressed in unexpected and dangerous ways as marginalized peoples in the region contested the political settlement after 1954 with calls for a 'new king'.

Lentz's work also helps us rethink the well-known battle of Điện Biên Phủ. As he shows, the battle was not about 'retaking' or 'liberating' territory, but rather an event in a larger process of making that territory Vietnamese, both practically—through the ability to mobilize, exploit and administer its population—and symbolically, by marking it on the map as a powerfully and uniquely Vietnamese site. In a way, Lentz's focus on logistics reproduces a major theme in nationalist historiography. But where Vietnamese historians use logistics to glorify the mass support that made the great victory possible, Lentz uses it to underline the connections among making war, building states and constructing territory, and to recover at least in part the experiences of those called upon to sacrifice their produce, their labour and sometimes their lives in the name of the nation. This latter concern has also animated Goscha's work, most recently in his authoritative *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* (Goscha 2010, 2022).

These are just three of the many contributions that Lentz makes, and it is a testament to his scholarship that other readers will be able to point to many more. Given my training as a historian, it is almost inevitable that any issues I might raise have to do with narrative and sources. Where we begin and end our stories matters. Granted, authors have to make difficult choices about where to focus and how to frame their accounts. In a H-Diplo roundtable, Lentz explains that studies on the region by historians Bradley Davis (2017) and Philippe Le Failler (2014) allowed him to "build on their shoulders and focus on a conjunctural moment" (Lentz 2020). But this decision comes with risks. Without a more sustained engagement with history, some readers may fail to place the subsequent campaigns led by the Việt (Minh) in the context of a series of invasions stretching back more than half a millennium, or understand how knowledge of these invasions and the violence, coercion and privation that came in their wake would have been etched in the texts and oral traditions of local people. They may dismiss French policies in the region as "divide-and-rule" intended to "fragment nationalist sentiment" (pp. 15, 106, 114, 137) even though such terms assume the existence of the very categories of 'Tai-Kinh unity', 'nation', 'homeland' or 'Vietnamese' that the DRV state had to painstakingly construct after 1945. And they may not understand that while some in the Northwest in 1950 may have welcomed Việt Minh cadres with "an affect approaching unconditional love" (p. 245), this was only one potential response among many, and perhaps not even typical.

As Lentz points out in his introduction, the book is informed by over a decade of fieldwork, and this is evident in its rich description of the place and its people. That said, his account is based primarily on sources from Vietnamese state archives. All of them, even those by ethnic Tai cadres like Lò Văn Mười, were produced by and prepared for perusal by other state officials. No matter how carefully we read the accounts, whether 'along' or 'against' the grain, their potential for reconstructing an account from inside the village is limited. Ken MacLean, for example, has embraced the potential such sources

provide in his wonderful ethnography of the Vietnamese party-state (MacLean 2013). But while such sources provide fascinating insight into the creation of a state apparatus and its mobilization of people and resources under challenging conditions and at incredible speed, they cannot take us very far into the lives of the people who lived through those processes. Their lived experience appears dimly in the statistics of the state: they participate enthusiastically, they shirk; they contribute, they withhold; they eat tubers, sometimes they die. It is important that these facts be remembered. But the perspective from government archives remains that of the state and its accountants.

Given his training in rural and development sociology, Lentz seeks to escape the world of the state and engage with the lives of the people it ruled. To that end, he carefully deconstructs his sources. Chapter 3 focuses on the terms *hăng hái* (enthusiasm) and *thắc mắc* (anxious) as a means of capturing the ambivalence and shifting subjective responses of villagers. However, given that these are Vietnamese terms and not those used by the inhabitants of the Northwest, all they really tell us is the limits of acceptable discourse for cadres at the time. *Hăng hái*, for example, is a standard formula that appears frequently in internal and external party documents to signify, essentially, the minimum acceptable level of enthusiasm that citizens were expected to display. Lentz also highlights the apparent semiotic slippage between the terms *công dân* (citizen) and *dân công* (conscripted labour) and argues that this helped to normalize state demands for labour (p. 108). Leaving aside the issue of whether Vietnamese-speakers would have understood the terms as he suggests, the deeper problem is that hardly any of the region's inhabitants spoke Vietnamese. Thus, the problem is less the type of sources, which arguably can be addressed through theory and critical reading, but rather the more fundamental problem of language. Mai Na Lee, for example, has woven diverse oral and textual sources together in her account of the Hmong in this period (Lee 2015). Alas, given the Vietnamese-language sources Lentz uses, it is difficult to know how the state's demands for food, labour and allegiance were translated to and understood by the region's inhabitants. If for the moment this

goal remains elusive, Lentz's contribution is to bring this diversity of historical experience to the fore and to explore its role in the making of Vietnam's Northwest. Thus, like so many great works of scholarship, *Contested Territory* is as important for the lines of future research it suggests as for the fascinating story it tells.

## Author's Response: Christian Lentz

I wish to thank the two reviewers, Gerard Sasges and Grace Cheng, and the editors of *SOJOURN* for convening this discussion. Such a collegial, thoughtful and in-depth dialogue about a book and the ideas therein is rare, and I am very grateful to take part.

On my first research trip to Điện Biên Phủ, I travelled overland in April 2006 with a group of Vietnamese educators and researchers from Hanoi. Unlike flying, driving there opened vistas on to mutable landscapes, layered histories and continental flows. In contrast to the short hop by airplane, our 500-kilometre road trip along National Road 6 took two days and a night. We raced through the eastern Red River delta, rolled through hills in Hòa Bình, passed an enormous dam on the Black River and climbed slowly up and over a steep ridge above Mai Châu before spending a cool night on the Mộc Châu plateau. As evident in the names of these last two towns, toponyms in the Black River region often feature the particle '*châu*' (mountain district), departing from the regular '*huyện*' (district) characteristic of historically Kinh/Việt places. Only later did I learn that these *châu* were built atop historic Tai *muang*, incorporating their administrative dimensions, populations and authority relations. Near Thuận Châu the next morning our van paused on a dusty roadside at the foot of Pha Đin Pass awaiting the all-clear signal from roadcrews blasting switchbacks into a towering mountain range. Years afterwards I realized that *dân công* labourers, youth pioneers, soldiers and engineers had blazed this trail while dodging French fighter-plane fire during the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign of 1953–54. Rolling downhill into town that afternoon, we were greeted by a dry, warm, westerly wind known as the 'Lao wind' (*giò Lao*) blowing across the sun-baked interior. If travelling by land gave us a sense

of expanse and landscape, it also exposed us to what a generation of labourers and soldiers had built: the infrastructure that has worked ever since to close the distance between Southeast Asia's rugged interior and one of its lowland centres. And they had travelled not by air or car but on foot.

Ethnographic experiences such as the above faded from the book manuscript, but they nonetheless informed my questions, archival inquiry and writing of *Contested Territory*. When, how and why had the distance between Hanoi and Điện Biên Phủ been closed? By whom? To what effect? The answers to these questions, I argue, lie in a political project that began after World War II and accelerated through the First Indochina War. Making Vietnam's socialist state took place rapidly under challenging conditions, as reviewer Gerard Sasges rightfully notes and Chris Goscha recently wrote (2022). When I say 'took place' here, I deliberately invoke a geography that incorporates peoples, the places they inhabit and the spaces between them. Indeed, creating the DRV in the long 1950s meant also constructing a coeval territory across rugged terrain and forging a nation out of ethnically diverse peoples. Viewing the construction of Vietnam's state, territory and nation from the borderlands, as reviewer Grace Cheng suggests, throws these embattled processes into sharp relief, thus enabling an analysis of each in turn as well as their militarized compression under conditions of mass mobilization.

Writing about a geographically diverse and historically rich borderlands entails making difficult choices that hinge on analytical trade-offs regarding context and language, literature and theory, audience and tone. Approaching the area through Vietnam and in Vietnamese, I learned as much as I could in the national vernacular, finding in Cầm Trọng's excellent *Người Thái ở Tây Bắc Việt Nam* (Tai Peoples of Northwest Vietnam) (1978), for example, explanations of the toponyms I had observed on the road. But I saw limits in conventional Vietnamese contextualization of the region as 'Northwest Vietnam', an appellation proclaimed only in 1952 but often projected anachronistically far earlier. Here, I, like Sasges, am indebted to the groundbreaking histories of Philippe Le Failler

(2014), Brad Davis (2017) and John Whitmore (2004). Generous with his sources and brilliant in analysing them, Le Failler inspired my choice of contextual frame—the Black River region—thus endowing a history and geography to a region long claimed but not necessarily controlled by Vietnam. Davis showed me how a borderlands history can capture the complexity of multiple trajectories and why we must query the terms like 'bandit', 'enemy' or 'communist' that obscure the humanity of historical actors. Furthermore, Whitmore's study of fifteenth-century military campaigns matters too, as Sasges so elegantly shows with his example of Lê Lợi's stele, even if I assumed—rather than elucidated—its relevance in "the context of a series of [Kinh/Việt] invasions stretching back more than half a millennium". Here, Thongchai's *Siam Mapped* (1994) offers an important counterpoint. It supplies not simply a theoretical innovation, as Cheng notes of the geobody, but also an elucidation of an alternative history and chronology centred on Tai political projects, especially the Sip Song Châu Tai (Twelve Tai Principalities) and its command over the region during the later pre-colonial era. Viewed from this angle, the triumph at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 looks like a compromise between centuries-old Tai and Kinh/Việt political projects that has since managed to push other claimants out of a long-contested area.

I zeroed in on a conjunctural moment in this longer story because doing so offers readers steeped in a nationalist narrative of 'The Great Victory' a more nuanced entry into place-based history. *Contested Territory* tells a story of how the Black River region became Vietnamese when, in the long 1950s, its incorporation into nation-state territory literally reoriented its political, economic and cultural relations in lasting ways. During the First Indochina War, a multipolar world of overlapping sovereignties shifted inexorably towards a centralizing state eventually located in Hanoi. Notably, the French had sought to do much the same thing at the same time, leading me to consider territory as one technology shared by two competing political projects. Fortunately for me, geographers Stuart Elden (2010) and Emily Yeh (2013) were writing about territory as

a political technology and as an ongoing process, respectively, as I composed this manuscript. Connecting their geographic ideas to the Black River's uncertain trajectory, I used the concept of contingency to argue that territory is, in addition to technology and process, subject to the unexpected outcomes, dead ends and whims of chance that historians have long incorporated into thinking about the past.

Thinking about the contingent construction of territory helped me explain a puzzle: why all of the grinding groundwork of cadres, workers and soldiers during revolutionary war generated not only a space since claimed by a hegemonic Vietnamese state but also the 1957–58 millenarian counter-movement that challenged its grip. In other words, militarized territorialization made a Vietnamese territory administered largely by local Tai elites *and* political discontent among the Hmong, Khmu, Dao and other local peoples who suffered in its making. Cheng notes that my tone grows more critical over the course of the manuscript, a tendency that reflects to some degree a shift among these local peoples from excitement about revolutionary possibility to disillusion with the authoritarian socialist state that the revolution ultimately—but not inevitably—produced.

In addition to these histories of the Black River region and geographies of territory, I also drew on a growing literature on 'Zomia'. Thinking across the modern borders of nation-states highlights underlying cultural and ecological patterns germane to the highlands of Southeast Asia and their transformation in relation to lowland political projects. But adopting this framework whole-hog, I soon realized, carries its own simplifications; notably, the highland-lowland binary critiqued by Cheng that overlooks social difference at smaller scales. Itself a product of nation-state-territory making, the category of 'ethnic minorities' does not do justice to the many and diverse peoples who alternately allied, resisted or accommodated the postcolonial political project. They may also have split amongst themselves in face of imperial France, as the Tai did in Vietnam and the Hmong did there and in Laos. For an alternative take on highland societies, I found a relevant literature centred on peoples and places next door, including Karl Izikowitz

(1951) on social layering and Mai Na Lee (2015) on Hmong politics in Laos; Edmund Leach (1965) on ethnogenesis in Burma, Thomas Mullaney (2011) on ethnic classification in China, and Thongchai on political cartography in Siam (1994); as well as Andrew Turton (2000) on transnational Tai societies and Nicolas Tapp (2015) on Hmong messianism in virtually all these places. These portraits of far-flung places connected by kin, trade and custom but often divided in conflict helped me understand a context not adequately captured in Vietnam studies.

Drawing more fully on Southeast Asian studies, in other words, helped me underscore the connections between peoples now obscured by maps and relegated to territorial margins. Further, investigating the varied motivations of diverse peoples led me to argue that the Vietnamese state not only climbed the hills from down low, as the literature on Zomia would have it. It was also pulled up there as well, notably by the Tai elites who escaped land reform and made common cause with Kinh/Việt cadres to secure their *muang* domains in new guise.

The story I tell in *Contested Territory* is hardly the last word on Điện Biên Phủ, much less the Black River region. As Sasges astutely notes, my story is based on archival sources largely in Vietnamese and secondarily in French. Created by and for official purposes, Vietnamese state archives tend to approximate, mischaracterize, condemn or overlook much about the everyday rhythms and village-based life that characterized common folk at the time. I thus resolved to critique these sources by pointing out internal contradictions, for example, and highlighting their underlying logics, such as the impetus to render humans abstractly as units of labour. Like Sasges, however, I am eager to see work that not only interrogates the archive but also expands it. Incorporating local Tai, Hmong, Dao or Khmu perspectives would add new layers to this story based on polylingual oral histories and other non-textual sources, much like Mai Na Lee (2015) did to stellar effect.

Furthermore, taking a long view involves looking forward as well as backward, and the sort of political processes explored in

*Contested Territory* continue into the present. Jane Ferguson's (2022) excellent study of Shan politics in the borderlands of Thailand and Myanmar and Nga Dao's (2015) first-rate work on dam construction, population displacement and plantation development in the Black River region both demonstrate that history has not faded into the past. Like the territorial politics under discussion, telling the story of highland Southeast Asia in general and the Black River region in particular are ongoing and iterative processes.

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## NOTE

1. My English translation is based on the translation of the poem into modern Vietnamese found in *Sông Đà: Thơ xưa và nay* (Trần Lê Văn, Vũ Ngọc Kỳ, 1982). I thank Philippe Le Failler for providing me a copy of this book. The following discussion is indebted in particular to the work of Philippe Le Failler (2014), Bradley Camp Davis (2017) and John Whitmore (2004).

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