Research note

Between Memories and Taboos: The Formation of Alternative Vietnamese and Myanmarese Spaces of Citizenship and Belonging

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Abstract
In the postcolonial states of Southeast Asia, governments weaponize their histories to create spaces of legitimate memories for nation-building processes. Local identities that do not conform to the official historiography are silenced. Beyond these state-sanctioned boundaries, however, alternative practices of remembrance are upheld that can challenge the state to produce different forms of belonging, identity, and citizenship. This paper analyzes the creation of opposing spaces of memory and belonging. The case studies include the struggle for meaning and identity between the State of Myanmar and the local population in Rakhine State as well as the inclusion and exclusion of the memory of war in Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora in Germany. Governments in Myanmar and Vietnam use their respective histories to create patterns of continuity and exclude those defined as outsiders. Memories of local struggles are maintained, practiced, and even celebrated in local communities and the diaspora. Hereby, we point to practices that maintain excluded memories and enable alternative forms of belonging and citizenship to endure.

Keywords: Myanmar, Vietnam, citizenship, memories, belonging, nation-building, Rhakine, Rohingya, diaspora, Sino-Vietnamese war

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Introduction

From the 2014 China-Vietnam oil rig crisis to the 2021 coup in Myanmar, past conflicts over ethnicity, autonomy, and identity still haunt the countries of Southeast Asia. In the context of current tensions in the region, questions of memories, belonging, and citizenship come to the fore. Spaces of memories are weaponized by states and social actors alike to mobilize communities. These spaces are materialized and reproduced locally to create official histories and identities. Historical narratives and practices of remembrance are thus used to either include or exclude citizens.

From these official landscapes, nationalized forms of citizenship are disputed. According to Berenschot et al. (2018), citizenship is the underlying narrative of state-society relations in Southeast Asia. The rights and obligations inherent in this relationship are continuously negotiated. These negotiations employ local needs, interests, and memories to establish a national identity. In Vietnam and Myanmar, this identity is monopolized by the centralized state — as controlled by their respective dominant ethnic and religious groups. The construction of citizenship in both countries is shaped by dominant historical interpretations, ethnicity and political affiliations. Everyday practices of citizenship negotiation are intertwined with legalized definitions of citizenship often employed in practices of inclusion and exclusion.

As memories and their materiality become national boundaries of belonging translated into the establishment of official citizenship, these negotiations exclude alternative identities based on marginalized memories. However, outside of these state-sanctioned boundaries, alternative practices of remembrance are maintained on the spatial, temporal, and social periphery. They can challenge the state and produce alternative forms of belonging, identity, and citizenship (Kwok and Waterson 2012; McCormick 2014; Scott 2009). We argue that these alternative forms of citizenship and belonging emerge and indeed endure at the interface between that spatial-social periphery and local memory practices in Vietnam and Myanmar.

Methodology

Based on three case studies — in Vietnam, among the latter's diaspora, and in Myanmar — we analyze practices of remembrance and how these play a role in maintaining alternative forms of citizenship. To this end, we use qualitative interviews, participatory observation, and visual data from field research in Vietnam, Myanmar, and Germany. We aim to reconstruct in an emic manner the local landscapes of social and cultural meanings, aspirations, and relations from the analysis of observed, local everyday practices (Evers and Korff 2003, 11). Because aspirations and practices are rooted in localities, their analysis helps us to understand local space, knowledge, and social organization and their relationship to concepts of belonging — and hence citizenship.

We start by defining state practices regarding memories and nation-building in the context of citizenship in Vietnam and Myanmar,[1] based on taking an ethnographic approach in both countries. Our case studies include: (1) the commemoration of the victims of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War; (2) practices of remembrance in the Vietnamese Catholic diaspora in Germany; and (3) the struggle for identity between the state of Myanmar and the local population in Rakhine state.

We chose our three case studies because these are our fields of expertise and also a step toward moving beyond a mere country focus in academic work on Southeast Asia. We argue that both states use their respective histories to create patterns of continuity and to exclude those defined as outsiders. The existing literature talks of a "memory machine" in the case of Vietnam (Grossheim 2020) and a "truth regime" in that of Myanmar (Cheesman 2017). At the same time, decades of conflict, war, and ethnic marginalization have created a localized, fragmented society, including significant diaspora communities from both countries. We argue that this led to opposing spaces of memory and belonging in Vietnam and Myanmar, and hence our chosen analytical focus.

All three cases are geographically located on the periphery and among the historically marginalized. As they call into question official narratives, memories of struggles are maintained, practiced, and even celebrated in local communities — whether privately or in the diaspora. We also chose our cases to point toward the diverging levels — local, national, and international — at which practices of remembrance and belonging are negotiated and established. We look at practices that maintain excluded memories, and therewith enable alternative forms of belonging and citizenship to take hold in both countries and among their diasporas too.

Literature

The localization of citizenship in Southeast Asia

This paper aims to expand the emerging academic work on citizenship in Southeast Asia by including discussions on memorialization and belonging (Le and Nicolaisen 2021; Berenschot et al. 2018; South and Lall 2018; Kuan and Lam 2013). Broadly speaking, "citizenship" defines the membership of an individual person in an ordered community (Kuan and Lam 2013, 49). Citizenship hence mediates a sociopolitical identity and enforces one's civic integration into society. Starting with Western classical theory, Tilly (1995) defines "citizenship" as a contract between the state and its people, which leads to transactions of enforceable rights and obligations

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1 We are particularly aware that the developments in Myanmar since the coup on February 1, 2021, pose a major challenge for this work. There are dynamic changes, ongoing and new conflicts on different levels, with various actors involved. Therefore, we chose a descriptive-analysis approach to focus on the topic at hand. To work out persistent fault lines that have come into play in the current situation, the case study is embedded in the historical context.

independent of personal considerations. The liberal model of citizenship focuses on the formal, legal dimensions hereof and employs a universal rights-based approach (Berenschot at al. 2018; Kuan and Lam 2013). Contrariwise, the republican model defines active participation in the community for the common good as a fundamental duty of each citizen ("duty-based approach"). Individual political participation allows for a sense of identity and belonging (Kuan and Lam 2013). Finally, in the communitarian tradition (Schinkel and Houdt 2010; Kuan and Lam 2013) the focus is on the creation of a shared identity rooted in the acceptance of plurality, as expressed by means of an unofficial, moral citizenship based on the shared norms of a given community.

Most of the work on Southeast Asia recognizes the need to move beyond the classical work on citizenship (Tilly 1995; Schinkel and Houdt 2010; Rawls 1993). Instead, citizenship is framed as being based on practices that are inherently local expressions of state-society relations, creating diverse patterns of duties and rights, state responsiveness, and legitimacy (Berenschot et al. 2018; Suriyadinata 2014; South and Lall 2018; Le and Nicolaisen 2021). According to Berenschot et al. (2018), citizenship negotiations in Southeast Asia are geared toward more inclusive governance rather than the universal implementation of rights. Changing interpretations and expressions of religious and ethnic identities generate new understandings of rights. However, political violence, underlying narratives of morality and nationalism provide tools of control and exclusion.

Citizenship thus combines one's legal, social, and/or cultural position in a community and its associated civil, political, and social rights with a sense of belonging. Hereby, citizenship also includes those lacking formal status or experiencing "second-class" citizenship. It is to those on the margins that we now turn.

Citizenship on the periphery: Remoteness as a means of resistance

At its core, citizenship is most generally discussed in connection with the nation-state. Citizens negotiate their relationship with the center. As the latter expands its reach, it redefines its own relationship with the periphery. Remote areas, in particular borderlands and mountainous highlands, are contested spaces in the context of the nation-state (Scott 2009). [2] Due to their politically sensitive nature, spatial remoteness, and often violent history, frontier spaces are of high interest to the state and yet at the same time difficult to fully integrate into the nation. Frontiers are both remote in relation to urban centers and central in the context of national sovereignty. They also offer ample opportunities for those able to access the key resources, like

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2   Scott (2009) describes "Zomia" as a precolonial periphery in Southeast Asia that offers a counterpoint to the power of the central elite. On this periphery, alternative forms of living could be maintained by organizing in ways that made people's integration into the centralizing states of the region difficult.

financial support, consumer goods, social relations, political power, state services, and land.

This duality of the periphery leads to "social edginess," as rooted in a given person's social, economic, political, and temporal location (Harms 2011). Social edginess points to the risk of marginalization on the periphery for those without access to such vital resources. For many local residents, this results in exclusion from full citizenship — in particular for ethnic minorities. As remoteness is politicized, local strongmen can become the focal points of power, create alternative centers of belonging, and thus challenge the understanding of citizenship promoted by the state (Berenschot et al. 2018).

However, remoteness can also be a choice to challenge the central authorities. We argue that because remoteness is often socially constructed, it is not always rooted in marginalization but can in fact provide social countermeasures thereto. While the state has a monopoly over national identity at the center, alternative identities based on marginalized memories and practices can emerge and prevail on the periphery in consequence.

Practices of remembrance: Aspirations and belonging

If remoteness is used as a countermeasure to the state's aspiration to control, it needs to produce an alternative narrative of belonging. The latter needs to be defined as based on sociocultural aspirations that are rooted in related practices (Appadurai 2004; Holston and Appadurai 1996). The capacity to aspire grows from a set of norms, values, and collective experiences, and leads to the imagination of a possible future worth striving for (Appadurai 2004; Holston and Appadurai 1996). Aspirations are, hence, future-oriented but locally rooted, with the past serving as a frame of reference here.

Belonging expresses the aspiration for security, individual rights, and shared norms and values. The nation-state is the ultimate form of such belonging, institutionalized via the concept of citizenship. However, for those living on the margins of the state, the aspiration to belong can be embedded in alternative forms of citizenship connected to separatist movements or to local/transnational communities.

This aspiration is embedded in memories of a forgone community that contradict the formal state interpretation of the past. Here, aspirations are closely linked to nostalgia for an idealized past — something also common among state institutions (Edwards 2016). Nostalgia centers on the imaginations embedded in this past. For this purpose, memories are shared to pass this idealized past onto other members of the community — thus providing a vision of the future rather than conveying objective truth. From these alternative memories, local communities will derive practices, narratives, and meanings which are used to produce alternative spaces of belonging that can challenge the state space of citizenship. Nostalgia hence becomes a political tool to unify communities.

Citizenship negotiations in practice

The struggle for identity between the State of Myanmar and the local population in Rakhine State

In 2012, conflicts between Muslims and Buddhists, framed as intercommunal, broke out in Myanmar's Rakhine State. In August 2017, more than 700,000 Muslims, including members of the Rohingya community, fled the fighting into neighboring Bangladesh, where they have since been staying in refugee camps.[3] In 2019, another armed actor, the Arakan Army, composed mainly of Buddhist Rakhine fighting for increased autonomy for their state, engaged in armed conflicts with the Myanmar army.

When the Myanmar military staged a coup on February 1, 2021, it interrupted a process aimed at establishing a democratic system in the country that pushed the so-called Rohingya question into the background as the coup faced public resistance, primarily from the emerging Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).[4] The military resorted to violence against its own population, leading to civil war. These events have since paralyzed the country's economy and caused the collapse of its education and public-health systems.[5]

Fox et al. (2021) argue that the crisis in Rakhine State is a local conflict between the Muslim minority and the Buddhist Rakhine. However, there is a larger underlying conflict here between the Bamar-dominated unitary Myanmar state, the Buddhist Rakhine, and the Muslim Rohingya: the prerogative of interpretation and implementation of citizenship laws as well as highly problematic identity politics practiced by different Myanmar governments have resulted in numerous conflicts in this multiethnic state. With a court case at the International Court of Justice in The Hague brought by The Gambia in November 2019, the conflict gained an international dimension (Fox et al. 2021). In Myanmar, the explanation for these circumstances is clearly articulated: according to the government, the Rohingya are not genuinely Myanmarese, they entered the country illegally, and as such cannot be citizens (Kyaw 2017). Only after the coup in 2021 would the question of belonging be renegotiated by various actors, while the military is once again using violence — thus sticking to its core ideology and mindset.

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3   The flight was triggered by coordinated attacks on Myanmar border posts in the north of Rakhine State carried out by a rebel group that calls itself the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and claims to be committed to the rights of the Muslim Rohingya. The Myanmar military responded with heavy offensives that not only resulted in waves of Muslims fleeing to Bangladesh but also affected Hindus, Rakhine Buddhists, and other groups, who fled to Rakhine State's southern regions (Fox 2017).

4   This is still ongoing at the time of writing.

5   UNHCR (2021) reports that more than 200,000 people have fled Myanmar since the coup. The United Nations fears that by 2022 half of the population, up to 25 million people, will have been thrown into poverty by the twin impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the political crisis triggered by the coup (Fox 2022).

Ethnicity and religion are instrumentalized and politicized in Myanmar. The term *thaingyintha,* understood as "national races" in political readings, became part of the state-building program and its rituals of national unity (Cheesman 2017, 463, 465). The Burmese *taingyintha* concept conceives of a relationship existing between people and soil: only those living in a given place since the dawn of time came to be seen to really belong "[as] *taing-yin-tha* took on new importance as the primary identifier of belonging" (Brett and Hlaing 2020, 3). Myanmar's 2008 Constitution "establishes a conceptual relation between national races and citizenship" (Cheesman 2017, 470). Consequently, while the government recognizes 135 indigenous groups based on obscure data, the Rohingya are not included in the concept, since they allegedly immigrated during the British colonial period (Cheesman 2017, 468). This leads to the state-induced exclusion and inclusion of certain ethnic and religious groups. The 1982 Citizenship Law follows the same logic, making people first-, second-, and third-class citizens. Belonging to one of the national races becomes herewith the "gold standard" for citizenship (Cheesman 2017; Kyaw 2017).

When General Ne Win staged his coup in 1962, referencing the colonial-era nationalist slogan "to be Burmese is to be Buddhist," xenophobia and racism were on the rise (Gravers 1999, 69). Different groups of people — Chinese and Indian, including also Muslims, Hindus, and the Rohingya — had been accused of being illegal immigrants who only settled in Burma under British rule (Fox et al. 2021). This resulted in a nationwide immigration and residence check — known as Na Ga Min ("Dragon King") — aimed at registering every resident of Burma as a citizen or alien (Kyaw 2017, 274). Two military operations aimed at rooting out illegal migrants in Rakhine State in 1978 and 1991 led to nearly half a million Muslims fleeing to Bangladesh.

After the coup in 1962, the military, lacking legitimacy among the population, resorted to history in an attempt to position itself within the tradition of successful Bamar kings — specifically as a good and just ruler. They portrayed the British colonial period as a break in continuity and the Anglo-Burmese wars as having been lost only due to the lack of a strong, modern army (Tatmadaw) at that time. This rhetoric was recycled during the transition phase (2011–2021), when the military presented itself as the guardian of the democratic process, national unity, and the constitution. The 2021 coup maintains this interpretation of their political role.

Since the 1960s, the military has sought to create a national identity that evokes an unprecedented, mystical unity between the different ethnic groups in drawing on an imagined historic community, as a way "to legitimize a centralized regime as a base for a unitary state" (Gravers 1999, 58). One of the three national causes of the military is the "non-disintegration of national solidarity" — even though there had never been a national solidarity. The threat hereto was framed as an external one: the army protects the social order and Buddhism from interference by foreign politics. Slogans invoking national unity and emphasizing the military's role as a state-

builder appeared regularly in the *New Light of Myanmar*, the state's propaganda newspaper. The reality, however, was characterized by a forced assimilation policy and conflicts with ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) fighting for autonomy and self-determination as counter identities and -movements emerged.

Practices of remembrance between the state and the local: The Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979

In Vietnam, the state conceives citizenship to be an idealized cooperative partnership between the government and all Vietnamese people (Le and Nicolaisen 2021; Binh Trinh 2021). The aim of this partnership, from a state perspective, is to generate legitimacy for the rule of the socialist party and its nation-building efforts. In reality, this idealized form of citizenship is challenged by localized conflicts (Le and Nicolaisen 2021). To minimize challenges, the Vietnamese party-state combines violence against the political opposition, narratives of moral expectation, social pressure (Binh Trinh 2021; Kerkvliet 2010), and a "memory machine" (Grossheim 2020) that instrumentalizes Vietnamese history and remembrance to induce social conformity (Grossheim 2021c).

The use of historical narratives as means of nationalist mobilization is found at all levels of government, from decisions on textbook content at the national one to local campaigns (Grossheim 2018). This leads to selective remembrance of Vietnam's past. This is most obvious concerning memories of the Republic of South Vietnam and its material remains, like old Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) cemeteries (Grossheim 2021b). Political memorialization excludes all those from full membership in the Vietnamese nation who do not uphold the same interpretation of the past as the state. Forms of political remembrance outside of government-sanctioned narratives are pushed to the margins of society or into the diaspora. The Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 stands out here, because interpretation of it is now shifting and linked to current policy decisions regarding China (Grossheim 2021a). The ambiguity of state remembrance practices regarding this conflict opens up space for local appropriations.

The Sino-Vietnamese War was fought on the border between China and Vietnam from February 17 to March 16, 1979, after the former's forces invaded the latter's territory. The Chinese offensive was a response to the Vietnamese-led overthrow of the Chinese-supported Khmer Rouge regime (Yin and Path 2021, 13). This short-lived fighting led to the death of tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians on both sides, mostly natives of the region (Nguyen 2017). Before retreating, Chinese soldiers destroyed local infrastructure and houses. Both China and Vietnam maintain that they won the war. Meanwhile, conflicts along the border would continue until 1989 (Nguyen 2017).

Since the conflict was a direct altercation with China, it has affected relations between the two countries and forms a common point of reference for actors mobilizing against China. When the conflict in the South China Sea erupted in 2014,

protestors compared China's actions to the border invasion of 1979. Additionally, due to the link with Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia (Vincent 2022), increased attention being paid to these events also opens the Vietnamese Communist Party up to scrutiny. State-level commemoration of the war is thus politically motivated and embedded in geopolitics.

Generally speaking, there are four groups of actors who participate in practices of remembrance and commemoration. First, there are the government officials involved in overseeing education, tourism, and museum exhibitions. They come from the local, regional, or national level and support state narratives on official memories. Increasing interest in Vietnamese history and museum exhibitions necessitates a discourse about how historical events are to be portrayed to national and international audiences. How the Sino-Vietnamese War's presentation in museum exhibitions has shifted is representative of changing values regarding international relations with China (Grossheim 2021a).

Second, there are veterans and their families. They have no formal support network but are members of informal circles and engage in similar interactions. Third, there is also the broader group of residents of the northern border region, including ethnic minorities who are not active participants in externally produced narratives — rather, they are mostly recipients and consumers thereof. According to Tuong Vu (2014, 41) there is, fourth and finally, another group of actors here: the "political civil society" involved in challenging official state narratives and policies, especially regarding Vietnam-China relations.

Citizenship narratives in a transnational community: The Vietnamese Catholic diaspora in Germany

Moving beyond the local and national, people will also negotiate practices of remembrance and belonging at the transnational level too, in particular in cases of a larger diaspora originating out of a common historical event. Memory practices among the Vietnamese Catholic diaspora in Germany illustrate this. The Vietnamese community in Germany is diverse, with a small group arriving in both East and West Germany in the 1950s and 1960s. Later, guest workers in the former and boat people in the latter were added. Since the 2010s, a new wave of Vietnamese migrants has arrived — often illegally. As part of this larger Vietnamese-German diaspora, the community of Vietnamese Catholics was estimated at around 16,000 people strong in 2014 (Ninh 2021).

This Catholic community emerged in large part out of the South Vietnamese boat people leaving post-1975, in fear of the new socialist government and due to postwar economic hardship. Being on the losing side after the Second Indochina War (from the late 1950s to 1975), the Catholic diaspora is embedded in the latter's history, in the former Republic of Vietnam (RVN),[6] and in their shared experience as refugees

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6   Previously, South Vietnam from 1954 to 1975.

coming to Germany. Many of these refugees, including Vietnamese Catholics, not only identified (and still do) with the former RVN but also shared their fear of persecution and the nature of their escape and arrival in reception centers in Germany (Beuchling 2003). Due to these shared experiences, they have created a close-knit community that maintains many practices, memories, and traditions more than 40 years after arrival.

As South Vietnamese refugees, the community is also home to alternative processes of memorialization. Contrary to memories of the First (1946–1954) and Second Indochina Wars, which are dominated by state narratives,[7] the Catholic diaspora maintains an alternative form of commemoration of both these wars. Instead of the socialist victory, the focus herein is on the loss of one's homeland and belonging. In this memory, the socialist state is not the glorious victor but a brutal occupying force.

The personal networks forged during these experiences were maintained while establishing new lives in Germany. Furthermore, these Catholic refugees, often deeply devout and perceiving their faith to be the reason for their erstwhile persecution in Vietnam, have held onto their religion — which is infused with Vietnamese rituals and symbols. Central to this is the worshiping of Our Lady of Lavang, which became established practice in Vietnam following the supposed apparition of the Virgin Mary to a group of persecuted Catholics there in 1798 (Ninh 2021).

Generally, the Vietnamese Catholic community in Germany can be divided into a Vietnamese-speaking clergy, with direct roots in Vietnam, and into a diaspora community, with its members often having been educated in Western countries (Ninh 2021). Priests, monks, and nuns often play central roles as spiritual leaders in the community and are well-connected — including internationally. Besides the clergy, the community has a large number of grassroots laity organizations, including youth clubs like Thanh Nien Cong Giao VN tai Duc," (TNCG), choirs, and similar (Ninh 2021). There also exist publications, both print and digital, and radio programs which are distributed (Ninh 2021). These organizations are internationally connected to diaspora bodies in Australia, the United States, and back in Vietnam through family ties. Some of these groups are also politically active, mostly in support of democratization, anticommunist endeavors, and the pursuit of religious freedom in Vietnam. Finally, many of those involved in events organized by the Catholic community are either Catholics without any organizational affiliations or non-Catholic Vietnamese who participate due to cultural and social aspects beyond religion.

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7   While many lost family members fighting for the former South Vietnamese state, practices of remembrance are a political taboo. Places of memories, like old cemeteries, can be found embedded in the modernizing landscape of Vietnamese cities and villages, but they are often closed, abandoned, and forgotten — sometimes by force (Grossheim 2021b).

Maintaining alternative forms of belonging or shifting ideas of citizenship?

The localization of citizenship: Different levels of negotiation

In all three case studies, negotiations of citizenship take place at three diverging levels — local, national, international — to establish practices of remembrance and belonging. Legalistic, state-centered, and localized, community-based citizenship is intertwined. This leads to a complex interface, with state and social actors intervening therein to varying degrees.

The Myanmar state defines the narratives that are then reproduced by local communities to demarcate themselves from perceived others, like in Rakhine State. While Buddhists can easily use these narratives to establish their sense of belonging, they are less accessible for Muslims. While today's Rakhine State is characterized by a cultural and religious diversity rooted in historical trade networks with Bengal, ones that can be traced back to the ninth century, with the first Muslim settlements emerging in the 15th century, the military government of Myanmar views this diversity as a threat to its Buddhist-Burmese conceptualization of the state (Fox 2010, 7, 56; South 2008).

Local historiography by Rakhine Buddhists claims that Rakhine State is historically Buddhist. According to this narrative, Rohingya people are not native to the region — rather they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, who supposedly aim to Islamize Rakhine State and the whole of Myanmar (Fox 2017). This widespread fear in Burmese society is fueled by political activists organized in Buddhist nationalist organizations, such as the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha), made up of monks, nuns, and lay people. It has historical roots, with the Bamar — as noted, the country's majority ethnic group — feeling doubly colonized (Taylor 2015): first, by the British and, second, by South Asians, as Burma was established as a province of India until 1937 leading to extensive South Asian immigration. As the use of social media spreads hate speech and nationalist narratives (ICG 2017), this rhetoric still in use today (Taylor 2015), influences citizenship narratives.

The question of identity is immensely complex. The political identity of today's Rohingya only developed recently, in the 1940s (Tonkin 2014; Leider 2013; Chan 2005). The 2012 conflict and the collective experience of increasing exclusion transformed the Rohingya identity. While Muslims in central Rakhine State inter alia referred to themselves as "Rakhine Muslims" (Fox interviews 2008–2020), they refer to themselves as "Rohingya" after experiencing violence and heavy segregation.

From a formal standpoint, in order to receive full citizenship, recognition as an ethnic group or proof that one's family lived in Burma prior to 1823 — that is, before the First Anglo-Burmese War — is required. Thus, Rohingya spokespersons try to

provide evidence that the Rohingya had already lived in Burma before that year. Thereby, the Rohingya rehearse the state's own logic and reproduce its truth regime (Cheesman 2017, 475). For the Buddhist Rakhine and Bamar, the claim that the Rohingya are an ethnic group in Myanmar with historical roots is not accepted, nor is the demand that the "Rohingya" be known under this name as a way to demand citizenship (Fox 2017).

The case of Rakhine State shows how collective negotiations of citizenship and belonging are often framed and dominated by narratives conceived and promoted by the central state. Local actors and communities are forced to engage with these narratives to be able to define their own identities — not always successfully. In other cases, local interpretations are used to push the state to reevaluate identities and narratives — as in the earlier-mentioned case of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War's remembrance. The shift in the state's handling of commemoration of this conflict was influenced by continued pressure from local veterans (Vincent 2022). The practices of remembrance upheld by local veterans and civilians mourning for family and community members who fell in this war stem from the local population's need for validation of their lived experiences — regardless of state aspirations to appease China.

In the 1990s, due to the normalization of relations with the latter, the Vietnamese government aimed to curtail commemoration of the 1979 War and downplay the role of China as aggressor. Both the Vietnamese and Chinese governments remained largely silent and kept commemoration of the event low-key so as to not endanger their newly established official relations (Nguyen 2017). In the current state version of the war, the Vietnamese government also omits connected events that might portray their country in a negative light: namely its treatment of ethnic Chinese and military failures (Yin and Path 2021, 25). Contrary to the usual patterns of state practice, which use military success in the past to legitimize current power, in the case of remembering the Sino-Vietnamese War the government takes current and future relations with China into consideration. It aims to balance economic interest, territorial sovereignty, and its role in the international arena here. The Vietnamese state wants to demonstrate both power and secure lasting peace by simultaneously highlighting the successful defense of its northern border — but without emphasizing China's role as aggressor.

However, in academia and Vietnamese society, memories of the conflict have survived (Yin and Path 2021, 13). Young academics and some high-ranking public and military figures have voiced concern about the lack of representation of the conflict in school textbooks and the silencing of the individual sacrifices made by civilians and soldiers alike. They argue that the availability of accurate information regarding the conflict is necessary to counter Chinese narratives, which portray Vietnam as the aggressor in the war. One example is the 2021 Chinese television drama *Ace Troops*, which led to outrage by Vietnamese netizens (Nghinh Xuan 2021) criticizing its recasting of local history. To counter the silencing of the war in

official textbooks, meanwhile, history teachers and professors have since turned to discussing it informally with their students outside of the classroom (Vincent 2022).

Non-state actors are, hence, increasingly taking commemoration of the war into their own hands (Grossheim 2021a). With heightened tensions in the South China Sea, civilians in Vietnam took to social media to criticize the government's perceived silence regarding the latest conflict with China (Nguyen 2017). Anniversaries are observed in cemeteries, where civilians and soldiers who died in the conflict are buried (Sullivan 2015). The intention behind these local memory practices is predominantly to recognize individual sacrifices and local losses of life independent of official state narratives. Thereby, veterans have successfully opened up new spaces of discussion and remembrance on the state level. In 2016, President Trương Tấn Sang visited sites of the conflict; Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính followed suit in 2022 (Vincent 2022).

Finally, citizenship narratives can also emerge in spaces completely detached from legalistic models and state territory, like in the case of the Vietnamese Catholic diaspora in Germany. The latter use symbols, narratives, and religious practices as framework for a Vietnamese community outside of the formally existing state structures — one transcending international borders. Activities organized by different actors within the community combine religious, cultural, and social interactions and forms of exchange. These activities include the Holy Mass as well as individual religious celebrations like weddings and funerals in the Vietnamese language, following native customs. Laity organizations, as noted, also host youth events and group meetings.

The most important of these activities is the annual gathering Đại Hội Công Giáo (Ninh 2021). For this, up to 6,000 Vietnamese meet over the long Pentecost weekend from Saturday until Monday in the city of Aschaffenburg, sleeping in hotels or at the venue itself (Ninh 2021). The event combines deeply religious celebrations, like the Pentecost Mass on Sunday and a procession on Monday morning, with social activities like meetings of laity groups, religious gatherings, and daily prayer circles. Beyond the religious dimension, the event thus creates a community space for communication and interaction, to share customs and traditions, to promote the Vietnamese language, and to maintain personal networks. Vietnamese food trucks sell traditional meals, with families and friends gathering together on Sunday for picnics on the school grounds. Vietnamese traders sell produce like herbs, rice, and vegetables, while Vietnamese women share homemade native specialties. The youth group TNCG organizes a cocktail bar for the younger generations and an evening event "Show Your Talent," with karaoke and dance performances in the Vietnamese language.

Some laity groups use the gathering for their political platform, often framed as anticommunist. Organizations sell religious, language, popular, and political books in Vietnamese. In 2009, they also organized an exhibition on boat people and their experience to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the arrival of the first group of

Vietnamese in West Germany. Activism also includes rallying support for political and religious prisoners in Vietnam, like the dissident priest Thadeus Nguyễn Văn Lý.

To summarize, in all three cases, global interests intermingle with local-community practices and national narratives, helping to create the landscape in which negotiations over citizenship at the national and subnational levels are embedded.

In Rakhine State, international media coverage was perceived by Buddhist groups as biased and international sanctions imposed on the Myanmar government actually increased public support for the military action in Rakhine state in August 2017 among certain segments of society. This has gradually changed as Myanmar collectively experiences the military's actions since the coup of 2021. In Vietnam, the local experience of war is embedded in geopolitics concerning Sino-Vietnamese relations. The continuous downplaying of China's role and of the scale of the conflict by the Vietnamese government demonstrates the highly sensitive nature of historiography in their country, where the state's legitimacy hinges on the public perception that the government is fulfilling its self-proclaimed role of protector of the national interest.

However, as seen in the case of the Vietnamese Catholic diaspora, the global dimension can dominate narratives too. Citizenship rooted in transnational practices and memories creates a global interface of interaction beyond the Vietnamese state, as characterized by the mobility of ideas, goods, and people. Due to their identity as overseas Vietnamese, a new localization of belonging rooted in transnational networks and local communities provides an alternative perspective on "being Vietnamese."

Citizenship on the periphery: Different forms of remoteness

The location at the periphery as spatial or socially constructed remoteness is a catalyst for conflicts over belonging and identity in all three of our presented case studies. Remote communities can be easily silenced and ignored. However, due to their unique circumstances on the periphery, they are also in the position to use their location to maintain alternative practices of remembrance and create localized communities of belonging. Because these communities are not isolated, they can engage with those state-sanctioned narratives and thus challenge official practices of remembrance.

Spatial remoteness defines Rakhine State as a border area, a historical space of mobility and exchange — one that leads to the contestation of its position within the State of Myanmar. Today, the past is still used to legitimize present narratives of belonging. However, local groups contest the formal interpretation of history by the state.

Contrary to the spatial periphery of Rakhine State, for the Vietnamese Catholic diaspora in Germany spaces of belonging are primarily temporal and social, as their

spatial counterpart no longer exists. This includes spaces helping uphold nostalgia for the past as well as the social networks and interfaces in which memories are embedded and shared. Being both Vietnamese but also not is the central experience of this periphery. This spatial and temporal marginalization of memories and belonging is thus a defining aspect of the community. Their geographical remoteness allows them to maintain and even celebrate a different perspective on Vietnamese history.

This finds its symbolic expression in the prominent placement of the RVN flag during the gathering in Aschaffenburg, including during Mass, creating a nostalgic link to a lost homeland. The use of the flag frames the event in terms of political orientation and loyalty. It gives voice to an older generation, one often still identifying with the RVN (Carruthers 2007) — leading to an underlying anticommunist narrative in the community's storytelling. At the same time, many diaspora members in Germany, including the Catholic communities, still have familial links to modern-day Vietnam, often travel to the country, send money and gifts, or invest in Vietnamese businesses, therewith softening the anticommunist narrative of the past (Lauser 2007).

The example of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War illustrates the paradoxical remoteness, in a figurative and a geographical sense, which emerges for social groups located in border areas: being both important for national security and at the same time removed from the political center. As local memories are instrumentalized by the state, local actors lose the prerogative of interpreting and representing their own history. They are moved to a symbolic periphery, where their voices become silenced. The attempt to isolate the event and those involved in it by excluding it from official historiography has opened up space for local actors to share their version of events through informal personal networks and in ways that do not directly challenge the state. So while the 1979 War is geographically and temporally remote, local actors have been able to influence official narratives and public perceptions of China and the Vietnamese government beyond the northern border area. Symbolically remote spaces can thus offer opportunities to push back against state narratives, precisely because their inhabitants are often overlooked.

Meanwhile, ethnic minorities residing in the border region between Vietnam and China have different perspectives on national politics and local geography. While the fighting occurred in territory inhabited largely by different such groups, they are not part of the official narrative regarding the conflict. One main reason for this is the erstwhile insurgencies by different ethnic groups and a history of support for them by China or France in their respective struggles against the Vietnamese. Their perspective on citizenship is connected to their own ethnic affiliation, with a shared language, culture, and history. To them, the mountainous regions of northern Vietnam and southern China do not constitute a border but a region of connectivity and mobility.

However, remoteness also emerges as a social alienation experienced in everyday life. This is most obvious in the case of Rakhine State, where questions of belonging are intertwined with practices of violence, discrimination, and centralized power. An event that Buddhists and Muslims alike recall as a collective memory or trauma is the 1942 communal riots in Arakan Province (today Rakhine State) (Leider 2020). As Leider states: "[T]he 1942 atrocities in Arakan may be considered as an example of the academic marginalization of the borderlands of Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh and Arakan/Rakhine State in modern times" (2018, 194).

Similar to those in Rakhine State, social alienation for the Vietnamese diaspora is rooted in feelings of loss concerning personal connections, language, and possessions — which can be viewed as a loss of both past and future. This sentiment leads to alienation, as intensified by intergenerational conflicts within the diaspora. To address this, many older Vietnamese maintain close networks in Germany, therewith creating a distinct community of belonging that is not rooted in the real State of Vietnam.

Practices of remembrance: Narratives and storytelling on the periphery

Memories play an important role in the construction of landscapes of belonging in all of our three case studies, where local actors reproduce diverse narratives and practices of remembrance in their quest for belonging.

In the case of Rakhine State, Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya engage in storytelling practices to claim citizenship and negotiate questions of identity and belonging. The remembrance of conflicts is not only of concern for state-led endeavors here but also for social groups. Rakhine Buddhist and Muslim political parties use concepts such as "indigeneity" (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung 2016) or the idea of a "fearsome Other" (Schissler et al. 2017) for practices of othering: namely to claim citizenship, discredit other narratives, and justify discrimination (Schissler et al. 2017).

Being less antagonistic, veterans of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War as well as the Vietnamese Catholic diaspora in Germany respectively commemorate their individual sacrifices and shared struggles to create communities of memories. Victims of the 1979 War are predominantly remembered on the individual-family level. Practices of remembrance focus on the individual sacrifices of civilians and soldiers for the protection of national sovereignty. By keeping the memory of family members alive and sharing individual experiences of the conflict, veterans have been able to preserve information and share it with the local community and interested visitors. These practices reproduce individual and collective memories via storytelling.

Furthermore, as commemoration takes place at physical conflict sites, that storytelling is embedded in the material, mountainous landscape of Vietnam's northern border region. These sites are intertwined with the lived memories of those

who either fought in the conflict, were civilian victims, or lost a relative. The material landscape at hand underlines the difficult conditions faced in the fight against the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for the Vietnamese soldiers — and thus their sacrifice.

Narratives of individual sacrifice and national sovereignty thus dominate local and national storytelling vis-à-vis the war in Vietnam and China alike. This finds its expression in the different names used in each language: in Chinese, the war is framed in terms of "self-defense" while in Vietnamese "Chinese expansionism" is referenced. [8] Consequently the Vietnamese government emphasizes the acts of individual veterans, reinforcing the official narrative of the party-state's key role in ensuring national protection. These frames of reference cement the border region being central to national sovereignty and security, and are aimed at creating a sense of belonging to a greater Vietnamese nation for locals. Commemoration of the event by veterans expresses similar sentiments of sacrifice and endurance. Thus, they criticize the lack of state recognition in comparison with the Second Indochina War and its hero worship (Tai 2001), which not only affects individuals' sense of belonging and pride but also the funding for cemetery maintenance or the search for remains.

This same need for validation of one's experiences and memories exists also among the diaspora community. This leads to a longing for reconciliation and a feeling of nostalgia for their homeland in the shape of stories, songs, and food — as experienced in Germany through get-togethers and accessed through media. This longing extends to the material space that still exists within the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, yet it is one becoming increasingly alien to them. Thus, the individual space, at home in Germany, needs to conserve and validate these memories via photos, religious symbols, and decorations referencing the lost home. As practices of belonging in the diaspora are increasingly less spatially fixed, an imagined Vietnamese community emerges.

Symbolic storytelling as a link between past and present, Vietnam and Germany, is hence important in the Vietnamese Catholic community. This can be seen in the prominence of Our Lady of Lavang, with its symbolism and meaning for Vietnamese Catholicism in both Germany and Vietnam. Thus in Aschaffenburg, a statue of Our Lady of Lavang, with its blue scarf, is displayed during all Masses and creates a direct connection between the Catholic communities in the two countries (Ninh 2021). Transferring localized traditions from Vietnam to Germany and maintaining them as a central anchor point provides a means of identification for the Vietnamese

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8   In Chinese, the war is called *Zhōng-Yuè biānjìng zìwèi huánjí zuòzhàn*   边   卫还击   战 ("Self-defense battle on the China-Vietnam border"). This portrays the event as self-defense and a counterattack against Vietnamese aggression, locating the conflict vaguely at "the China-Vietnam border" rather than on Vietnamese territory. In Vietnamese, the war is known as *Cuộc chiến chống bè lũ bành trướng phương bắ* ("The war against the invaders of the north"), referencing the popular Party narrative of Chinese expansionism.

community distinct from European Catholics. This link to Vietnamese tradition is also seen in the wearing of áo dài, the traditional Vietnamese costume, by those active during Mass. Beyond the religious narrative, the Aschaffenburg gathering thereby helps maintain links to Vietnamese customs, language, and food. It strengthens personal networks in the diaspora community, nurtures a sense of belonging, and upholds the idea of an alternative Vietnamese space for those no longer part of the state-sanctioned one in Vietnam.

Discussion

Transforming the citizenship discourse?

References to the Rohingya situation and expressions of solidarity recently increased on social media and during public demonstrations following the 2021 coup. On August 25, 2021, marking the fourth anniversary of hostilities and the expulsion of Muslims from Rakhine State, a social media campaign titled "We Apologize" was launched. The English title of the campaign suggests it was geared toward an international audience, calling into question the underlying intentions of the campaign and its potential for the emergence of new cross-group solidarity. In the face of dissenting voices and countermovements, it is difficult to discern how far-reaching and resounding these declarations of solidarity are.

The National Unity Government (NUG), an executive body formed after the 2021 coup to oppose the military, announced its intention to replace the 1982 Citizenship Law in seeking to end discrimination against the Rohingya. Again, the question remains of whether this is just a campaign statement to ensure the international community's support or whether genuine long-term reform is envisaged (Frontier Myanmar 2021). The public use of the name "Rohingya" is a novelty. The ousted government, led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), had previously issued the directive to speak of the "Muslims living in Rakhine." While declarations of intention by the NUG provide a starting point, attitudes and beliefs regarding belonging, identity, and religion that have grown and thrived for decades will not change overnight.

In Myanmar, as questions on future citizenship emerge in a country beset by civil war, the discourse is still framed by a legalistic perspective that offers little space for negotiation and reinforces marginalization. In the wake of the 2021 coup, and with the whole country now facing an uncertain future, addressing issues of citizenship seems utopian at present.

Reaffirming the state, or reemerging spaces of memories?

In contrast, the Vietnamese state seems willing to renegotiate practices of remembrance regarding the 1979 War. While memories of war crimes committed by Chinese soldiers and the execution of members of ethnic minorities believed to have

aided the PLA are left out of official narratives, the Vietnamese state is increasingly recognizing the individual sacrifices made (Vincent 2022). New interpretations of the conflict in Chinese media have created awareness of the event and a desire within Vietnamese society to reclaim it.

The Vietnamese state is softening its approach to the local memorialization of certain events as a response to pressure from local communities. The example of memory practices concerning the 1979 War shows that the state can change its position depending on geopolitical needs. It tends to instrumentalize local memories and history, which carries the risk of alienating them from the local context and destroying local communities of belonging. Pressure to conform with state narratives, particularly vis-à-vis a moralistic perspective on citizenship, also alienates local memories of more controversial historical landscapes, creating a sense of loss for those who have lost family members, friends and their home. In the case of the 1979 War, however, continued activism from veterans and civilians has influenced state practices. Since 2019, the Vietnamese government has increasingly allowed and even supported commemoration of the conflict on the local level, while acting more cautiously on the national one. Local practices of remembrance — operating inside the national framework, and referencing state narratives of heroism, sacrifice, and protection — are, therefore, an example of the role of memories in citizenship negotiations in Vietnam.

Maintaining alternative forms of belonging, or shifting citizenship?

With regard to the diaspora communities, the Vietnamese state takes an ambivalent position (Carruthers 2007). Due to the need for remittances, investments, and financial flows from diaspora Vietnamese, the Vietnamese state tries to balance the suppression of dissidents with an open door for those returning by creating a sense of nationalistic connectedness with its diaspora communities. Vietnam's visa policy makes it easier for former citizens and their families to return for extended periods of time (Lauser 2007), with adoptees and the exiled now coming back to look for lost family members or to reconnect with their personal history. At the same time, a younger generation of diaspora Vietnamese are starting to lose interest in the country as they become fully assimilated into their new ones and no longer identify with the old fault lines. They thus no longer participate in the creation of an alternative citizenship on the periphery.

Conclusion

Based on our three cases, citizenship emerges on a continuum of belonging and contention. As pointed out in the beginning, citizenship as a framework has four dimensions to it: rights claiming; duties toward a community; belonging; and, social practices. In our context, the framework to which we attach citizenship in the West — primarily the nation-state — can evidently be contested.

First, citizenship is negotiated at different levels from the local to the transnational, where it is not always guaranteed by the state and not always requested by all communities either. Second, negotiations of citizenship all use practices of remembrance, memories, and the landscapes of historical experience and interpretation to maintain or create community cohesion. Third, citizenship is the struggle for emancipation: to claim rights (over one's past, present, and future) and fulfill duties toward the community of which one feels a part. Thus, quests for citizenship are rooted in the aspiration to belonging and in seeking validation of both individual and collective experiences.

Consequently, formal state recognition of citizenship can be a starting point to realize these aspirations but is no guarantee of access to the community of belonging. Furthermore, formal citizenship might seem unnecessary where the community of belonging in question is not congruent with an existing state structure. Overall, with an increasing authoritarian turn in the Southeast Asia region, we propose "citizenship" as a conceptual framework to move beyond the dichotomy of "democracy" and "authoritarianism," enabling a nuanced look at everyday practices of belonging. With a younger generation growing up with social media, the roles of history and memories remain contentious.

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