

# Seminar ehvn

## Environmental History of Vietnam

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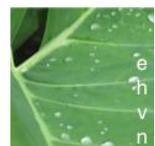


### ***A short state of art***

From the bowl of Điện Biên Phủ, to the jungle ecocide during the American war, and not to mention the more recent issues of climate change and record atmospheric pollutions, environmental issues have been a dramatic major player in Vietnam's recent history. Despite the urgency of present day discussions on the environment, it would be a grossly myopic to overlook the role the environment has played in Vietnam's more ancient history. Yet, till today, environmental history has not been developed as an academic field in Vietnam. There is neither research teams of environmental history in the department of history in the National University of Social Sciences and Humanities, nor a group of research of environmental history in the Vietnam academy of social sciences (VASS). **The present proposal is to build blocks of such an environmental history of Vietnam and contribute to the emergence of the field in the same way. It will take the form of a seminar assembling existing reflections on different related themes, each of them enriching this multiform historical object.**

In Europe, the field of environmental history is rooted in **different schools and traditions ranging from history, geography and, as of the present, in political ecology**. One can trace the history of this study to the French tradition of *L'Ecole des Annales*, which has developed historiographical methodologies favoring long-time period analysis and integrating the environment as a key actor of human history like in Braudel's *Mediterranée* (Braudel, 1949), or Le Roy Ladurie's *Climate history* (Ladurie, 1967). *L'Ecole des Annales* has also played a key role in the wedding of history and human geography and its concept of "possibilism" developed by Paul Vidal de la Blache in his book *Tableau general de la géographie de la France* (La Blache, 1903), and later by Lucien Febvre in *La Terre et l'évolution humaine* (Febvre, 1922).

**One can also locate antecedents for the field of study in later in North American intellectual movements taking place in the 1970's**, with the rise of strong environmentalist movements in West Coast academia with people such as Roderick Nash and Donald Worster. This tradition has produced a strong criticism of the "wilderness", in the sense that it is a neo-colonial vision of a wild nature devoid of any meaningful native American history. As emphasized by Cronon (1996), environmental history always bears the risk of getting back to the wrong nature, if it just hides the multiple modes of relations between humans and non-humans that existed before the diffusion of the naturalist experience throughout the world.



In this sense, **colonial and post-colonial history is also a key aspect of environmental history** as it revives the dynamic social construct of natural objects (Crosby 1986, Mackenzie, 1988 ; Guha, 1989 ; Grove 1995; Arnold 1997 ; Thomas, 2009) and reminds us that there is no such thing as an abstract human responsibility that explains the new era of the Anthropocene but always some specific modes of production and their associated ethic (Worster, 1993, Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2015; Malm, 2017). Unlike in McNeill (2001), the different natural elements should become historical subjects through the very specific modes of relation they develop with societies and human beings.



Today, **environmental history stands at the crossroads of global history, history of science, geographical history and political ecology** (Locher, Quesnet, 2009). It encompasses widely different research objects such as the history of forests and forest services, the history of irrigation and water domination, the history of climates and pollutions, and more generally the history of private, public or collective management of resources and ecosystems, up to the ecological history of economic dynamics. It also includes the history of ideas around nature, of cultural representations of nature, and notably the intellectual history of landscapes, of conservation movements and protection policies, especially between developed and developing countries in a globalized world. There is no such thing as a unified and coherent field called environmental history, agreeing on the place attributed to the environment in the explanation of the dynamics of societies, or the role of nature and non-humans in historical dynamics. We have to deal with a much more open space, embedding a wide diversity of research objects.

### ***Objectives of seminar***

**Our seminar will embrace the same inclusive spirit.** We will welcome, with no discrimination, different methods, values and treatments regarding the place of nature and environment in history, with the aim to convene together existing contributions/research/works by enlightening them through the scope of their contribution to an environmental history of Vietnam, and thus to favor a dynamic of Vietnamese and international researchers for the methods and new subjects proposed by environmental history. Among the different themes the seminar expects to address, the questions of the primary sources will be a first concern, with a particular focus onto the Imperial annals, the colonial archives (in Vietnam and in France) and the contemporary archives of Vietnam. Other archives produced by natural sciences (dendrochronology, soil coring, trace pollutant studies etc.) will also be taken into consideration as a source for environmental history. A particular attention will be paid to the history of different ecosystems (tropical forest, jungle, Central highland, Northern mountainous, mangrove, Mékong delta, sea etc.), or different resources (timber, big games, coal, bamboo, hydropower-electric dam, irrigation systems, fishery, aquatic and marine resources...) or cash crops (rubber tree, tea and coffee plantation), and their transformation through different historical phases of regional and global economic and diplomatic integration. The more recent environmental upheavals, since the Doi Moi, will be also studied (urbanization, industrialization, soil depletion, land-used changes, atmospheric and water pollution, industrial hazards managements, natural disasters, typhon, floods, risk assessment, risk management...). The changing ideas of nature and of the relation to non-humans in the arts and religion will be investigated, as well as the question of how this cultural background might play a role in framing a specific kind of dualism **between Nature and Culture in Vietnamese contemporary society**

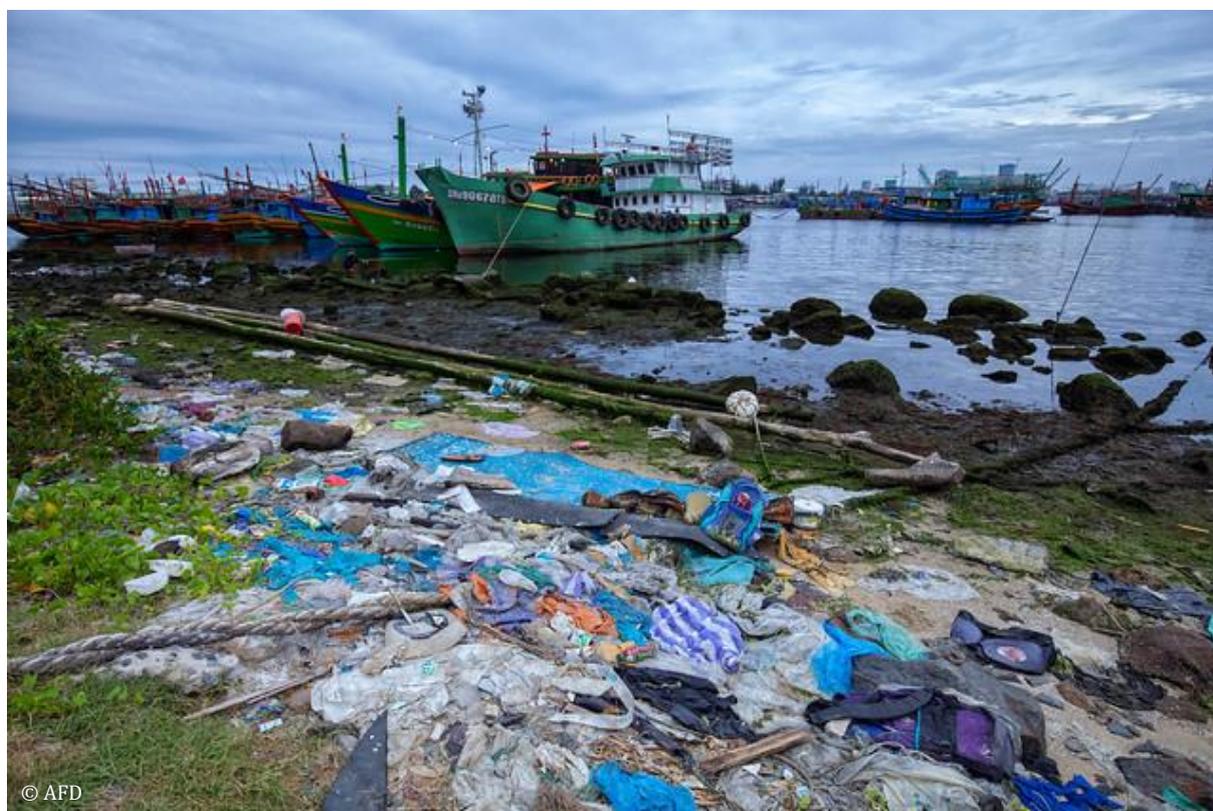
It will also help to better understand the cultural and social construction of nature and environment in Vietnam as natural objects do not exist *per se* but emerge as soon as they are named or measured by societies particularly in the context of ecological crisis. An environmental history of Viet Nam should thus not be mixed up with a natural history of Viet Nam (Sterling, 2008).



## Organization and grant

This seminar is a component of GEMMES-Vietnam project, funded by French Development Agency (AFD), which conducts a large study of the socio-economic impacts of climate change in Vietnam. GEMMES-VN is coordinated in Vietnam by the French national research institute for sustainable development (IRD). One of the goals of this project is to better understand adaptation potential and resilience capacity of the Vietnamese society in face of environmental change and more specifically climate change. We bet that a proper historical knowledge of different kinds of relationship between society and nature in passed and contemporary multi-ethnic Vietnamese Society can help to better understand the socio-cultural drivers of environmental degradation/mitigation and more generally the way Vietnamese culture deals with non-human.

The seminar will be conducted collegially by a team of Vietnamese and French academics. In order to ensure a wide audience, the seminar will be itinerant: it will mostly be hosted in Hanoi by the University of social science and Humanity (VNU), in France by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CASE, Inalco, Ehess, Cnrs) and in Ho Chi Minh city at the French School of Asian Studies (EFEO). It will also be organized in the form of a webinar so that it can be followed from anywhere in the world.



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