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Source: *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 141-169

Published by: University of Minnesota Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.2.1.0141>

Accessed: 21-09-2016 21:43 UTC

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LONG T. BUI

The Global War City: Traces of the Militarized Past in Saigon's Urbanized Future

I don't like it [HCMC] at all. Too polluted and too much traffic. Because of the economic recession, I can't afford to go back to the U.K. But here, the cost is less and I can live a comfortable lifestyle . . . but it's not London.¹

—Karen, language educator

Saigon is a different kind of world-class city. It has gone through much.²

—Zoe, art gallery director

THE ARTICLE ELUCIDATES the enduring effects of the modern warfare in cities like Saigon, whose traces of military violence govern its spatial logics and limit its world-class potential. Though Vietnam finds itself in the throes of globalization and mass urbanization, the country continues to be synonymous with war, a symbolic association that refuses to quit given the pivotal role war has played in Vietnam's history. Major urban centers like Saigon have gained prominence as the primary engine for the nation's fast-paced economic reforms, but the city, much like the rest of country, must still deal with the nation's militarized legacies in a number of ways. Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), as it is officially called, was once the capital of the now defunct South Vietnamese nation, or the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), the former puppet regime and ally of the United States, which fell to communism in 1975. Though the nation's capital is based in the Northern city of Hanoi, Saigon remains the central hub for the country's transnational labor markets, consumer circuits, capital flows, and cultural production. In a mostly rural country, Saigon acts a vital conduit for developing the urban infrastructure of a

communist country experimenting with free trade; and while it might appear as another example of an Asian municipality on the verge of becoming a “global city,” I argue that Saigon’s uneven growth patterns and questionable future as such raise issues about how non-Western locales experience urbanization as a historical by-product of war. Recognizing the enduring impact of state violence upon the scale, scope, and pace of urbanization in Southeast Asia, this article grapples with HCMC’s messy past as the former base of U.S. military operations. Turning away from Eurocentric structural notions of the “global city” with its First World developmentalist assumptions, this essay explores Vietnam’s busiest, most populated city as a spatial terrain bearing traces of war that have not disappeared from public consciousness, one with implications for how scholars conceive urban change today.

Through the concept of a “global war city,” this article weaves together methods and approaches from anthropology, geography, and history to forge an interdisciplinary discussion of contemporary HCMC. Traditional studies of regional urbanization tend to focus on empirical observations of the circulation of people, goods, and capital. This study initiates new critical inquiries to reframe “global Asia,” recognizing how non-Western territories wracked by colonial wars and military political economies open up the study of urbanization and globalization with attention to historical specificity and theoretical depth. As the Vietnamese socialist government becomes more and more reliant on megacities like Saigon to propel its resource-strapped nation forward into the capitalist world system, a question concerns how this bustling city, full of tourists, educated professionals, rural migrants, businessmen, expats, and the like, crystallizes the splintered identity of a country operating nominally under two systems of rule (communist and capitalist), a country that was once spatially bifurcated and ideologically split into those two opposing parts during the Cold War. Outside popular imaginings of Saigon as an emergent “global city” moving toward modernity and higher standards of living set by the West (Figure 1), we might ask how HCMC’s complicated form of urbanity reflects what I term the “global war city.” Further questions to ponder include, How does contemporary Saigon register the latent and residual influence of the U.S. Cold War machine, which ironically helped make it into the urban global attraction that it is today? How is Saigon and its cosmopolitan consciousness imagined or challenged by its residents and by planners? How can the public fantasy of the global city and globalization be disarticulated to consider the connections and continuities between peacetime and wartime, the past and the present, the local and the global?



Figure 1. Street sign that translates into English as “Vietnam is on the road to industrialization and modernization” (photo taken by author).

This is not a comprehensive study of HCMC that documents the conspicuous experience of urbanization but rather a critical piece that seeks to apprehend how this city port has been conceived historically and contemporaneously under legacies of war. Through this understudied site, I offer a transdisciplinary intervention in the fields of global studies, Asian area studies, urban studies, and history/memory studies to demonstrate how the policies and effects of war shaped and still shape the differential urbanization of cities, while puncturing the discourse of globalization and global cities by considering the “historical arrangements—and indelible traces—of genocidal state violence” (Rodriguez 2010, 3). With select examples and testimony of real-life people, I reconfigure HCMC as a fragmented cityscape riven with social inequalities, whose causes or origins can be drawn from ignoble times. Looking to the future with a rear view to the chaotic past resituates Saigon’s bumpy road toward global city status by taking into account the profound warping effects of protracted fighting upon this city.

Given the convoluted nature of discussing a historically rich site like HCMC, this essay is divided into two parts. The first section threads secondary resources to argue for the major influence of the American War in Southeast Asia, stressing the considerable impact of military-funded large-scale urbanization projects in Saigon. The second part uses everyday examples to analyze present-day forms of urbanization in the city inasmuch as they manifest the traces of war as well as the present conditions of the new world order. If *traces* are the marks or objects indicating the past existence of something, what might it mean to remark upon the traces of war in present-day Saigon? The traces of Saigon provide a differing model for conceptualizing urbanization in HCMC, holding forth the contention that locales in the Third World still bear in ways not fully noticeable the brunt of global warfare as well as the First World's hold on notions of progress and modernity.

Saigon stands out as a *global war city*, which I define as a city organized and reorganized by militarized capitalist forces and whose development has been sparked, stunted, and deeply molded by political economies of war that ultimately express the growing modern interlinkages between regional activities and international developments. Although this seems to suggest that many cities in the world could be labeled as global war cities, I recognize that those conquered territories in the so-called Global South cannot escape their prior encounters with colonial warfare and military destruction as easily as those in the wealthier industrialized imperial nations of the Global North. For this reason, the global war city is a more apt category for Southeast Asian cities like Saigon, long struggling to define their future apart from past traumas and devastation as former war zones. In a sense, cities such as Saigon are global when considering their place within a colonialized planet, divided into First and Third Worlds, East and West, poor and rich, rather than *globalizing* and becoming interconnected through world trade. The world is always already global, according to Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007), where all non-European populations and territories are plotted on a "horizon of death" (signified by wars, savagery, and poverty) in a spatial-temporal configuration drawn up by Euro-American colonial powers. Recognizing the global traces of military colonialism in urban locales throws caution to the winds of change to ensure that the Saigon of yesteryear is not forgotten in the city's headlong rush toward modernity. In the following, I reappraise HCMC's urban culture to build on what anthropologist Christina Schwenkel (2006) has observed as Vietnam's "recombinant history" or the ways "global entanglements" create the narratives and knowledge that shape perceptions of society. Whereas Schwenkel spotlights

practices of memory and historical representation, I build on her observation to instead examine history's polymorphous "trace" as the surviving mark or sign of a process thought to be gone or done. Where *traces* means the representation of something from the past without entirely presenting it (Ricoeur 2004), one might ask about the traces of the past that came before found in art, urban planning designs, and public discourse, which are constantly being put to work in constructing "traces of the futures" (Till 2005). Traces, alongside the complementary work of memory, dovetail with philosopher Walter Benjamin's (1999) anti-progressive sense of history to account for developmental changes in "the city" and the world beyond expectations of new "adventures" or "immediate experience," the challenge being that "whoever follows traces must not only pay attention; above all, he must have given heed already to a great many things" (801). Before exploring these traces, the discussion turns first to explicating the ways twentieth-century wars have molded cities like HCMC into global war cities.

■ WAR'S IMPACT ON VIETNAMESE URBAN LIFE

Urban studies scholars have long identified city planning as a prime source for enforcing state ideology and dominant power structures (Soja 2000; Lefebvre 2003; Davis 2006; Sassen 2001). The French, for instance, were more interested in extracting resources and creating comfort for their colonialists than in improving the domestic lives of the enslaved local inhabitants. French "internal colonial urbanization" focused on mobilizing space toward a new city-based authority, turning a once social and intercultural site of trade or exchange into a highly political one (Peycam 2013). Urbanization in the non-Western colonial context thus reflects the legacies of Western domination, and the strange hybridity of a former colonial *entrepôt* and bastion of military capitalism like Saigon displays forms of urban expansion that are often not reflected in the usual European order of things (McGee 2009, 243). According to Michel Foucault (2002), the Western *epistémè* is one built on scientific discipline shaped through governing codes that determine public knowledge and modern life. Increased attention to the space of society as a contested terrain of power or knowledge challenges the merits of any dominant ideology that purports to be universal or "global" that can remedy what he describes as the postcolonial versus modernist struggles born out of "the omnipresence of war and the threat of war—from colonial wars of expansion and wars of independence to contemporary imperial ventures" (quoted in Walkowitz and Maya 2008, 6). Traditionally, globalization and urbanization scholars in the West fail to take into account

the impact that colonial wars have had on the postcolonial “underdevelopment” of the non-West (except as a cultural deficit or unfortunate problem of the past). Assumptions about globality are left intact insofar as Western nations are global, while the rest of the world is only striving to be.

An early urban bias was concretized with the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam (1955–75), where great emphasis was placed on city planning as a measure of population control. While France utilized rural areas as remote sites for natural resource extraction and labor exploitation of peasant plantation workers to procure more kickbacks for Saigon’s urbanized colonial elites, the United States updated that tradition to appropriate the rural areas for the military defense of the city-fortress of Saigon (Wright 1991, 213–16). French colonial urbanism paved the way for the rapid spread of American-style military urbanization in the late 1960s to 1970s. Under the Americans, a modern lifestyle corresponded with objectives to “contain” the country’s masses within tightly controlled boundaries or encampments (Tyner 2009, 57).³ The dirigiste policy of “forced draft urbanization” advocated by influential American neoconservatives like Samuel Huntington (1968) was engineered and implemented through a promise of military protection from communists, premised on the added assumption that a “pro-Western” Vietnam would turn into a “functioning polity” (642). While U.S. military forces decimated the countryside and the North, the South, anchored by Saigon, became the bedrock for grand American dreams of global power.

Vietnam is cemented in world history as a global flashpoint for the planetary armed struggle between colonized peoples and their oppressors.⁴ Whereas the French “internationalized” Vietnam, the United States sought to “globalize” it during the Cold War. According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), the American War in Vietnam was the last stage before the United States fully assumed the imperialist mantle once occupied by Western Europeans, forging new international hierarchies with the superpower at the helm, manifesting new spatial forms of control that built upon the ashes of colonialism. In the age of “multiple Vietnams,” Negri and Hardt claim, we must bear witness to an “accumulation of struggles” that are virtual and actual, global and local, urban and “post-urban” (263). But while Negri and Hardt focus on global empire as a “utopian project whose main interest today lies in the new forms of identity it unleashed across the globe” (Brennan 2003, 339), globalization theorist Timothy Brennan observes that the philosophers fail to capture the local struggles of Third World spaces and the “residual” forms of

global–historical struggle upon these violated spaces. Recognizing that “Vietnam,” and, by extension, “Saigon,” circulates as a global sign and trace of empire’s historical violence, I turn now to exploring how the American War in Vietnam specifically molded the urban terrain.

South Vietnam was a key site for the United States to extend its global influence through foreign “nation building” and covert military actions. Implemented in all Southern provinces, the program of “de-ruralization” coupled with “forced urbanization” only ended up weakening popular support for the U.S.-supported South Vietnamese military regime (McCullum 1983), as the greater efforts to fortify Saigon as the last anti-communist stronghold against the Việt Cộng communists only displaced more and more people from their homes. Though Saigon was mostly shielded from the aerial bombardment and artillery attacks in other cities, and also did not suffer as much from the poorly executed socialist postwar redevelopment plans that turned many of Vietnam’s cities into urban failures and dystopic “slums” (Schwenkel 2013), it would be a mistake not to view Saigon as a war city, as its evolution into a major urban conglomerate cannot be entirely divorced from the “hyper-urbanization” fostered under military imperatives (McGee 2009, 37). One way the U.S. military and the South Vietnamese puppet regime shored up their sovereignty was by developing a metropolitan urban economy in the city, as it was believed that the formation of a bourgeois society of consumers dependent on foreign material comforts and global products would not play into the hands of communism, the latter viewed as champions of rural local values.

During the reconstruction period, Vietnam’s nationalist scholars lamented the sinister ways the U.S. aid had suspended the creation of an industrial base in South Vietnam, flooding it instead with so many foreign exports that the fledgling nation could not compete with other capitalist countries or make its own living. The infiltration of U.S. loans, which included \$260 million for construction works and capital investments, persisted until 1973, the year when U.S. troops pulled out in large numbers. This U.S.-led effort to “Vietnamize” the war and make South Vietnam independent actually led to more U.S. aid and the importation of technology and equipment from allied nations like Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan (Nguyen 1975, 235), establishing the international infrastructure for South Vietnam’s continued dependence on foreign capital, even after the war. Through the symbolism and political power of Saigon, South Vietnamese urbanism came to signify a site of global intervention, even though Saigon’s culture has always been throughout history a synthesis of many influences.

Although it is not entirely correct to say that the war was the sole driving force for Saigon's rapid urbanization, a focus on the U.S.-influenced Cold War period digs up much of the material conditions that enabled Saigon to bounce back from a state of decline to stage an amazing revival at a time when the rest of the country is trying to "catch up" in the age of globalization. An awareness of urbanization processes tied to the governmentality of war helps to distillate the traces of the global militarized past in the age of global empire. While the countryside farmer was propped up as national icon in the post-1975 era, and the urbanite as the embodiment of foreign corruption, the city dweller as a model of both national and global citizenship came back in vogue during the 2000s with the capitalist boom in Vietnam. This city focus, exacerbated by an uneven spread of foreign economic investment in Vietnam, led to increased rural-urban divides. New market policies created gains for city dwellers, because one-party governments under strong political pressure from the urban population tend to direct resources to the city instead of to the rural areas (Fesselmeyer and Le 2010). Such inequality can be equally attributed to postwar socialist policies that were reacting harshly to the American style of forced urbanization.

■ POSTWAR DE-URBANIZATION AND NEO-URBANIZATION

Deeply altered by both American militarized urbanization and Vietnamese population redistribution, the primate city of Saigon never experienced any kind of permanent or uniform sense of development. In their study of urban regional policy in Vietnam, Lang and Kolb (1980, 294) argue that the U.S. policy of "forced urbanization" corralled millions of people in the vicinity of Saigon, leading to major unemployment, starvation, and disease. Before the war, the vast majority of South Vietnam's population was rural based, but the American War urbanized the populace in less than one generation so that, by the end of the war, South Vietnam was the second most industrialized nation in Southeast Asia after Singapore (Goodman and Franks 1975). After 1975, communist officials mobilized all their resources to remake Saigon into the epicenter for managing "social order" and combating the malaise associated with urbanism, hoping to move the city from its former label as a den of American "neo-colonial poison" (Taylor 2000).⁵ Postwar efforts to "deprogram" Saigon's urban denizens and extricate them from their pro-Western consumerist roots failed. Equally a failure was the program to "depopulate" the city and alleviate crowding in the urban core, which meant relocating families to the rural areas of the country so they could become "reeducated" in communist principles. But many residents returned to the city

with the economic collapse of collectivist farming and national gross domestic product (Bhaduri 1977).⁶

Beginning in 1975, the socialists created a New Economic Zones program, designed to provide agricultural work opportunities to unemployed city dwellers seen as immoral, backward, lazy, and inept.⁷ The Communist Party's efforts to "purge" Americanism from the city clashed with the government's same knowledge that Saigon's concentration of international economic assets gave Vietnamese leaders a sort of wind-fall for an "ideologically unadventurous industrialization of the country" (Thrift and Forbes 2012, 156). The phenomenon of the global war city, as I locate it within Saigon, raises queries regarding the particularity of cities as not only a matter of global empire but also a matter of effective domestic authority. The Vietnamese government's current practice of "red capitalism" provides interesting lessons on urbanization as shaped by a series of state policies responding to internal "culture wars" as well as the "savage urbanization" promulgated by the U.S.–South Vietnamese military regimes (Harms 2011, 204).

Beyond the national scene, HCMC sits ambiguously within larger discourses of globalization and the "global city" that flowered in the 1980s, which attributed the slowdown in urbanization in cities like HCMC to the problem of socialist mismanagement rather than to external pressures like war and colonialism. By blaming the Global South for its own retardation, the Global North could maintain a monopoly on "global city" discourse (Thrift and Forbes 2012). Henri Lefebvre (2003, 113) observes that urban space is "no differently defined in a socialist country than it is anywhere else," because urbanization is a "planetary phenomenon." While the language of world cities came into vogue in the 1980s, Lefebvre was one of the earliest to analyze its problems in the late 1960s, as the Vietnam War was heating up. Just as the illogic of war is obfuscated by the supposed "logic" of realpolitik and political game theories, the rationalism of global cities, according to Lefebvre, hides what he calls the "urban problematic," where the myth and "science" of global urbanization exacerbate and mask over the domination of the world's urban centers over the peripheries. Critiquing globalization and global city discourse through sites like Saigon (and the concept of the global war city) promises an avenue for fielding questions related to space and who defines space as well as those about who controls temporal ideas of progress. In this field of inquiry, Saigon is not an urban utopia on the global edge, or even an underdeveloped city, but a heterotopic site, as philosopher Michel Foucault might say, a cityscape that brings together the unitary and/or heterogeneous

assumption of the “global” with the gaping irreconcilable schisms of “war.”

Many people now celebrate Saigon’s remarkable return to form, touting the rebirth of one of the most commercially vibrant cities in Southeast Asia. Vietnam’s push for a “socialist-oriented market economy” continues to draw on the historical traces and cultural capital of Saigon as a mecca of urban agglomeration, whose rate of development moves at breakneck speed compared to the rest of the country. The rapidity of change in Saigon, from a decade of military dictatorship under U.S. sponsorship to a decade of socialist authoritarianism to the current period of crony socialist capitalism, means that this global war city is always under construction and a prime target for hegemonic forces.

■ BEYOND THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN SUPPLEMENT TO GLOBAL STUDIES AND AREA STUDIES

There has always been interest in theorizing the city as a spatial metaphor for modernity. Walter Benjamin (1999) argues for a method of viewing human progress and geography that presents an antievolutionary sense of history, rooting out the idealism of global human progress and drawing out what he calls the “multiplication of traces” (225). The imperial city, says Fiona Ngô (2014, 11), helps to record the multiple traces and interconnections of empire as “a global spirit and a global culture.” Cities accumulate imperial debris and historical detritus, providing the surplus capital that funds the urban projects and empires of tomorrow. Redeploying Benjamin’s notion of the multiplication of history’s traces and Ngô’s notion of the imperial city as a global formation throws a wrench into our governing rubrics about space and time, igniting a crisis about how we know what we know (epistemology) that reconfigures our “senses and the meanings attached to the sensible” (Ngô 2014, 75).

The urban city has gained even more importance and attention for rethinking global and area studies. Specifically, Saigon/HCMC—the city with two names—helps us to reframe national imaginaries and global cartographies but not necessarily move *beyond* or *outside* them. Indeed, there is much divergence as well as slippage between the popular spoken colloquial name of “Saigon”—overseas Vietnamese refuse to call it otherwise for cultural and political reasons, as it is a reminder of its significance as the former capital of the defunct RVN—and the official designation of “Ho Chi Minh City,” used by the communist government for ideological and business reasons since 1976. Semantic confusion alludes to the uncertainties of firmly mapping Saigon/HCMC as either a

geopolitical or linguistic entity. Dispute over what exactly to call this place means Saigon is less a bounded physical thing than what literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt (2007) has termed a “contact zone,” forced into global encounters fostered during the colonial and Cold War eras. As the conduit for the international pull of the West and other powerful Asian nations like China, ground zero for proxy wars between world powers, Saigon and other cities in Southeast Asia, such as Bangkok and Bandung, have been instrumental in mediating global crisis and the uneven transition of world history from colonialism to postcolonialism, from the Cold War to the “post–Cold War” period.

Global wars do not end without a trace of their former existence. As scholars have noted, the Southeast Asian city’s brush with superpowers has left it deprived of “its life-giving substance. . . . These are the lesson the most recent emerging ‘global cities’ in the region, those in Vietnam, have before them, as well as their own draining and drained past encounters with the global encounters of the Cold War” (Bishop, Phillips, and Yeo 2003, 28). The HCMC of today is still haunted by its spectral double, the Saigon of before. It is also haunted by the many “Little Saigons” found all over the world today that replicate Saigon’s Cold War history and the memory of South Vietnam. For many urban studies scholars, HCMC operates as a robust site of “exceptional globalization,” negotiating the dilemmas and gaps between “global urbanism” and “post-colonialism,” which in turn propels “unconventional formulations” of the city (Bishop, Phillips, and Yeo 2003, 3–5). Tying postcolonial studies with globalization and urban studies (fields where Southeast Asia has been less invisible), Saigon helps to remind scholars of the way war both prompts and preempts a city’s potential to rapidly or effortlessly transform into another global “city of the future,” and the way military adventurism has decimated poor nations like Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Beyond the plotting of Southeast Asia as a “supplement” to global or Asian studies, the particular positioning of the United States within the global imaginary of the Vietnam War—where Americans stand center as the main protagonists of an epic tale with Vietnamese as faceless minor characters (Espiritu 2014)—can often turn the vivid lingering historical memories of war into mere traces of history, absent of presence and visibility. Emptying the memory of Vietnam as the focal point of global conflagration, the country becomes another up-and-coming “developing nation” on the horizon, with its major cities, such as Saigon, wannabe “global cities.” Though Vietnam and Saigon are “global” considering their modern roots, they are not seen as such in a postmillennial zeitgeist propelled by futuristic “end of history” narratives that promote an

Americanized global culture characterized by historical–imperial amnesia (Fukuyama 2006).

From the Vietnamese perspective, time and history do not work in a straight line from the old to the new, from the national to the global. As a country historically segmented by culture, class, geography, and politics, Vietnam's different regions push ahead at multivariate speeds to stage a topsy-turvy movement forward in time with the possibility of returning to the past. As a global war city developed quickly by military necessity, Saigon holds primacy as a case study in how history moves diffusely through contemporary urban geographies. My designation of Saigon as a global war city echoes Jodi Kim's (2010, 16) reminder of the unceasing "effects and traces of American empire" in Asia, which require a deft reading for that which should be gone but still endures or remains.

Taking stock of HCMC's urbanized future in relation to its militarized past can be tricky. Take, for example, a 2006 *New York Times* article written by Seth Mydans titled "Ho Chi Minh City on the Cusp of Greatness." In the *International Herald Tribune*, that same essay was replicated and given the alternative title "Ho Chi Minh City Hurries to Become a Megacity" (Mydans 2006b). A day later, it was reprinted again without any content change in another media source with a different title, "High-Rise Development Plans Threaten Vietnam's Once Gracious Former Capital" (Mydans 2006c). How do we make sense of this rendering of HCMC as a city (1) on the cusp of an *undefined greatness*, (2) on track to *becoming a megacity*, and (3) developing in ways that will endanger its *once glorious* past? The author invokes the city's once glorious past, but there is little detail about what he means, especially in regard to its specific ugly history as the former capital of the French protectorate of Cochinchina (1862–1954) and the capital of South Vietnam (1954–75). Saigon's imperial past is treated less as a grounded baseline for studying present-day urbanization than as the traces of something abstract and fleeting, now disappearing before the materializing visions of HCMC as a global urban playground. In the article, Mydan mentions war only very briefly as a reason for the city's hobbled development, a partial reason why, he says, Saigon will not become another Singapore. This selective forward-but-past-looking gaze exemplifies the vague ways of talking about a city's history without explicitly recounting its historical traumas or genealogies. In citing the nickname of Saigon under French rule as the "Pearl of the Orient," Mydans (2006a) recalls imperial stylishness rather than brutality, while blatantly ignoring the equally important influence of the Americans, whose military-heavy influence might appear crass compared to what he deems to be French colonial sophistication. Rushing to advance

Saigon as a future world-class city, Mydans says the following: “Meet the world’s next great metropolis, a once-gracious city bursting from the confines of its history. . . . Held back by a half-century of war and privation, it is charging forward with gigantic plans for urban expansion and development, determined to seize what it is certain is its rightful place as a world leader.”

The author’s enthusiastic quote is supplemented by more carefully weighted words from Nguyen Trong Hoa, director of city planning for Saigon: “We want to become the biggest city in Vietnam . . . and be the center of Asia and the center of the world as well.” Nguyen represents the mounting desire by urban planners to turn Vietnam’s most dynamic metropolis into a global city even though the pathway to this goal is still uncertain. “The city is not yet sure of its own identity,” opines architect Nguyen Van Tat. “For some developers, modernity is the next step in the city’s development. . . . City officials are now redefining it for the next century or more, and the question is how much of old Saigon will remain. . . . It needs to have a past.” Nguyen’s attention to the city’s past speaks to the need to personalize and historicize the Southeast Asian global war city in the face of both its historical dehumanization and present-day renovation under the bulldozers of change. In a 2015 *New York Times* article titled “Capitalist Soul Rises as Ho Chi Minh City Sheds Its Past,” the Northern population of Hanoi is viewed as having a more conservative outlook, while the more ostentatious Saigonese are, according to Ted Osius, the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, “the most entrepreneurial people on earth,” comprising young people whom one businessman says are stuck on a “culture of materialism for its own sake” (Fuller 2015). In any case, these statements reflect the objective to capture Saigon in ways that both reflect and deflect from its complicated historical identity as a world target.

■ THE NEW SAIGON AS WORLD TARGET

My adoption of the global war city concept responds to the “post-national” turn in area studies, observing the potential of cities to challenge the disciplinary insularity and occasional provincialism of academic fields like “Asian studies.” Approaching “Asia as method” rather than a place to apply Eurocentric scientific methodologies, says Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010), decolonizes hegemonic thinking about space and place, emphasizing “deimperial” ways of studying taken-for-granted categories like “urban,” “city,” “globalization,” “Asia,” and even “Southeast Asia.” Per Chen, all geographies must revisit not only questions of spatial power and knowledge but also issues of history and time. Recent

attention to “global Asia” as the next phase of world politics and economy, he says, conjures the traces of a global historical memory, one common “among Asians [involving] suspended recollections of being conquered” (67). Many global cities in Asia are being built atop former imperial war zones, but this “palimpsest” layering does not erase the traces of empire. Instead, it can provoke anxieties of another global conquest of Asia as the continent once again becomes a world target.

One primary arena for world targeting in Asia is local urban design. Saigon’s city planners are developing in an area called “Saigon South” (District 7) as an extension of HCMC. As an insular, fully “modern city” located within the larger metropolis, Saigon South is filled with swanky apartments, shopping malls, expensive hotels, elite schools, modern hospitals, golf courses, and an amusement park—District 7 promises to be the new face of urban Saigon, which, for Seth Mydans (2006a), promises to be “neat, clean and orderly . . . a futuristic Saigon, leached of its history.”⁸ He goes on to compare this area to the “Little Saigon” ethnic enclaves in the United States and the world constructed by former refugees from South Vietnam, most of whom are urban elites from Saigon. He says, “The fresh face of Saigon South is uncannily similar to the version of a modern Vietnam that was created by refugees as Little Saigon in Southern California. . . . Big Saigon is being transformed into a big Little Saigon.” The speaker is comparing emergent urban lifestyles in Vietnam to the pockets of Vietnamese diasporic life overseas, where the neighborhoods constructed by overseas “exiles” (many resistant to communist Vietnam) are propped up as models and analogues of a “modern Vietnam” represented by Saigon. By collapsing Little Saigon with the big Little Saigon, the speaker not only strips global war cities of their geopolitical affiliations and historical connotations but suggests that all modern spaces are interchangeable. Such simplification discounts what makes different cities unique. At the same time, such rhetoric about the global commonality of local urban cities refracts a poor understanding of how war-created spaces cannot simply “jump scale,” especially as it transposes one space (First World suburbs) with another (Third World suburbs). Such sleight-of-hand points to the fact that the study of “empire is in the details” (Lutz 2006). Although such talk seems to offer another example of “glocalization,” or the ways the local and global interact (Robertson 1992), glocalization is a process integral to but distinct from what I am describing as the global war city, because the latter pays much more attention to historical memory, trauma, and temporality to resist the sense of time–space compression assumed under glocalization (and even globalization).

Moving beyond pure spatial abstraction and leaps, I find it necessary to recognize concreteness and uniqueness of place in the study of the global war city. For planning purposes, the Saigon metropolitan area has been divided into five subregions. Efforts to suburbanize the city's border zone and gentrify the center demonstrate the present urge to turn Saigon into the "world's next great metropolis," despite Vietnam's overall staggering economy and delayed construction plans due to the major hit of a global recession in the 2000s. Despite this internal fraying as a reflection of global currents, bold plans for Saigon as the urban model for Vietnam testify to the attempts to bring a "new standard and urban society to Vietnam in a privately run global city [that] has all the hallmarks of utopian visions" (Douglass and Huang 2007, 23).

Saigon South is fitfully emerging as the swanky side of HCMC, an area built upon reclaimed land along an extended part of the city to the east of the Saigon River. The limited impacted space of Saigon's inner city is a major reason for the sub-urbanization and conurbation in outer areas. There are little reliable and consistent statistical data on urban planning in HCMC, but those that are available suggest an eccentric pattern of development catalyzed by multinational corporate interests. Unlike the loosely organized districts of old Saigon planned under the war powers of the French and Americans, Saigon South features urban projects carried out by a global team of U.S. and East Asian companies. Saigon's main investors interestingly hail from wealthy Asian countries, such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, that originally profited from their Cold War military alliances with the United States, which opened up Southeast Asia's virgin labor and consumer markets to these East Asian powerhouses.

Spatial order is highly imposed as a matter of making South Saigon the new paradigm of city-global life. The planning of central Saigon is asymmetrical, spreading out in a number of directions, with uneven street blocks reflective of its history of hurried planning under colonial military authorities, whereas the exurb of South or new Saigon is mapped along neat spatial coordinates that impart a sense of conformity, homogeneity, and regularity in accord with "international" standards of "metropolization" (Wust, Bolay, and Du 2002).

Traces of war can also be found inscribed within the contemporary discourse on the (sub)urbanization of Saigon. On the official website for the 2014 Global Economic Symposium, the development of District 7 was touted as "projecting social responsibility" into the "hearts and minds of the people" to achieve urban sustainability.⁹ Such language borrows literally from the militaristic propaganda language used by the United

States to wage a war to win over Vietnamese “hearts and minds” to project a sense of social responsibility into locals. Though the phrase was originally directed at the South Vietnamese in a speech by President Johnson in 1963, it also referred to the gifting of urbanized modernity to the rest of global humanity inasmuch as U.S.-directed urbanism in Saigon fed into larger global military projects that confer upon “other little nations . . . hope and electricity . . . striking a very important blow for the cause of freedom throughout the world.”¹⁰ In the Global Economic Symposium, the geopolitical lexicon of war is revived and recuperated not as a direct reference or link to the past but only as an indirect allusion to Vietnam’s violent history. The past is sanitized and a(na)esthetized even as it is commodified and fetishized. Cold War geopolitical vocabulary is slickly embedded in the vernacular of urbanized globalization as something assiduously acknowledged but not properly claimed or sourced; in other words, it operates as a trace. As cultural critic Rey Chow (2006) details in *The Age of the World Target*, the entire world is framed by military frameworks and lexicons, but we often do not know this. In this register, the global war city offers a flexible conceptual device or instrument for studying Asian urbanism, where space and language reflect what we already know but also what we are not allowed to know. The militarized aspects of globalization are hard to notice in cities like Saigon, given the slickness of the historic “transition” from imperialist imperatives to “global” interests. Chow quips, “In a country that was devastated by U.S. military forces and weapons such as Vietnam, there is, ironically, widespread welcome of the return of American businesses today” (104).

■ COMPARING GLOBAL WAR CITIES

What can be considered global seems obvious but needs to be contested. The term *global cities* is most identified with globalization scholar Saskia Sassen, who lists Tokyo, New York, and London as examples. Sassen (2001) defines the global city as an emblem of new frontiers of global capitalism juxtaposed with older temporalities and spatialities. Major thinkers of the neoliberal global city like Saskia Sassen, along with David Harvey, have offered much in theorizing the city in relation to late capitalism. David Harvey (1990) notices that globalization obviates capitalism’s propensity for “time–space compression.” Noting the time–space *decompression* found in Southeast Asia, however, other scholars recognize the historical (de)formations of “othered” world cities as reflecting an alternative form of or barrier to normative ideas of globalization, insofar as denizens in former war cities enact their own forms of urban spatial

mobility against the cosmopolitan demands of the “global community” and First World elites (Wang 2005; Sopranzetti 2014).

But war is often left out of discussion of the global city. Economic ratings companies like Kearney’s Global Cities Index classify such cities based on economic measures such as financial penetration, public transportation, and high urbanization. With the top cities in high-income nations, HCMC ranks low at number seventy, described as one of those cities “that have progressed significantly but may be running out of steam.”¹¹ Such global measures fail to take into account how cities like Saigon historically and spatially interact with the rest of world and the volatile nature of their geopolitical relationship to an international system built on military empire and conquest. Such metrics, according to sociologist Kimberly Kay Hoang (2010), would make Saigon always an “emergent international city” rather than a bona fide global city, forever residing at the periphery of world markets rather than being a place for centering global affairs. But what makes London more of a global city than, say, Saigon? Though London was heavily bombed during World War II, London’s preeminent status as the capital of the expansive British Empire gave it a long line of wealth and global resources (alongside U.S. recovery aid) to restore the city to its former glory. Saigon’s building capacity was deteriorated by decades of foreign meddling and exploitation, a problem exacerbated by a postwar U.S.-led embargo of communist Vietnam, impoverishing the country and constraining rebuilding efforts for decades. The study of global cities should ultimately be attuned to inequality and power, as Sassen reminds us, but my intervention builds on and revises her critique to suggest that although cities like London are indeed global cities, other global cities exist, those not afforded the same conditions to attain that lofty title.

A better point of comparison for Saigon is Seoul, a global war city of a more privileged kind, one dependent for many years on U.S. assistance to protect itself against communist North Korea. Under the seigniorage between an export-oriented economy and military aid, the Republic of Korea, anchored by the capital of Seoul, began its fast track to modernity, benefitting from the “bonanza” of America’s expanding war machine in Pacific Asia (Cumings 2005, 321). Meanwhile, the Republic of Vietnam and its capital of Saigon became too reliant on imported American–Korean goods to maintain its artificial urban culture and burst from its industrial “nonproductivity” and hypermilitary activities. Saigon’s stumbling efforts to rise above its Third World inferior status contrast with those of once-poor cities, like Seoul, that have risen from that position. Though Seoul has all the negative features of an “Asian global

city,” with all its attendant problems of social turmoil, “illiberal” authoritarian governments, and economic inequality (Yeung 1996), its glossy current image as a global city was a reason for why it was chosen as the site of the 1988 Olympics in the same year that HCMC was starting to toy with the idea of private property.

When speaking about urbanization in global war cities, context matters. Whereas the Western perspective takes urbanization in Asia as unprecedented and futuristic, trained mostly on the megacities of north-east Asia—such as Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo, Taipei, and Hong Kong (a concentration that reveals a bias in the imagination and theorizing of “global Asia”)—another contextualization is needed to account for the perverse urban formations of former conflict-ridden territories in Southeast Asia, such as HCMC or Phnom Penh, that project a different kind of Asian global futurity and urbanity that somehow cannot erase the traces of war on their terrorized landscapes. Instead of using quantitative indexes to measure the global character of cities, anthropologist Sylvia Nam (2011) considers it best to consider other idioms that do not suggest Eastern mimicry of a Western developmental template but rather express the ever shifting dynamics of city making in what we know as Southeast Asia.

Still, for many Western economists, third-rate cities like Saigon “lag” behind their Euro-American and East Asian counterparts, their underdevelopment blamed on the poor organization and corruption of local governments rather than the neocolonial–neoliberal global forces that delimit their productive capacities.¹² Without grappling with the imperialist historical roots underlying globalization and urbanization processes, there is little to no understanding of the hard path that cities like Saigon must take to become simply a “global city.” Despite recent claims of a “Vietnamese economic miracle” and “urban revival,” Vietnam is currently engaged in a different kind of war against its powerful enemy—the United States—whose army of command and power is wielded “less through military hardware and more through the dollar” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 247). Within the sphere of new global trade wars, there is greater emphasis on industrial self-management (and procuring greater loans from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) on the part of developing nations, suggesting that some countries are successful and others are not based on their own effort or lack thereof. Part and parcel to globalization discourse, urbanization becomes a local problem of “impoverished” cultures and disabled peoples rather than an issue of global hegemony and the war waged by the rich and powerful upon the poor and vulnerable. The next section turns to consumer and visual culture to examine this notion of Vietnam as involved in “another

war” with America and how the seemingly bygone problems of military empire crop up again in the global war city.

■ URBAN CULTURE WARS IN THE POSTSOCIALIST CITY

Traces of the war can still be largely felt in the city’s popular culture. In terms of music, Saigon was once filled with the sounds of sappy love songs and American-style rock music disparaged by communist leaders as opium for the masses, but the musical culture that now pervades all of Vietnam and HCMC is the “lament of the unpropitiated soul” of South Vietnam (Taylor 2000, 123).¹³ Stained by its debauched former wartime associations with loud music, sex, drugs, and crime, Southern urban culture typified by Saigon continues to hold a mirror to contemporary society to reflect past events. Attention to urban culture and the cultural wars of the city reveals the internecine struggle over meanings attached to a place, allowing for closer scrutiny of local restaurants, for instance, with tongue-in-cheek names like Miss Saigon’s Café, that reference a controversial American Vietnam War-related musical.

The Cold War memory of old Saigon is revived and recalibrated by former refugees who have returned to live in the city. One such returnee is Dinh Q. Lê, an artist who left Vietnam as a child refugee to come to the United States but who decided to return to Vietnam and bolster the art scene in Saigon. The denial of the historical legacy of the South Vietnamese republic by the current socialist government has forced Lê to cling diligently to his former Saigonese roots. Former exiles, once deemed enemies of the state, are now recruited for their global talents, money, and skills, but their political identities are not celebrated. Training his Western art education and gaze on the everyday streets of HCMC, Lê has created stunning pieces that take old film strips from the war to weave them into collages of latter-day urban life. The artist is famous for reappropriating the most famous photographic images from the war, all of which occurred in the South. In works like *Street Execution in Black* (Figure 2), he makes the visual argument that the spectacle of urbanized globalization cannot be held inseparable from the cultural memory and specter of urban warfare. The work showcases a pixelated famous image of the open public execution of a suspected communist by Saigon’s chief of police; its blurring renders history as a trace of the fading, eruptive past but our disruptive amnesiac future.

Other works overlay U.S. corporate logos found in the packaging materials for global commodities like video games, potato chips, and soft drinks on the overwrought globally circulated images of the Vietnam War. Such artistic displays combine the militarized international

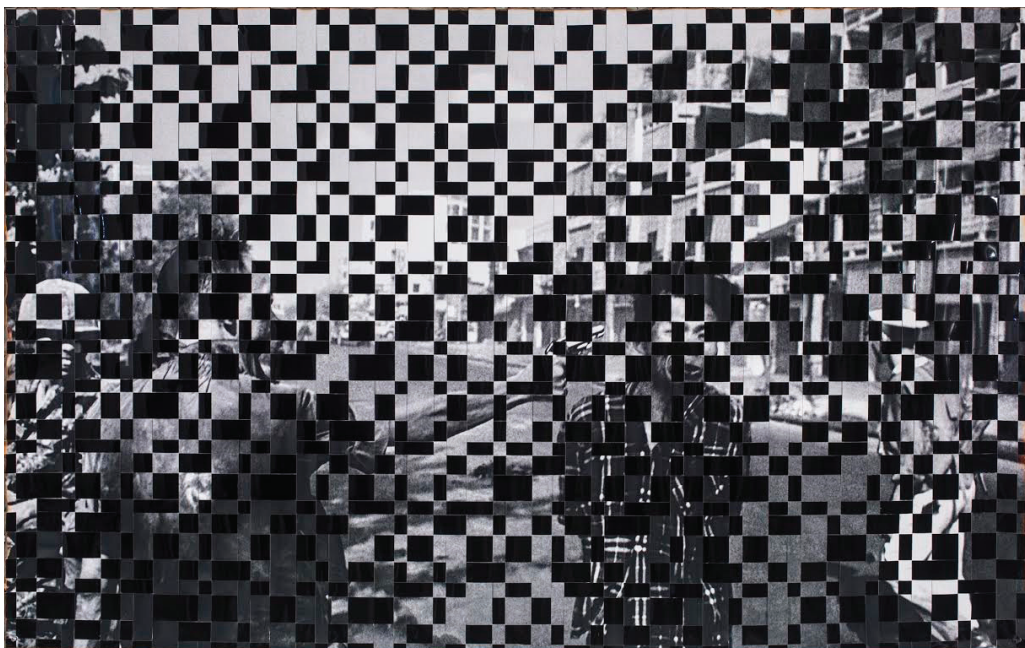


Figure 2. “Street Execution in Black.” c-prints and linen tape (by Dinh Q. Lê).

conditions of back “then” with the global violence of “now,” putting a focus, as I view it, on Saigon as a global war city, one that still bears the traces and residues of its old self, even if people’s memories or recollections of the past are spotty. Monitored and occasionally censored by local authorities, Dinh is a tentatively welcomed addition to HCMC’s arts scene. Despite the ability to outline what Pheng Cheah (2012) calls the “political aesthetics of the city,” the diasporic creative class is feeding the growing global desire for cultural consumption, while being cognizant of the elements of global–historical violence found in that consumption.

Visual traces of war can be identified in the countless products peddled to tourists in the city. Insofar as Vietnam is still associated with war, military souvenirs and memorabilia still retain popularity, though the demand for these items is declining given the heavy value placed on global signs of middle-class and high-end culture (Truitt 2008). With attention to history’s silent imprinting upon “mundane interstitial urban spaces” (Kim 2012, 226), one can peruse shops where merchandise with American brand names, such as Nike, Northface, and the New York Yankees, are stacked on top of hats embossed with the words “Saigon, Vietnam” (Figure 3).

Produced from the same cloth and differentiated only by insignia,



Figure 3. Hats sold by street vendor (photo taken by author).

the caps are identical in look if dissimilar in their connotation. The brightly colored hats displaying the cosmopolitanism of global cities like New York rub up against gray and green camouflage hues of the caps exhibiting the military symbolism of Saigon. The contrast and distinction between them expose the differences in meaning ascribed to everyday objects, where “assigning value to icons and images from the war reflects historically constituted socioeconomic and geopolitical relations . . . [that] reflect the Vietnamese state’s precarious global position as it negotiates global hierarchies of power and international (especially U.S.) pressure” (Schwenkel 2009, 101).

Saigon’s scuttling toward an urbanized future defined by global tourism pulsates through and against a shunted memory of this place as a site of military tourism. On a bus, an American woman told me that Saigon’s history of war made it “easier” for her to navigate the city insofar as South Vietnamese were used to seeing and dealing with foreigners, and especially with Americans. In other words, global contacts instituted by war allow foreign tourists easier access to the global war city. Historian Edwin Martini (2007) believes the “American war on Vietnam” is still going on, something carried past the terminal date of 1975, with the United States flexing economic and diplomatic muscle against a smaller

country, forcing Vietnam to adopt “global” standards of development that push the Vietnamese to accommodate an “invisible enemy” (Martini 2007). Beyond the economic realm, he considers that this war continues by other means within American movies, myths, and memorials that display U.S. hostility toward socialist Vietnam and indifference toward the South Vietnamese. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese communist government continues to work with the United States, its largest trading partner, but endeavors to censor anything that might glorify American military culture. All of this suggests that, despite its relative openness to the world, Vietnam continues to be engaged in a never-ending global war, one that has never stopped but rather has morphed into something else.

■ CONCLUSION: THE NEW WAR IN THE GLOBAL CITY

This article addresses the present moment of “globalization” and the problems of identifying “global cities” in Vietnam. Examining the traces of imperial warfare and history in Saigon, this article offers another way of knowing or exploring urbanization beyond the optics usually made available. In combining *global-war-city* to express the idea of the global war city, *war* sits as the conceptual bridge between the poles of *city* and *global*, provoking historically relevant questions about why some cities are global or not. Through this framing device, this project reappraises Saigon/HCMC’s transformation from a “former” symbol of Cold War military empire to a global magnet and world target for foreign multinationals. Moving from urban planning to popular culture to visual art, it maps out Saigon’s urban landscape as a mnemonic territory rife with conflicting impulses. Currently a public battle is raging over how to preserve the old remnants of Saigon, which remind people so much of Vietnam’s military heritage, and thus make way for the city’s unknown modern future. What must be destroyed and/or salvaged remains to be seen, but the legacies of war sit ensconced as a shadow presence that can intermittently be made known again through its traces. In the global war city, the traces of historical violence continue to reflect the unequal power relations of domestic and international society.¹⁴

In a communist country where organized protests, free press, and open criticism of the government are discouraged, the hope of national elites to reorient civil society for the global market find their biggest resistance in urban dissidents.¹⁵ The 2000s witnessed the flourishing of underground political cadres such as the Patriotic Youth alongside artist collectives, such as Tỳ Tiện (At Random), Cửa (Door), and Da Vàng (Yellow Skin), that use their art as a “mouthpiece” for the masses to chastise wrongdoing by the state. The government has limited tolerance for

these groups' growing influence, which signals a populist movement for reform in Saigon that can be traced to the war's many social movements.

Bắc Cường is a seventy-five-year-old artist who was politically active during the war's heyday. In my interview with him, he spoke of his participation in radical youth associations that criticized the South Vietnamese and U.S. governments.¹⁶ After 1975, he spent time in a reeducation camp, and Cường soon learned that the politics of urban warfare with which he engaged as a youngster proved too dangerous in communist Vietnam. Nowadays, the painter lives a busy, peaceful life teaching art and giving exhibition tours around the world. He believes the antiwar political cause he once adopted as a young artist continues to be pursued by underground groups like *Môi Miệng* (Open Mouth), a secret cadre of intellectuals and artists based in Saigon whose antecedents, he says, can be traced back to the protest traditions sparked during the war. Beyond these socially conscious groups, the elder believes it is a challenge to "convey the memory of war to the younger generation," who are driven more by urban global demands for better employment or leisure than by the struggles for freedom.

While Cường believes "war is bad for art," peacetime is just as stifling for creative expression, because it is not only the Vietnamese government working to diminish political consciousness but the American diplomats and foreign companies discouraging protest from disgruntled citizens and local wage earners making merchandise brands like Nike shoes for the global market. For the elder, a global war is still happening in the city. The price, Cường says, for the end of war is not freedom but a never-ending struggle for freedom in a world where "everything now has a price." Cường's statement loops back to the spirit of pre-1975 youth rebellion, gesturing toward a democratic movement still unfolding. He offers a perspective on the repoliticization as well as depoliticization of Saigon's urban populace and global-minded youth. As he sees it, the propping up of Saigon as a potential global city by corporations and planners does little for advancing "people power," evacuating the political histories of the city and diverting attention from the secret war currently in operation. Local acts of opposition to the "new modern" rub up against the dominant global order, he believes, where the popular sector acts as an agent of revolutionary change in a world that has commodified the idea of change. Future attempts to "globalize" and "urbanize" Saigon will only expose the underlying sources of conflict that have always simmered in this archetypical global war city.

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■ NOTES

I would like to thank the wonderful Christina Schwenkel for her comments on a draft of this article.

1. Informal interview, HCMC, June 7, 2013.
2. Formal interview, HCMC, July 8, 2013.
3. Amid the testy time of the 1954 Geneva Peace Accords, negotiations regarding the future of the Vietnamese nation, U.S. State Department officials encouraged the mass movement of people from the more populated Northern region into the South by targeting farmers and Catholics, spreading rumors of a possible takeover by the Chinese and a possible economic collapse in the Northern region. U.S. government propagandists stoked fears in Northerners, persuading many thousands to flee to the South, contriving a demographic advantage for the South in the coming national elections, a great migration aided by U.S. ships carrying thousands of “refugees” southward.
4. At the same time, this representation of Vietnam as an emblem of global anticolonialism conceals the Vietnamese regional colonization of ethnic minorities like the Cham, Laotians, and Cambodians.
5. For more on how the popular music of the Republican South now pervades Vietnam despite its former ban, see Taylor (2000).
6. Within two years of the capture of the city by the VC, 1 million people had been forcibly removed and more than a million had left as refugees in the following decade. Government handouts of rice were linked to pledges for people to leave urban Saigon for the countryside and work on farms to build their character. However, the decentralization of the command economy and economic reordering under the country’s *Đổi Mới* renovation policies in the late 1980s allowed many to return to HCMC to rebuild their lives as pro-capitalist urbanites.
7. It was hoped that as the population of HCMC fell to a reasonable level, food production would climb. However, the economic situation in HCMC in 1975–77 became worse when production plummeted and unemployment skyrocketed.
8. <http://www.nytimes.com/>.
9. <http://www.global-economic-symposium.org/>.
10. See Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Remarks at a Dinner Meeting of the Texas Electric Cooperatives, Inc.” at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.
11. <http://www.atkearney.com/>.
12. As part of Vietnam’s normalization of trade with the United

States and opening to the “Free World,” the country was forced to pay back the loans that South Vietnam owed to the United States. In other words, socialist Vietnam had to pay back the debts of its internal enemy to its external enemy to enter a putatively democratic world market. U.S. foreign military funds were used for the war effort and urbanization projects, bolstering South Vietnam’s construction of roads, power stations, and railroads. The destruction and debts of war faced by Vietnam constitute one major reason why it relies so heavily on foreign capital. Another example of foreign intrusion can be found in the fact that Vietnam’s formerly state-owned oil company is now co-owned with American, South Korean, and French interests—three countries that fought for South Vietnam against the North during the war (Sanger 1997).

13. I returned to Saigon months after the death of Phạm Duy, Vietnam’s prolific songwriter. Phạm Duy was a former refugee from Hanoi whose music was banned for thirty years by the Hanoi government, until his return to the country and resettlement in HCMC. After his death, multiple benefit concerts were staged in the city, and his music was widely distributed throughout the city. Popular musical shows today, such as *Vietnam Idol* and *The Voice*, are derivatives of popular American and Western ones. For more on the cultural imperialism and hybridity of this process, see Bui (2012).

14. Though in 2010, the population of HCMC was a little more than 7 million people (<http://www.gso.gov.vn/>), the actual population of the city is probably significantly higher than official estimates because the city population is more likely to contain 10–15 million persons due to a large influx of migrants from the country (Givental 2013).

15. The city is becoming increasingly porous, more so with the rise of Internet cafés and wireless communication seeping through the cracks of government censors, as evidenced by Talawas (2001–9), a website founded by a North Vietnamese refugee living in Germany whose domain has been controlled and firewalled by the state.

16. Interview, HCMC, August 20, 2012.

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