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Contested Nationalism:

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The conventional scholarship depicts noncommunist nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam, 1954-1963) as weak or inauthentic, especially when compared to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, or North Vietnam). But such arguments assume that Vietnamese nationalism was singular and unitary. This essay reinterprets wartime nationalism by proposing the concept of contested nationalism. Specifically, it examines how the Republican government combined anticommunism with Vietnamese cultural identity in its cultural policy. Geography education, new cultural institutions, and historical preservation helped promoted the RVN as the exclusive embodiment of Vietnamese culture and challenged the DRV’s legitimacy.
Introduction

On 4 May 1957, Nguyễn Hữu Ba inaugurated the National Conservatory of Music with a lecture entitled, “The Path to Restoring the National Music.”¹ A professor of traditional music at the school, he argued that music expressed a nation’s distinctive identity, which a national conservatory should preserve and promote:

Every nation in the World has its own national music. To protect their independent character and traditional civilization, many countries have long had music schools to teach the National music to the population, just as the people are taught the National language and National literature. The Vietnamese nation possesses a traditional National music that originated in the language and voice of the Vietnamese and has risen with the civilization of our people.²

After a preliminary overview of Vietnamese music, the professor declared, “Today, our country is independent, and all aspects of our people’s character must be exalted, and that is why there is the Vietnamese National Conservatory of Music.”³

Nguyễn Hữu Ba conceived of “national music” as a single, coherent unit that was specifically identified with Vietnamese music. The emphasis on “the language and voice of our people” restricted the nation and its music to ethnic Vietnamese and excluded indigenous

¹ The government did not formalize the new institution until 1958.
² Capitalization in original. “Mỗi quốc gia trên Thế giới đều có một nền quốc nhạc riêng. Để bảo tồn tính chất độc lập và văn-minh truyền thống của họ, nhiều nước đã có trường âm nhạc từ lâu để dạy dặn trong nước học Quốc nhạc như học Quốc ngữ, Quốc văn. Quốc gia Việt-nam đã có một nền Quốc nhạc truyền thống bắt nguồn từ tiếng nói, giọng nói của người Việt, và đã [sic] tiên lên theo đã văn minh của dân tộc”: “Nhạc sĩ Nguyễn Hữu Ba trình bày về đường lối phục hưng nền quốc nhạc,” Lệ sòng 916 (4 Jun 1957): 2-3, citation from 2. See also Nguyễn Hữu Ba, Dân ca Việt Nam (Saigon: Trung tâm Học liệu, 1971), IX.
³ “Ngày nay đất nước nhà đã độc lập, mới bận nặng bản sắc của dân tộc cần phải được đề cao, nên mới có Trưởng Quốc gia âm nhạc Việt Nam”: “Nhạc sĩ Nguyễn Hữu Ba trình bày về đường lối phục hưng nền quốc nhạc,” Lệ sòng 916 (4 Jun 1957): 2-3, citation from 3. See also Nguyễn Hữu Ba, Dân ca Việt Nam, IX.
minorities, who spoke other languages. The professor also discussed Vietnam as if it was a unified nation and never acknowledged the existence of two parallel states, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam, 1954-1975), where he lived, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, or North Vietnam). Furthermore, he referred to his government’s National Conservatory as the only appropriate institution to develop national music. Mentioning the National Conservatory, but not counterpart institutions in the DRV, implied that the RVN was the true embodiment of Vietnamese culture rather than its northern rival. While the professor may have been primarily concerned with his music school rather than politics, his speech demonstrates how some leaders in the RVN defined the nation as based on Vietnamese ethnic identity that was represented solely by the southern regime.

This essay explores the promotion of Vietnamese ethnic identity as a component of state nationalism, particularly as expressed in cultural policy. Specifically, it examines how the Saigon government constructed a politically-empowered Vietnamese ethnic identity and claimed legitimacy over the entire Vietnamese nation. Nationalism is typically understood as the association of ethnicity with state power, but the Republic faced a particularly difficult challenge because it was part of a partitioned country. The essay proposes the concept of contested nationalism to describe nationalism in partitioned countries. While most nation-states stake unique claims to particular ethnic identities, nationalism in partitioned countries is complicated by a shared ethnicity between enemy states. The RVN and the DRV were sibling states competing over the same ethnic nation, and Saigon’s rival was not a foreign country but an ethnically similar government that controlled the northern half of the county. For both Vietnams, nationalism developed in a dialogical relationship characterized by both identity and difference. The essay contributes to the understanding of nationalism in the southern Republic by examining
the most formative years of Republican nationalism. It focuses on the First Republic (1954-1963), when the RVN was ruled by of Ngô Đình Diệm. To compete against the DRV, Ngô Đình Diệm’s government combined anticommunism with Vietnamese ethnic identity and specifically rejected its northern neighbor. Although the First Republic collapsed in 1963, the ideal of an anticommunist Vietnamese remained the core of Republican nationalism for the rest of the RVN’s existence.

The essay begins by placing the RVN within the scholarship on Vietnamese history, partitioned states, and theories of nationalism. Proposing the idea of contested nationalism, it explores three aspects of Republican nationalism. First, the state created nationalist conceptions of space and time through geography education, the reform of place names, and the celebration of the former imperial capital. Second, the Ministry of National Education established national cultural institutions such as the National Conservatory of Music. These institutions aimed to homogenize the diverse practices of ethnic Vietnamese into a single national culture and aspired to guide the totality of cultural development. Third, the government used international cultural exchanges to more forcefully assert its superior claim to Vietnamese identity over the DRV. Together, these cultural policies normalized the RVN’s status by subtly presenting the regime as the sole embodiment of Vietnamese culture and the only legitimate national government.4

Choosing Sides in Partitioned Vietnam

One of the central questions behind the scholarship on modern Vietnam is whether the DRV or RVN was genuinely nationalist. While scholars in the 1950s and early 1960s often favored the American-backed RVN, those from the mid-1960s onwards recognized the DRV as

4 The First Republic did not possess a systematic cultural policy directed by a single agency, but most state-sponsored cultural activities fell under the purview of the Ministry of National Education.
the true representative of Vietnamese nationalism.\textsuperscript{5} The latter school remains dominant in the
historiography, particularly the communist-centric research on the colonial period. David G. Marr’s \textit{Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925}, and its sequel, \textit{Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945}, argue that the traditionalist anticolonial movements of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century led directly to the modern communist struggle.\textsuperscript{6} Similarly, Huỳnh Kim Khánh asserts in \textit{Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945}, that the Vietnamese communist movement was grafted onto a pre-existing tradition of indigenous patriotism. But Marr and Huỳnh Kim Khánh obscure the importance of noncommunist nationalism as well as the rivalry between communists and anticommunists within the nationalist movement.\textsuperscript{7} By conflating Vietnamese nationalism with the communist movement, their work implicitly endorses the DRV as righteously nationalist and dismisses the RVN as a deviation within the dominant trends of Vietnamese history. Hue Tam Ho Tai’s \textit{Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution} has challenged this communist teleology by demonstrating the significance of non-ideological and noncommunist nationalism,\textsuperscript{8} but no scholarly work has examined the colonial origins of Saigon’s nationalism as Marr and Huỳnh Kim Khánh have done for Hanoi.

Such bias is compounded by Vietnam War scholarship, which depicts the confrontation between American intervention and communist nationalism as the central dynamic of the war. When the RVN is mentioned, it is usually dismissed as an American invention. Typical is Marilyn Young’s \textit{The Vietnam Wars}, which describes the establishment of the RVN as an American creation: “The United States had succeeded in creating a new government that would

\textsuperscript{7} Huỳnh Kim Khánh, \textit{Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).
now call itself a nation, the Republic of Vietnam."\(^9\) Undergirding these debates is the assumption that only one of the two Vietnams could be authentically nationalist and, by extension, politically legitimate. At its core, the impulse to choose sides is less about Vietnam than about American policies: if the RVN was the only nationalist regime in Vietnam, American intervention was justified. But if nationalism belonged to the DRV, then US policies were not.

Recently, historians have moved past this simplistic dichotomy to examine the construction of nationalism on both sides. The new research depicts nationalism in the DRV and RVN as mutually constitutive: both regimes manipulated history and ethnic heritage to assert their own nationalist legitimacy and reject the other’s claims. In Patricia Pelley’s *Postcolonial Vietnam*, a study of historical scholarship in the DRV from the 1950s to 1970s, Pelley argues that Hanoi drew upon history to present itself as defending the nation against foreign invaders.\(^10\) Northern historians ignored the fact they were actually fighting fellow Vietnamese, not just Americans, and named the offensive against the RVN the Nam Tiễn (Southward Advance). The Southward Advance was a historical term that referred to the annexation of non-Vietnamese lands in what is now central and southern Vietnam, and the name implied that northern soldiers would be chasing away Americans rather than attacking people of the same ethnicity.

There has also been limited research on the RVN’s usage of the past. Matthew Masur’s dissertation on cultural nation-building in the First Republic suggests that the Saigon government harnessed history to appropriate Vietnamese heritage. He argues that Saigon instituted holidays to celebrate Hùng Vương, the mythical founders of the first Vietnamese kingdom, emphasize the regime’s connection with the past, and accuse the DRV of forgetting its roots.\(^11\) Masur’s work

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\(^10\) Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*.
focuses on the differences between American and Vietnamese cultural programs and provides only a brief glimpse into Republican nationalism. This essay aims to extend Masur’s research by examining ethnic identity in the RVN and the significance of its rivalry with the DRV. By taking Republican nationalism seriously, it departs from the dominant scholarship by Marr and Young to study the RVN as a distinct political entity worthy of scholarly inquiry.

The competition between the two states is a reminder that wartime Vietnam was a partitioned country. In 1954, the Geneva Agreement ended the First Indochina War by dividing the country at the 17th parallel into two zones that were to be reunited through a general election two years later. (See Map 1.) When it became clear that the southern government refused to hold the election, the zones became de facto states, the RVN and DRV.12

The concept of a partitioned country is theoretically useful because it allows scholars to consider the possibility of multiple nationalist states. In Warpaths: The Politics of Partition, Robert Schaeffer defines partition as the “division of countries into separate states.”13 Schaeffer’s international history of partitions is written from the perspective of the great powers and identifies two categories of partitions: the British style of partition, based on ethnic and religious differences, and Cold War partitions, which were demarcated along ideological lines under the aegis of the US and USSR. Vietnam is classified as a Cold War partition that resulted in the creation of two “sibling states,” similar to Korea, Germany, and China and Taiwan.

Schaeffer does not define “sibling states,” but the term appears to describe ideologically distinct but ethnically identical states created during the Cold War. The idea of a sibling relationship accurately captures the fraternal rivalry that animated the DRV and RVN. Especially

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insightful is Schaeffer’s recognition that sibling states often compete over territory, sovereignty, and diplomatic recognition. He cited the constitutions of the two Vietnams to argue, “The constitutions of many of the divided states, for example, claimed territories not assigned to them and derogated the sovereignty of sibling states, which resulted in the derogation of sovereignty for both.” Indeed, the DRV and RVN shared the same definition of national territory: their combined areas. As George Kahin so aptly put it, “Adherence to the principle of a unified Vietnam was common to almost all Vietnamese; where they differed was under what authority it should be reunited.” Unfortunately, Schaeffer’s analysis is not fully theorized, and his definition of partition describes a completed action instead of a continual process.

More useful is Smita Tewari Jassal and Eyal Ben-Ari’s definition of partition in *The Partition Motif in Contemporary Conflicts*. They understand partition as “a violent territorial and political separation of groups” that results in the “creation of distinct political identities.” Partition also “forms the basis for long-term practices such as identity, work, memory, and inspiration, and the very bases on which different societies are organized.” Compared to Schaeffer, Jassal and Ben-Ari more fully theorize partition as a process and set of ongoing practices. Particularly useful is their observation that partitions affect group identities.

In Vietnam, the partition influenced the national identity in both states long after 1954, as each sibling state claimed Vietnamese ethnic identity while rejecting similar arguments from the other. Such inter-ethnic competition meant that Saigon had to prove not only that it represented Vietnamese identity but that its authenticity was superior to that of the DRV. However, Jassal

and Ben-Ari’s edited anthology is devoted mainly to British-style partitions and provides limited insight on Cold War divisions. As the southern half of an ideological division, the case of the RVN contributes to scholarly understanding of Cold War partitions and their relationship to nationalism.

Unfortunately, the scholarship on Cold War partitions is fairly limited and rarely discusses the phenomenon in relation to nationalism. But the concept of partition is useful when combined with the theoretical literature on nationalism. Ernest Gellner defines nationalism as a theory of political legitimacy in which ethnic and political boundaries are congruent. Stated differently, Gellner explains that nationalists desire a unity of culture and power. In contrast, Benedict Anderson argues that nations are imagined political communities. He describes them as sovereign states with limited group membership in which individuals profess affiliation with the collective group. At heart, both of these definitions are about the legitimacy of state power.

Gellner claims nationalists recognize legitimacy based on ethnic identity, while Anderson suggests that legitimacy rests on a sense of community, which has been created by specific historical circumstances and may not necessarily be ethnic. In the case of partitioned states, Gellner’s interest in ethnicity and boundaries is more suitable because it highlights the uniqueness of sibling states as ethnic populations that are politically separated. However, Anderson’s discussion of imagination explains how sibling states continue to construct the nation as including more territory and population than their governments actually control. In partitioned

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18 For more on ethnic and religious partitions, see Radha Kumar, “The Troubled History of Partition,” in *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, ed. Prasenjit Duara (New York: Routledge, 2003), 162-175.
Vietnam, both the DRV and RVN tried to transcend their political boundaries by imagining an ethnic community that reached beyond the 17th parallel.

Based on these two bodies of scholarship, I propose the idea of contested nationalism to describe nationalism in partitioned countries. The noun “nationalism” recognizes that sibling states are genuinely nationalist. I define nationalism as the intended alignment of ethnic identity with state power. As in Gellner’s understanding of boundaries, nationalists in partitioned countries desire to establish and live under a nation-state, that is, a single sovereign state that encompasses an entire ethnic group and is governed by members of the same group but excludes foreign ethnicities. Applied to Vietnam, the concept of contested nationalism recognizes that both the DRV and RVN were nationalist because they both aspired to become nation-states. In the case of the Saigon regime, the government tried to create an ethnically uniform territory and linked political power with Vietnamese ethnicity. It systematically removed vestiges of French colonialism and asserted Vietnamese dominance over indigenous minorities.

Critics have accused the RVN of accepting American neo-colonialism, but the First Republic under Ngô Đình Diệm was a period of relative autonomy. The RVN was economically and militarily dependent on the US, but American officials were frustrated that their support did not translate into greater influence. Only the removal of Ngô Đình Diệm enabled the Americans to intervene as they desired. In these respects, nationalism in the RVN resembled that in non-partitioned countries.

The other half of the term, the adjective “contested,” highlights the aspirational and competitive character of nationalism that distinguishes divided states. Partitioned countries like wartime Vietnam fall short of the nationalist ideal, especially Gellner’s definition of congruent political and ethnic boundaries. The DRV and RVN were unable to achieve congruence because
the partition created a political border that cut across the ethnic Vietnamese population. Of course, most countries are unable to draw clean ethnic boundaries or maintain a homogenous racial composition, but the case of partitioned countries represents a particularly egregious violation of nationalism. In a partitioned country, the coexistence of sibling states claiming the same ethnic group contradicts the principle that each ethnic group is ruled by only one state. In Vietnam, this discrepancy meant that neither the DRV nor the RVN could be considered the “real” nation. After all, leaders on both sides knew that a large population of ethnic Vietnamese belonged to the rival government and that their enemy invoked a similar ethnic heritage.

In fact, the competition of the partition era can be traced back to the colonial-era rivalry between communists and noncommunists within the nationalist movement. Thus, the concept of contested nationalism is particularly appropriate for examining the Vietnam War because it conceptualizes nationalism as competitive and plural rather than unitary and singular. Of course, nationalism is multiple, contested, and bound up with statecraft in many countries, but the term contested nationalism here will refer specifically to partitioned countries.

As a concept, the idea of contested nationalism has three theoretical advantages. First, it accepts the possibility that multiple sibling states may be nationalist but does not assume that they all must be. Such a framework accommodates the multiplicity of political centers in wartime Vietnam. It justifies the study of nationalism in either state as a distinct political entity without rejecting the possibility of nationalism in its rival. Second, the concept conveys the mutual influence and hostility of nationalism in partitioned countries. An alternative term for the phenomenon might be parallel nationalism, but the adjective “parallel” suggests two independent trajectories rather than an interactive competition. Nationalism in the two Vietnams was mutually constitutive, and both regimes built their legitimacy partly by denigrating the other’s
sovereignty. It can even be argued that contested nationalism is an aggressive expression of Andersonian imagination. Nationalists in the DRV and RVN dreamed of a single national community and used violence to impose their visions upon other Vietnamese who were loyal to the other side. Third, the concept draws attention to the contradictory quality of nationhood unique to partitioned countries. In a rivalry between ethnically distinct countries, both countries are likely to highlight their differences. In contrast, nationalism in sibling states is often characterized by opposing impulses of identity and difference. The RVN condemned the communist regime even as it recognized the DRV’s population as compatriots, conceded that the northern territory was the historical heartland, and appealed to the same history. Using the framework of contested nationalism, this essay examines Republican nationalism with special attention to the rivalry between the RVN and the DRV. It begins with the most fundamental elements of nationalism: space and time.

**Nationalist Constructions of Space:**
**Vietnamese Ethnic Identity and State Power**

Saigon’s conceptions of national space and time tied Vietnamese ethnic identity to state power. The government revised place names to conceptually transform the RVN’s official territory into an ethnically uniform area of uncontested sovereignty. It also developed a national sense of time by celebrating Huế, the former imperial capital, and presented itself as the only legitimate state for the Vietnamese nation.

The greatest challenge for nationalist conceptions of space was territorial control. In 1954, Ngô Đình Diệm was deeply disappointed by the loss of northern Vietnam and ordered his
representative at Geneva to refuse to sign the agreement.\textsuperscript{21} Throughout his early years, Ngô Đình Diệm struggled to pacify areas formerly held by his opponents, consolidate political authority, and expand the reach of the central government into rural areas. These efforts were relatively successful until the emergence of the southern insurgency in the late 1950s, and insurgents slowly rolled back Saigon’s earlier advances. By the early 1960s, the government’s administrative hold on the countryside was once again receding. Despite these territorial limitations, the state aimed to create a single homogenous nation based on Vietnamese ethnicity and conceptually extended state sovereignty over all of the national territory.

Thongchai Winichakul argues that one of the components of a modern nation is its “geo-body.” In \textit{Siam Mapped}, a study of how Thailand acquired its modern boundaries through mapping, he explains that the geo-body is the process in which a nation is spatialized into a territorial definition by specific institutions, practices, and technologies. The result is the acceptance of the nation as a bounded, geographical space that is internally homogeneous, and its boundaries demarcate the limits of national identification.\textsuperscript{22} Benedict Anderson has further argued that maps during the colonial period acted as logos, as an “infinitely reproducible series,” that appeared in numerous textbooks and everyday objects.\textsuperscript{23} The circulation of the map naturalized the belief that the bounded territory belonged to the nation.

Vietnamese in the RVN had inherited national conceptions of space from colonial-era nationalism, when nationalists conceptualized Vietnam as including Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, the three western provinces of French Indochina.\textsuperscript{24} (See Map 2.) After 1954, the

\textsuperscript{22} Thongchai Winichakul, \textit{Siam Mapped} (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).  
\textsuperscript{23} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 175.  
\textsuperscript{24} This area roughly corresponds to the pre-colonial Vietnamese kingdom of Đại Nam. For why anticolonial nationalist movements adopt colonial era administrative units as the boundaries of the nation, see Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 113-140. For an exploration of ideas about national space among Vietnamese nationalists...
RVN only controlled what had been Cochinchina and the southern half of Annam, but the underlying assumption about what constituted Vietnamese territory persisted. Saigon continued to depict Vietnam as a unified space rather than two separate states, even though the national territory included areas it did not control.

So serious was the belief that the national educational curriculum obligated students to learn about the geography of northern areas that were under the DRV’s control, as if to teach them that all of Vietnam was part of their patrimony and implicitly contest Hanoi’s claims. Geography textbooks consistently included northern territory in their descriptions of the country. For example, the introductory lesson to Nguyễn Văn Mùi’s Địa lý Việt Nam lớp đệ tứ (Vietnamese Geography for the Fourth Form) provided the country’s global coordinates and described its shape: “Vietnam is found approximately between latitude 8.33° and 23.22° north and between longitude 102 and 109 east. Its shape is long and narrow. From North to South, its length is 1650 km. The two ends are puffed up, but the middle is slender, and the narrowest place is only 50 km.”

The description of Vietnam reaching the 23rd parallel instead of the 17th, the measure of its length, and the inclusion of a “puffed up” northern end all indicated that the northern half of the country was fully included in the official conception of Vietnam.

Even a quick perusal of the available textbooks demonstrates that students were surrounded by the universal logo of a single Vietnam. Almost all maps found in the geography texts depicted a unitary Vietnam stretching from the Chinese border to the Gulf of Thailand. Absent is the demilitarized zone that separated the sibling states. At most, the maps show the

during the colonial period, see Christopher Goscha, Vietnam or Indochina: Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887-1954 (Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Books, 1995).

25 Chương trình trung học, 57.

26 “Nước Việt-Nam ở vĩ khoảng, giữa Bắc Vĩ tuyến 8°33’ và 23°22’ giới Đông Kinh Tuyên 102° và 109°. Hình thể dài và hẹp. Từ Bắc xuống Nam đường thẳng do được 1650 km. Hai đầu phân ra, quảng giữa thật lải, chỗ hẹp nhất chỉ do được 50 km”: Nguyễn Văn Mùi, Địa lý Việt Nam lớp đệ tứ, 3-4.
Bến Hải River, which technically separated the two regimes, but the maps identified the river as a geographical landmark rather than a political boundary. To appreciate the visual impact of this omission, compare the physical and transportation maps in Địa lý lớp đệ nhị (Geography for the Second Form), published in the early 1960s, with the political map from Bernard Fall’s The Two Viet-Nams, a respected account of the two states published around the same time. The map in Fall’s book clearly labels the two Vietnams with their respective names and shows a bolded “demarcation line” to emphasize the partition. (See Map 1.) In contrast, the physical map from Geography for the Second Form does not identify either the RVN or DRV as distinct entities, even though it labels Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and China. (See Map 3.) The map also shows the boundaries that separate Vietnam from neighboring countries but ignores the border between the RVN and DRV. Even more striking is the transportation map, with its railroads and national routes linking Hanoi to Saigon, as if to suggest that Vietnam was internally bound through travel. (See Map 4.) Like Anderson’s reproducible series, the maps that Republican schoolchildren studied encouraged them to accept that their nation encompassed all of Vietnamese territory, regardless of whether the area was controlled by the RVN.

Of course, Saigon was unable to rule all of the territory it claimed, but its extensive revisions of non-Vietnamese place names south of the 17th parallel was an attempt to nationalize geographical space. In the mid-1950s, one of the vestiges of French colonialism was the foreign toponyms attached to many cities, provinces, and other geographical sites throughout the country. Saigon enthusiastically replaced the European names with their former Vietnamese

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27 For example, see ông bà Tăng Xuân An, Địa lý Việt Nam lớp đệ nhị A, B, C, D (Saigon: Sông mới, 1963), 12, 69, 204; Phan Xuân Hòa, Tót yeu địa lý Việt Nam lớp đệ nhị (Saigon: Thủy Đình, 1960), 13, 33. This is not to suggest that there were no maps published under the First Republic that depicted the demilitarized zone, only that the maps in available geography textbooks did not.
ones. Thus, the cities of Faifo and Tourane reverted back to Hội An and Đà Nẵng, popular vacation spot Cape St Jacques became Point Vũng Tàu, and Bassac Canal in Phong Dinh province was rechristened Cái Côn Canal.

The project was not merely about asserting sovereignty over former colonial spaces. Numerous non-French place names also disappeared from the map, especially ones of Khmer or ethnic highland origin. Claims by Vietnamese nationalists notwithstanding, the area that became known as Vietnam in the 1950s was historically inhabited by a diverse variety of ethnic groups besides the ethnic Vietnamese. In the early 1960s, the RVN had a total population of 14 million, including approximately 400,000 Khmers found mostly in the Mekong delta, 600,000 upland minorities concentrated in the central highlands, and up to 35,000 Chàm living in pockets of central and southern Vietnam. The historical presence of these indigenous minorities was reflected in the names of many places, which the Saigon government altered to conform to Vietnamese pronunciation and orthography. For example, the district of Djiring, Lâm Đồng province, was Vietnamized into Di Linh. Eager government officials in some locales were so thorough as to alter all names down to the level of individual communes.

28 Minister of Public Works and Transportation Trần Lê Quang to the President on changing the name of postal stations, 25 Jun 1957, National Archives Center II, Phong Phú Tổng thống Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa (hereafter, DICH) 1851.
29 Dự án Sắc linh đối tên địa điểm địa dư, cầu và kinh năm 1957, DICH 1851.
32 Several highland communes in Quảng Ngãi province were revised. Sắc-lịnh 234-NV ng 9 th 9 năm 1959 thành-lập quân Chuong-Nghiba, Nghị-dính số 1247-BNV/NC8/NĐ ng 16 th 9 năm 1960 doi lại tên Việt các xã thuộc quân Chuong-Nghiba tỉnh Quảng-Ngãi, DICH 2187. There were also plans to change Khmer place names in Kiên Giang province. Thư động-lý văn-phòng [Phủ Tổng-thống? ] v/v Việt-hóa các áp, xã, tổng tên Miên, about late Apr 1957, DICH 1164.
The revision of minority place names is particularly striking because, unlike Hội An and Đà Nẵng, most of those locations were geographically remote, had been historically inhabited by non-Vietnamese, and, in many cases, had never before bore Vietnamese names. The minority populations living there often did not even speak Vietnamese, let alone refer to their homes by the new names. Saigon’s decision was unusual compared to French colonial officials, who usually tolerated indigenous place names for far flung places they never ventured. In fact, the renamed areas were often as foreign to most lowland Vietnamese as the mountainous regions of Cambodia or Laos, but their location within the RVN’s boundaries made their names anomalies inside the national territory.

The new names homogenized the regime’s official territory into an ethnically uniform nation and tied minority spaces to the central government.33 Yet spatial schemes could be inherently ambiguous. The government could not convincingly rename sites north of the 17th parallel without calling attention to the DRV’s existence. The physical specificity of spatial schemes threatened to highlight rather than hide territorial shortcomings.

33 Strangely, Saigon even revised Vietnamese names to sound more literary. The name of Bến Tre province in the Mekong delta was based on the common Vietnamese vocabulary word for “bamboo port.” It was changed to Kiên Hòa, which maintained the meaning but substituted classical Chinese root words for vernacular Vietnamese. The substitution of Sino-Vietnamese names for vernacular ones suggests that renaming was meant to elevate Vietnamese culture to a level of classical refinement. Even Vietnamized versions of highland names like Di Linh were decidedly Sinic rather than colloquial alternatives that may have been more faithful to the original pronunciation. For example, Djiring could have been vernacularized into “Chi Rưng,” rather than the more Sinic “Di Linh.” See Donnell, diss., 74.
The Celebration of Huế and Historical Time

One incontrovertible reality that nationalists in the RVN had to face was that the DRV controlled the Red River Delta, the historical heartland of Vietnamese civilization. By comparison, most of the RVN’s territory had only become incorporated into Vietnamese-controlled lands since the 17th century through the historical *nam tiến*, and the newest of all were the southern lowlands where Saigon was located. Contesting the DRV’s claims to history, the regime turned to the city of Huế, the last imperial capital, as the focal point of its historical claims. Masur has rightly argued that the government promoted Huế because it provided a stronger symbolic connection to Vietnam’s past than the more newly settled south. But Huế was important in another sense as well. The government used the city to spatially and temporally reorient the nation towards the southern regime. Official rhetoric shifted the center of Vietnamese ethnic identity from Hanoi to Huế, and state-sponsored scholarship created a historical narrative that made Saigon the political successor to the Huế court. This new conception of historical time depicted the nation as moving through time to become the modern day RVN. The southern state became the patron of Huế’s ethnic authenticity and celebrated the former dynastic seat with new educational institutions, historical preservation, and scholarly research.

Hanoi had served as the capital of various Vietnamese kingdoms from the eleventh through seventeenth century, until 1802, when Gia Long founded the Nguyễn dynasty and moved the capital to Huế. As a counterpoint to Hanoi, Huế offered an alternative symbol for Vietnam’s precolonial heritage. The selection of Huế over historically older sites suggests that ethnic identity and state power were critical considerations for the RVN leadership. The city had

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been founded in the 17th century, relatively late compared to other historical landmarks. The government could easily have chosen Óc Eo, an archaeological site from an ancient civilization in the Mekong delta dating from around the 3rd century AD. Another possibility might have been Hội An, the premodern port town just north of Huế and dating from the late 16th century.

Certainly, Hội An and Óc Eo were arguably as deserving of scholarly attention, but they had been cosmopolitan trading entrepôts and offered little that would promote a specifically Vietnamese identity. In fact, Óc Eo civilization actually predated Vietnamese presence in the Mekong delta. What distinguished Huế was that it had been the capital of an ethnically Vietnamese polity, and official rhetoric consistently emphasized the city’s essentially Vietnamese character.

When the regime established the University of Huế in 1957, Ngô Đình Diệm’s inaugural speech praised the city for its cultural purity:

Due to its geographical location, the region of Huế has remained beyond the immediate reverberations of both Western and Eastern civilization. Therefore, Huế is an ideal setting for a center of Vietnamese culture. This [Vietnamese] culture is always developing and willing to accept what is truly valuable from foreign cultures without the fear of losing its roots because it possesses a national culture that has been cleansed of subservient values. 

The president portrayed Vietnamese culture as a continual process of change and continuity, and he envisioned Huế’s role as maintaining the nation’s cultural authenticity. The culturally

35 The original name for Huế was Phú Xuân. The village of Phú Xuân only became important after the Nguyễn lords built a citadel around it in 1687 and then chose it as the capital of their domain in 1744.
untainted city was implicitly contrasted with “subservient values,” which referred to values that betrayed a dependency on foreign cultures. By emphasizing culture rather than antiquity, Ngô Đình Diệm relocated the center of Vietnamese ethnic identity from Hanoi to Huế and, by extension, from the DRV to his own government.

The official commemorative volume for the one year anniversary of the university’s founding was less extreme in its description of the city. Published by the university, the volume portrayed Huế as a meeting point between different cultural influences: “the capital city of Huế has long been known as a peaceful place, as a place of encounter, exchange, and union between Indian and Chinese civilization and on the road between north and south.” But the city’s defining trait was still its maintenance of traditional culture. According to the booklet, Huế had been “forged by the utterly tranquil spirit of traditional culture,” a spirit that continued unaltered by historical change. The volume claimed, “In space, the land of Huế has never once changed its character, even when events have caused great changes; in time, the comportment of the Huế’s people rarely departs from traditional virtues: indomitable but quiet and composed.”

The government appropriated Huế’s dynastic legacy to promote itself as the successor to the Nguyễn state. Cultural policy emphasized the city as a historical site, and a narrative of succession provided justification for Republican legitimacy. Significantly, the government avoided praising the Nguyễn royal lineage, which was too closely associated with former emperor Bảo Đại, whom Ngô Đình Diệm had overthrown. Instead, the government promoted the imperial city to celebrate modern state power and challenge Hanoi’s claim to origins and continuity.

38 “từng nung đúc theo một tinh thần văn-hoa có truyền hệt sức trầm tĩnh”: Viện Đại học Huế, Kỷ niệm để nhận chu niên, 2.
Under the First Republic, the city of Huế and the surrounding province of Thừa Thiên became the focus of architectural restoration. The Institute of History, established in 1956 as a branch of the Ministry of National Education, repaired numerous imperial tombs, royal residences, pagodas in the greater Huế area, and significant portions of the citadel. Though the Institute did engage in other projects throughout the country, its highest priority was always Huế’s royal architecture. It began work on Huế within the first year of its existence and continued to devote the bulk of its restoration projects to the former dynastic capital. Imperial architecture was originally a dynastic achievement, but Saigon’s restoration appropriated the court’s cultural legacy while replacing a royal kingdom with a modern state.

In the mid-1950s, the RVN officially transferred the royal music and dance troupes formerly attached to the Huế court to its administration. The overthrow of the monarchy in the fall of 1955 had left their status unclear, and Saigon used them as representatives of traditional Vietnamese culture. The government sent the troupes abroad to perform in international cultural exchanges, displayed their talent for visiting dignitaries, and offered occasional public performances throughout Vietnam. In the early 1960s, the government sponsored audio and video recordings of traditional court rituals, and organizers called many performers out of retirement. By incorporating royal pageantry into its cultural policy, Saigon established itself rather than Hanoi as Huế’s successor and the inheritor of state power and cultural authenticity. This lineage erased the French colonial period to depict the Vietnamese nation as traversing through time towards the RVN.

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41 Đại biểu Chính phủ tại Trung-Nguyễn Trung-Phân trình Tổng-thống VNCH ngày 17 tháng 10 năm 1962 về thu thập và quay phim các cỗ lễ. Sổ 1716-VP/NPT; Công diễn 226-BT của Đại biểu Chính phủ tại Trung-nghệ Trung-Phân gọi ĐLVPh Phú Tông-thống ngày 5 tháng 7 năm 1963 v/v quay phim và thu thập Lê Tất Nam-Giao; Công diễn số 9243 của Quốc Tông Đức ĐLVPh Phú Tông-thống gọi Đại biểu Trung-nghệ Trung-Phân ngày 6 tháng 7 năm 1963 v/v quay phim và thu thập các cỗ lễ, ĐICH 17.899.
The most powerful statement of Saigon’s historical narrative was state-sponsored scholarship on Huế. The study of Huế and the Nguyễn dynasty was an area of research where the RVN enjoyed clear superiority over the DRV. Not only did it have access to Huế’s architecture, it possessed the original annals of the Nguyễn dynasty. The University of Huế housed a special research unit called the Committee for the Translation of Vietnamese Historical Documents that was dedicated to translating the royal annals from classical Chinese into vernacular Vietnamese. It was also home to the Institute of Chinese Studies dedicated to the study of the Chinese language, which was established partly to support the translation of classical Chinese texts.

Two scholarly journals, the University of Huế’s Đại học (University Journal) and the Ministry of National Education’s Cultural Monthly, became the primary vehicles for new scholarship on imperial architecture. Bùu Kế, a professor at the University of Huế and co-chair of the Committee for the Translation of Vietnamese Historical Documents, wrote several articles on the royal citadel and the imperial tomb of Tự Đức, the last emperor of precolonial Vietnam.

In 1957, Cultural Monthly published an article by Thái Văn Kiệm, entitled, “Huế muôn thú” (“Huế Forever”), which the Ministry of National Education commissioned the author to expand into a full-length book. The result was Cố đô Huế (The Ancient Capital of Huế), published by the Directorate of Cultural Affairs, a subsidiary of the Ministry of National Education. The Ancient Capital of Huế was a comprehensive study that surveyed the imperial sites of Huế, the city’s history throughout the premodern period, and the literature associated with Thừa Thiên.

43 Nghị định số 1505-GD/ND tổ chức Viện Hán học tại Đại học Huế, 9 Dec 1959, ĐỊCH 1.863.
As Masur has pointed out, the volume focused on dynasties and kingdoms, aspects of the old city that served the RVN’s nation-building agenda. Bao La Cự Sở, another Huế-based scholar, wrote the introduction. In it, he posited a historical narrative that explicitly anointed the Saigon regime the exclusive successor to the Nguyễn dynasty and the newest incarnation of legitimate state power. Bao La Cự Sở argued, “In the history of our country, each time the imperial seat is moved by the motions of heaven, it signals the arrival of a new epoch.” The literary phrase “motions of heaven” (tien di) invoked the classical idea that the events in human society reflect the will of heaven. He listed what he considered the three most significant moments in Vietnamese history, which all entailed the relocation of capital cities: Thăng Long (modern day Hanoi) became the capital in 1010 AD at the beginning of the Lý dynasty, Phú Xuân (modern day Huế) became the capital in 1802 at the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasty, and Saigon became the capital of the RVN in 1954. The Lý dynasty had been the first stable Vietnamese dynasty after the country won its independence from Chinese rule, and the Nguyễn dynasty had been the last independent Vietnamese dynasty before the country fell to French colonialism. Bao La Cự Sở implied that each capital city represented the establishment of legitimate state power for a new era. The narrative of the three cities conceived of the nation as historically progressing from the Lý and Nguyễn dynasties to the modern day RVN.

This conception of national history accords with Benedict Anderson’s argument that nations are imagined as “a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.” Rather than conceiving of the Lý, Nguyễn, and RVN as unrelated states, Bao Lao Cự Sở knit them together

47 Masur, diss., 122.
into a single genealogy of an enduring nation, or, what Anderson calls “the expression of an historical tradition of serial continuity.” As Anderson’s theoretical arguments predict, Bao La Cù Sì’s historical narrative is presentist and works backwards to create the origins for the contemporary RVN. Equally striking is the narrative’s spatial dimension. Instead of genesis or continuity, the narrative emphasizes evolution to redirect national legitimacy southward away from the northern heartland.

The glorification of Huế as a premodern capital foreclosed the possibility of a Hanoi-centered narrative, in which state power would return to the DRV after the anomalous Nguyễn dynasty. Bao La Cù Sì’s conception of history made Hanoi more archaic than authentic, and Huế functioned as the critical halfway point in the temporal and spatial reorientation of the heavenly mandate. In short, the whole of Vietnamese history led to the birth of the Republic. The official spatial and temporal conceptions of the nation tied Vietnamese ethnic identity to the Saigon regime. They homogenized the RVN’s territory into a uniformly Vietnamese space and constructed an understanding of historical time that made the RVN the exclusive inheritor of Vietnamese political legitimacy. These policies exemplify the main themes of the RVN’s politically empowered Vietnamese identity: unification of Vietnamese culture by Saigon and the exclusion of the DRV.

**Linguistic Unity and National Reunification: Plans for a National Academy**

Although Ngô Đình Diệm rejected the reunification elections that were stipulated in the Geneva Agreement, the decision was by no means a repudiation of the nationalist dream of a

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51 Anderson calls this presentism of national histories as being written “up time.” Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 205.
52 Interestingly, Bao La Cù Sì’s ignored the fact that the Huế and Saigon had served as capital cities for far shorter periods than Hanoi.
unified Vietnam. The Saigon regime was unable to forcibly reunite the country under its rule, but it compensated by attempting to unify the nation culturally through the creation of cultural institutions, similar to the National Conservatory of Music mentioned in the introduction (above). The primary example of this impulse was the unfulfilled plans for a national academy. Through various stages of planning, the government promoted the idea of a single, homogenous culture based on Vietnamese ethnicity that was under Republican leadership. The most remarkable feature of these policies was their ambition to encompass the totality of Vietnamese culture. The state’s vision involved not only the homogenization of diverse practices into a single national culture but also the implicit rejection of the DRV’s alternative cultural legitimacy. In effect, the envisioned national academy expressed the government’s desire for the cultural reunification of the nation under the RVN’s rule and contested its rival’s legitimacy as a Vietnamese state.

Throughout the 1950s, government officials proposed a national academy that would act as the highest authority on the Vietnamese language and provide a unified direction for cultural development, in the style of the Académie Française. Such an institution was totalizing in its interdisciplinary approach, which sought to mold every aspect of the country’s contemporary culture. As early as 1954, there had been calls for a national academy. Towards the end of that year, the Hội đồng Quốc gia Lâm thời (Provisional National Council) appealed to the government to establish a number of cultural institutions, including libraries, museums, local associations devoted to spreading literacy, a national literary prize, and a national office of cultural affairs. The council argued, “The government must boldly establish a Vietnamese Academy with the responsibility of revising and unifying the Vietnamese language and
encouraging literary production” (underline in original). The academy’s main tasks would include compiling an official dictionary and grammar of the Vietnamese language and organizing a national literary competition. In addition, the council also recommended the establishment of a national institute of Vietnamese culture that would administer libraries and research institutions, increase reading rooms and mobile libraries among the population, organize local literacy associations, collect historical sources for the production of a complete national history, translate foreign classics, and support artistic research and the collection of artwork.

The proposals conceived of Vietnamese culture as a coherent, national unit that could be guided by one set of grammatical rules and encompassed by one official history.

As might be expected, the council never questioned that the Saigon government should assume the leadership for the entirety of Vietnamese culture. It justified the proposals by arguing that all modern countries had established similar institutions long ago, and Vietnam needed to have them to keep from slipping behind:

Considering that all progressive countries from the West to East have had such institutions, such as the Académie Française established in 1634, like in China where there has been a Hall of Great Learning and Translators’ College organized according to the modern Western method since the Qing dynasty, like in Japan where education and culture have been organized as thoroughly as in the West and cultural agencies are found throughout the country… then our country, while regaining its independence in the middle of the 20th century, must quickly organize cultural institutions so that our progress

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53 “Chánh phủ nên bảo đảm thành lập một Hàn lâm viên Việt-Nam với nhiều vụ san đính và thống nhất ngôn ngữ Việt-Nam và khuyến khích việc trước tác văn học”: Kiến-nghi của Hội đồng Quốc gia về việc chấn hưng văn-hóa, 15 Dec 1954, PTHTVNCH 29.111.
54 “Chánh phủ nên bảo đảm thành lập một Hàn lâm viên Việt-Nam với nhiều vụ san đính và thống nhất ngôn ngữ Việt-Nam và khuyến khích việc trước tác văn học”: Kiến-nghi của Hội đồng Quốc gia về việc chấn hưng văn-hóa, 15 Dec 1954, PTHTVNCH 29.111.
will catch up with that of the world and to prevent Marxist culture from spreading and invading the intellectual and spiritual life of our people.\footnote{“Thiệt nghĩ các nước tấn tiến từ Tây chỉ Đông đều đã có những cơ quan nổi trên, như Hàn làm viên Pháp đã thành lập từ 1635, như ở Trung quốc tự đời Thanh đã có các Đại học viên và Sở quản Dịch học quán tổ chức theo tân thực Âu Mỹ, như ở Nhật bản nền học và văn hóa đã tổ chức đến mức hoàn bị không kém gì Âu Mỹ các cơ quan văn hóa đẩy đẩy cả nước;… thì nước ta trong lúc lái đợt lập giữa thế kỷ thứ 20 này phải nhanh cấp bách tổ chức các cơ quan văn hóa để tiến triển cho kịp đà quốc tế và để tránh nhan văn hóa mặc xít lan ra xâm chiếm đối sỏng tình thần của quốc dân”: Kiến nghị của Hội đồng Quốc gia về việc chuẩn hung văn-hóa, 15 Dec 1954, PTHTVNCH 29.111.}

Of course, the RVN differed from France, Qing dynasty China, or Japan because, unlike these countries, the RVN’s claim to Vietnamese culture was disputed by a rival state. Without any mention of the DRV, the comparison implied that the southern government was the only representative of Vietnamese culture. The council only acknowledged the rivalry obliquely with a vague reference to “Marxist culture.” The label implied that the DRV was more ideological than Vietnamese, and communist culture was described as a threat to the Vietnamese people. Although the National Provisional Council probably had little or no political power, its petition demonstrates how a national academy was conceived by political leaders as the exclusive prerogative of the southern regime.\footnote{The document that mentions the Provisional National Council is dated from 1954. Historians have not yet identified its existence. In 1952, a relatively powerless body with the same name was established under the SVN, and it is possible that it remained in nominal existence in 1954. I thank Edward Miller and Tuan Hoang for their assistance with this matter. For the document, see Kiến nghị của Hội đồng Quốc gia về việc chuẩn hung văn-hóa, 15 Dec 1954, PTHTVNCH 29.111. For the formation of the council in 1952, see Đoàn Thiềm, Hải miền nam qua, việc tổng ngày, 1945-1964 (Los Alamitos, Cal.: Xuân Thu, 1986), 115.}

The government’s response to the proposal is unknown, but the Ministry of National Education under Ngô Đình Diệm sought to fulfill a vision of linguistic unity and a national academy very similar to the one suggested in the council’s petition.

In the fall of 1956, the ministry began taking preliminary steps with the Hội nghị Thông nhất Ngôn ngữ (Conference on Linguistic Unity),\footnote{Hội nghị Thông nhất Ngôn ngữ literally translates to the Conference to Unify Language, but I have chosen a more elegant translation.} organized by the Directorate of Cultural Affairs. The month-long meeting was meant to lay the foundations for the National Cultural Conference, which in turn would prepare for the establishment of the Hội Văn hóa Việt Nam
(Vietnamese Cultural Organization). Ultimately, the Vietnamese Cultural Organization would
come a full-fledged Hàn Lâm Viên (National Academy) to guide the development of
Vietnamese culture.⁵⁸ The name of the conference bore striking resemblance to the National
Provisional Council’s recommendations to “unify” the Vietnamese language, but it is unclear
whether the conference was influenced by the council’s proposal (thông nhất) .⁵⁹

For the Ministry of National Education, unification referred to the standardization of
language practice throughout the country, and the conference concentrated on three main issues:
orthography, vocabulary, and scientific terminology.⁶⁰ Võ Văn Lúa, the Director of Cultural
Affairs, introduced the conference by blaming the French for the country’s linguistic
heterogeneity: “During the entire colonial period, the conquerors made all efforts to divide the
people and the land, both physically and spiritually.”⁶¹ As evidence, he cited the colonial
division of Vietnam into three regions with different legal regimes and consequent difficulties in
interregional travel and jealousy between people of different regions. As a result of colonial
policies, “language seemed to stop and stagnate in each place with its local patois, separate
meanings, unable to spread to other places, which has caused us to be removed from each other
not just geographically, politically, or administratively, but linguistically, intellectually, and

⁵⁹ The earliest evidence of the conference is a charter from late summer 1955 granting the organization of the
conference to the Directorate of Cultural Affairs. This would have been nine months after the National Provisional
Council’s proposal. The composition of the council is unclear, but a full list of the conference participants is
available. For the legal charter, see Nghị định 287-GD/NĐ thiết lập tại Nhà Văn hóa một Hội nghị bàn v/v thông
nhất ngôn ngữ, 30 Aug 1955, PThTVNCH 10.432. For the list of participants at the Conference on Linguistic Unity,
⁶⁰ Phạm Xuân Đô and Nguyễn Thế Trường, “Hội nghị Thông nhất Ngôn ngữ: Mục đích và công-việc của Hội nghị,”
VHNS 16 (Nov 1956): 1771-1773.
⁶¹ “Trong suốt thời kỳ đô-hồ, mọi cổ-gương của kẻ thống-trị là chia rẽ dân-tộc, đất-nước, về thể-chất cũng như về
tinh-thần”: [Võ Văn Lúa], “Diễn văn giới thiệu Hội nghị của Ông Giám đốc Nhà Văn hóa,” VHNS 16 (Nov 1956):
1776-1778, citation from 1777.
emotionally too.”\(^{62}\) Furthermore, people of different social classes expressed themselves differently, which reinforced the class stratification of the old feudal society.\(^{63}\)

Minister of National Education Nguyễn Dương Dön echoed Võ Văn Lúa’s sentiments. He argued that streamlining the vernacular language would overcome the divisions and lead to greater national unity. He urged the audience, “Let us not wait any longer to identify and explain those few discrepancies, so that all [our] compatriots may understand each other better, regardless of their situation or native region. To unify [our] language and consciousness is to help the people grow in unity and mutual affection.”\(^{64}\) The denunciation of recent French policies transformed the project into a return to original unity. Nguyễn Dương Dön suggested that unity was particularly needed because the arrival of northern refugees in 1954 had provided unprecedented opportunities for social interaction between northerners and southerners.\(^{65}\)

The Minister of National Education situated the conference within his department’s long-term objectives for the expansion of the Directorate of Cultural Affairs. The directorate was to add several new subsidiary divisions: new research and publishing units to produce a national scholarly journal; new agencies to compile dictionaries, research grammar, and determine technical terminology; and an office to study the possibility of establishing a National Cultural Organization leading towards a National Academy. Afterwards, the participants divided into committees and subcommittees according to their expertise in the conference’s three main

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\(^{64}\) “…còn chữ gì mà chẳng nên ra và giải thích những chữ sai-biết ratt ít kia, để toàn thế đồng-bào, dù ở hoàn cảnh nào, dù què-quần ở đâu, cũng có thể hiểu biết nhau hơn. Thông nhất về ngôn ngữ và tình-thân, tức là làm cho nhau đáng tham tình đoàn kết và tường-thần tương-ái”; “Thông nhất ngôn ngữ,” VNHS 15 (Sep-Oct 1956): 1647-1650, citation from 1647-1648.

concerns. The conference concluded with the recommendation that the Ministry establish an independent National Institute of Language.\(^{66}\)

The Conference on Linguistic Unity proposed to reduce a vast collection of different language practices into a uniform linguistic field. It aimed to root out local variation, including those among ethnic Vietnamese, and pull the DRV’s territory into its jurisdiction. Phạm Xuân Đỗ and Nguyễn Thế Tương, the official secretaries for the conference, summarized the position of the conference by describing linguistic discrepancies as “weeds in the garden of national culture” in their report for *Cultural Monthly*.\(^ {67}\) They declared that the Vietnamese language was an indivisible whole and never acknowledged the partition: “the language of our country is unitary – there is one Vietnamese language from Nam Quan Pass to the Point of Cà Mau.”\(^ {68}\) Nam Quan Pass and the Point of Cà Mau are the proverbial northernmost and southernmost points of Vietnam, respectively, and Nam Quan Pass was located on the Sino-Vietnamese border. The statement depicted Vietnamese as a vertical line stretched along the country’s north-south axis to penetrate the DRV. A more extreme claim was found in the introduction written by the staff of *Cultural Monthly* to frame Nguyễn Dương Đôn’s speech: “From the South to the North, our national language is currently used everywhere in the nation.”\(^ {69}\) Here, Vietnamese was no mere line but a more robust presence that blanketed the RVN and the DRV. In either case, the faith in the unbreakable unity of the Vietnamese language concealed a territorial claim. In 1956, the idea of linguistic unification was especially powerful because that was the year that the Geneva Agreement had planned for nation-wide reunification elections, which the RVN had

\(^{66}\)“Đề nghị đề ông Bộ trưởng Quốc gia Giáo dục,” *VHNS* 16 (Nov 1956): 1850.


\(^{69}\)“Từ Nam chí Bắc, quốc ngữ của ta hiện được dường khắp nơi trong nước”: “Thông nhất ngôn ngữ,” *VNHS* 15 (Sep-Oct 1956): 1647-1650, citation on 1649.
rejected. Furthermore, the 17th parallel was a militarized border and far more restrictive of travel and interaction than colonial-era divisions. Intolerant of internal differences and geographically expansionist, the dream of linguistic unity expressed the RVN’s desire to unite the country under its exclusive rule.

For reasons that remain unclear, the Ministry of Education’s plans for a national academy never came to fruition. The National Cultural Conference, which was to be the second step in the process after the Conference on Linguistic Unity, was granted to the Ministry of Information. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Information had no particular interest in establishing a national academy and designed the conference to support the Denounce the Communists campaign. The resulting National Cultural Conference of 1957 did not emphasize Vietnamese ethnic identity as much as anticommunism. Ultimately, the RVN never established a national academy during its twenty-year existence, despite continual discussion concerning the matter. Throughout the Conference on Linguistic Unity, the Ministry of Education emphasized the unity of Vietnamese ethnic identity, the wholeness of the nation, and the naturalness of Republican leadership. Embedded within these cultural discussions was a soft approach to politics. The ministry subtly linked language reform to national reunification and strengthened the RVN’s exclusive claim to Vietnamese culture through discussions of language. As for the DRV, the ministry simply ignored it.

70 The Office of Cultural Affairs had suggested a cultural conference since 1955, but it was postponed. See Phạm Xuân Thái, Tổng trưởng Thông tin và Chiến tranh Tâm lý giới Thứ trưởng ngày 29-3-1955 (số 398-VP/BTT); Trần Trung Dũng, Bộ trưởng đặc nhiệm tại Phú Thủ tướng nói Tổng trưởng Thông tin và Chiến tranh Tâm lý ngày 4-4-1955 v/v hoàn lại Đại hội Văn nghệ (số 243-PTT/TTK), TTLTQGII DICII, hở số số 16.246.

71 In the early 1960s, another ambitious plan called for an Institute of Vietnamese Culture to compile a Vietnamese-language encyclopedia and Vietnamese-language books for higher education and popular consumption in a variety of disciplines. This proposed national academy would have greatly expanded the state’s intervention into Republican cultural life, but it is unclear whether the plans were ever seriously considered. See Dư-ăn kế-hoạch hoạt-dộng Viện Văn-hóa Việt-Nam, about 1961, DICII 17.387. For more popular discussions, see Doàn Thêm, “Viện Hàn lâm hay Viện Văn hóa?” Bách khoa 175 (15 Apr 1964): 3-8.
International Art Exhibitions and the Exclusion of the DRV

The omission of the DRV was even more effective when placed in an international context. In the early 1960s, the RVN organized a series of international art exhibitions to celebrate Republic Day, the annual celebration of the founding of the Republican government. The government invited Free World countries and neutralist nations to contribute artwork but excluded the DRV and all communist countries. The exhibitions situated the RVN in an international community of nations by including local and foreign artwork within the same display, a combination that portrayed the Saigon government as the internationally recognized representative of Vietnamese art.

Conversely, the absence of the DRV constituted an implicit rejection. Just as the format elevated the RVN into the same category as culturally legitimate nation-states, it erased DRV’s existence and rejected Hanoi’s claims to Vietnamese culture. In addition, the exhibitions celebrated the city of Saigon as the center of intercultural interaction, almost as a foil to Huế. If Huế’s traditional purity allowed Vietnamese culture to accept foreign influences without losing authenticity, then Saigon was the sophisticated, modern capital that attracted foreign artists from throughout the world and contributed to the cosmopolitan exchange with its own artistic achievements.

The First International Salon of Pictorial Photography was organized for Republic Day 1960. The organizing committee consisted of a combination of personnel from the Ministry of Information and professional photographers. Over a thousand photographs poured in from

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72 There had been plans for an international cultural exhibition as early as 1957. See Cuộc triển lãm văn hóa quốc gia tại "Thảo cảm viên" sẽ khánh thành vào tháng 4. Bản tin VTX, buổi chiều, thứ hai, ngày 18 tháng 3 năm 1957 - số 2207, article on VII-VIII, quote from VII, DIC 1501 – 16.249
73 I have found no evidence of anticommunist speeches or publications surrounding the exhibition. It should be noted that, around the time of the exhibition, the Ministry of Information was dismantled and was reduced to the General Directorate of Information within the Office of the President, but much of the mid-level and lower level
every imaginable corner of the noncommunist world. A total of 21 countries participated, from familiar Asian neighbors, like Burma, Cambodia, Taiwan, Korean, Malaya, Thailand, and the Philippines, to distant nations with which Vietnam had had little contact prior to the Cold War, such as Argentina, Australia, Spain, Finland, Italy, and the US. Of these, the committee selected 265 photographs for the exhibit.\(^{74}\) The sheer variety of images concealed the absence of communist countries. In the official catalog, the organizing committee claimed that the event was a demonstration of international reciprocity and friendship. The standard practice in the RVN was to use “Vietnam” and the “Republic of Vietnam” interchangeably, a practice that associated Vietnamese culture exclusively with the Saigon regime. The organizing committee adhered to this practice as it explained the genesis of the exhibition:

There have been in the past several opportunities for cultural and technical exchanges between the Republic of Vietnam and friendly countries. But this is the first time we are able to welcome entries of photographers from all over the world at an exhibition in our very country… That is also a tangible expression of friendship between Vietnam and other nations of the Free World.\(^{75}\)

That artists from Thailand and Australia participated in the exhibition indirectly confirmed the regime’s ethnic legitimacy as a producer of Vietnamese art. But what the passage failed to mention was that many participants were actually from non-aligned countries, whose recognition personnel likely remained unchanged. The president of the organizing committee for the exhibition was Nguyễn Hữu Dung, who had been the Chief of Cabinet in the Ministry of Information in the late 1950s. Among the remaining five members, I have been able to identify two: Phạm Văn Mùi, president of the Saigon Photo Club and a speaker at the National Cultural conference; and Ứng Hội, who worked in the Office of Motion Pictures in the General Directorate of Information. The others were Nguyễn Thao and Trần Văn Khanh.

\(^{74}\) Triển lãm quốc tế nhiếp ảnh mỹ thuật nhân dịp lễ Quốc khánh Việt Nam Cộng Hòa 26 tháng 10 năm 1960, unpaginated.

\(^{75}\) Triển lãm quốc tế nhiếp ảnh mỹ thuật nhân dịp lễ Quốc khánh Việt Nam Cộng Hòa 26 tháng 10 năm 1960, unpaginated. The original statement is in English.
of both the RVN and DRV undermined Saigon’s pretensions as the only authentic Vietnamese state.

Within the display, the arrangement depicted Vietnamese culture as a distinct subset within a diverse collection of international artwork. Like the petition by the Provisional National Council, the organization of the photographs obscured the qualitatively different character of the RVN by comparing it with non-partitioned states. There was nothing visually incongruent about Republican photographs displayed next to those from Cambodia or Italy, but the Italian government’s claim to represent Italian culture and Cambodia’s claim to represent Khmer culture were not in contest as was the case with RVN and Vietnamese culture.

Likewise, the absence of the DRV in such an international array implied that the rest of the world considered Hanoi irrelevant, at best, or illegitimate, at worse. Together, the omission of the DRV and the presence of foreign countries portrayed Saigon as the true representative of Vietnamese art. The government’s ability to solicit foreign participation was also a testament to the regime’s diplomatic legitimacy, as the RVN was far more successful in winning recognition from non-aligned, third world countries than the DRV.\footnote{Bernard Fall, \textit{The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} rev. ed. (New York and Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967): 398-399; In fact, the RVN appears to have inherited a tradition of celebrating foreign alliances from the SVN. (Dúc Quốc thông hiểu triệu quốc dân Việt-Nam Tên Nguyễn-dân Tấn-Mào, prepared for 6 Feb 1951, PThTVNCH 3655 – 29.092; Le Secrétaire Général des Nations unies au Ministre des Affaires étrangères et de l’Intérieur du ViêtNam le 6 septembre 1951 au sujet de la célébration de la Journée des droits de l’homme. SOA 373/1/06; Lê Tân Nâm le Ministre de l’Éducation National au Président du gouvernement le 1 décembre 1952 au sujet de la célébration au Viêt-Nam de la “Journée des Droits de l’Homme” à la date du 10-12-1952. No 6314-GD/UNESCO; Nguyễn Văn Tâm Président du Gouvernement au Ministre de l’Éducation Nationale le 4 décembre 1952 au sujet de la célébration au Viêt-Nam de la “Journée des Droits le l’Homme” à la date du 10 Décembre 1952. No 1573-SG/L; PThTVNCH 3655 – 29.094.)\textsuperscript{76}} Reflecting on the experience, the Director General of Information Trần Văn Thọ explained, “this Exhibition also allows the
Vietnamese people to see clearly the government’s diplomatic and political achievements in relation to foreign countries.”

In 1962, the government organized an even larger exhibition, the First International Exhibition of Fine Arts of Saigon. The organizing committee was headed by the Director of Artistic Studies within the Ministry of National Education, and most of the committee members were art teachers at the National Advanced School of Art in Saigon, the National Advanced School of Art in Huế, or the Secondary School for Decorative Arts in Gia Định. An international panel of judges selected 430 watercolors, oil paintings, drawings, and sculptures representing twenty-one countries. The official catalog reinforced the idea of the world as a collection of cultural units. The glossy, trilingual volume divided works by country of origin, with each section preceded by an official statement by the country’s ambassador or other national representative.

The RVN’s section was labeled “Vietnam” and introduced by Nguyễn Văn Thế, a well-known sculptor and an adviser to the organizing committee. As an art student in France, he had won second place for the prestigious Prix de Rome scholarship from the government of France. In his remarks, the sculptor highlighted the international character of the exhibit and its importance for “Vietnam”: “Vietnam welcomes the artists of twenty different countries to Saigon. This is an event of considerable importance and exceptional interest to the Vietnamese public who will for the first time be able to enjoy a complete panorama of all the styles of


78 Dề nhạt triển lãm quốc tế mỹ thuật tại Sài gòn 1962, 83, 95, 257.
contemporary Art.” Nguyen Van Thé implied that the entire international world of art was contained in the exhibition and ignored the absence of artists from communist countries. Like the physical arrangement of artwork, the visual format of the catalog, the usage of “Vietnam” for the RVN, and Nguyen Van Thé’s description all portrayed the RVN as the only Vietnam and rejected the DRV.

More than the photography exhibition of 1960, the exhibition of fine arts was meant to raise the stature of Saigon to an international city. The official purpose of the exposition was “to strengthen, beyond already existing cultural relations, the friendship of artists of all participating nations in an atmosphere of mutual confidence and respect.” The exhibition was imagined as a cultural dialogue between equals, where Republican artists contributed as much as foreigners. In the official catalog, the Vietnamese subtitle billed the event as “An encounter between Vietnamese and Foreign Artists at Tao Đàn Park Hall.” The catalog celebrated Saigon as a culturally cosmopolitan city. Referring to previous international art exhibitions, the catalogue explained,

Following the examples of Venice, Sao Paolo and Paris, the city of Saigon – with its choice geographical location encouraging cultural relations between the East and West to multiply and flourish over the centuries – is led to try to match the symbolic gesture of its elders [Italy, Brazil, France] by inviting artists of the world to again pay homage, this time within its walls, to Art and Beauty.

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79 “...le Viet-Nam acceuille à Saigon les artistes de vingt pays différents. C’est là un événement d’une importance considérable et d’un intérêt exceptionnel pour le public vietnamien qui, pour la 1ère fois, pourra jouir d’un panorama complet de toutes les tendances de l’Art contemporain”: Đệ nhất triển làm quốc tế mỹ thuật tại Sài Gòn 1962, 247.
80 The original is in English. Đệ nhất triển làm quốc tế mỹ thuật tại Sài Gòn 1962, 32.
82 Đệ nhất triển làm quốc tế mỹ thuật tại Sài Gòn 1962, 29. The original is in English.
By relocating the center of international art and culture from such renowned cities to its own capital, the regime was declaring its importance not merely as a distinctive member but as a potential leader of international culture. That the DRV was not even invited to such a glamorous cultural show seemed to imply Saigon’s superior sophistication. These qualities made the city the modern complement to Huế. Just as the old imperial capital derived its cultural strength from tradition, Saigon prided itself on cosmopolitanism.

Rhetorically, the exhibitions built upon other aspects of Republican cultural policy and constructions of ethnic identity. At its most basic, Republican nationalism sought to link state power with ethnic identity through spatial, temporal, and historical conceptions of the nation. The revision of toponyms created a uniform territory that shared the same ethnic and political rituals, and the celebration of Huế crowned Saigon as the inheritor of cultural authenticity and political legitimacy. Cultural policy sought to enforce and expand the reach of empowered Vietnamese identity. The Ministry of Education envisioned and established national cultural institutions that claimed to place all of Vietnamese culture under Saigon’s leadership. In doing so, it tried to transcend the partition. Finally, cultural policy turned outward towards the international world and used foreign participation in cultural exchanges to portray Saigon as the only Vietnamese state and to contest the DRV’s cultural legitimacy.
Conclusion

Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which these programs influenced public sentiments, it is possible to assess their relative strengths and weaknesses. One of their greatest limitations was that the RVN’s cultural policy could only reach as far as the regime’s territorial control. Unable to maintain security in the countryside, schools and cultural programs were often confined to the cities. More significantly, the cultural programs had a class bias. They glorified elite Vietnamese culture while largely ignoring popular, particularly rural, culture. Imperial architecture, royal music and dance, art exhibitions, academic research, and secondary and university education were all part of urban, elite cultural and intellectual life. The government generally offered no parallel programs that supported folk dances, rural crafts, or oral literature, though the National Conservatory did incorporate popular music traditions into its curriculum. Furthermore, the impulse towards cultural “unification” called for the homogenization of regional and local cultural forms far removed from urban centers. Not only did the definition of ethnic identity marginalize the DRV, the Ministry of National Education did little to incorporate the peasantry into its vision of the Vietnamese nation. These limitations reflect the RVN’s inability to enlarge its political base, a weakness that was established under Ngô Đình Diệm and continued throughout the history of the Republic.

Instead, the celebration of ethnic identity targeted a small, but influential sector of the population: educated middle and upper class urbanites. The urban population would have had the greatest access to research institutions, conservatories, and art exhibitions, which were all concentrated in cities, and the appreciation of such elite culture generally required significant education. For those who were actively involved in Republican intellectual life, the government programs were potentially powerful because they were present in so many distinct realms of
activity. Whether these educated urbanites examined the latest academic research, attended concerts by the National Conservatory, toured the imperial citadel at Huế, assisted their children with homework, or admired photographs at the state-sponsored art exhibitions, they were presented with depictions of Vietnam as a single culture under Saigon’s leadership.

More specifically, the cultural policies appear to have won over many intellectuals and scholars. Nguyễn Hữu Ba, Bao La Cự Sĩ, Nguyễn Văn Thế, and other intellectuals that cooperated or worked for the Ministry of National Education were not career propagandists or high level government officials. Rather, they were scholars and artists who willingly collaborated with the regime even when the artistic and literary scene of the RVN provided ample professional opportunities outside of government employment, and it seems reasonable to consider that they were genuinely committed to the development of Vietnamese culture.

Furthermore, the profound engagement of the Ministry of National Education in scholarship and culture endowed it with an air of disinterested expertise and lofty aestheticism. Unlike much of Republican propaganda, the cultural programs engaged indirectly in politics and were not saturated with anticommunist denunciations or lavish praise for Ngô Đình Diệm. As educated urbanites became frustrated with Ngô Đình Diệm’s heavy handed politics, cultural policy may have represented one aspect of Republican nationalism that they did support. Combined with the pervasive rumors that the DRV suppressed intellectual freedom, cultural programs may well have helped to retain political support for an anticommunist Vietnamese state, even as many intellectuals turned against the First Republic. Certainly, the passionate interest in Vietnamese culture outlived Ngô Đình Diệm’s rule. Intellectuals continued to explore Vietnamese history, language, and literature, and many of the institutions and historical projects first established in the 1950s continued well into the early 1970s. Many historians have assumed
that the middle and upper class supported the RVN out of economic interest, but the research presented here suggests that the regime’s official promotion of Vietnamese ethnic identity may have acted as a genuine source of positive attraction that was distinct from economic calculations.

Situated within Vietnamese history, some aspects of Republican cultural policy appear to have continued intellectual trends from the late colonial period, particularly the anxiety over linguistic diversity. In the 1920s and 1930s, many nationalist intellectuals championed the development of vernacular Vietnamese and quốc ngữ, the Romanized script, as a form of national improvement. They sought to perfect the script and debated the rules that should govern word usage. As early as the 1930s, some began calling for an official institution to regulate the formation of new words. The interest in a national academy and cultural centralization in the RVN may have grown out of these earlier desires to regulate the Vietnamese language, but what differed was that the Republic had the capacity to establish state-supported cultural institutions that colonial-era nationalists did not.

Another similarity between late colonial and Republican nationalism is its identification with educated, middle class urbanites. Scholars have remarked on the essentially urban character of the Vietnamese nationalist movement, a handicap that only communist nationalists were eventually able to overcome. In continuing an urban, elite base, Republican nationalism grew out of late colonial nationalism. Instead of a deviation from Vietnamese history, the RVN might represent a distinct stage in the nationalist movement.

84 Marr, Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 136-189.
85 Marr, Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 168.
This essay introduced the concept of contested nationalism to describe nationalism in partitioned states. It argues that nationalism in sibling states is mutually constitutive and is characterized by both commonalities and differences. This framework moves beyond scholarly interpretations of a singular Vietnamese nationalism and suggests further research should be conducted on the interrelationship between alternative forms of nationalism, particularly between the DRV and RVN. Applied to partitioned countries elsewhere, the research suggests that the study of nationalism in divided countries should take into account the dialogical relationship of contested nationalism because the coexistence of sibling states profoundly influences the definition of national identity. In the RVN, the partition was always an underlying theme in official celebrations of Vietnamese ethnic identity. Cultural programs consistently expressed that the Vietnamese nation was singular, not plural, and implicitly rejected the validity of the partition as well as the DRV.

In fact, it is striking that the Republic and its rival shared the same notion of geographical territory. This similarity suggests the continuing relevance of the nationalist ideas that were formed in late colonial Vietnam. Benedict Anderson has argued that French colonial policies on education and language prevented the emergence of an Indochinese nationalism and instead favored three distinct “imagined communities”: Cambodge (Cambodia) for the Khmers, Laos for the Laotians, and the combined areas of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina for the Vietnamese. Anderson compares Indochina with Indonesia to point out that ethnic differences were less determinative than colonial policies. Refining Anderson’s argument, Christopher Goscha’s *Vietnam or Indochina?* finds that, as late as the 1930s, Vietnamese nationalists entertained two competing spatial conceptions of the nation, French Indochina or modern day Vietnam, and the latter prevailed when Khmers and Laotians spurned efforts to create an Indochinese

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87 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 124-134.
consciousness. Yet, in the 1950s, both sibling states clung to the same geographical concept in spite of the partition and did not reformulate state nationalism to promote their truncated territory.

The difference between the 1930s and the partition years suggest that nationalist ideas and sentiments may have crystallized in the 1940s, during the First Indochina War, and they apparently resisted the centripetal forces of political antagonism and internal warfare. Alternatively, it may be possible that the partition actually strengthened nationalist sentiments by threatening the legitimacy of both states with an ethnically similar nationalist rival. The complex relationship between Cold War partitions and nationalism remains unclear, but the persistence of nationalism and its adaptations to partitions speaks to the enduring strength of “imagined communities” long after they were first imagined.

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88 Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina?*
Map 1. “The Two Viet-Nams”

Map 2. Administrative Map of French Indochina

Map 3. “Việt Nam Thiên nhiên” (“Physical Map of Vietnam”)

Source: Địa lý Việt Nam lớp đế nhà lớp A, B, C, D, by Tăng Xuân An and Mrs. Tăng Xuân An (Saigon: Sông Mới, 1963), 69.
Map 4. “Việt Nam: Đường giao thông” (“Roadmap of Vietnam”)

Source: Địa lý Việt Nam lớp đệ nhị lớp A, B, C, D, by Tăng Xuân An and Mrs. Tăng Xuân An (Saigon: Sóng Mới, 1963), 204.