Postwar Journeys: American and Vietnamese Transnational Peace Efforts since 1975

Abstract
This dissertation explores U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations through the transnational peace endeavors of American and Vietnamese ordinary citizens. The subjects of the study included Vietnamese refugees, children of American personnel and Vietnamese women, American and Vietnamese veterans and their families, relatives of fallen soldiers on both sides, and other civilians who experienced the impacts of war one way or another. The dissertation also highlights the roles of nongovernmental organizations and individuals who strove for peace and mutual understanding through transnational humanitarian and cultural activities. The study’s major argument is three-fold. First, American and Vietnamese ordinary citizens were active historical actors in their changing environments. Second, it was ordinary citizens of both countries who laid the groundwork for U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic normalization. Third, the “universal human aspirations and emotions” (to borrow historian Akira Iriye’s words) played a significant role in U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations. This research reveals a plethora of boundary-crossing interactions between American and Vietnamese citizens, even during the times of extremely restricted diplomatic relations between the two nation-states. Bringing to center stage American and Vietnamese citizens’ efforts to solve postwar individual and social problems, this dissertation aims to bridge a gap in the scholarship on the U.S.-Vietnam relations.

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The wars in Vietnam lasted 30 years. They began when France tried to restore colonial rule after World War II. Fear of losing Southeast Asia to the Communist-led independence movement brought U.S. backing to the French effort during the 1950s. French defeat resulted in a divided country, with the United States supporting the weak but pro-Western government of South Vietnam. When advice failed to stem the Communist tide, the United States in 1965 launched an air war against North Vietnam and committed ground troops to combat guerrilla insurgency in the south. American strength peaked at 540,000 in 1969, then rapidly declined. Growing numbers of Americans opposed the war on political or moral grounds, and public protest mounted. Vietnam War summary: Summary of the Vietnam War: The Vietnam War is the commonly used name for the Second Indochina War, 1954–1975. Usually it refers to the period when the United States and other members of the SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) joined the forces with the Republic of South Vietnam to contest communist forces, comprised of South Vietnamese guerrillas and regular-force units, generally known as Viet Cong (VC), and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Never before or since have journalists been given such complete access to cover a war. Unlike previous wars, where only still images or short movie newsreels were available for conveying images, this was America’s first television war.