



The king yields to the village? A micropolitics of statemaking in Northwest Vietnam



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A B S T R A C T

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The village in Vietnam has long been subject of scholarly inquiry and site of state power. Too often held apart, these two observations together inform this investigation of statemaking in the Northwest highlands and micropolitical relations between agencies and villages. Essentialized village and state ideas are idioms of power in and around socially diverse communities of Điện Biên Phủ. Embedding these communities in ruling relations locates ideological dimensions of statemaking, such as abstract notions of village and state, in their generative contexts. Tracing idioms back to conflicted power relations engages modern forms of governmentality to reconceptualize political tactics, strategies, and technologies as ideologically generative practices. Demarcation, for example, is a state tactic that produces multiple ethnic, sovereign, and spatial boundaries—ideological forms that pose hazards for researchers and subaltern subjects alike. Drawing on ethnographic data, I explore my access to and denial from village field sites to position the researcher amidst the same power relations under study.

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Introduction

The village, much like the state, remains impervious to scholarly warnings against its reification. Despite being highly abstracted categories, “the village” and “the state” are not the same everywhere and always. This paper explores their meaning and analyzes the work they do as idioms of power in the highlands of Northwest Vietnam. Why are villages necessary for state administration but state–village relations so often misunderstood? How does everyday talk of “the state” function in relation to “the village” yet obfuscate the real ties between them? In what ways do these discursive invocations both conceal and reveal their ideological effects?

In Vietnam, essentialized ideas of state and village are expressions of the fraught relations between them. State is often socially constructed as like a king or akin to a patriarchal family just as villages are constructed as somehow autonomous from state power and nationally uniform. In reality, they generate each other: the concepts emerge from dialectically-contested processes of making village communities and state institutions coterminous. That is, constructing state and village together produces ideas of each as somehow separate from one another. Understood as ideological effects generated by powerful tactics and strategies, “village” and

“state” invite us to bring questions of ideology and practice back into readings of governmentality’s modern forms. Village and state ideas do *do* something: they legitimate the uneven power relations that link village to state by, for example, obscuring bureaucratic conflicts, excusing official failures, silencing coercion, and erasing traces of earlier dominations from ostensibly rational, centrally-organized institutions.

A famous Vietnamese proverb offers a vision of state as a king whose “rule” or “permission” (*phép*) stops at the village gate. However much this view valorizes village autonomy in relation to a person-like sovereign, it does evoke boundaries between village and state. By serving as units of territorialized administration *and* sites of everyday social encounters, villages straddle tense lines of demarcation. As places inhabited by the majority of Vietnam’s population, villages are home to families and neighbors, contain their fields and shops, and anchor cultural activities.¹ As fundamentals of a national state bureaucracy, villages sort rural populations territorially, generate administrative knowledge, and locate economic and social development. This article shows how villages’ dual roles as regulatory unit and communal place often conflict and sometimes contradict, a finding that partially explains their ideological simplification as socially uniform and politically autonomous.

Navigating village boundaries is an everyday practice not just for village residents but also for researchers required to obtain state permission (“*phép*”) before entering village sites. As method, I examine my own micropolitical negotiations with authorities

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regulating village access. Analyzing issues of research access ethnographically, in other words, offers a tool to situate villages in political configurations so often described as king-like or familial. My position as researcher embedded me in the same fraught political relations that interest me analytically. In short, my ethnography examines the delineations of state power through the (de) limitations of ethnography itself.

The socially diverse village field sites considered here sit amidst broader, historically-layered power relations in Điện Biên Province. A new generation of scholars has returned to Vietnam's villages—and Asia's more broadly (Bremner, Kloos, & Saith, 1997)—not as insular types but as historically dynamic, regionally varied, and internally differentiated sites of social change (Kleinen, 1999; Luong, 2010; Papin, 2002; Tô, 2003). While my analysis builds on their insights, I depart from a bias favoring lowland deltas and head for the hills. In so doing, I study “ethnic minority villages” but break with discursive frames that limit understandings of variable and multiple forms of social difference. Even the category of “Vietnamese,” as in “the traditional Vietnamese village” (Phan, 2006), illustrates an official nationalist ideology disguising state tactics that index community by ethnicized village unit.

This paper begins by grounding a theoretical frame in state-making and governmentality literatures. Next, it offers ethnography as well-suited to studying everyday micropolitics and situates the field site in a history of spatially-snarled power relations. The subsequent narrative traces how a bewildering array of state agencies mediated my research access to villages and regulated their communal identities, political relations, and economic activities. The conclusion summarizes the paper's implications for rethinking state–village relations in Vietnam, for enriching notions of governmentality with ideological practice, and for analyzing research access ethnographically.

Governmentality, statemaking, villagemaking

Ideological constructions of state and village emerge as effects of uneven, historically-sedimented power relations that often overlap and sometimes conflict one another. To avoid reifications of state and to deprive institutions as autonomous forces, governmentality approaches theorize power as diffusely located in social relations, decentered throughout society, and exercised through everyday tactics (Jones, 2012; Painter, 2006). Yet debunking “the state” as a unified and solitary source of power does not necessarily require governmentality scholars to reject a study of state power (Jessop, 2007). Rather, governmental rationality includes powerful practices and strategies, political projects and technologies that enrich understandings of states and statecraft. Michel Foucault's definitions of state—as “a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction” (2007a, p. 109) and an “effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities” (2008, p. 77)—both emphasize underlying relations and techniques *and* open space to analyze their ideological effects. Intimate and fraught relations between village and state in Vietnam produce ideological effects that shape how social actors embedded in these relations (mis)understand one another and act accordingly.

In a similar vein, historical and comparative state formation scholars advance a critical understanding of states and state power through analysis of their representations, an approach I extend to “the village.” Much like Foucault's critique of a “mythicized abstraction,” Philip Abrams rejects “the state” as a flawed analytic and argues, instead, for studying a “state-idea,” or ideological construct, in relation to “state-system,” or its institutional and material forms (1988). His call to demystify and historicize relations of domination and subordination has inspired investigations of state ideas as artifacts of legitimation work and culturally-specific

sites of meaning and practice (Corrigan & Sayer, 1985; Joseph & Nugent, 1994; Vu, 2010). Even as I concur with Blom Hansen's and Finn Stepputat's assertion that states “are amorphous and bereft of any unifying and encompassing rationale” (2001, p. 29), the state idea, like the village idea, nonetheless figures as an elementary form of legitimation. An orderly idea of state serves a powerful purpose by distracting attention from disorderly, overlapping, and historically entangled political technologies and ruling relations.

Understanding how villages in Vietnam co-generate state power in the countryside—as sites of knowledge production, spatial demarcation, and economic development—continues Foucault's dialog with geography. Just as I read his idea of state to include how it comes to be mystified, Foucault's notion that knowledge “disseminates” the effects of power leaves room for critical engagement (2007b, p. 177). Breeding knowledge in and of Vietnamese villages is not a one-way, top-down process but is itself deeply relational and dispersed.² Furthermore, his narrow focus on “tactics” deployed through “distributions and demarcations” to the exclusion of “ideological forms” (2007b, p. 182) fails to account for the ways in which migration, rural development, and boundary making in Vietnam are ideologically generative projects. Either ideology or tactic? Why not both? Indeed, demarcations operate on society and space together, contributing toward the mystification of categories like state, society, and economy as ontologically separate and contained neatly within national territories (Migdal, 2001; Mitchell, 1999, pp. 76–97; Sivaramakrishnan, 1999). I show below how tactical negotiations in rural Vietnam over residence and mobility, land and resources operate in a discursive field just as ideologically charged as materially and socially consequential.

An ethnography of research access and denial

Analyzing ethnographically how state and village ideas are constructed every day in Vietnam shows how state power works in often arbitrary and conflicting ways yet still comes to be *mis*-recognized as a singular sovereign entity, like a king. Negotiating access to rural social life alerted me to legitimation work that structures, and is structured by, overlapping and multiply-configured power relations. At multiple turns, I found that an idea of “the state”—as mystifyingly unified in purpose and organization—rises as an ideological effect that obfuscates the concrete, contradictory, and sometimes blunt ways in which social actors enact and enforce relations of domination.

My methodological approach builds on growing political geographic interest in ethnography's ability to bridge elite and everyday views, to scrutinize conflicts within ostensibly coherent entities, to learn from mistakes, and to incorporate affective experience of uneven power (Megan, 2006; Till, 2012; Wolford, 2006; Woon, 2013). I extend these insights to the research permission process by treating the gain or loss of access to village sites as a source of data. Why discuss the bureaucracy of research clearance and unintended outcomes? What can scholars gain from expanding a notion of village field site to include where and how one accesses it? I answer these questions historically and positionally.

As an American researcher aware of his country's history in Vietnam, my attempts to enter village sites entangled me in village affairs and state power, neither of which, I realized, can be understood without the other. The ways in which scholars know and study rural life there is embroiled in a series of powerful projects—the likes of which rural subjects must deal with every day. My epistemic approach breaks with French colonial and American Cold War village studies that interposed a fictive distance between ethnographer and subject to produce villages as somehow distinct

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