

***Unearthing Politics: Environment and Contestation in Post-Socialist Vietnam.* By Jason Morris-Jung. Singapore: Springer, 2021. E-version: 241pp.**

Due to its complex entanglement with politics and its transformative potential, the environmental protection has been considered a “global symbol” for collective action that historically inspires social movements, especially in socialist societies. Vietnam is no exception to this. Jason Morris-Jung’s *Unearthing Politics: Environment and Contestation in Post-Socialist Vietnam* provides a compelling analysis of environmental politics in Vietnam, focusing on a bauxite mining project that used Chinese technologies and contractors in the country’s Central Highlands.

After the Second World War, wealthier nations tended to mine bauxite in poorer countries due to cheaper costs and less political resistance to their projects. Despite the government’s assurances about the safety of the mining projects, Vietnamese scientists, activists, professionals and community leaders were worried about their potential social, environmental and economic impacts. Such worries were understandable as Vietnam had generally prioritized economic growth and development over environmental protection since the country started market-based economic reforms in the late 1980s. In narrating public opposition to the bauxite mining project in early 2009, the author reveals how this movement prompted politically diverse groups within the communist state to band together and form activist coalitions that sought to work towards a more democratic and liberal Vietnam.

The book comprises six chapters. Chapter One outlines the author’s methodology and provides an overview of the controversy over the bauxite mining project. It also explains the political ramifications of the controversy and helps readers understand the alternative political futures of Vietnam. Chapter Two discusses how the government’s plans to mine bauxite shaped shifting political alliances after the Vietnam War. Since it lacked the infrastructure and finances, the government constantly sought the cooperation of its international partners to develop the bauxite mining industry before finally coming to rely on China.

Chapters Three and Four articulate how the controversy started, its political implications, and how opposition to the project subsequently turned into something more radical. They also offer insights into the efforts of anti-bauxite activists, including the strategies they

adopted. Chapter Three examines the lesser-known triggers of the controversy: two articles in the *Saigon Economic Times*, General Vo Nguyen Giap's letter to then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, a "scientific workshop" organized by the government about the project, and "embedded activists". These activists presented themselves as allies of the state rather than its adversaries, a strategy considered by scholars as the most successful form of advocacy in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian settings. In this chapter, the author does an excellent job of demonstrating both the limitations and effectiveness of this low-profile and non-confrontational form of activism. In Chapter Four, the author focuses on the efforts of three Vietnamese intellectuals: two literary scholars from Hanoi (Nguyen Hue Chi and Pham Toan) and a hydrologist from Central Vietnam (Nguyen The Hung). Their online petition helped shift the debate from one spurred by gentle critics (the traditional approach) to one with more public opposition (the oppositional approach). The petition spurred public awareness and fuelled sentiments that questioned the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam.

Chapter Five takes a detailed look into the nature of the Vietnamese party-state and how it responded to the challenges from civil society over the bauxite mining project. The author discusses how state authorities attempted to control the debate through their well-known "Response-Repression" measures, the so-called two arms of the party-state. In essence, repression signifies the use of force to put down criticisms or demands from civil society, while response denotes the government's concessions to critics. In the bauxite mining controversy, the repressive arm was used by the state as the last resort to stifle public debate. At the same time, this measure also prompted the emergence of new networks, forms and discourses of political activism over the next ten years. This chapter stresses that the most significant outcome of the bauxite mining debate was the impact of these social movements on Vietnamese political consciousness rather than its impact on policy change. This chapter answers the question of how the Vietnamese communist government could maintain its monopoly of power going forward.

In the final chapter, Morris-Jung argues that the legacy of the bauxite mining controversy has led to a substantially more active political culture in Vietnam. He discusses the rise of civil society and maintains that the controversy was a pivotal moment leading to the re-emergence of Vietnamese intellectuals after years of silence. Following the bauxite controversy, three major forms of autonomy and opposition to the party-state emerged: high-profile

online petitions, large-scale nationwide demonstrations, and online self-declared activist organizations. This chapter considers the future implications of the debate's legacies, pondering what could come next for the politics of Vietnam and how the country's leaders might react to the growth of domestic political activism.

The book also explores the possibility of a pathway to political liberalization in the Vietnamese context. China's involvement in Vietnam's extractive sector offers some understanding into the socio-environmental politics in other countries where China has invested in extraction, development and investment projects. By studying the case of Vietnam, we can gain insights into the state-society relations in other communist countries.

Overall, Morris-Jung conducts an exhaustive investigation into, and developing a thorough narrative of, the bauxite mining controversy. It took the author a significant amount of time and effort to identify the key participants in the debate and achieve a level of trust at which they were comfortable enough to share their thoughts. This book should therefore be valued for the author's tremendous effort and its contribution to the literature on politics in today's communist regimes. This in-depth and intriguing analytical work should be a go-to reference for anyone interested in Vietnam's contemporary environmental politics.

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