

1

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, I was riding my motorbike and stopped at a traffic junction in Hanoi. I was then studying Vietnamese as an undergraduate student in Vietnam. As the traffic light was red and the drivers were patiently waiting for the traffic flow from the intersecting street to die down, a few students with raised posters and uniformly dressed in “350.org” t-shirts, bravely crossed the street in front of the motorbikes. The words on the posters read “*Đèn đỏ tắt máy*” [Red light, turn off your engine]. Having been involved with the environmental movement in Germany since 2005, I was intrigued, to say the least.

This was the first time I had personally witnessed public environmental action in Vietnam. The incident happened at a time when the 350.org movement gained momentum and spread worldwide, transforming many young people into activists. At the time, I was not aware that this global movement had spread to Vietnam. I was fascinated at what this movement meant in different places and how actions were adjusted to different contexts.

I continued to stay in touch with environmental student groups throughout my undergraduate years in Hanoi. Even after I have graduated from university, I remained interested in environmental movements in Southeast Asia. After graduation, I got a role as a coordinator between the head office of a German political foundation in Berlin and country offices in Southeast Asia. While

I was working with the people and organizations in Southeast Asia, a few questions came to my mind: Are we actually dealing with the same problems from all perspectives? Do the solutions we are jointly working towards make sense? How much must the project partners in Southeast Asia perform in order to get funding?

What remains true across borders and boundaries is that in times of environmental crises, immediate and effective actions are necessary to save lives and livelihoods. Environmental projects are needed not only to mitigate crises, but also to adapt to unavoidable consequences. Yet, in a global context where resources are unevenly distributed and the needed actions rely on projects and funding from another place, a few questions remained: Are the projects that exist necessary and effective? Or are power relations and misunderstandings of sociocultural translations hindering truly meaningful actions? This book cannot provide answers to all these questions. Rather, it begins by examining environmental action at a specific place and what narratives frame this action and the reasons behind it. This research maps environmental actors and their actions in Vietnam by focusing on the relations between the state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It traces how the narrative—Sustainable Development—is used to build environmental rule, why the Sustainable Development paradigm is used by different actors to navigate state-society relations and illustrates how the development practice puts cracks in the ecological modernization programme of the narrative.

Environmental actors in power are not homogenous and are not located at only one place. They are positioned across the trans-scale processes of environmental policies and actions. Central to this is the Vietnamese authoritarian state. International organizations (e.g., head offices of international NGOs, donors and cooperation partners of Vietnamese NGOs) also exert power in discourse setting and development agendas. NGOs, the cornerstone of this research, make trade-offs between their own definition of causes of ecological crises and the possible solutions. They navigate the red lines set by the Vietnamese state and funding guidelines, bringing together external expectations and their own theories of changes. They adjust their positionality and roles to what is possible and necessary. They adopt certain languages and then act accordingly. How the frictions between practice, narrative and perceptions in the end look like is not equal between organizations. The diversity in environmental actions of NGOs in Vietnam informs us about the state's environmental rule.

Decentralization and the norms and values created are an interlinkage of capitalist market-based economy that forms the basis of the state's ecological modernization programme. This programme is framed in Sustainable Development and socialist morality that encourage citizens and institutions like NGOs to contribute to the development of their nation. In this process, the Sustainable Development narrative becomes universal and is co-created by a diversity of actors. In this discourse making, the Vietnamese government takes on a central role, and it uses the narrative strategically for its environmental rule. But the decentralization efforts make space for actors to co-shape the narrative through practice.

While Chapter 2 sets the scene for the book and explains the Vietnamese context, Chapter 3 discusses whether NGOs and civil society organizations exist in Vietnam. There is a range of research on non-governmental actors in the Vietnamese context, for example Hannah (2007), Wells-Dang (2011), Salemink (2011), Wischermann (2003, 2010, 2018) and Bui (2013). These research debates on the existence of "non-governmental" in Vietnam and the definition of civil society and non-governmental organizations. Kerkvliet (2019) has coined the term "responsive-repressive" to describe the state's interaction with other actors, summarizing how the socialist one-party state navigates dissent and conflict within the country. The book describes the interaction between NGOs and the Vietnamese state in environmental governance by focusing on three perspectives: self-identification by the NGO staff members, the official definition by the state and the networks that the NGOs positioned themselves in. I argue that approaching NGOs through these three perspectives helps in understanding the state-society relations.

Chapter 4 takes us beyond the Vietnamese state by outlining cross-scale processes that inform environmental rule. It portrays international flows that have shaped environmental narratives throughout history and in contemporary Vietnam. It shows how NGOs are embedded not only in national authoritarian power relations, but also in international ones from the colonial times. Nevertheless, NGOs have spaces to navigate in both narrative and practice. In addition, power relations within NGOs persist, too, and open up the process analysis towards local entanglements. For example, the urban-based, middle class shapes organizations, perpetuates power relations regarding ethnic minorities and marginalizes socioeconomic groups. Chapter 4, therefore, reminds us to look at processes beyond scales for meaningful research.

Chapter 5 analyses in detail the Sustainable Development narrative and compares it with the actual practice of environmental action. The difference

between narrative and action shows that we need to look at both discourse and practice to get a realistic understanding of development processes. The research, therefore, reunites the opposing ends of the development discourse as exemplified by Ferguson's (2005) and Mosse's (2005) contributions on understanding development. Each of the chapters is accompanied by ethnographic stories that illustrate the arguments in the chapter through a case study.

Data and Limitations

The data in this book is based on the discourse analysis of Vietnam policy papers, laws and strategies, NGO publications, twenty-nine qualitative interviews with NGO representatives and key experts, and participant observation and focus group discussions in three case studies of NGO projects. All data were obtained between summer 2019 and spring 2021.

This time frame has three limitations for the research. Firstly, the 13th Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) was held in spring 2021. This event curbed the opportunity for research permits, especially for interviews conducted outside of Hanoi. In the run-up to the Party Congress every five years, the political situation in Vietnam comes to a standstill because new leadership is elected and all state-affiliated officials wanted is to secure their positions. NGOs postpone projects during this period, and research permits are not granted. Secondly, I undertook a major part of this research during the COVID-19 pandemic. While I have been lucky enough to have been in Vietnam prior to the shutdown of the country, the lockdowns nevertheless made it difficult to conduct field research. Trips occurred on short notice, were often rescheduled, postponed or cancelled. Thirdly, research for this book took place before the crackdown on NGOs in 2022. The text has been updated where appropriate, but the data were obtained before the change of political climate, so I have left out some information regarding my informants for ethics and security reasons.

Another bias to the research is my own positionality. I come from a background of NGO work and being a white Western woman comes with its privileges as well as its limitations. Many NGO representatives were willing to talk to me while some community members were hesitant to tell me about the challenges they faced. Being a woman who is conversant in Vietnamese language gave me advantages: the three female NGO leaders in the case studies were willing to support my research because of my language skills

and because I am a fellow woman. Interestingly, my East German family background also formed informal relations with the interviewees through a common perception of socialist experience. Another crucial point is that my husband works in the NGO sector in Vietnam, and this gave me access to interviewees.

I did not interview all organizations in the environmental field; in 2017, there were 180 Vietnamese organizations whose work centred around environmental topics and were registered under the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (Ortmann 2021). I excluded those based in Ho Chi Minh City in my analysis. In Hanoi, I included various types of organizations in my sample: both large-scale and small-scale (in terms of staff strength and funding obtained); international NGOs (INGOs) and Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs); those with different work approaches (e.g., policy advocacy, capacity building and research) and different ways of incorporating environmental concerns (this will be elaborated more in Chapter 2).

Developing a methodology to track changes in narratives throughout history and attribute them to certain actors is challenging. This methodology would have given my analysis a deeper historical perspective. However, written sources are often conceived by the educated class. Sources about environmental perception by the wider population are found in folktales and folk songs, but because they are orally transmitted and recorded in writing only recently, we can date neither the stories and their metaphors to a certain period, nor their changes. Also, it is unclear how the different belief systems in Vietnam have informed the mindsets and practices of the people. The various religions and beliefs make it difficult to date them to a certain period. Therefore, I add brief historical contexts to actors where appropriate and where existing research allowed me to do so. Despite the difficulty of establishing a sound analysis, contextualizing the history of Sustainable Development helps to establish the narrative in Vietnam.

Over ten years after my first encounter of environmental action in Vietnam, this book tries to answer the questions that I had in my mind back then. A lot of practitioners in Vietnam have sought my advice and are interested in my research results because they feel a disconnection between their projects and the reality in Vietnam. This book, therefore, is of practical significance for actors who are involved in environmental work in Vietnam. It contributes to academic literature on the environment and Vietnam from an Area Studies perspective. It examines the Vietnamese context and uses various Vietnamese voices as its point of departure for research in a system

of oppression. I hope that my research encourages meaningful and effective environmental involvement in Vietnam (see also Li 2007).

Environmental Rule in Late Socialism

Environmental governance in Vietnam has been a topic in several research projects, covering how the state institutionalized environmental responsibilities in its system (Benedikter 2014; Ortmann 2017), how cooperation among different actors functions within the country (O'Rourke 2004; Zink 2013; McElwee 2016) and regionally (Wong 2012; Holzhacker and Agussalim 2019). These are important resources for my research in understanding the Vietnamese state.

Environmental authoritarianism is a concept connected to the decline of socialism in the 1980s and has been applied in different contexts (Ophuls 1973; Doyle and Simpson 2007; Beeson 2018; Arantes 2023). Beeson (2018) and Arantes (2023) applies the concept to understand sustainability and its top-down application in China. In addition to Beeson's work on political actors, Arantes describes how grassroot initiatives have become part of building a "green consensus" as a norm of environmental action in China. Many of the processes she illustrates for the Chinese context can also be found in Vietnam. Yet, I chose not to centre the analytical framework of this book around environmental authoritarianism but situate it in the concept of "environmental rule" (McElwee 2016).

In *Forests Are Gold*, McElwee (2016, p. 5) contends that the concept of "environmental rule" is useful for understanding environmental politics in Vietnam because "the concept offers a clearer explanation for the interventions directed at nature, which have not been confined to linear patterns of capitalism, socialism or neoliberalism, as others have asserted". She focuses on "unexpected relational interactions" that are constantly changing due to their context and how they transform environmental action over time. The concept recognizes that environmental rule does not come from one actor or one party alone, but from a variety of actors.

For her methodological framework, McElwee (2016, p. 14) breaks down environmental rule into these categories: problematization, knowledge-making, directing conduct and subject making. The point of departure for my research is problematization. Although all four fields matter in my analysis, my approach and focus differ from McElwee's. While she focuses on forest policies, I set out to understand the environmental narratives that frame policies in general

and their role in governance so that I can contrast the discourses with the practices of development. While the linear patterns of political and economic systems are not sufficient for understanding environmental action, they nevertheless shape realities when investigating the environmental narratives closely. Therefore, the systemic frameworks of capitalist market economy, socialism as well as other cultural factors are important to my analysis. What remains similar in both our work is the emphasis on the diversity of actors that are involved in the processes and that are part of the social and cultural contexts that define Sustainable Development in Vietnam. Looking beyond the nation-state and the history of current policies is necessary for a complete understanding of environmental rule.

This book is set in the political context of the Vietnamese one-party state, led by the CPV. I chose the context of late socialism and not post-socialism for this research. Wilcox et al. (2021) and Leshkovich (2008) have, among others, described that late socialism better describes the realities in Vietnam, China and Laos. Post-socialism is used to describe the context of former socialist states (e.g., Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia) that continue to be impacted by their socialist past. It has also been applied to Vietnam, China and Laos to underline the realities of capitalist market-based economies and the major changes the countries have undergone over the last decades. But putting these very different sociopolitical realities into one category risks overlooking fundamental principles in power exertion. The Vietnamese state has continued to operate officially with socialist morals, propaganda, goals and policymaking. The governance that comes with this assumption of socialism is central to the analysis of this book. Therefore, I still recognize the influence of capitalism in today's nation-state and find the term "late socialism" the best fit for the reality in Vietnam.

Arriving at Environmental Narratives

The journey from Berlin to Hanoi and eventually to the location of the three case studies in Central Vietnam and the Mekong Delta has unravelled my own positionality and assumptions and made me rethink the conceptual framework that I used in this research. I was fortunate to have interviewees who did not refrain from asking me questions and thereby informing the analysis; for example, "Why do you focus so much on international actors? We care much more about what the government tells us"; "Why do you want to focus

on North Vietnam? You need to come to the Mekong Delta to understand what environment in Vietnam is about". As I analysed my data and applied grounded theory to include my informants' views, it became clear that the contradictions in my conceptual framework seemed to be connected to one big goal: creating a liveable environment for all without getting banned by the Vietnamese government and without losing funding.

Consequently, I use Tsing (2005)'s theory of universality and frictions to explain environmental action by NGOs, environmental narratives and power structures in Vietnam, while I define actors in the research based on Latour (2007)'s actor-network theory. To understand the meaning of environment and nature for NGOs and how these meanings are shaped by NGOs' entanglements in power structures across scales, I look at environmental narratives following Tsing (2005)'s approach of analysing universalities and the role of different actors. I then contrast these narratives with the practices thereof in three case studies. Looking at only the discourses would be misleading because the mere use of words and concepts does not equate to the actions behind the terms. For example, an organization may use certain terms in their documents to fulfil donor and government requirements and to explain their work to outsiders. However, the actual practice in projects may differ from the discourses or they may be implemented in different ways.

I refer to environmental narratives using the concepts by Hajer (1995) and Forsyth and Walker (2008). Hajer (1995) equates narratives to storylines and discourses that are the results of negotiations between different actors and their framing of a problem. Instead of using clear and uncontested definitions of words, he understands environmental terms as concepts that define the reasons and possible solutions to a problem. Additionally, looking at the narrative and deconstructing which actors are involved in its making tell us about the political agenda behind it. All contexts of time, space and sociocultural relations between the actors informing the narrative make up a discourse setting.

Forsyth and Walker (2008) refer to this understanding of Hajer's and extend it to their analysis of environmental change in Thailand. The authors seek to overcome the dichotomy between local and scientific knowledge and between local and state knowledge, and instead show how environmental narratives are made and remade by different actors that influence each other in their knowledge production. Therefore, they seek to break down hierarchies and power structures involved in making the narrative.

Knowing what constitutes environmental narratives helps us to understand their meaning and function in the research context. Structuring environmental problems in this way also means assigning accountability to certain actors (Hajer 1995), leading to a simple understanding of environmental change (Forsyth and Walker 2008). Hence, narratives fulfil an important political function by valuing certain storylines and experiences more than others and drawing practical consequences from environmental accountability, thus putting actors in fixed roles and positions; “in other words, environmental knowledge and social order are coproduced” (Forsyth and Walker 2008, p. 18). For this research, I am interested in studying this coproduction and not in the soundness of environmental narratives and the descriptions of environmental crises. Instead, I seek to map out the different understandings of problems, solutions and responsibilities to make sense of NGOs’ work and the environmental rule that is informed by multiple cross-boundary processes and negotiations between actors.

Due to Sustainable Development’s omnipresence and the various actors involved, this research focuses on its deconstruction and explains how it became universal in Vietnam. Some alternative discourses are also discussed. All narratives are analysed according to the problems and solutions as well as the responsibilities and blames that they focus on. This brings up several frictions which I will point out. Additionally, I give this analysis a historic perspective and retrace the agendas that the actors used to interpret the narratives.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable Development—the central concept of this book—is omnipresent and important for environmental governance in Vietnam. It does not originate from Vietnam, but it has made its way into the country from the international policy sphere. The Sustainable Development concept is dated to 1987 when the World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland Commission, defined the term in its report as a global response to the looming environmental and humanity crises. It defined Sustainable Development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations General Assembly, 1987, p. 43). Before that, Sustainable Development was occasionally used as a term but without a clear definition; it was contextualized from case to case before 1987. The concept is embedded in the development discourse.

Escobar (1995, pp. 194–95) establishes a link between the traditional development paradigm and Sustainable Development by drawing parallels: “again the global is defined according to a perception by those who rule it. Liberal ecosystems professionals see ecological problems as the result of complex processes that transcend the cultural and local context” and “the Western scientist continues to speak for the Earth. God forbid that a Peruvian peasant, an African nomad, or a rubber tapper of the Amazons should have something to say in this regard”. This analysis is too short sighted; as we shall see in the practice of Sustainable Development in Vietnam, peasants, workers, NGO staff and others have an agency to fill the narrative with practical meaning and work towards development on both structural and individual levels.

As Bernstein (2005, p. 659) argues, the Brundtland Report provides the first legitimization of the environmental protection-economic growth nexus with an emphasis on technocratic management. According to Escobar (1995, p. 192), this nexus was a linear next step from the development paradigm and combines the eradication of poverty with protection of the environment and Western hegemony through its concept of the environment and economy. Both poverty and environmental destruction were not perceived as inherent in the economic system, but in the poor management of the political-economic system, which could be fixed with technocratic reforms. With the right economic policies, people could be lifted out of poverty and adopt an environmentally friendly behaviour. Despite the Brundtland Report establishing a path dependency within this environment-economic nexus, it still left space for interpretation as it did not suggest methods on how to tackle environmental crises in detail (Tulbure 2011, p. 126). This space was intentionally created to frame Sustainable Development as a matter of consensus, despite the pluralistic concerns that vary globally (Grunwald 2011, pp. 19–20). The Vietnamese government used this space for its authoritarian approach to environmental rule and reinforcement of local power structures, while following the environment-economic nexus. The nexus shows that Sustainable Development is not completely content-free (Grunwald 2011), but it has developed a basic common ground for actors to agree upon when referring to Sustainable Development.

In academic literature, several authors have defined the Earth Summit in 1992 as another key event in strengthening Sustainable Development on the global level. Bernstein (2005, p. 659) claims that it was this summit that the Sustainable Development discourse took on a route of “economic liberalism”

as it “institutionalized the view that trade and financial liberalization, and corporate freedom, are consistent with, even necessary for international environmental protection and sustained economic growth”. Critics see this summit as a failure because it did not create a joint strategy and was too focused on enhancing economic growth; the singular focus on economic growth overshadowed the aim to stop climate change (Degenhardt 2016, 5f). Principle 12 of the Rio Declaration that was produced at the Earth Summit provides the crucial point of this critique. It says:

States should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries, to better address the problems of environmental degradation. Trade policy measures for environmental purposes should not constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination or a disguised restriction on international trade [...] (United Nations General Assembly 1992).

This political commitment is one example for how Sustainable Development has become an ecological modernization programme. It is itself proof of the emergence of an international regime. Additionally, we can see the rise of importance of non-state actors, especially private businesses. Decentralization of policies relies heavily on the attribution of power to market mechanism and seeing them as crucial instruments for environmental policies. In this process, privatization has gained prominence, and it uses science and technology to categorize ecological crises.

Ten years after the Rio Summit in 1992, the World Summit on Sustainable Development took place in Johannesburg and continued the environmental narrative of solving ecological crises using an ecological modernist agenda. This includes the promotion of public-private partnerships and privatization, making private businesses a central actor in environmental action (Bernstein 2005, p. 660). Even when the UN World Summit confirmed its view on the environmental, economic, social and cultural pillars of Sustainable Development, the hegemony of capitalist ideas of modernity remained and influenced all pillars (To 2011). The Sustainable Development concept was developed through different blueprints, and it was first originated in connection to the Green Growth concept in 2005 at the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development (MCED) in Seoul. The Green Growth concept was an idea derived from an Asian initiative, and it expanded to international and multilateral organizations and to national governments. In 2012, Green Economy became a key term at the Rio+20 United Nations

Summit (Jacobs 2013, pp. 197–98). The term refers to Green Growth debates that have been popularized since about 2008 by international economic and development institutions, such as the World Bank (Jacobs 2013), which play an important role in the Vietnamese government's understanding of an authoritarian socialist state with a market economy. The ambiguity of Sustainable Development continues to leave space for different forms of environmental rule and policymaking.

As another milestone in the global making of Sustainable Development, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were proclaimed as successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the UN in 2015. The SDGs function as a framework for policies across the globe. Holzhaecker and Agussalim (2019) argue that the SDGs have the advantage of being more qualitative and less quantitative than the MDGs, therefore making space for more local solutions. They are a “shared language for engaging contested futures” (Swilling 2019, p. 3). Economic growth and capital accumulation remain explicit in Goal 8: “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (UN website, accessed 20 November 2021). The language of the SDGs is not all-inclusive, but ecological modernist. In the case of climate change, this means, for example, that the narrative of climate change is based on a modernist natural science understanding and framed in numbers (e.g., carbon dioxide emissions, carbon footprints), and problems can be solved using innovative techno-fixes and market regulations (Lindeggaard 2020, p. 159). Consequently, the dependency on partly regulated market economy is still in force, and this narrows the field of possible environmental action and with it, actors who partake in this environmental narrative. The economic system and its strong actors exclude alternative visions and those actors who try to establish a newly regulated economy outside the growth narrative.

We shall see later in this book that the SDGs and the Paris Agreement play a major role when connecting activities in Vietnam to the international scale. They serve as a broad context and reference for specific goals to which organizations contribute their work. While the importance of the Paris Agreement is limited to organizations that work on climate change, the SDGs tend to be universal so that all organizations find some points of connection.

The ambiguities of the Sustainable Development narrative in general, and the SDGs in particular, make space for different interpretations. As Tsing (2005) notes, this global scale discourse has become universal by its

entanglement and transformation through localities and their influence on the discourse as we shall see in Vietnam. Sustainable Development invites different actors to fill it with practices and meanings, making it universal. Vietnam has picked up all the abovementioned key terms and discourses and translated them into national policy with some local adjustments. At the same time, the Vietnamese government has redefined Sustainable Development for their own means and has only passively accepted international paradigms. The restricted framing of Sustainable Development is welcomed by the state, which uses the global discourse to further power structures. The CPV uses it to maintain their legitimization as a problem solver and to characterize alternative narratives as a threat to the environmental rule.

Environment and Nature—Environment or Nature— Environment vs. Nature?

Research on the sociocultural understanding of environment-human relations in Vietnam is rarely undertaken. Especially in the field of political science, scholarly works assume, for example, that the Sustainable Development is used to analyse frameworks of environmental policy. Analyses on the narratives used in Vietnam on what the environment is and where the understandings come from, are constituted on ethnic minorities (Lundberg 2004; Salemink 2011), but they do not explicitly question understandings of the Kinh ethnic majority. My research is concerned with environmental narratives and power structures in NGO work in Vietnam, and I therefore add to the existing literature with contemporary perceptions of ecological crises and the definition of problems and solutions thereof.

In seeking to understand Sustainable Development, the readers of this book need to know what I meant by terms like “environment” or “nature”, which have sociopolitical meanings. The term “nature”, caught in a net of dichotomies, is a highly contested one. The opposite of the term “nature” has been described as “culture”. Still, in today’s understanding of Western science as well as Western literature and arts, nature is described as something “natural” that is not touched by “humans”; it is a state that has existed before culture (Latour 1993). For example, a patch of grassland can grow naturally or be cultivated into a garden. In colonial history, colonized communities have been described as closer to nature, reinforcing racist stereotypes but also self-perception of white colonizers. Tsing (2005) describes, for example, that scholars in service of colonial powers conducted botany such that the

gathering of non-European plants also defined European consciousness about themselves and their modern, strategic thinking. The nature-culture dichotomy does not only influence thoughts in the Global North. Throughout the chapters in this book, it will become clearer that actors in Vietnam share a similar understanding of contrasting nature and culture against each other. Nature continues to be defined not only as “non-human” in a passive way, but also as an actor. Phrases like “nature hits back”, “nature is getting revenge” (quotes from my interviews) and more implicit descriptions of how nature makes people calm and healthy portray nature not as a passive territory, but as an actant.

Nature and environment: What is the actual difference between these two? All interviewees, no matter whether they are Vietnamese or not, working for INGOs or VNGOs, agreed that humans are the decisive factor in differentiating between the two terms. Environment is everything surrounding a person or a thing; it is defined from the perspective of a subject. It includes water, air, trees, natural resources, humans and everything man-made. In contrast, nature is everything that “has existed from the beginning” without humans. This dichotomy in thinking seems to be very close and relatable to traditional European environmental philosophy but should not be traced back exclusively to colonial flows. Instead, roots in emic historic concepts as laid out in Chapter 2 need to be considered too.

Latour (1993) combines the nature-culture dichotomy into one term—“nature-culture”. He characterizes “nature-culture” as a construct of “humans, divinities and nonhumans”. In his later work in 2017, Latour was critical towards this conceptualization. Although the term describes the modern living concept and its shortcomings, the divide between humans, divinities and nonhumans seems problematic when we move outside of the Western sphere. In the Vietnamese context, the difference between these three can become quite blurry. Hồ Chí Minh, for example, was a human being but is now treated as a divine in some parts of the country (Lauser 2008). The category of “nonhumans” is questionable as trees, stones, etc. can be seen as reincarnation or symbols of human beings. Nature needs to be seen with an understanding of the actors in it. This means that nature is separate from humans and has its own agency.

The other ambiguous term—the environment—also needs to be viewed critically. Escobar (1995) describes the environment as a transformation of nature to rid it of agency and to fit it into an economic understanding. This is, however, not true for all environmental narratives and for all actors, and

it focuses too much on a particular understanding, leaving out resistance, contestations and alternative understandings. I agree that the environment lacks agency, but not because it is rendered passive. Instead, I understand the environment as a space in which humans, nature and other actors interact. This definition underlines the social and political elements that are essential to the concept of environmental narratives and the analysis of what Sustainable Development means for different actors in Vietnam and why it or alternative narratives are used.

What is Vietnamese?

The Vietnamese nation-state is multiethnic and draws from various cultures. Ethnic minorities in Vietnam do not necessarily perceive themselves as “Vietnamese”. Discrimination against ethnic minorities has been and continues to be widespread. The ethnic majority, the Kinh or Việt, are the focus of this study, and to underline the cultural strains that have predominantly existed among them, I will speak of Kinh or Việt culture, instead of Vietnamese. The power relations between Việt and ethnic minorities are highly relevant for NGOs and their projects. As Saleminck (2011, p. 48) phrases it, “historiography and ethnography of Vietnam also require a view from the mountains in order to redress the nationalist and developmental notions about backwardness, remoteness and isolation produced by the modern state and eagerly supported by NGOs and other development donors.” Ethnic minorities use environmental narratives in the othering process during environmental actions (this will be discussed in detail in Chapters 3 and 4). In the next chapter, I shall introduce the actors of this book and the context of Vietnamese governance.