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# **Youth and the State in Contemporary Socialist Vietnam**

**Phuong An Nguyen\***

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**Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies  
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## **Abstract**

This paper offers an analysis of the relations between youth and the socialist state in contemporary Vietnam, which sheds light on the wider state-society relations. Amid rapid social changes brought about by economic liberalisation, the Vietnamese Communist Party and socialist state may no longer be the sole driving force that motivates young people. As they seek to be both in control of and in touch with youth, the leaders of the Party and state find themselves negotiating between maintaining their ideological integrity and accommodating the changing needs and desires of youth. An analysis of recent events demonstrates that youth are no longer merely a subject of political propaganda and mass mobilisation, but instead they have evolved to become an important social actor urging the leadership to further reform itself. As young people express a desire to embrace socio-economic and cultural changes wrought by processes of globalisation, the Party and state are actively reforming themselves not only to respond to young people's desires and aspirations, but also to strengthen their political authority and leadership, and to consolidate their control and management of youth amid the new conditions of a market society. Overall this paper sheds light on the changes in what I consider to be the 'strategic' relationship between the state and youth, and the wider process of socio-political transformation in present-day Vietnam.

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## Introduction

Since the mid-1980s Vietnam has undergone a range of socio-economic and structural reforms aimed at reversing the country's decades of economic stagnation. A key policy line of the renovation (*doi moi*) is to implement an 'open door' policy (*chinh sach mo cua*) in order to enable a move away from a centrally planned economy towards a more liberal, multi-sector market economy. Nevertheless, 'open door' (*mo cua*) and the move towards economic liberalisation can often contradict communist ideology and socialist values promoted by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and socialist state. The consequence has been rapid socio-economic changes occurring in a monopolistic political system, which can potentially trigger popular discontent. Recent demonstrations by various segments of the population (including urban residents, peasants, ethnic minorities, and so forth) demanding change and/or protesting against certain policies and actions taken by the authorities point in the direction of popular discontent (see, for example, Reuters, 13 May 2001; Reuters, 5 December 2001). Such sentiments on the part of the populace are obviously a cause for concern for the Party and state which face a major dilemma: on the one hand there is perforce a greater openness and the loosening of political control and, on the other hand, the slowing down of the process of reform and economic development to ensure that political power is retained and consolidated. This tension has impacted on both state policies and state discourse with regard to socio-economic development, and consequently generated changes in state-society relations.

One of the 'arenas'<sup>1</sup> of Vietnam's state-society relations is youth and their relations with the state, which, as I argue in the following parts of this paper, have undergone significant changes and modifications in the context of a market-oriented society in contemporary socialist Vietnam. Similar to all other segments of the population (for example, women, workers, peasants, intellectuals, war veterans, ethnic minorities, and so on) whose activities are often carried out under the umbrella of Party-led mass organisations such as the Vietnam Fatherland Front (Fforde, 2004: 286), young people find the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League and its associated organisations such as the Students' Association and the Vietnamese Youth Federation as sponsors

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<sup>1</sup> Kerkvliet (2003) proposes that in analysing state-society relations, specific arenas should be emphasised instead of attempting a broad-brush analysis of the state versus society. The arenas in Kerkvliet's approach are understood as specific places, organisations, groups, policies, and controversies – things in which relations between state and society are 'problematic' (Kerkvliet, 2003: 49). As such, youth, being a sector of society, can be seen as an arena for analysing and illustrating state-society relations.

for many of their activities.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, as the vanguard in the process of nation-building and as the future of the nation, young people have received enormous attention from the communist leadership and have been a key target of mass mobilisation and political propaganda. Nonetheless, only recently have they become a subject of social science research (Dang, 1996; Nguyen, 2003). In fact, young people's perspectives and attitudes towards social change have not been the subject of any serious or sustained scholarly examination by Vietnamese researchers.

Based on extensive and in-depth fieldwork observations between 1999 and 2004, and from the perspective of a Vietnamese researcher who grew up in Vietnam in a climate of intense political control combined with cultural and social fragmentation, and who also has first-hand experience of *doi moi* and economic liberalisation, I consider the interactions and relations between youth and the state in the present context of rapid socio-economic change. Towards this end, I commence my discussion with a consideration of the different conceptualisations of youth in general and a review of studies relating to Vietnamese youth in particular, which confirm my observation of the relative lack of studies on youth in post-reform Vietnam. In the second part of the paper, I look at the contradiction between the rhetoric of the Vietnamese state with regard to *doi moi* and the reality of *mo cua* in which young people occupy a central position. I then turn to examine the interactions and relations between youth and the state as seen from young people's response (or the lack of it) to state rhetoric and the Party's mobilisation of youth as well as young people's desires and actions in contemporary Vietnam.

I argue that the relationship between youth and the state is complex, interactive, and subject to significant change. In this relationship the state, at times, gives conflicting signals which manifest the gap between the state rhetoric of reform and market reality, and between the aspirations and desires of young people and the Party's ideological commitments. Whilst the ultimate goal of the state is to retain control of youth and the population at large, it has recognised the changing needs of society and subsequently initiated changes in its approach to accommodate young people's expectations and interests. It is, nevertheless, simplistic to take the view that economic liberalisation compounded with the processes of globalisation will automatically bring about political democratisation. Overall, this paper sheds light on the changes in what I consider to be the 'strategic' relationship between the state and

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<sup>2</sup> In Vietnam mass organisations receive the major part of the funding from the state budget and are essentially linked with the VCP (Fforde, 2004).

youth, and the wider process of socio-political transformation in present-day Vietnam.

## **Approaching Youth as a Research Subject**

Youth began to emerge as a subject of interest to sociology and the popular media in the West in the 1950s (Wulff, 1995; Wyn and White, 1997). Since then, 'youth' is frequently used and perceived as a categorisation of people based on their age, although there is no clear theoretical basis for such a categorisation and it is difficult to define it precisely (Frith, 1984; Wyn and White, 1997). Age and the concept of youth, as a matter of fact, refer to different phenomena, with the former referring to a biological category and the latter – as a subject of social studies – referring to a social and cultural category or construct. Whilst biological processes seem to be acknowledged as similar everywhere, social and cultural experiences of youth vary greatly. As such, it is argued that the categorical approach is overly simplistic and of an 'ahistorical and static nature', assuming similarities among those within the age category whilst overlooking the differences and disregarding continuities linking past, present and future (Wyn and White, 1997: 12). In social science analysis, it has thus been argued that the relation between age and the concept of youth should only be acknowledged to the extent that youth describes aspects of people's social position and cultural categorisation which are an effect of their biological age but not completely determined by it (Frith, 1984). Youth, therefore, needs to be considered in relation to specific social, cultural, political, and economic conditions.

From sociology's life course perspective, youth is a stage and a transition in the life course which is socially, culturally and institutionally constructed. This life course approach provides a coherent way to document the intensity of social change through the study of the effects of certain societally shaped events (for example, first entry into the labour market, marriage, retirement) and/or major historical events (for example, war, the Holocaust, the Cultural Revolution) on individuals, generations and cohorts (Elder, Jr., 1985; Clausen, 1986; Heinz and Krüger, 2001). In Vietnam, events such as the Vietnam-American War and the implementation of *doi moi* in the late 1980s can be seen as important watersheds that significantly influenced the shaping of the life course and, against the background of which, life stages such as youth can be studied.



Institutions such as the state, the family, the educational system, and the labour market also play a central role in constructing and implementing the life course. Heinz and Krüger (2001) identify a trend in some countries for the state to expand its role, usurping the prerogatives of family and previously autonomous social groups. More specifically, in countries such as China and Vietnam, this trend of significant state intervention in the construction of the life course of its citizens is particularly invasive. The communist party, on its own as well as through a range of state institutions and a plethora of party-led organisations, attempts to penetrate all corners of the society and to occupy a central position in the construction of the life course, particularly the stage of youth (Gold, 1996).

Whilst events and institutions exert a number of certain universal impacts on youth as a whole, it is important, however, to bear in mind that youth is not a homogeneous group. Indeed, the social features of a person such as gender, social class, ethnicity, citizenship, family and cultural backgrounds determine social differentiations and generate heterogeneous outlooks (Bourdieu, 1977). Additionally, in the contemporary globalising world where societies integrate to various degrees into the global system, foreign influences constitute another important factor impacting upon young people's lives (Gold, 1996).

Therefore, in order to analyse the interactions and relations between youth and the state amid rapid socio-economic changes in Vietnam, it is important not only to consider youth in relation to social and political institutions, acknowledging the impacts these institutions have on them, but also recognise the varying impacts of a range of socio-economic and cultural factors upon young people.

## Youth in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the word 'youth' (*thanh nien*), borrowed from the Chinese language (*qing nian*), can be used to mean youth, young people and young adults interchangeably. Unlike the West where youth is often portrayed as the 'bad', the 'male', and as a potential threat to the stability of society (Frith, 1984), in Vietnam *thanh nien* (literally: young or green years) is associated with positive values such as dynamism, courage, bravery and hope (cf. Kwong, 1994). Young people are considered to be in the vanguard of the process of nation-building, nicely expressed in Ho Chi Minh's words: 'For the home

country to be strong or weak, it largely depends on young people' (Ho, 1980: 166). This view is again reflected in the words of the VCP:

Whether the cause of *doi moi* will be successful or not, whether the country ... will gain a deserving position in the world community or not, whether the Vietnamese revolution will firmly follow the path of socialism or not, it depends largely on the force of youth, and on the educating and training of young generations. The matter of youth is a matter of life and death for the nation, and one of the decisive factors for the success or failure of the revolution (VCP, 1993: 82).

There is a tradition for communist parties in Marxist-Leninist countries to place strategic importance on youth, because young people are considered 'a white sheet of paper' (*to giay trang*) on which everything can be printed (cf. Kwong, 1994; Gold, 1996). Thus, they do not possess any political and ideological stance and therefore are able to be moulded and persuaded to work for the communist party's objectives, as suggested by Nguyen (1997: 6):

Youth in general ... is a section in society that does not have their own ideology. Therefore, the workers' class and their vanguard party must seize the youth, mobilise, educate and awaken them in order to help them find the revolutionary truth and strive for this truth.

Although youth has always been a subject of strategic interest, political propaganda and mass mobilisation in socialist Vietnam, not until the mid-1980s did Vietnamese social scientists start to recognise youth as a subject worthy of study. Dang Canh Khanh (1996: 23) remarks that 'today, activities in the life of young people are portrayed not only within the limited scope of public mobilisation work, but are also analysed in social research'. As soon as they became a subject of academic interest, however, they were immediately recognised as 'a challenge to social studies' (Dang, 1996: 21-23). Vietnamese researchers 'have not been able to either establish a coherent set of concepts or develop standardised research methods required for explicit studies of youth' (Dang, 2001: 15) whilst today's Vietnamese youth are 'no longer a monotonous, rigid, and uniformly moulded group as in the period of central planning, they now comprise diversified and energetic groups, which are becoming increasingly complex and difficult to recognise' (Dang, 1996: 23). The late recognition of youth as a research subject, compounded with the

challenges confronting Vietnamese researchers in youth studies, have led to the fact that young Vietnamese have not been sufficiently observed and researched in the present context of rapid social change. It is thus imperative that social scientists take actions to start reversing this severe paucity of research on youth in Vietnam.

## **State Rhetoric and Market Reality: *Doi Moi* versus *Mo Cua***

At first glance, the terms *mo cua* (open door) and *doi moi* (renovation, reform) seem to be used interchangeably to refer to the period starting from the late 1980s when the Party and state embarked upon the path of renovation. They both connote the politics of economic, social and cultural liberalisation in Vietnam. However, in daily conversation people are more likely to use the metaphor *mo cua* to describe socio-economic changes since the implementation of *doi moi*. *Mo cua* brings together diverse changes in the economy, society and culture whereas *doi moi* is usually used to refer to the official policy line and the new era of renovation, especially economic reform (*doi moi kinh te*), starting from the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Careful reading of official texts reveals the different shades of meaning of these two terms as reflected in the writings and speeches of both Vietnamese officials and researchers. For example, when emphasising the importance of *doi moi* for ‘the nation’s life and the country’s development’, Tran Trong Tan writes:

In order to overcome the socio-economic crisis, it is not possible to be simplistic, but rather it is necessary to carry out comprehensive renovation, starting from new thinking (*doi moi tu duy*), particularly economic thinking, in order to achieve a new model for the building of socialism in Vietnam in the new era.

...

Comprehensive renovation is to bring into play the significant achievements of the Revolution, to correct the errors and mistakes made earlier, to realise and address newly arisen issues, to bring into play national strength and the strength of the era, to maintain independence and sovereignty and to march firmly to socialism (1997: 58-59).

This is an example of the rhetoric of *doi moi* in state discourse. The wording is such that it clearly demonstrates the positive value of state policy of *doi moi*, the goal of which is for '*dan giao, nuoc manh, xa hoi cong bang, van minh*' (wealthy people, strong country, equal and civilised society).

*Mo cua*, on the other hand, is perceived not so much as an official policy, but rather as an act, which is neither initiated by nor is within the total control of the Party and state, and which can bring about both negative and positive outcomes. The same author writes:

*Mo cua* and international integration naturally carry many complexities, and often entail a price to pay. ... It is necessary to predict the negative matters that could happen during *mo cua* (Tran, 1997: 64).

Observing the use of the terms *doi moi* and *mo cua* both in daily life and in official writing, one can conclude that *doi moi* is regarded as a peacetime revolution, as crucial and as significant as the two long national salvation revolutions against French colonialism and American imperialism. It is a national salvation revolution in its own right, as *doi moi* has brought the country out of crisis and bankruptcy and saved its people from starvation. The metaphor of *mo cua*, on the other hand, is not a metaphor of revolution, but subsumes a set of contradictory tendencies and trends, and lends them the coherence of a general process of social change. As I will discuss in the following section of this paper, the contrasts between the official discourse of *doi moi* and daily reality (resulting from *mo cua*) are reflected in the response (or the lack of a response) from the populace, and young people in particular, to various state policies and official promulgations which embody state discourse. At the same time, the wider study of these contrasts also serves to contextualise and helps us to understand the perspectives and actions of the socialist state in its relations with youth.

## **Relations Between Youth and the State: An Examination of Recent Events**

### **Pronouncement of the Year of Youth**

In 2000, in order to coincide with the start of the new millennium and to emphasise the Party's and state's imposition of a continued strategic focus on

young people, the VCP and the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League announced *Nam Thanh nien* (the Year of Youth). According to the announcement made by the Central Committee of the Youth League, it was 'in compliance with the wishes of the youth' and 'in response to the appeal of [Party] Secretary General Le Kha Phieu' that the 'Party and state decided to choose the year 2000 as the Year of Youth'. The Youth League subsequently initiated *Phong trao Thanh nien Tinh nguyen* (the Youth Volunteer Movement), whereby young people should 'volunteer to work to exceed the [state's] production plans; volunteer to study, to conduct scientific research, and to apply technological advances; and volunteer to go anywhere and do whatever the people require' (Vu, 2000: 33). It called upon the entire membership of the Youth League, as well as young people in general, to 'actively participate in teams of volunteering youths to build up the economy, eradicate hunger and alleviate poverty, protect the environment, and fight unemployment, illiteracy, and social vices, especially the evil of drugs' (Vu, 2000: 33). In addition, 'each unit of the [Youth] League and the [Students'] Association should register to undertake a youth project or youth work; to organise for all youths to participate in activities of traditional education, political education, physical exercise, and cultural activities' (Vu, 2000: 33). Since the launch of *Phong trao Thanh nien Tinh nguyen* in the Year of Youth in 2000, every summer the VCP, through its youth organisations as well as government ministries, offices and state organisations<sup>3</sup> has launched and implemented campaigns of 'young people, pupils and students volunteering during the summer period' (Minh Anh, 2004: online). In addition, 'in compliance with the wishes of all units of the Youth League and young people all over the country, the Party and state have agreed to designate March each year as the Month of Youth' (*Nhan Dan*, 3 October 2004).

All the young people I spoke to in Hanoi, however, were uninterested in these official pronouncements, nor did they have any direct impact upon their daily lives. Instead, they tended to pay attention to matters concerning their individual lives (for example, finding a 'good' job, earning money, and achieving success in both professional and familial lives) in a market-oriented society (Nguyen, 2004). Most people are unaware of the special Year of Youth and the various youth campaigns, unless they are directly involved in the activities of Party-led youth organisations which are visible and active mainly at state schools, universities, government offices, state organisations, and state-

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, on 19 May 2004 the Prime Minister issued a directive to all government ministers, heads of ministerial offices and government bodies, chairpersons of people's committees of cities and provinces to give guidance on the implementation of the 2004 movement of volunteering youth, pupils and students (Minh Anh, 2004).

owned enterprises. As such, the Year of Youth and other youth campaigns have failed to attract the attention of a significant proportion of young people.

The announcement of the Year of Youth and the various volunteer youth campaigns acknowledged the importance of research, science and technology in the country's socio-economic development. This is an official recognition of the need to reform and develop the country's economy. In order to achieve economic goals through the application of science and technology and, in the official discourse, through the implementation of a 'knowledge-based economy', the Party and state indicate their denial of the ideal of achieving socialism through altruistic political ideology, self-sacrifice, and simple living. Furthermore, they recognise a socio-economic reality or the reality of *mo cua* in which 'social problems' such as hunger, poverty, unemployment, and drug abuse exist and affect young people. In other words, socialism in Vietnam, although perhaps not entirely replaced by a liberal market economy, is significantly affected by it.

At the same time, however, the announcement testified to the continuation of a die-hard tradition by the socialist state to emphasise youth mobilisation, extol the importance of young people as 'nation-builders' and, at the same time, mould and persuade them to contribute to the Party's goals. The present-day rhetoric of *Phong trao Thanh nien Tinh nguyen* resembles the revolutionary rhetoric of the *Phong trao Ba san sang* (the Movement of Three Readinesses) during the Vietnam-American war years. Young people in the 1960s and 1970s were told to be 'ready to fight; ready to join the armed forces; ready to go anywhere and do whatever the Fatherland requires' (VCP, 3 August 2004: online). Today young people are told to 'inherit and promote' the spirit of the Movement of Three Readinesses and volunteer with a spirit of 'volunteering, dashing, being ready to overcome difficulties and promote youthfulness and revolutionary aspiration' (*Nhan Dan*, 4 August 2004; VCP, 9 August 2004). In the view of the Party, 'the Movement [of Three Readinesses] was the force to urge young people to devote their strength, mind and youthful years for the revolutionary cause' whilst the Youth Volunteer Movement 'has helped young people to strengthen their political stance, intensify the spirit of mutual help, love, humanity, and moral qualities of the Vietnamese youth' (VCP, 9 August 2004: online).

At present, the Party and state are facing difficulties in their efforts to mobilise young people due to their lack of utilitarian motives. Carl Thayer observes a gap in the relationship between the Party/state and youth as manifested in the fact that in recent years there has been a sharp decline in the number of young people joining the VCP. In 2000, up to 41.5 per cent of the

Party's grassroots level organisations failed to admit any new members, and during the five-year period of 1996-2000 only 7,347 students joined the Party (Thayer, 2003). The Party's perception of the changing needs of Vietnam and its recognition of the difficulties of mobilising youth are manifested in the high frequency of youth campaigns and the intensified efforts on the part of the Party and its organisations to engage young people. Seen from the perspective of the official discourse of youth mobilisation, the Party is attempting to deal with these difficulties by trying to reach a balance between 'reform' whilst remaining on the path of socialism on the one hand, and implementing an 'open door' policy and accepting its consequences on the other hand. This attempt on the part of the VCP to balance its ideological commitments (as demonstrated through state discourse) and its realisation of and adaptation to the realities of *mo cua*, as I demonstrate in the later part of this paper, are reflected in and govern the policies and actions taken by the state in relation to youth.

### **Celebration of the New Millennium**

On New Year's Eve 2000 I went out to participate in and observe Vietnam's capital city welcoming the new millennium. At around 10 p.m. on 31 December, a friend of mine and I headed for the August Revolution Square in front of the Opera House in central Hanoi where the celebrations took place. We joined immense crowds of young people who were clearly excited and who were trying to move nearer to the Square where a huge stage had been erected. Rows of chairs were installed near the stage to accommodate some two hundred important officials from the Party, state and municipal authorities, and the crowd present in this square was, according to one source, estimated to be some five thousand (*Hanoi Net*, 2 January 2000: online). In spite of two giant screens broadcasting stage scenes to the crowd, many people brought with them small plastic stools to stand on for a better view.

In this floodlit square in front of the ingeniously illuminated Opera House, the young men and women in the audience were not only from Hanoi but also from various Northern provinces and nearby villages, recognisable by their different accents, as well as there being a line of large buses with registration plates of neighbouring provinces parked in nearby streets. Excitement and enthusiasm were high and contagious, sending a chill down my spine, as I had never experienced anything remotely close to this in my hometown. Popular singers such as Hong Nhung, Thanh Lam, My Linh, Bang Kieu, Quang Linh, Ba-A Group, Tik Tik Tak and many others sang

modern Vietnamese pop songs – clearly a departure from the usual turgid political songs and politically-oriented performances that one used to expect for such a major public event. The young crowd energetically sang along.

After the songs there was an impressive drum performance. My friend, who was a journalist, told me the biggest drum ever made in Vietnam was being beaten in this performance to usher in the new millennium. Drums have become the new sound of *Tet* (the Vietnamese Lunar New Year) and now of the millennium, as traditional firecrackers have been banned for several years due to safety concerns. At the celebration, people told me that the sounds of the drums create excitement in the same way as firecrackers, yet are far more economical and safe, yet still very ‘typically Vietnamese’. When the drummer was beating the biggest drum, the crowds were chanting and cheering to encourage him to beat even louder. Then came the countdown to the New Year and new millennium, to be followed by a speech by the President, though in such a massive gathering it was difficult to follow the presidential message televised on the giant screen.

The millennium celebration at the Opera House Square was a public event organised by the authorities in a public space. Mandy Thomas (2002b; 2003) observed that in contemporary Vietnam official ceremonies no longer usually attract audiences, and the Party has not been successful in promoting attendance at state-organised public events. At the same time, crowd gatherings on other occasions such as protests, religious festivals, sporting events and music performances are making the Party nervous, as they signify, to a greater or lesser extent, disrespect for authority and a loosening of Party control. Why, then, did the millennium celebration attract and excite such large crowds of people and, specifically, young people?

The answer to this question lies in the Party’s acquiescence in accommodating the desires of youth and, more generally, those of the public. On this square, young people were yearning for recreation and freedom to celebrate a landmark event which enabled them to experience globalisation in real time. Showing its accommodation to these desires of young people, the Party reduced political messages, omitted the usual rhetoric of political propaganda while tuning into popular culture and allowing for the performances of popular songs by celebrities who serve as icons<sup>4</sup> for the young population. The young people’s enthusiastic response to the non-political celebration of a public event was in itself a manifestation of their political stance. It suggests that young people are no longer interested in partaking in grand causes, such as building socialism, which once enthused their parents.

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<sup>4</sup> On the creation of and responses to celebrities in Vietnam, see Thomas and Heng (2001).



Instead, they are interested in integration with the capitalist world, in creating time for entertainment and recreation, and in achieving individual goals through professional, financial and family successes (Nguyen, 2004). When the Party and state campaigned for 'open door' policies and actively reached out to meet the desires and interests of youth, they could mobilise a youthful mass which was energetic and enthusiastic and which displayed a sense of unity and openness. But when they organised and hosted the millennium celebrations, the Party and state signified their recognition of the need for a new style of youth management, and a new style of mobilising youth and gaining their support.

### **'Officially Organised' and 'Spontaneous' Anti-War Rallies**

In 2003 a series of rallies took place in major cities throughout Vietnam to protest against the war in Iraq. About two weeks before the war broke out on 20 March, local and foreign news agencies reported that a total of more than two thousand people participated in rallies against the possibility of an 'American-led war in Iraq'. These rallies were 'officially organised' by various mass organisations and local units of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, and took place in Hanoi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh City (Associated Press, 19 February 2003; Vietnam News Agency, 19 February 2003). In particular, as many as about 1,000 students and other young people attended a meeting organised by the Communist Youth League in Ho Chi Minh City on 18 February 2003. They held banners reading 'No wars, we want peace for the Iraqi people' and chanted 'Ho Chi Minh City's youth against war. Peace for Iraqi people' (Associated Press, 19 February 2003).

In the days following the air strikes, mass organisations, including the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League, the Vietnam Women Association, and the Vietnam Labour Union continued to stage anti-war rallies and meetings in Hanoi and other locations across the country. Up to several hundred people participated in each demonstration. Typical of official meetings and demonstrations often seen in Vietnam, the participating crowds were orderly, rather sluggish at times, and chanted slogans in unison following prompts from the gathering's leaders. It was not obvious that the participants in these rallies were particularly enthusiastic about the anti-war stance. 'In fact, they were very staged', said a 23-year-old interviewee in Hanoi (fieldwork observations and communications, 2003).

Nevertheless, away these officially staged demonstrations, Vietnamese people did indeed demonstrate a strong interest in the war, as they followed

closely the daily political, diplomatic, and military developments in Iraq. Newspapers such as *Tuoi Tre* (Young People), *Thanh Nien* (Youth) and *Nguoi Lao Dong* (The Labourer) were 'competing fiercely in supplying the latest news to readers, reflecting intensive interest in the war' (Tran, 2003: online). The state-run Vietnam News Agency increased the circulation of its evening newsletter *Tin Tuc* (News); in the past it had done so only during the US-led attacks on Afghanistan in 2001, the 2002 World Cup Football and the Southeast Asian Games which took place in Vietnam in 2003 (Tran, 2003). On the same day the war broke out, people 'flocked' to the sales offices of Vietnam Cable Television to take out subscriptions to the CNN and BBC news networks (*NetNam*, 20 March 2003). In Hanoi, I also observed people showing an interest in the daily combat scenes and military operations, while others followed the counts of the US military death toll and stories of US military deserters and their family's emotional appeals to the American public and authorities (fieldwork, April-May 2003).

The officially organised rallies and public displays of interest in the war (outside the scope of the rallies) point to a relative lack of response from the populace to the Party's agenda (enacted through the workings of Party-led mass organisations) and a gap in the relationship between the state and society. Mass mobilisation and state-society relations are areas that have been analysed in various studies (see, for example, Turley, 1993; Thomas, 2001; Kerkvliet, 2001; 2003). However, as part of an analysis of the relations between youth and the state, it is my intention in the following section to focus on the issue of participation and the Vietnamese conception of democracy.

A twist was added to the government-sanctioned anti-war campaign when a demonstration by a group of students took place in the streets of Hanoi on 20 March, the same day the war broke out in Iraq. The students, whose number was estimated by one of my informants to be around one hundred, started their protests outside the United States Embassy on Lang Ha Road, and then marched towards the offices of the British Council in Cat Linh Street nearby. The idea was to protest outside offices of organisations that represented the interests of the United States and the United Kingdom, as these were the two countries leading the military operations in Iraq.<sup>5</sup> The student demonstrators carried placards with slogans such as 'Everyone, let's protest against the war', 'No war for Iraq' and 'Support peace, oppose war' written in Vietnamese and English. At the height of the protest during the afternoon rush hours, they

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<sup>5</sup> It was difficult to gather and protest outside the British Embassy, because the Embassy's offices are located on the third and fourth floors of a central high-rise office building in Hai Ba Trung Street.

shouted out slogans and even burnt American flags. As a consequence, the presence of police and security guards was augmented at the two embassies, the respective ambassadorial residences, and other major buildings related to the two countries.

Foreign diplomats with whom I spoke in Hanoi were of the opinion that, like other rallies, this demonstration was incited, or even organised, by the government. However, no Vietnamese said so, and according to one of my informants, the principals at various universities in Hanoi were even requested [by the Party and state authorities] to investigate who participated in the protest. What is more, there was almost no coverage of this demonstration in the state-controlled news media. That is except for a brief report under the column of Miscellaneous News (*Tin moi mat*) on *NetNam*, an Internet site set up and run by the Institute of Information Technology under the Vietnamese Academy of Science and Technology. Describing the event as a 'spontaneous gathering' (*tu tap tu phat*), the report writes:

Worried about the study of the students, a number of officials from the Student Management Office and the Office for Political Affairs of the nearby Law University went to the scene of the gathering in order to recall any student from the University. However, one of the officials confirmed that they did not see any students from the Law University.  
...

The Vietnamese people always love peace and oppose unjust wars. There are, however, many ways to condemn the war against Iraqi people by the bellicose governments. Therefore, one should not gather at one's own will (*tu y tu tap*) and consequently neglect one's work and study (*NetNam*, 21 March 2003).

Available data and information gathered from the field indicate that the students' protest was 'spontaneous' rather than 'officially organised', and, therefore, was not approved by the authorities. Organised activities outside authorised channels to voice citizens' concerns, complaints and demands have been discussed elsewhere (see, for example, Thomas, 2001; Kerkvliet, 2003). Protests over issues such as inadequate compensation for land acquisition, excessive taxes, corruption, abusive authorities, and religious freedom do not normally receive government sanction, because in such instances the protesters display an overt opposition to and confrontation with the authorities and state policies. In the case of the students' demonstration, however, there was no

confrontation with the authorities or opposition to official policies. On the contrary, the opposition articulated by the students was in line with the anti-war stance of the Vietnamese government.<sup>6</sup> It is then paradoxical that in this instance the authorities showed a lack of support to these educated youth and 'nation builders'. The answer to this paradox lies in the Vietnamese conception of democracy.

Similar to Western conceptions of democracy, citizen participation is also stressed as a prime component of 'socialist democracy' (*nen dan chu xa hoi chu nghia*) practiced in Vietnam. Compared to established liberal democracies where, in fact, there are quite low levels of participation (Lewis, 1997), the VCP argues that socialist democracy is characterised by high levels of participation not only in voting and elections but also in the running of the country, and by the fact that 'power belongs to the people' (*quyen luc thuoc ve dan*). This is made possible by the socialist one-party political system in which the VCP represents the interests of the proletarian majority of the population in the administration of the state (Nhi and Le, 2005). However, the high level of participation in Vietnam is mainly due to mass mobilisation through a plethora of Party-led mass organisations (Gainsborough, 1997; Thayer, 2003). In the socialist one-party system, mass participation within the framework of organisation and mobilisation by the ruling party characterises 'democratic centralism' (*dan chu tap trung*). Under democratic centralism individuals exercise the right to participate, and once a consensus has been obtained and a decision has been made, responsibility and power of execution are centralised and uncontested. Thus, on the one hand, people participate in and contribute to the making of state policies, which constitute a democratic process called 'grassroots democracy' (*dan chu co so*). On the other hand, in order to maintain the unity of will and action, 'everybody must thoroughly understand and seriously abide by all guidelines and policies of the Party and state as well as all instructions from above' (Le, 2005: online).

In the instance of the students' antiwar rally, it was not the meaning and intention (protesting against the war) but the nature of the action ('spontaneous' gathering) that caused concern for the Party and state officials. When the students staged a protest without going through the official channels (that is, relevant mass organisations such as the Vietnamese Students' Association or the Youth League), they were, from the perspective of the

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<sup>6</sup> The Vietnamese government indeed condemned the war in a statement released on 20 March 2003, which reads 'The American and British authorities on March 20 launched a war against the Iraqi people, regardless of the protest of the majority of the world people, ignoring efforts by many United Nations members to prevent war and seek peaceful solutions to the Iraqi weapons issue' (*Vietnam News*, 21 March 2003).

authorities, organising an unauthorised gathering. The action of the students fell outside of the scope of participation through mass mobilisation and was independent of state-authorised bodies. Hence, the demonstration set a precedence of overlooking, if not disregarding and potentially challenging, the central authority of the one-party state and the underpinning principle of 'democratic centralism'. This explains why the authorities did not sanction such a gathering.

While an analysis of the cause of the government's disapproval sheds light on the type of democracy Vietnam pursues, it is equally important to consider the authorities' reaction to the 'spontaneous' demonstration by the students. It is important, because an examination of the government's response reveals some clues regarding the future direction of the VCP in its management of youth. Here, the authorities did not take any overt action and exercise their power by, for example, deploying the police or security forces to stop the students gathering. Instead, they applied moderate measures, including not giving the event publicity on the news media and hence playing it down. Similarly, although it was said that university presidents had been requested to investigate who participated in the rally, there was no indication of any disciplinary action being taken against the student demonstrators. In other words, while the government disapproved of the way the students acted independently, it tolerated their action.

What we can surmise so far is a combination of measures taken by the VCP in its management of youth. On the one hand, the Party still applies the age-old style of youth management, where young people remain an important target of political propaganda and mass mobilisation campaigns. Also, it continues to stress the importance of stability for the one-party system, within the framework of democratic centralism. On the other hand, the Party and state have become rather more tolerant in allowing youth a greater scope of flexibility, including the flexibility to act to an extent outside the authorised channels, as demonstrated in the authorities' response to the 'spontaneous' gathering. This suggests that the Vietnamese one-party state is reforming itself 'incrementally' to accommodate youth (Thayer, 2005: 1). What has emerged out of the students' demonstration is not only a signal of the Party taking steps to reform itself, but also, and more importantly, a sign of a mutual trust in the relationship between youth and the state. It is a mutual trust, because the Party, on the one hand, permitted (albeit reluctantly) young people to act independently, while youth, on the other hand, demonstrated their confidence in the authorities when they took the same political stance as the

government (in opposing the war in Iraq) and consequently took to the streets to voice their political opinion.

## Conclusions

In examining the interactions and relations between youth and the state in the context of the rapid socio-economic changes currently taking place in Vietnam, this paper, first of all, uncovers a tension between the reality of a market-oriented society and the rhetoric of the Party and state with regard to reforming the economy while remaining on the socialist path. This tension has led to significant changes in the relations between the state and youth, and indeed larger state-society relations. As Vietnam is moving towards a market society, the VCP and socialist state may no longer be the sole driving force that motivates all members of the society. Findings from this research support the broader assertion by Marr (1996) and Thomas (2002a) that today's youth no longer respond to emotive political appeals from the leaders of the Party and state. Instead, young people express a greater interest in matters directly relating to their lives, a desire to embrace socio-economic and cultural changes wrought by the processes of globalisation, and an aspiration to act independently and take responsibility for their actions.

In a context where the grammar of youth discourse is no longer the political grammar prescribed to them by the ruling communist party, the VCP is negotiating between maintaining its political and ideological integrity and accommodating the changing needs and desires of youth and the larger society. What we have seen in this paper are illustrative narratives of the Party's attempts to remain simultaneously in control of and in touch with youth, although some of its attempts are more effective than others. Whilst the pronouncement of various youth movements exemplifies the VCP's failure to mobilise young people, the interactions between youth and the authorities as seen in the millennium celebrations and the 'spontaneous' antiwar rallies testify, in one way or another, to a new and more successful style of mobilising and managing youth.

Amid the current processes of globalisation and economic liberalisation, as part of their new style of youth management, the Party and state have relaxed the level of political indoctrination and instead given room for youth to live out their desires, interests, and ideals. It is, however, simplistic to conclude that the processes of globalisation and economic liberalisation will automatically lead to political liberalisation and democratisation in Vietnam.

While actively reforming itself, the ultimate goal of the VCP has been to strengthen its political authority and leadership, and consolidate its control and management of youth and the population at large amid the new conditions of a market society.

I conclude that whilst young people are increasingly adopting individualistic values (Marr, 1996; Nguyen, 2003), they also show a sense of community, interest in politics, and generally youthful idealism. These are the qualities and values that their parents displayed during their young years when the country went through the prolonged struggles against French colonialism and American imperialism. At the same time, amid the prevailing market conditions in present-day Vietnam, they are also the values promoted by the Party and state. As such, while embracing 'modernity' and cultural globalisation, young Vietnamese do not altogether reject the values imparted to them by their parents and promoted by the Party and state.

What we have seen from the events examined above further suggest that it is incorrect to make a broad-brush generalisation that today's Vietnamese youth are apolitical. Although they are not enthusiastic about the old-style propaganda and mass mobilisation, they have responded positively when the Party has reached out to be in touch and in tune with them. In fact, as young people celebrated the new millennium or gathered to make their anti-war stance known, they were responding to the Party, and in effect gathering to celebrate the reform of the Party, show their confidence in the authorities and simultaneously urge for further reforms in the direction of participatory democracy.

Overall, the relationship between the state and youth in present-day Vietnam is complex, dynamic and interactive. The state no longer occupies a central position in the construction of youth and the shaping of their life course. Instead, the boundaries of its authority are constantly tested and redrawn through the workings of social change and market forces as well as through a process of negotiation and compromise between the state, with its authority and ideology on the one hand, and youth, with their desires and aspirations on the other.

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