Culture and Politics of Development in Contemporary Vietnam
PLSC 362V / 3 Credit Hours
Offered Fall and Spring Semesters
Instructor: Doan Nguyen

Meeting Time & Location
TBA

Course Description
Economic development, under-development, developing countries, newly developed countries, and under-developed ones. “Development” seems so commonplace and obvious we often don’t reflect on its complex and ambiguous relationship with other sets of equally “obvious” notions: modernization, modernity, being or striving to be “modern” or “developed.” In this course we approach these issues from the social scientist’s viewpoint, whose main purpose – analyzing other cultures – is to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. We engage these questions from within a metropolis undergoing rapid social change and fast economic growth: our aim is to conceptualize better the complex flows of capital, people, and ideas underlying theories and practices of development and modernization.

We begin with urbanization, one key aspect of these questions in Southeast Asia, and Asia generally (think China and India). We begin here and now, in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City. From this basic grounding in the realities you are now encountering on a daily basis, we begin to reflect on various theories of the benefits and costs of “development” (or its means and ends). We then move on to the politics of development and modernization, especially the politics of natural resource use and environmental destruction.

One important focus in this course is infrastructure: road building, urban planning and demolition, farmland conversion, gigantic national projects such as dams and hydropower on the Mekong and high-speed rail. Infrastructure is a key interface between people and development. It is capital-intensive, and the site of exhaustive top-down planning by governments and development agencies and donors (such as the UN, World Bank, or Asian Development Bank). One recurrent question is the role and place of people in development: do governments (state agencies and state officials) know what’s best for their people in terms of “developing” and “modernizing” them? Do people themselves at the local level know “what’s best for them”? And how do/can they organize to put this into practice? Who decides, and how does one decide? – not only about what constitutes “development,” but how best to achieve it.
Throughout the course, you will acquire sets of theoretical and practical tools to better analyze the Vietnamese situation, and development issues more generally.

**Student Assessment**

Active daily participation is required of all students. Competency and final grades will be determined by the following:

- 3 short exercises-------------------------------------30% (10% each)
- 1 research paper (3000 words)----------------------40%
- Class participation and article preparation---------30%

**Expectations**

As long as you come to class adequately prepared to discuss readings, your research, and service work, and if you turn in your assignments on time while having spent a reasonable amount of time on them (i.e. turning in decent work taken seriously), there should be no worry about your final grade.

Please note that this course is in seminar format. This requires that you come to class prepared to discuss the readings. The weekly readings are not long, but they require concentration and effort. In addition to those weekly readings, you are required to come to class with at least one article clipped from international and regional newspapers that addresses the topic under discussion or a current issue that impacts development in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. The selected articles will be submitted at the end of the class. The submission can be in digital format. Read assigned articles and collect newspaper articles carefully and take notes on them.

I will ask you questions directly about the readings and about your analysis of them. I will ask you questions and follow up your answers with additional queries. This is done in order to open a dialogue in class about the issues at hand, and promote creative thinking and analytical skills while taking other people’s comments into account.

Please carefully proofread, spell-check, and edit your written work before turning it in. This is the first (and easy) step toward professional-level writing. Your work should be page-numbered and double-spaced, in a basic 12-point font (e.g., Times, Arial, or Calibri). Please remember to include your name, class, assignment, and date. All written assignment must be submitted via email by the deadline.

**Assignments**

**Short exercises**

The objective of these 3 short exercises is to provide you with opportunities to write analysis of development case studies and issues over the semester, and adequately prepare you to write a good, self-reflective paper on your experiences with development here in Vietnam.

**Schedule and topics of short exercises**
• Short exercise #1: The meaning of development to Vietnamese people. You are required to ask at least two Vietnamese people what they think development means to them and how it affects their life. You can be creative in your approach in this exercise and choose to do a small survey, comparison of photos showing different levels of development, or a 15 minute discussion.

• Short exercise #2: The Case Study of Phu My Lepironia Wetland Conservation. You are required to analyze the case study based on the information from the slides and handouts. The simple guiding question is whether the project is a successful case of community development.

• Short exercise #3: View the documentary on girls waiting to get married to foreigners. The film is titled Destiny (Duyên nợ), which was directed by Grace Chew in 2014. https://www.viddsee.com/video/destiny/4tlsu. Please write an analysis (not synopsis) of the film, trying to answer the following questions:
  o Should the Vietnamese government try to stop bride services as they did in the past?
  o Do you condemn the service and the girls in the documentary?
  o Who do you blame for this “problem”?
  o How does what you see fit in the story of development in Vietnam?

Topics and Readings

Theme 1: Urban Spaces and urbanization

Week 1: Course introduction
The introductory session begins with the history and culture of Ho Chi Minh City. The students have an opportunity to discuss what development means.


Week 2: National holiday

Week 3: Development as deconstruction
The session examines development through the lenses of American anthropologists, planners, and scholars. The students compare and contrast development and its consequences in America and in Vietnam. A presentation on land use, ownership, and planning will serve as a starting point for further discussion on urbanization and land ownership in different economies.


Short exercise 1 is delivered.
Week 3: Make-up class:
The students spend this week to explore on their own what is meant by development through the eyes of Vietnamese people.

Week 4: Urban planning and political power
The session begins with the student presentations and sharing what development means through the Vietnamese lenses.

• James Scott, Seeing Like a State (Yale University Press, 1998). Chapter 4, “The High-Modernist City” (focus especially on pp. 103-119 and 130-146).

Short exercise 1 is due.

Week 5: Road-building and developmental thinking
The session will be devoted to the rising phenomenon in Asia, mega projects that have strong impacts on lives of people in one country, dislocating thousands of people. In some cases, the impacts can spill over beyond the border of one country. Those urban projects may encourage migration from rural areas into metropolitans, changing forever the existing culture and lives of people there.

• Erik Harms, Saigon’s Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), Chapter 5, “The Road to Paradise: Building the Trans-Asia Highway”.

Week 6: Excursion – NO CLASS

Week 7: Marginal spaces, poverty, and migration
• Davis, M. Planet of Slums. (NLR 26, 2004).

Theme 2: Development and Theory in Practice

Week 8: Theories of development
The students review important theories of economic development, ranging from classical economic thinking to Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach.


Short exercise 2 is delivered.

Week 9: Excursion– NO CLASS
Week 10: Theories of development  
The session begins with the students sharing their answers to Short Exercise 2. The students will be able to compare and contrast different practices being used by professionals in Vietnam and perhaps other developing countries in Southeast Asia. The discussion now turns to using happiness as an indicator/measure of development. The students share what they think development is taking place in Cambodia and Vietnam.


Short exercise 2 is due.

Week 11: Global flows of people, commodities, capital, and ideas  
Urbanization and globalization join forces together to change the world’s social landscape. The students will discuss the patterns of how ideas and capital travel South to create economic development in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, and how brain and commodities travel North to sustain growth. The students will also discuss impacts of trade agreements in America and Vietnam.


Theme 3: Natural Resources and the Politics of Environmental Destruction

Week 12: Resource politics: Water, market power  
The students will watch a documentary of Mekong River and the debate over the construction of dams on the river and their impacts on lives of people who depend on this river for various purposes. The students will form groups to deliberate on remedial approaches to help solve the dilemma of development.


Week 13: Resource politics: Land, rainforests  
The theme continues in this session with presentations on the tragedy of the commons and the role of the community in regulating public goods.

Theme 4: Poverty and Marginality

Week 14: Marginalized and vulnerable groups
The students will watch a documentary titled A Village Called Versailles about the Vietnamese community in New Orleans, USA. They will have an opportunity to learn about different marginalized and vulnerable groups in Vietnam and discuss democratic movements that start with the community. They will explore the question of how cultural difference influences local politics.


Short exercise 3 is due.

Week 15. Marginalized and vulnerable groups
- Student presentations and discussion of research papers.
- Continued discussion on grassroot organizations and community participation
- Course conclusion and review

Research paper is due on December 15, 2015