



“U.S. - Sino – Vietnamese Relations: A Historical Perspective”

Presented by Dr. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen of
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and the U of L Center For Asian
Democracy

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In August 2010, the U.S. Aircraft carrier *George Washington* made an official visit to Vietnam. The visit – the first official visit of any U.S. military forces to Vietnam since the end of the war – was held to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the normalization of U.S.-Vietnamese relations. This visit was widely interpreted as a symbolic gesture against China, which has been a threat to Vietnamese security since the brief Chinese invasion of Vietnam's northern border in 1979.

Dr. Nguyen asserts that the conflict between Vietnam and China developed much earlier, during the American War, and that the role of internal politics in North Vietnam during the war has been downplayed by a U.S.-centric research approach. The recent opening of some national archives in Vietnam and the release of now-declassified documents have allowed historians to paint a fuller picture of the conflict. This aptly named “Vietnamization” of Vietnam War studies is central to Dr. Nguyen's work.

The talk focused on the period of the Tet Offensive. Traditionally, historians have interpreted the timing of this phase of the war with reference to internal issues in South Vietnam and the United States. The widespread attacks by Communist forces were thought to be timed to coincide with the presidential election in the United States, in hopes of breaking the American public's support for the war and the U.S. military's will to win it. Dr. Nguyen, however, suggests that this interpretation is overly simplistic and ignores the importance of political turmoil, which was occurring in Vietnam at the time.

In 1967 the Communist leadership in Hanoi orchestrated a series of purges, often referred to as the “Revisionist Anti-Party Affair” or the “Hoang Minh Chinh Affair,” after one of the more prominent accused traitors. The traitors targeted by this purge were those members of the Party who were ideologically pro-Soviet, and wanted to abandon the current attempt to win the South. The leading prosecutors of the purge, however, were pro-Chinese, at a time when the Sino-Soviet split was changing loyalties throughout the Communist world. The Chinese Communist Party, unlike that of the Soviet Union, did not support the idea of “peaceful co-existence” with the West, and Dr. Nguyen's research suggests that the Tet Offensive was motivated not only by a desire to break American and South Vietnamese willpower, but also to maintain Chinese support.

The modern implications of these new facts are unclear. As a historian, Dr. Nguyen was reluctant to make predictions about the future of Vietnamese relations with the world's sole remaining superpower and its most likely successor. Nonetheless, her study of the Tet Offensive reminds us that seemingly minor internal politics can have a substantial effect on global affairs.