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Goodbye Vietnam, Good Morning Indochina: Teaching the Indochina Wars in American World History Classrooms

Most American *World History Connected* readers probably imagine they are teaching a world history course that challenges students to see the world differently. We're not high school American history teachers who can't stop talking about the Civil War and struggle to cover anything beyond the Second World War. We're not teaching Western Civilization and getting lost in the Thirty Years' War and the French Revolution. We're not even world history teachers whose survey is the West and the Rest. We most likely imagine we're aware of Eurocentrism and how it shapes our understanding of world history. But if you're like me, we still have areas for improvement. How we teach Southeast Asia after the Second World War is probably one of those areas for growth.

In world history surveys, Southeast Asia often appears in particular contexts. We focus on how Southeast Asian states (e.g., Khmer Empire or Srivijaya) flourished and participated in Indian Ocean exchange before 1500. After the arrival of Europeans, we focus on how Europeans established trading posts in part of Southeast Asia (e.g., Melaka or Jakarta) and how other parts (e.g., Siam) resisted Europeans. During the era of New Imperialism, we explore European colonization of Southeast Asia and Indigenous resistance in the region. Once we come to the period after the Second World War, almost every world history textbook adopts an Americentric approach to the political conflicts and discusses the "Vietnam War" as one of many "proxy wars" in the Cold War. Instead of approaching Southeast Asian history from an American perspective, we can adopt regional and global perspectives that allow us to center the experiences of people who lived in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

The Americentric Idea of the Vietnam War

Whether we like it or not, popular culture has influenced our understanding of Southeast Asia after the Second World War. Most people teaching world history today grew up in the 1980s or later, which means we probably watched a lot of movies that focused on the Vietnam War. The list of potential movies that have influenced how we think about Southeast Asia begins with *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and includes *First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *Platoon* (1985), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *Forrest Gump* (1994), and even satirical comedies about making a Vietnam War film, such as *Tropic Thunder* (2008). I'm leaving out many other movies, but we quickly get the idea. It would be nearly impossible for any teacher in the United States not to have been influenced by at least some of these movies.

In *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-2010*, James Olson and Randy Roberts argue these movies have contributed to "distorted images" and "missed opportunities."[1] Our understanding of the war has been distorted to the point that we focus primarily on the experiences of American soldiers, and people from Southeast Asia fade into the background. Because we are only concerned with American soldiers in the war and after they returned home, we've missed the opportunity to reflect on how Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese experienced and remember the war.

Regardless of how we feel about these movies, we can't ignore their influence on how we teach Southeast Asia. Popular culture influences how we think about the past and teach history.[2] Whether we're thinking about the authors of world history textbooks, ourselves as teachers of world history surveys, or our students, we've all grown up with "distorted images" of Vietnam. For most of us in the United States, the main conflicts that took place in Southeast Asia were all part of the "Vietnam War." Anything that happened in Cambodia and Laos were sideshows to the main war. Other than Ho Chi Minh, the people fighting the Americans were all "Charlies." As Americans, like it or not, our understanding of that war is skewed. An abundance of movies about the Vietnam War has influenced how we see past events in Southeast Asia. The notable exception to this pattern is teachers or students from the region. They are more likely to be aware of the perspectives of Southeast Asians.

We can see the influence of popular culture when we look at how world history textbooks cover Southeast Asia after 1945. Almost every world history textbook identifies the political conflicts in Southeast Asia beginning as struggles for independence and part of a larger movement for decolonization. However, in most textbooks (*Voyages of World History*, *The Earth and Its Peoples*, and *A History of World Societies*), the authors refer to the political conflicts in mainland Southeast Asia as the "Vietnam War" after the United States became involved. In *Traditions & Encounters*, the authors use "Vietnam's 'American War.'" In *World Civilizations: The*

Global Experience, the authors use "The War of Liberation against the United States" and recognize that "from the Vietnamese perspective" it was the "Second Indochina War." All these textbooks primarily focus on the conflict as being between the Americans and the Vietnamese, with only brief mentions of Cambodian or Laotian involvement. In *Societies, Networks, and Transitions*, Craig Lockhard (a Southeast Asian specialist) uses "The American-Vietnamese War" and devotes a section to "War in Laos and Cambodia."

What all these textbooks have in common is a focus on American involvement and participation in the war and little focus on how Southeast Asians experienced the war. Like the many American movies on Vietnam, world history textbooks treat Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese as extras existing in the background. The notable exception is Ho Chi Minh, the only Vietnamese individual specifically identified in all textbooks. What's missing from these textbooks are sections in the body of the text (not a sidebar) that center Southeast Asian voices and perspectives.

Names Matter

What we call things when teaching matters. The names we use for events, geographical regions, and physical landmarks have meaning. When we choose to use one name and not another, our choice has meaning and can affect our students.[3] I first began to understand the significance and implications of what I always called the "Vietnam War" when I first traveled to Vietnam in 2003. I was quickly surprised to discover that the "Vietnam War" didn't exist. Vietnamese called it the "Resistance War Against America" or the "American War." In Ho Chi Minh City, the recently renamed War Remnants Museum was still called the Museum of American War Crimes and Aggression by most people I encountered. That trip challenged me to rethink my understanding of the war and how I taught it. For many years, I preferred the more neutral American-Vietnamese War. Using the Vietnamese War seemed wrong. It reflected the idea of a war that began in the 1960s and was about American men drafted to fight in Vietnam.

I also began questioning the use of the term "proxy war" after that trip. In world history textbooks, Cold War proxy wars are sideshows to an American-Soviet ideological struggle. When we describe the many military conflicts between 1945 and 1991 as proxy wars, it removes the agency of the people fighting. For students, proxy wars are something they don't need to pay much attention to. The details don't matter when we're talking about proxy wars; what matters is the struggle between the "Great Powers."

Figure 1: Map of First Indochina War. Source: Wikipedia. Creative Commons BY-SA license.

Figure 2: Map of Second Indochina War ("The Vietnam War"). Source: Wikimedia. Creative Commons BY-SA license.

Figure 3: Third Indochina War. Source: Wikimedia. Creative Commons BY-SA license.

As I gradually learned more about the American-Vietnamese War, I noticed that the war wasn't limited to the period of American involvement or contained within the territorial borders of Vietnam. Fighting often spilled over into neighboring Cambodia and Laos. The United States became involved in the region in 1950 when it recognized the French-sponsored Bao Dai government and began financially supporting the French.[4] Fighting continued in the region after the United States withdrew its troops in 1973. The "American-Vietnamese War" didn't also seem to be adequate as a name for a war that included more than the Americans and the Vietnamese. I eventually began to follow the lead of recent scholarship and use the phrase "The Indochina Wars."[5] Instead of names suggesting separate self-contained wars, the Indochina Wars were three connected regional wars that included outside actors, such as France, the United States, and China.

Decolonization and the Global Cold War

While having a new name for the political conflicts in mainland Southeast Asia is helpful, we still need to develop different approaches to teaching the Indochina Wars in the context of world history. We can begin by teaching about the Indochina Wars within the context of decolonization and the Cold War. Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of understanding the Cold War and decolonization as interconnected events.[6] Too often, we separate teaching the Cold War and decolonization, but that does not help when we think about these events. For people living in 1955, the Cold War and

decolonization were not separate events - they were related and occurring at the same time.

I use a map from Edward Judge and John Langdon's *Connections: A World History* to introduce the Cold War and decolonization as interconnected processes. There is a similar version of this map available from the OER Project. Maps in world history textbooks tend to focus on either when former colonies gained their independence or where Cold War conflicts occurred, but rarely do they combine the two. The map is a quick and easy way to help students visualize how the Cold War and decolonization affected each other.

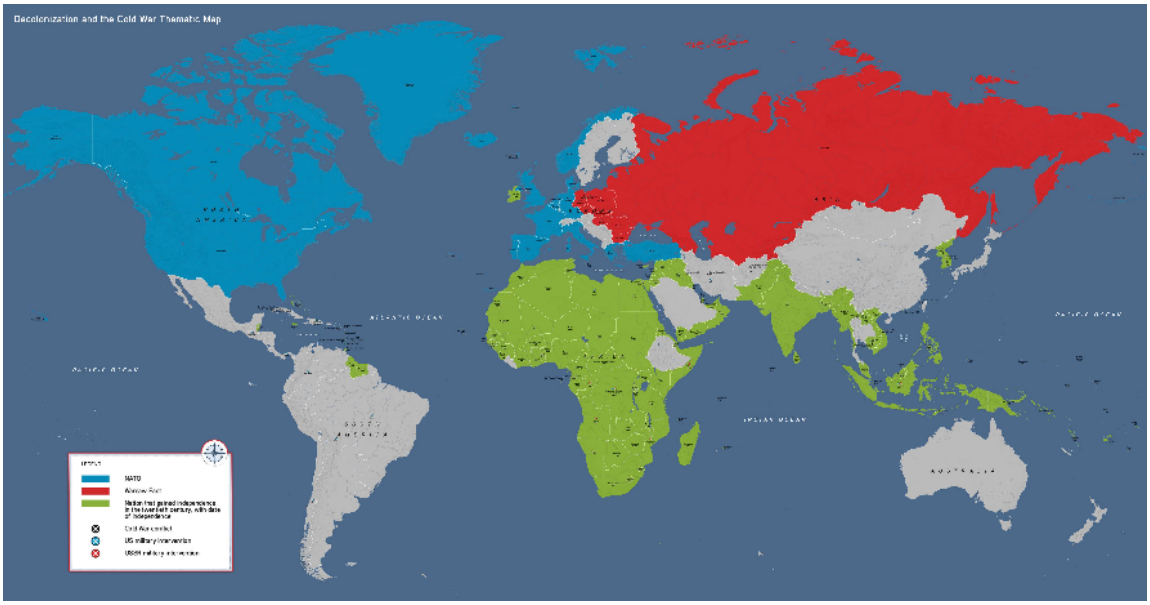

Image 4: Decolonization and Cold War Thematic Map. Source: OER Project. Public Domain.

We can also use propaganda posters from the different participants in the Indochina Wars. Students can analyze these posters to understand how the participants saw the conflicts as part of the battle against imperialism and a larger global ideological struggle between capitalism and communism. Even people in other parts of the world who were not participating in the Indochina Wars saw connections between the anti-imperial and ideological struggles.

Figure 5: Soviet Poster: "The distance is great, but our hearts are close!" (1958). Source: The Propaganda Archive. Public Domain.

Image 6: Chinese Poster: "The peoples of the three countries in Indochina must win American imperialism must be defeated!" 1971 poster. Source: UC Berkeley Library Digital Collections. Public domain.

Image 7: American Poster. "Anywhere there is communism, there is terrorism and assassination!" American poster 1954. Source: DocsTeach - National Archives. Public domain.

Women's Experience of the Wars

Despite a wealth of scholarship on the involvement of Southeast Asian women in the Indochina Wars,[7] world history textbooks rarely discuss women's involvement in the Indochina Wars. The images of popular culture influence American students' approach to wars. The popular American image of the war is primarily about the male soldiers and officers who fought in Vietnam, but what about the role of women? Textbooks may mention the anti-war movement in the United States, which often involved women, but what about women in Southeast Asia? Southeast Asian women fought in the Indochina Wars and supported the war effort. They also were more directly affected by the fighting than American women.

Because women didn't fight for the French or the Americans, Vietnamese propaganda emphasized women's involvement. There are a few helpful articles available online that we can use to introduce this topic. The images and discussion of illustrations regarding "Vietnamese Women's Revolutionary Roles Depicted In Propaganda Posters" at https://saigoneer.com/saigon-music-art/4360-vietnamese-women-s-revolutionary-roles-depicted-in-propaganda-posters from an exhibit at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, focuses on the depiction of women in Vietnamese posters. The article includes many examples of posters. Sud Chonchirdsin, the former curator of Vietnamese art in the British Library, wrote https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2015/10/women-and-the-vietnam-war.html, a post that appeared on the British Library's African and Asian Studies Blog. He contrasted the traditional Confucian image of women in Vietnam and their role during the wars. He also discusses examples from the British Library's collection.

We can teach how Southeast Asian women experienced the war using memoirs. The most well-known example is Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace*. Hayslip was born in Vietnam in 1949 and published her memoir in 1989. She focuses on how the war affected her childhood and teenage years before she and her new American husband moved to the United States in 1970. Her memoir can be challenging to follow because it shifts back and forth between her life in Vietnam and the United States. Despite this issue, her writing is compelling and can help students understand how the wars affected Vietnamese women:

> *Of course, the Viet Cong cadremen, like the Republicans, had no desire (or ability, most of them) to paint a fairer picture. For them, there could be no larger reason for Americans fighting the war than imperialist aggression. Because we peasants knew nothing about the United States, we could not stop to think how absurd it would be for so large and wealthy a nation to covet our poor little country for its rice fields, swamps, and pagodas. Because our only exposure to politics had been*

> *through the French colonial government (and before that, the rule of Vietnamese kings), we had no concept of democracy. For us, "Western culture" meant bars, brothels, black markets, and xa hoi van minh—bewildering machines—most of them destructive. We couldn't imagine that life in the capitalist world was anything other than a frantic, alien terror. Because, as peasants, we defined "politics" as something other people did someplace else, it had no relevance to our daily lives—except as a source of endless trouble. As a consequence, we overlooked the power that lay in our hands: our power to achieve virtually anything we wanted if only we acted together. The Viet Cong and the North, on the other hand, always recognized and respected this strength.*[8]

Chantha Nguon's *Slow Noodles: A Cambodian Memoir of Love, Loss, and Family Recipes* is a more recent memoir that mixes stories about her life during the second and third Indochina Wars with family recipes. Nguon was born in Cambodia in 1962, and her family fled to Vietnam in 1971. She then lived in a Thai refugee camp before migrating to the United States. She provides an engaging way to show students how the "Vietnam War" was a regional war:

> *The sun rose over a city transformed by unrest. The population of Phnom Penh had swollen with refugees, who streamed in from the surrounding forests and villages. In the countryside, bombs rained down (unofficially, but lethally) from American planes, in a covert campaign to destroy the Vietnamese Communists' operations in Cambodia. The destructive shelling fanned the flames of a civil war between government troops (backed by US aid) and Khmer Rouge revolutionaries, who—with the help of North Vietnamese fighters—were suddenly gaining territory and strength very quickly. Cambodia's neutrality was shattered. Phnom Penh's graceful boulevards were packed with soldiers and refugees and ringed with barbed wire, and the three rivers that flow through the capital were full of boats.*[9]

Southeast Asians' Experience of the Wars

Beyond women's perspectives, memoirs and novels can help students better understand how the Indochina Wars affected people across Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. Haing Ngor was a Cambodian doctor who spent four years in a Khmer Rouge prison camp. He eventually settled in the United States and became an actor, appearing in *The Killing Fields*. He told his life story in *Haing Ngor: A Cambodian Odyssey* (1987).

Bounsang Khamkeo was born in Laos and educated in France. He returned to Laos in 1973, wanting to help rebuild his country. He worked for the Laotian

government for six years, but he came into conflict with his political superiors. From 1981 to 1988, Khamkeo was in a Laotian prison. After his release, he migrated to the United States and wrote his memoir *I Little Slave: A Prison Memoir From Communist Laos*.

Bảo Ninh fought in the North Vietnamese army for ten years from 1969 to 1979. In 1991, he published *The Sorrow of War*, a novel based on his time in the army. The novel's characters collect bodies after the war, and we learn about different people's experiences during the war.

Viet Thanh Nguyen is a professor at the University of Southern California and the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Sympathizer*. He was born in South Vietnam in 1971. In 2016, he published *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. He explores how Americans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong experienced and remember the wars.

Conclusion

Teaching world history always involves challenges. As teachers, we often struggle to cover thousands of years of history in a matter of weeks. There is no magic solution that works for everyone. Instead of worrying about how much information I included in my courses, I worry more about how I present the material. Instead of teaching a world history course that privileges Eurocentric or Americentric interpretations, I prioritize students engaging with a wide geographic range of interpretations and experiences. Using propaganda posters can help students understand how governments interpreted and justified their participation in the military conflicts in mainland Southeast Asia in the second half of the twentieth century. The books discussed in this essay are probably too long for most world history surveys, but they could be excerpted for students. More importantly, each book centers the experiences of Southeast Asians who lived through the Indochina Wars and allows us to get beyond the Americentric Vietnam War narrative.

Bram Hubbell writes about teaching world history for the newsletter *Liberating Narratives*. In his writing, he focuses on helping teachers decolonize the teaching of world history by centering African, Asian, Indigenous, and Latinx voices in the classroom. He currently lives in Charleston, South Carolina, but can often be found traveling all over Afro Eurasia. Bram's travel informs his writing and approach to teaching. He lived in New York City for over twenty years and taught world history at Friends Seminary. He also served on the AP World History curriculum and test development committees for many years and regularly participated in the AP reading.

Notes

[1] James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-2010,* Sixth Edition (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 237-256.

[2] Cord Arendes and Stefanie Samida, "Historical Culture and Popular Culture," *Public History Weekly* 11 no. 6 (2023). Accessed September 20, 2024. https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/11-2023-6/historical-popular-culture

[3] Sara Wicht, "Names Do Matter," *Learning for Justice*. September 9, 2015. Accessed September 20, 2024. https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/names-do-matter

[4] Logevall, Fredrik, "The Indochina wars and the Cold War, 1945–1975" in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds. *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume II: Crises and Détente* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 286.

[5] For example, see Logevall "The Indochina wars and the Cold War."

[6] Edward H. Judge and John W. Langdon, *The Struggle against Imperialism: Anticolonialism and the Cold War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Jessica Chapman, *Remaking the World: Decolonization and the Cold War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2023); Trevor Getz, "Connecting Decolonization and the Cold War," *OER Project*. Accessed 5 December 2024. https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/PDFs/1750/Unit8/Connecting-Decolonization-and-the-Cold-War

[7] Karen Gottschang Turner with Phan Thanh Hao, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998); Sandra C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[8] Ly Le Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Women's Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Anchor Books, 2017), xvi.

[9] Nguon, Chantha, *Slow Noodles: A Cambodian Memoir of Love, Loss, and Family Recipes* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2024),eBook, no page numbers.