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**‘DUST BENEATH THE MIST’: STATE AND  
FRONTIER FORMATION IN THE CENTRAL  
HIGHLANDS OF VIETNAM, THE 1955-61  
PERIOD**

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy of Political Science**

# STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY



I declare that this thesis is my own original work and all sources used have been duly acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stan B-H Tan", positioned above a horizontal dotted line.

Stan B-H Tan

# **WORD COUNT**

I declare that the main text of this thesis consists of 99,967 words.

Stan B-H Tan

## PREFACE

I began studying the Vietnamese language in 1995 while doing my undergraduate studies in the Southeast Asian Studies Program at the National University of Singapore. In 1997, I conducted my first fieldwork in Vietnam after completing an intensive Vietnamese language course in Ho Chi Minh City earlier that year. The fieldwork was carried out in Dong Thap province of the Mekong Delta region. While I was able to conduct the interviews in Vietnamese by myself, I still needed much help when I transcribed the recorded interviews. By the time I went up to the Central Highlands, specifically Dak Lak province, to conduct fieldwork for my master's thesis in late 1998, I was already quite adept at reading, speaking and writing in the Vietnamese language. In the highlands, however, I was confronted by other aspects of the language barrier. These were namely: the convergence of different regional accents of the language (generally categorized as north, south, and central) on the frontier; the 'variants' of the Vietnamese language spoken by some local highlanders; and the plethora of highlander languages. I soon got used to this rich variety of the Vietnamese language (but not so when it comes to highlander languages such as Ede or Jarai). At present, I have a tendency to speak in a mixed accent, which my Vietnamese friends termed '*giong thap cam*'. I was not alone when speaking in this accent. Many of the Vietnamese people who live in the highlands that I know actually have a similar accent. There is no mistaking the fact that the person speaks in a mainly northern, central, or southern accent, but it is also quite obvious that the accent is usually 'localized' in the context of the highlands frontier.

I still recall my initial thoughts when I first went to the Central Highlands to conduct fieldwork. Traveling along National Highway 14, which cuts across Binh Duong and Binh Phuoc provinces before entering Dak Lak, I was struck by the contrasting scenes going uphill. More significantly, at that point in time, I felt rather disturbed when I observed that the landscape on both sides of the road consisted of cleared lands, recently planted coffee or rubber trees, almost stereotypical clusters of frontier residences inhabited mainly by the Kinh people. The mesmerizing landscape of the forested hills and highlanders beautifully portrayed in the books written by ethnographers were gone. I identified this scene I saw as the retreat and subordination of the old inhabitants in the face of state formation on an expanding frontier.

I would soften my stance as I spent more time living and conducting research in the highlands. From the initial pulses of injustice I felt for the old inhabitants at the hands of the newcomers and the expanding state, I was soon confronted by the fact that many of these newcomers to the frontier were not out to 'dispossess' the highlanders. Many were there to realize their hopes of a better life; and many came to realize this objective via agriculture. The engraving on the tablet of a makeshift grave that I came upon (in 1999), which belonged to an ethnic Nung, is perhaps illustrative of this frontier dynamic.<sup>1</sup> Engraved in Han characters, it says

到此生黄金  
未得黄金  
却得土地葬身

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<sup>1</sup> Field notes, Dak Lak province, Vietnam, July 1999.

Translated to English, it simply means 'I came here to plant gold, yet to get rich but I at least found a piece of land to bury my body'. In the late 1990s, many farmers in the Central Highlands got rich by planting coffee, thanks to the booming international coffee market. As a result, many people from other parts of Vietnam began migrating to the Central Highlands, hoping to find a better life by planting coffee. Planting coffee, for many in the Central Highlands, was literally 'planting gold'. Planting coffee, or in fact any agricultural crop, is a long-term investment. Common sense tells us that agriculture expansion required a certain element of stability that cannot be sustained in an environment of perpetual conflict. And conflict was definitely not the sole characteristic defining the rise of an agrarian frontier.

I was also confronted by my observations of how officials went about their jobs. Many were more than willing to soil their feet, see to the fact that the job gets done, and attend to the concerns of the people within the jurisdiction of their job scopes. When I first presented my request in 1999 to study the knowledge and marketing networks of pioneer coffee farmers, district authorities immediately pointed me to the direction of an out-of-the-way settlement. What is so significant about this decision was that the field site they recommended was a free-migrant settlement. There were concerns about my safety and whatever rather insalubrious things I might find out concerning land disputes, ethnic conflicts or state-society disputes. But officials were more than willing to permit me to live in that village to conduct my study. They were also interested in understanding how they could help these people improve their lives.

There were reciprocal sentiments among the settlers, too. They were not just trying to escape the control of the state. One settler told me,

*...Life here, I can see that the state has put up some plans in the future for expansion in the cultivation of cash crops and coffee. The state is not going to forcefully chase us away; it will help us one way or another in our cultivation [my emphasis]. When an incident such as this happens (he was bitten by a snake a few weeks ago), it is really your fate or ill-fortune...Back then, I thought I had only a twenty percent chance of surviving the ordeal; the other eighty being that I am unable to bear with the pain. I was extremely sad. I have only a few siblings; my wife and my son, my wife...[inaudible mumbling] my son is still young. With just my wife working alone in the garden, when you actually calculate it is just ...[inaudible]. If I die, the future of my child will definitely be tougher.<sup>2</sup>*

This settler had just gone through the terrible experience of a poisonous snakebite that traditional herbal treatment by a local practitioner in the settlement failed to arrest. He finally had to rely on the goodwill of the local officials in the district center to help him get treatment at the district hospital.

I could not quite relate my encounters in the field with what I read in the existing scholarship about the Central Highlands of Vietnam. First, the convergence of Kinh people from different places of origins produced something quite different (for example, the way the Vietnamese language is spoken), to the extent that I would term it as hybrid. Can the meeting of Kinh and highlanders produce a similar effect? Can the meeting of state and society on the frontier produce a similar effect? Second, there is certainly more to the frontier story than conflict, conquest and a paradise lost. One simply cannot survive on agricultural means if one cannot be sure if the field will still

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<sup>2</sup> Field Interview, Dak Lak province, Vietnam, July 1999.

be there the next day or if one can actually reap the harvest. Third, some agents of the state are certainly capable of learning something about local practices on the frontier. Certainly enforcement is not the only mode of policy implementation. The state seeks the allegiance of the people. The people also seek from the state, guarantee or help for their livelihoods. There is a deal to be 'brokered' here.

I am mindful that existing studies about the Central Highlands are not wrong. These studies, however, could not explain my encounters in the field. I wanted to conduct a systematic study to determine if these were mere spurious encounters. If these were not, then there must exist a certain facet of the story of Vietnamese state formation on the Central Highlands frontier that is not explained by existing literature. By the time I began my PhD project in 2002, this kind of fieldwork was no longer possible in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The protest-demonstrations of 2001 and subsequent occurrences of such political disturbances meant that I could not obtain the kind of official field research permit that I had in 1998 and 1999. I could, however, still visit my friends and stay in the districts, which I did regularly between 2000 and 2004. But without official sanctions, I chose not to probe for more information or conduct any field interview. I did not want to get any of my friends into trouble with the security department or to 'poison the well' for future researchers hoping to conduct fieldwork in the highlands with official permission. Instead, I went to National Archive Center No. 2 of Vietnam (*Trung Tam Luu Tru Quoc Gia So II*) to see if I can detect any similar occurrences even in the so-called 'darkest period' of Vietnamese state formation for the Central Highlanders under the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, also known as the First Republic. This thesis is the result of my own experience on the frontier and my reading of the archival materials from the First Republic.

# ABSTRACT

As an undergraduate student, I read about the distinctiveness of the Central Highlands of Vietnam and its inhabitants in comparison to the Kinh people, the dominant majority from the plains. I was often left with the feeling that these people and their cultures were teetering on the edge of endangerment with the arrival of Kinh settlers and the Vietnamese state. This is the typical storyline of state formation on the frontier, telling how a sophisticatedly organized and technologically powerful people arrived to reign over the margins (of its heartland domain) and the inhabitants there. The turbulence caused by this 'transformation of the margins' can still be observed and felt in the present day context of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Covered by the red dust spiraling from the rotary motion of vehicles traversing the road while traveling in the Central Highlands frontier, I cannot help but feel that when the dust settles, the people and landscape are subjected and covered by the manifestation of an exogenous vector of force, state formation. And this seems to be the main storyline exalted by the existing literature, too.

Another facet to this story of state formation on the frontier, however, is missing from the prevailing literature. I am talking about a facet of the story that paints a less bleak picture of life on the frontier. It tells of how actors on the frontier try to make everyday relations bearable and operational, born out of attempts to understanding one another, albeit sometimes involving misunderstandings. This facet tells of mutability in the state formation process. This thesis explores this facet of the story and uses more nuanced conceptualizations of state, frontier, power, government and social orderings. I call this approach a 'recombinant model' of state formation.

This thesis is about one particular period of Vietnamese state formation on the Central Highlands frontier, 1955-61 under the government of the First Republic. I argue that the prevailing approach to understanding Vietnamese state formation on the Central Highlands frontier conceptualizes the state as an *a priori* formed entity engaged in a process of immutable diffusion on the frontier. I call this the 'diffusion model' of state formation. Using recently available archival documents and the optic provided by the 'recombinant model', I argue that Vietnamese state formation between 1955 and 1961 on the Central Highlands frontier was a mutable process that produced a state form that was hybrid and recombinant in nature. I support this argument with a thick description of policy making and modification of policies by the government on four key issues: administrative standardization, frontier formation program of *Dinh Dien*, state formation via agrarian change and management of the land question. The story reconstructed through these archival documents does not fit nicely with the storyline advanced by the diffusion model. The recombinant model provides a better framework for understanding this story.



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