




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘Chống dịch như chống giặc’ (‘Fighting the pandemic like fighting the invader’): Audience agency and historical resources in Vietnam’s early securitisation of Covid-19

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## Abstract

Vietnam’s initial response to Covid-19 was conspicuous for various reasons, including how its attempt at securitisation drew deeply from historical narratives, symbols, and traditions specific to the Vietnamese experience, as well as how the securitisation project was not simply top-down and state-driven but also featured ground-up participation where the public was mobilised to participate in and actively reiterate securitisation practices. This richly textured empirical case study of the workings of Vietnamese society and politics represents an invitation to explore key debates surrounding securitisation theory. Reflecting on the empirical material of the case, this paper builds on scholarship seeking to highlight the shortcomings of the Copenhagen School’s model of securitisation and from there further explore securitisation theory and its limits. It takes aim at how the audience and its agency is conceptualised in the theory and develops the notions of ‘historical resources’ and ‘activation architecture’ to more adequately explain the processes of securitisation.

**Keywords:** agency; Copenhagen School; Covid-19; historical narratives; securitisation theory; Vietnam

## Introduction

A striking feature of early national responses to the Covid-19 pandemic has been the prevalent use of war metaphors or military language to describe the virus.<sup>1</sup> The use of war metaphors as a strategy in public communication has a history and has been examined by previous scholarship within the field of public health and other related fields.<sup>2</sup> Ostensibly, by using these evocative metaphors, health issues are packaged in a way that is legible for the wider public and in the process communicate the gravity of the situation. These war metaphors are employed within a process where states engage in *securitisation*, most famously first put forward by a group of scholars that have come to be known collectively as the ‘Copenhagen School’. Briefly, they posit that security is not an objective state of affairs, but instead a speech act. Wæver notes that it is by ‘labelling something a security

<sup>1</sup>See Eunice Castro Seixas, ‘War metaphors in political communication on COVID-19’, *Frontiers in Sociology*, 5 (2021), pp. 1–11; Jessica Kirk and Matt McDonald, ‘The politics of exceptionalism: Securitisation and COVID-19’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:3 (2021), pp. 1–12.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Wen-Yu Chiang and Ren-Feng Duann, ‘Conceptual metaphors for SARS: “War” between Whom?’, *Discourse & Society*, 18:5 (2007), pp. 579–602.

issue, [that] it becomes one, and that ‘issues aren’t security issues in themselves.’<sup>3</sup> By labelling certain issues, events, or actors as a security threat, including by describing public health crises as a form of war, securitising actors bring an issue out of ‘normal politics’ characterised by everyday activity to instead justify a ‘state of emergency’ characterised by the use of extraordinary measures.

Among attempts at the securitisation of Covid-19, the first year of Vietnam’s pandemic response is conspicuous for at least three reasons: (1) the scale and consistency of the securitising acts, using various different mediums; (2) how securitisation also drew deeply from historical narratives, symbols, and traditions specific to the Vietnamese experience; and (3) how this securitising discourse was not simply top-down and government-driven but also featured ground-up participation, where the public was mobilised to actively reiterate securitisation practices. Vietnam’s securitisation of Covid-19 justified the implementation of measures that played a key role in Vietnam’s early success in containing the virus.<sup>4</sup> By 11 March 2021, Vietnam had a relatively low total of 2,529 confirmed Covid-19 cases, equivalent to around 26 cases per 1 million people, far below the global rate at that time of 15,223 confirmed cases per 1 million people.<sup>5</sup> With the three features mentioned, this richly textured empirical case study of the workings of Vietnamese society and politics represents an invitation to explore key debates surrounding securitisation theory. As Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka note, scholars can use ‘empirical material to reflect upon one or several component(s) of securitisation theory, generally with the aim of further refining existing formulations of the theory.’<sup>6</sup> In the case of Vietnam, the heavy exploitation and resonance of historical narratives transgressed simple distinctions between securitising agent and audience. The securitising discourse was received and reiterated by the public through creative, ground-up communications to conjure a reality of *chống dịch như chống giặc* (‘fighting the pandemic like fighting an invader’), a slogan promoted initially by state leaders but subsequently actively embraced by society as a collective responsibility. The case suggests that any direct application of the theoretical framework of classical securitisation theory would be inadequate and raises questions about the role and agency of the ‘audience’ within securitisation theory, as well as the role of historical narratives.

With these issues in mind, this paper examines Vietnam’s securitisation of Covid-19 from January 2020 to June 2021, striving to make both an empirical and a theoretical contribution. Besides being a contribution to the study of Vietnamese politics, culture, and society, this paper aims to discuss securitisation theory more generally, using the empirical material of the case to speak to prior scholarship, highlighting the shortcomings of the Copenhagen School’s model of securitisation. In particular, the concept of the ‘audience’ and its constituent forms of agency must be thought of beyond modes of ‘acceptance’ to include a broader concept of mobilisation and mobility. Further, to more adequately explain the success of securitisation, two terms are developed to buttress the conceptual vocabulary of securitisation theory: (1) showing that success of securitisation is conditioned by the depth of ‘historical resources’ – shared historical memories and symbols such as, in our case, a shared anti-colonial heritage of fending off ‘invaders’ – and (2) an ‘activation architecture’ – a set of institutions that are able to first develop, then later trigger or utilise, these historical resources to mobilise the population. These include, for example, communication networks and educational institutions to instil a shared historical imaginary.

<sup>3</sup>Ole Wæver, ‘Aberystwyth, Paris, Copenhagen: The Europeanness of new “schools” of security theory in an American field’, in Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney (eds), *Thinking International Relations Differently* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 48–71 (p. 53).

<sup>4</sup>Chi Nguyen Thi Yen, Catherine Hermoso, Elaine May Laguilles, Louise Elaine De Castro, Shera Marie Camposano, Noel Jalmasco, Kim Aira Cua, Mashkur Abdulhamid Isa, Edikan Friday Akpan, Tuan Phong Ly, Shyam Sundar Budhathoki, Attaullah Ahmadi, and Don Eliseo Lucero-Priso III, ‘Vietnam’s success story against COVID-19’, *Public Health in Practice*, 2 (2021), p. 100–132.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Léonard, and Jan Ruzicka, ‘“Securitization” revisited: Theory and cases’, *International Relations*, 30:4 (2016), pp. 494–531 (p. 508).

This paper will proceed as follows. The second section discusses securitisation theory, taking the Copenhagen School's securitisation theory as a starting point and from there going on to discuss relevant secondary literature. Through engagement with this extant literature and pre-empting the findings in the rest of the paper, the section moves on to proposing the development of a conceptual vocabulary that can contribute to ongoing efforts to rethinking the role of the audience and its agency: accounting for the depth of 'historical resources' and the structure of a society's 'activation architecture' in explaining the level of success of the securitisation move. The third section highlights the key themes that have emerged in official Vietnamese historiography, which the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) has developed as these aforementioned historical resources. The fourth section presents the different themes found in the Vietnamese state's securitisation of Covid-19 in primarily chronological fashion, showing how the VCP utilised its activation architecture to draw upon the historical resources outlined in the previous section, as well as emphasising the participation of Vietnamese society in the overall securitisation project. The fifth section concludes the paper by briefly gesturing at routes for future research.

### The Copenhagen School and securitisation theory

After briefly introducing primary features of securitisation theory as put forward in its 'classic' version by the Copenhagen School, this section details some relevant debates that have emerged within the field. From there, the section moves on to sketch a theoretical vocabulary that responds to these debates, specifically accounting for the depth of 'historical resources' and the structure of a society's 'activation architecture' to clarify the nature of the audience as it relates to the empirical literature. This, to be clear, is not intended as a comprehensive theoretical statement, but a relatively modest gesture at possible routes for securitisation theory to make sense of the empirical material at hand.

#### *The Copenhagen School and its discontents*

Briefly, the Copenhagen School emphasises four different subjects to be analysed – the referent object, a securitising actor, the audience, and the existential threat.<sup>7</sup> Through a process of speech acts, where the securitising actor labels a certain event a security threat, extraordinary measures are justified. Applied to Vietnam's efforts in its initial dealings with Covid-19, the intuitive understanding of the four subjects would appear to be: public health in Vietnam as the referent object; the Vietnamese state as the securitising actor; the Vietnamese public as the audience; and a nationwide health disaster as the existential threat. Extensive lockdown measures and enforced compliance with these measures are justified through a process of securitisation, where the Covid-19 virus is labelled a form of war.

Yet the case that this paper discusses is inadequately explained by the classic approach. These dissatisfactions speak to a pool of scholarship critiquing securitisation theory on a broad range of issues, though this paper narrows its focus by specifically concerning itself with issues regarding the 'audience'. First, the Copenhagen School has been rightly questioned over the conditions of the success of securitisation, or what explains the degree of 'assent' or 'acceptance' by an audience.<sup>8</sup> The Copenhagen School explain that 'the existential threat has to be argued and gain just enough resonance for a platform to be made from which it is possible to legitimize emergency measures or other steps that would have not been possible.'<sup>9</sup> The 'resonance' of the audience, or the conditions of a 'successful speech-act', hinge upon the following of conventional linguistic-grammatical procedures as well as the position that the securitising actor occupies.<sup>10</sup> This has been correctly

<sup>7</sup>Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

<sup>8</sup>Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka, "Securitization" revisited, pp. 499–501.

<sup>9</sup>Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

pointed out to be ‘radically under-theorized’ and in need of extensive unpacking.<sup>11</sup> This has led scholars to suggest, *inter alia*, that the depth of resonance must be explained by reference to the specific circumstances of the society in question. To employ Balzacq’s terminology, to understand resonance, one must understand the ‘regime of practices’<sup>12</sup> that these terms are situated in, where ‘the semantic repertoire of security is a combination of textual meaning – knowledge of the concept acquired through language (written or spoken) – and cultural meaning – knowledge historically gained through previous interactions and current situations.’<sup>13</sup> This Foucauldian approach highlights the sociological background that needs to be investigated to employ securitisation theory effectively.

This means that an audience must be primed to react to certain speech acts that will resonate with them. Scholars must examine circumstances not only at the point of or ‘after the [securitising] utterance but also *before* the utterance insofar as it is integral to establishing the social field that must first enable the securitise speech act.’<sup>14</sup> This insight can explain, for example, why certain societies use or do not use war metaphors to securitise public health crises, depending on the specific historical memory of the society in question. German leaders thereby sidestep the use of military metaphors,<sup>15</sup> while pacifist societies use disease analogies to justify war aims – a direct reversal of the case at hand.<sup>16</sup> Studying the background ‘regime of practices’, including shared historical memories and symbols, to ascertain the specific language that does or does not elicit resonance is crucial to understand the success of securitisation.

While Balzacq’s ‘regime of practices’ adds a crucial sociological edge to securitisation, the case study at hand shows how securitisation discourses are heavily embedded in broader shared narratives, alerting this paper to the need to further theorise the role of *historical narratives* within securitisation theory. While scholars have previously explored the role of history within securitisation, they have done so by pointing to a mode of understanding, where thinking historically can highlight the role of contingency and from there allow scholars to problematise securitisation processes.<sup>17</sup> As we shall see, however, the case at hand invites us to think through a separate, specific mode of the role of history, namely the *use* of historical narratives. Here, ‘history’ is understood as a wellspring of discursive and non-discursive symbols, woven into a set of overlapping narratives through extensive sociopolitical processes, typically through educational and communication institutions. History, as historical narratives, thereby appears as an object to be used, rather than as a mode of understanding.

Secondly, securitisation theory in its classic incarnation under-theorises the character of the agency possessed by the audience, particularly its scope of possible activity. This leads Balzacq to argue that in classic securitisation theory, ‘it is the sovereign who decides what is a threat to the community, and the audience does not participate in that process. Strictly speaking, there is no audience, only spectators.’<sup>18</sup> While Balzacq correctly highlights how the audience’s agency is reduced, the metaphor of a spectator does not fully capture the shortfalls of classic securitisation theory, in that spectators do not have any course of action available to them. If a metaphor is to be employed, perhaps it is closer to think of the audience as a jury in a courtroom. In any case, it is

<sup>11</sup> Matt McDonald, ‘Securitisation and the construction of security’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:4 (2008), pp. 563–87 (p. 572); see also Adam Côté, ‘Agents without agency: Assessing the role of the audience in securitization theory’, *Security Dialogue*, 47:6 (2016), pp. 541–58.

<sup>12</sup> Thierry Balzacq, ‘Securitization theory: Past, present, and future’, *Polity*, 51:2 (2019), pp. 331–48.

<sup>13</sup> Thierry Balzacq, *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> R. Guy Emerson, ‘Towards a process-orientated account of the securitisation trinity: The speech act, the securitiser and the audience’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22:3 (2017), pp. 515–31 (p. 516).

<sup>15</sup> Castro Seixas, ‘War metaphors’, pp. 9–10.

<sup>16</sup> Johanna Rodehau-Noack, ‘War as disease: Biomedical metaphors in prevention discourse’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 27:4 (2021), pp. 1020–41.

<sup>17</sup> See Faye Donnelly and Brent J. Steele, ‘Critical security history: (De)securitisation, ontological security, and insecure memories’, *European Journal of International Security*, 4:2 (2019), pp. 209–26.

<sup>18</sup> Balzacq, ‘Securitization theory: Past, present, and future’, p. 341.

clear that this is a weakness in classic securitisation theory and does not always reflect empirical realities, as publics do not merely 'accept' or 'reject' securitisation discourses but are instead active agents in an intersubjective process.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars have attempted to work on this tangent to refine the agency of the audience, for example, by pointing out that the audience can play the important role of either providing moral support or supplying a formal mandate to the securitising actor.<sup>20</sup> This has led Côté, in his detailed study of the audience in the theory, to suggest 'that the securitisation audience is best defined as *the individual(s) or group(s) that has the capability to authorize the view of the issue presented by the securitising actor and legitimize the treatment of the issue through security practice*'.<sup>21</sup> Here, authorisation and legitimacy become the key constitutive categories of the audience. Yet, agency can be conceptualised even more broadly – Côté's call to redefine the audience and clarify its role as both authorisers and legitimators is certainly a scholarly advancement, but both categories still function as extensions of the broader category of 'acceptance'. To push the boundaries beyond acceptance, where instead of merely to be convinced, audiences can or are to be *mobilised* to participate, reinforce, or even extend the initial efforts within the securitisation project.<sup>22</sup> While the securitising actor can still be said to maintain an agenda-setting function, the audience through bottom-up societal participation reproduces or extends narratives without the weight of direct coercive measures.

This rethinking of the character of agency has the effect of confounding the distinction between audience and securitising actor.<sup>23</sup> Since everyday citizens can also propagate discursive symbols and language on a large scale and therefore act to influence the rest of the population, public participation blurs the distinction between the audience and the securitising actor. The classic model, which introduces the securitising actor and audience as fixed subjects, appears unable to capture the dynamic nature of empirical realities. The case at hand instead invites the broadening of what entails a 'successful' securitisation, emphasising *mobilisation* beyond acceptance, or the extent to which the audience are *mobilised* to reinforce the security narratives. Mobilisation, or the introduction of mobility into the ambit of agency, reveals a different layer whereby 'the subject/securitiser ... is neither self-contained nor stable', and that agents are nomadic with respect to their roles within the theory.<sup>24</sup> This also suggests a potentially cascading effect, where public participation and reiteration of both securitisation discourses and practices turns the target audience from spectators into securitising actors in themselves, who may in turn enlist more members of the audience, turning passive actors to active participants of the securitisation. While previous literature has explored the agency of the audience in extensive detail, this shifting of roles has been given less attention.

Considering that the classification and roles of the securitising actor and audience are not fixed and are instead in fluid, dynamic motion can engage discussion surrounding the Copenhagen School's claims that securitisation is an 'intersubjective process' grounded in shared understandings, and the audience's position in this conundrum.<sup>25</sup> While scholars have insisted that a strictly top-down, elite-centred approach to securitisation is firmly implied by the Copenhagen School,<sup>26</sup> and others suggest abandoning the audience altogether,<sup>27</sup> reimagining the audience as

<sup>19</sup> Côté, 'Agents without agency'.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Roe, 'Actor, audience(s) and emergency measures', *Security Dialogue*, 39:6 (2008), pp. 615–35.

<sup>21</sup> Côté, 'Agents without agency', p. 8. Italics original.

<sup>22</sup> Some scholarship has emphasised that securitisation occurs more as a continuum than as a binary. See Colin McInnes and Simon Rushton, 'HIV/AIDS and securitization theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:1 (2013), pp. 115–38.

<sup>23</sup> This was drawn from a paper making a similar point in a very different context, attempting to explain diplomacy as a form of theatre. See Naoko Shimazu, 'Diplomacy as theatre: Staging the Bandung Conference of 1955', *Modern Asian Studies*, 48:1 (2014), pp. 225–52, especially pp. 233–4.

<sup>24</sup> Emerson, 'Towards a process-orientated account', p. 526.

<sup>25</sup> Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Jef Huysmans, 'What's in an act? On security speech acts and little security nothings', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 371–83.

<sup>27</sup> Rita Floyd, *Security and the Environment: Securitisation Theory and US Environmental Security Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 50.

a mobile rather than fixed category of actors can provide a potential route where intersubjective construction may be rescued. This is through recognition that the actor categories within securitisation theory – audience and securitising actor – are *abstract* concepts, defined by their role at a particular moment in time. Concrete entities embody more than one category at the same time, being both audience and securitising agent concurrently. Security is intersubjective in the sense that both actors dynamically co-construct each other in particular phases or moments, and from there constructions of meanings of security are not mono-directional but relationally constructed.

### *Audience participation and activating history*

With these two issues in mind, this paper moves on to briefly sketch two concepts to buttress the theoretical vocabulary within classic securitisation theory. First, the depth of *historical resources*, defined as the extent and range of shared historical narratives, traditions, and symbols within the society; and second, the nature and shape of the *activation architecture*, a set of institutions that both develops and utilises the historical resources. Historical resources, first cultivated then ‘activated’ by both linguistic and non-linguistic mediums, can mobilise a society’s energies towards a certain goal. However, the mere presence of the resource does not entail usage and therefore effect. To activate the resource, a set of institutions – what we here term the activation architecture – is implied, and these include educational systems to cultivate the sense of shared memory *before* the securitising move, and public communication networks to disseminate and *activate* the shared memories *at the point of securitisation* by particular agenda-setters within the given society.

These modifications can speak to the debate within securitisation theory where – against the classic securitisation theory models that take a Schmittian approach by distinguishing between ‘normal’ and ‘exceptional’ states of politics – broadly sociological approaches emphasise the everyday aspects of securitisation and confound the understanding of any strict division.<sup>28</sup> The approach outlined here aims to work towards reconciling the two poles of this debate, on the one hand preserving the distinction by showing how the ‘activation’ of certain narratives brings about a palpably heightened level of mobilisation, but on the other hand also aiming to show that the circumstances that foster this distinction, and that allow for shift between one to the other, are found in the everyday.<sup>29</sup> Broadening the basic understanding of a resource as a material or physical object, these further theorisations allow us to see shared historical narratives and symbols with characteristics similar to these traditional hard resources, in that they vary across societies depending on the specific and distinct realities of the society in question and require a process through a set of institutions to be cultivated and then utilised. These resources are cultivated and accumulated over a longer-term process, before the point of securitisation, and remain latent or dormant until used or ‘activated’ at the point of securitisation.

This allows a more complete explanation of the life cycle of the development and usage of history for the purposes of political mobilisation for securitisation. Moreover, the bringing in of state institutions that cultivate these historical resources allows us to see securitisation narratives not merely as needing to correspond with the ‘regime of practices’ of the society in question, but as also requiring active and deliberate statecraft to develop and use the historically embedded features of a society.<sup>30</sup> This offers a clearer route to theorising the role of historical narratives within securitisation theory, following calls to bring securitisation theory into closer contact with other

<sup>28</sup>See, for example, Michael C. Williams, ‘Words, images, enemies: Securitization and international politics’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 47 (2003), pp. 511–31; Michael C. Williams, ‘Securitisation as political theory: The politics of the extraordinary’, *International Relations*, 29:1 (2015), pp. 114–20.

<sup>29</sup>This draws and builds on from Emerson, ‘Towards a process-orientated account’; Williams, ‘Securitisation as political theory’; Claudia Aradau, ‘Security and the democratic scene: Desecuritization and emancipation’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 7:4 (2004), pp. 388–413.

<sup>30</sup>The activation architecture is not intended to be collapsible to state institutions, or vice versa. While state functions cover a large range of issues, from economic to health policy, activation architecture is here intended only to apply to the narrow issue

areas of research such as the politics of memory and the state institutions that enable it or to represent the arena under which they are contested.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, historical narratives are produced and reproduced by societal participation and mobilisation. In this case, interactive, participatory communication channels such as social media will become especially important components of the activation architecture, given how they allow society to reiterate these narratives. In the same way that Williams suggested that the rise of televisual mediums of communication changed the nature of the securitising act and pushed theorists to consider terrain beyond speech-acts, this paper contends that the rise of social media places similar demands on the theory.<sup>32</sup> Beyond political centralisation, where studies locate the previous success of the securitisation of public health in Vietnam, this paper suggests that it is the efficient and extensive use of participatory channels that allow for public engagement and participation that explains the successful securitisation.<sup>33</sup>

While the case study here concerns a post-colonial East Asian society with, as elaborated later, a strong anti-colonial heritage and identity and a collectivist cultural backdrop, as well as a centralised set of state institutions, the notions of historical resources and activation architecture are designed to be applied more generally. In the case presented, hegemonic conditions reign, and there is little contestation, which provides for a clear yet grounded investigation of the mechanisms under which the relationship between historical narratives and securitisation occurs. Securitisation of Covid-19 has occurred in countries with comparable political conditions, such as China and Taiwan, but the relationships between historical narratives, securitising actors, and audiences are not preserved within the domestic context (China)<sup>34</sup> or are substantively limited (Taiwan).<sup>35</sup> Other cases paint a more complex picture, exhibiting layers of contestation over historical narratives that underpin securitisation.<sup>36</sup>

Taken altogether, this allows a more complete articulation of the factors that contribute to a successful securitisation, where success entails not merely acceptance but mobilisation and fluidity of the actors within the model. With this in mind, the paper next explores the key trends within official Vietnamese historiography that have been developed as historical resources used during the Covid-19 securitisation.

### 'Historical resources': The Vietnamese condition of insecurity

This section highlights the key themes that have emerged in official Vietnamese historiography and have become widely shared within Vietnamese society. The topic of the development of hegemonic

of cultivating and activating historical resources and might not necessarily be encompassed by state institutions. Individuals or communities outside of the ambit of the state might take undertake similar steps.

<sup>31</sup>See Mykola Makhortykh, 'Historical memory and securitisation of the Russian intervention in Syria', *International Politics*, 57 (2022), pp. 1063–81; Donnelly and Steele, 'Critical security history'.

<sup>32</sup>Williams, 'Words, images, enemies'.

<sup>33</sup>Melissa G. Curley and Jonathan Herington, 'The securitisation of avian influenza: International discourses and domestic politics in Asia', *Review of International Studies*, 37:1 (2010), pp. 141–66. Scholars have also explored Mann's concept of 'infrastructural power' to understand Vietnam's early success. See Thomas Pepinsky, 'What state-party relations mean for COVID-19 management in Southeast Asia', *Brookings* (7 January 2021), available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/07/what-state-party-relations-mean-for-covid-19-management-in-southeast-asia/>.

<sup>34</sup>Florian Schneider, 'COVID-19 nationalism and the visual construction of sovereignty during China's coronavirus crisis', *China Information*, 35:3 (2021), pp. 301–24 (pp. 310–18). China's vilified status overseas as the alleged originator of Covid-19 has led to the rise of more jingoistic metaphors, which are absent in Vietnam's case. See Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky and Runya Qiaoan, 'The politics of blaming: The narrative battle between China and the US over COVID-19', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 26 (2021), pp. 295–315.

<sup>35</sup>The role of historical resources is not as prominent as the role of technological and economic capacity in Taiwan. Chia-Chien Chang, Wei-Ting Yen, and Li-Yin Liu, 'Fighting the pandemic with "shields": Successful COVID-19 securitization and mask policy in Taiwan', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 58:2 (2023), pp. 214–31.

<sup>36</sup>For example, the Philippines' securitisation of Covid-19 drastically differs from Vietnam. See Karl Hapal, 'The Philippines' COVID-19 response: Securitising the pandemic and disciplining the pasaway', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 40:2 (2021), pp. 224–44.

conditions in Vietnam through the use of state institutions has spawned a healthy literature that lays out the various historical resources on which securitisation narratives draw.<sup>37</sup> A constitutive, if not defining, element of Vietnamese nationhood is the perception of perennial insecurities throughout its official historical narratives and geopolitical concerns. Rooted in anti-colonial nationalism, Vietnamese historical narratives have centred around ‘heroic’ figures fighting off an ‘invader’. After Vietnam’s integration into the world economy in the late 1980s, state discourse has centred around ‘performance legitimacy’, in turn opening new domains for securitisation, including in public health and the economy. As we shall see, the need to organise communities against constant external threats also cultivated the collectivistic characteristics of Vietnamese society, whereby the welfare of the individual is subordinate to that of social collectivities.<sup>38</sup>

### *Anti-colonialism, the invader, and the hero*

Distinctive within official Vietnamese history is the theme of protracted warfare with foreign invaders from ancient to modern times – namely, China, France, Japan, and the United States.<sup>39</sup> With its historiographical origins rooted in colonial subjugation, Vietnam as a national identity is a recent phenomenon animated by the pursuit of independence and unity in both military and historical senses. It is worth recalling that Vietnam’s unification is barely half a century old, since the fall of Saigon in 1975, and its peacetime two decades old, since its border treaty with China in 1999. The historical construction of the Vietnamese nation began in earnest with its colonial encounter with France in the mid-19th century, which saw the ‘Vietnamese people’ conceptualised by Confucian scholars-turned-patriots as an independent community, calling for its people and elites to resist colonial domination.<sup>40</sup> After 1945, revolutionary scholars began rethinking Vietnam along Marxist and materialist lines against preceding narratives that would be castigated as ‘elitist’ or ‘feudalistic’. Traditions such as the ‘tradition of resistance against foreign aggression’ (*truyền thống chống giặc ngoại xâm*), ‘nation loving’ (*yêu nước*) and ‘solidarity’ (*đoàn kết*), and ‘the indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese’ ( *tinh thần bất khuất của người Việt*) began to take hold in Vietnamese post-colonial historiography and its burgeoning national culture.<sup>41</sup>

Vietnamese revolutionaries (and later officials) recognised the importance of history and literature to mobilise disparate historical communities and ideological followings and legitimise their struggle against prevailing Confucian and colonial narratives that framed them as derivative of China or ethnically fragmented.<sup>42</sup> Such popular portrayals of solidarity served not only to muster up strength against foreign aggression, but also to downplay and suppress internal differences. Having become synonymous with the Vietnamese national consciousness through popular education, these narratives have become readily available for ‘activation’ by centralised state organs, in order to mobilise the population against identified national threats.

Importantly, these threats are not concerned with just external enemies. Vietnamese history has seen the ‘invader’ metaphor invoked for non-military and internal issues to great effect and resonance with the conditions of the time. Contemporary Party pieces still echo Ho Chi Minh’s patriotic call in 1948, which rallied against the three threatening enemies at the time: the hunger

<sup>37</sup>See, for example, Casey Lucius, *Vietnam’s Political Process: How Education Shapes Political Decision Making* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 15–27; Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Martin Grossheim, ‘Celebrating the socialist past: The Vietnamese “memory machine” at work’, *Journal of Humanities*, 77:2 (2020), pp. 327–56.

<sup>38</sup>Phuong Linh Dinh and Thanh Tam Ho, ‘How a collectivistic society won the first battle against COVID-19: Vietnam and their “weapons”’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 21:4 (2020), pp. 506–20 (p. 507).

<sup>39</sup>Craig A. Lockard, ‘The unexplained miracle’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 29:1–2 (1994), pp. 10–35.

<sup>40</sup>Trong Duong Tran, ‘From Confucianism to nationalism’, *Asian Studies*, 8:2 (2020), pp. 165–83.

<sup>41</sup>Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, pp. 10–13.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 17–68.



invader (*giặc đói*), the illiteracy invader (*giặc dốt*), and the foreign invader (*giặc ngoại xâm*).<sup>43</sup> Alongside military feats are the Party's efforts to curb the Great Vietnamese Famine under the French and Japanese colonial administrations<sup>44</sup> and educate its vastly illiterate population through 'Popular Learning' (*Bình Dân Học Vụ*), with the romanised script of vernacular Vietnamese.<sup>45</sup> The utility of this metaphor is further reflected in the diversity in form and content and the proverbialism of party propaganda to rally people to its causes, be it revolution or national consolidation, during and after the war.<sup>46</sup> Part of this became the daily landscape for Vietnamese, where loudspeakers featured prominently and blared occasionally during and after the war, both on matters trivial, such as commune affairs, and on survival, such as incoming enemy aircraft.<sup>47</sup> They are still standing even after the popularisation of instant information technology (and public calls for their removal over concerns about noise pollution), their use reserved for cases of emergency propaganda and coordination.<sup>48</sup>

The invader metaphor is instrumental in a nation whose history has become identifiable as vulnerable or insecure, with its vast territory, ethnic diversity, environmental precarity, and constant foreign encroachment defining official discourse.<sup>49</sup> Closely related to the metaphor of an invader is the symbolism of the hero and the family. The nation came to resemble a great family (*đại gia đình*) rather than just a state: Vietnamese myths naturalised a common ancestry in the Hùng kings and referred to the Vietnamese as children from the same egg (*đồng bào*), and its people called their revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh 'uncle' (*Bác Hồ*).<sup>50</sup> Adjacent to this familial resemblance is the tradition of heroism (*truyền thống anh hùng*).

Heroes had long been part of Vietnamese culture as extraordinary individuals worthy of worship – a ritual practice once exploited by its dynasts.<sup>51</sup> Revolutionaries saw the utility of the hero and sought to remould its image, granting titles and benefits to those who served their cause. The new hero held the best qualities of a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary, which included love for his men and loyalty to the Party, and any ordinary man could become a hero through force of will and righteous struggle.<sup>52</sup> Popularised and idealised through many emulation campaigns (*chiến dịch thi đua*), new heroes proliferated in numbers and became cemented in socialist Vietnam. They represented fundamentally the ideals of the new socialist man, the exemplar being Ho Chi Minh himself, but also connected the budding official discourse with older local practices in Vietnam.<sup>53</sup> Even dead, these heroes marched on: the Vietnamese continued to honour its veterans and martyrs (*thương binh, liệt sỹ*), shrines and commemorations dedicated to them dotted the Vietnamese

<sup>43</sup> Song Nguyễn, 'Patriotic emulation according to the thought of President Hồ Chí Minh' (Thi đua ái quốc theo tư tưởng của Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh), *Online Newspaper of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (11 June 2020), available at: {<https://dangcongsan.vn/xay-dung-dang/thi-dua-ai-quoc-theo-tu-tuong-cua-chu-tich-ho-chi-minh-556812.html>}.

<sup>44</sup> Thế Anh Nguyễn, 'The formulation of the national discourse in 1940–45 Vietnam', *Journal of International and Area Studies*, 9:1 (2002), pp. 57–75.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Lo Bianco, 'Viet Nam: Quoc Ngu, colonialism and language policy', in Nanette Gottlieb and Ping Chen (eds), *Language Planning and Language Policy: East Asian Perspectives* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), pp. 159–206.

<sup>46</sup> Sophana Srichampa, 'Vietnamese propaganda reflections from 1945–2000', *Mon-Khmer Studies*, 37 (2007), pp. 87–116.

<sup>47</sup> Đỗ Phấn, 'Loudspeakers, remembering and forgetting' (Loa phường, nhớ và quên), *Law Newspaper of Ho Chi Minh City* (16 January 2017), available at: {<https://plo.vn/xa-hoi/loa-phuong-nho-va-quen-677899.html>}; Trọng Thịnh and Văn Minh, 'What happens to the ward loudspeaker in Saigon?' (Loa phường ở Sài Gòn giờ ra sao?), *Tiền Phong Newspaper* (27 February 2017), available at: {<https://tienphong.vn/loa-phuong-o-sai-gon-gio-ra-sao-post936717.tpo>}.

<sup>48</sup> Yên Thủy, 'Preempting disasters, Hanoi decides to keep ward loudspeakers' (Để phòng thảm họa, Hà Nội quyết định giữ lại loa phường), *VietnamPlus* (3 April 2017), available at: {<https://www.vietnamplus.vn/de-phong-tham-hoa-ha-noi-quyet-dinh-giu-lai-loa-phuong/439080.vnp>}.

<sup>49</sup> Đức Liêm Vũ, 'Vietnam: History of a "vulnerable" nation' (Việt Nam: Lịch sử một dân tộc 'dễ bị tổn thương') *Tia Sáng Magazine* (31 August 2018), available at: {<https://tiasang.com.vn/-khoa-hoc-cong-nghe/Viet-Nam-Lich-su-mot-dan-toc-%E2%80%9Cde-bi-ton-thuong%E2%80%9D-12721>}.

<sup>50</sup> Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, pp. 157–61.

<sup>51</sup> Benoît De Trégliodé, *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam, 1948–1964* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), pp. 12–20.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25–38.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1–10.

landscape, and their children had both material and symbolic benefits from the state as ‘relatives of people with meritorious services to the revolution’ (*thân nhân của người có công với cách mạng*).<sup>54</sup> Given the youth of the Vietnamese nation, such fighting traditions persisted as historically accessible discourse to mobilise people to national causes, ones that tap into both the revolutionary and the cultural aspects of Vietnamese nationhood.

### *The turn to performance legitimacy post-Đổi Mới*

However, nationalist historiography, while revolutionary and politically expedient, also demands a monolithic consistency throughout history, present, and future. In so being, such traditions endured in the discourse and body of practice for the Party, dressed within a ‘Communist’ signifier. Yet in joining the world economy with the historic Renovation (*Đổi Mới*) market-oriented reforms in 1986, the arena of use of these prevailing traditions shifted significantly. While traditions of resistance and heroes remain intact as the bona fide cultural and historical identity of Vietnam, their legitimisation effects for the Party waned as external enemies became less visible after independence and reunification. Legitimacy for the VCP no longer derives from just revolutionary credence, but also from performance in governance and economy.<sup>55</sup> Phan Doãn Nam, senior adviser to Foreign Minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch during this critical period, noted in the Party’s theoretical journal, the *Communist Review* (*Tạp Chí Cộng Sản*), in 1987 the need to align the strength of nation (*sức mạnh dân tộc*) with the power of the age (*sức mạnh thời đại*).<sup>56</sup> Phan importantly stated that ‘the security of our nation is not merely military security but also must be comprehensive security, in which economic security is emerging as predominant.’<sup>57</sup> Vietnam also began then to see its national security as part of an international security, beyond the socialist bloc whose geopolitical relevance would eventually fade out with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Having established precedents for broad threat perception beyond military threats, Vietnam could articulate its historical insecurities through global norms of security with less difficulty. In line with the shift in security norms since the end of Cold War, Vietnam has identified diverse security challenges – or ‘non-traditional security’ that encompasses issues from economic to health issues – in its Defence White Papers since 2004,<sup>58</sup> continuing to the latest iteration in 2019.<sup>59</sup> Elements of ‘human security’ are readily identifiable within various documents, policies, and media commentaries by the Vietnamese state, even before its adoption of the term.<sup>60</sup> Of these variegated security issues, food and health have been explicitly securitised by the contemporary Vietnamese state. In responding to the persistent food insecurity in Vietnam that resurged following the 2008 global financial crisis, Resolution No.63/NQ-CP on Ensuring National Food Security (*Đảm Bảo*

<sup>54</sup> Shaun Kingsley Malarney, ‘“The fatherland remembers your sacrifice”: Commemorating war dead in North Vietnam’, in Hue-Tam Ho Tai (ed.), *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 46–76.

<sup>55</sup> Hong Hiep Le, ‘Performance-based legitimacy: The case of the Communist Party of Vietnam and “Doi Moi”’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 34:2 (2012), pp. 145–72.

<sup>56</sup> Doan Nam Phan, ‘Aligning the strength of the nation with the power of the age’, in Jayne Werner and John K. Whitmore (eds), *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 579–585 (pp. 579–80).

<sup>57</sup> Phan, ‘Aligning the strength of the nation’, p. 582.

<sup>58</sup> Truong Thuy Tran and Minh Ngoc Nguyen, ‘Vietnam’s security challenges: Priorities, policy implications and prospects for regional cooperation’, in National Institute for Defense Studies (ed.), *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2013), pp. 93–112.

<sup>59</sup> ‘2019 Viet Nam National Defence’, available at: <http://www.mod.gov.vn/wps/wcm/connect/08963129-c9cf-4c86-9b5c-81a9e2b14455/2019VietnamNationalDefence.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=08963129-c9cf-4c86-9b5c-81a9e2b14455>}.

<sup>60</sup> Lan Dung Pham, Ngoc Lan Nguyen, Bich Thao Bui, Thi Trang Ngo, and Thu Giang Nguyen, ‘The concept of human security in Vietnam’, in Yoichi Mine, Oscar A. Gómez, and Ako Muto (eds), *Human Security Norms in East Asia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 249–71.

an Ninh Lương Thực Quốc Gia) was enacted in December 2009, empowering central governmental interventions in the vulnerable agricultural sector in Vietnam.<sup>61</sup>

Aware of its tropical climate and disease-prone environment, Vietnam has also been mustering considerable resources already in infectious-disease control since the early 2000s.<sup>62</sup> In particular, avian influenza and, to a lesser extent, HIV/AIDS were securitised by the Vietnamese state, as they posed serious challenges to the economic outputs and livelihoods of the Vietnamese.<sup>63</sup> Notwithstanding their different regulatory logics, evident in these cases are the enduring perception by the Vietnamese state of its insecurities that had extended beyond military concerns and their capacity to consistently mobilise its people in socially consequential crises.<sup>64</sup> As the next section details, just as ‘invaders’ are not confined to external military aggressors, there can be heroes beyond the battlefields – in hospitals or domestic affairs, combating the Covid-19 ‘invader’.

### Vietnam’s securitisation of Covid-19

Between January 2020 and mid-2021, Vietnam pursued an active containment strategy to combat Covid-19. This stringent approach entailed intensive testing, mass quarantine, surveillance of suspected cases and close-contact individuals, targeted isolation, and social distancing.<sup>65</sup> Scholars have agreed that the strategy has been largely successful in containing the virus but differ on whether to interpret it more benignly as a representation of state–society cooperation through collectivist practices<sup>66</sup> or a more insidious exercise of state coercive mechanisms.<sup>67</sup> We intervene in this discourse by exploring how, as in other countries, these measures were undergirded by the securitisation of Covid-19 through war and military discourse but conspicuously transcended generic war metaphors and drew extensively on the key themes in official Vietnamese history to construct a war-like reality, thereby eliciting citizens’ support for its strict Covid-19 related policies. This support grew from public acceptance to public mobilisation, as Vietnamese citizens actively reiterated the security practices.

<sup>61</sup> Timothy Gorma, ‘From food crisis to agrarian crisis? Food security strategy and rural livelihoods in Vietnam’, in Judith Ehlert and Nora Katharina Faltnann (eds), *Food Anxiety in Globalising Vietnam* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2019), pp. 235–66.

<sup>62</sup> Joanne Silberner, ‘How Vietnam mastered infectious disease control’, *Public Broadcasting Service* (6 November 2015), available at: {<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/one-health-vietnam/>}.

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Herington, ‘Securitization of infectious diseases in Vietnam: The cases of HIV and avian influenza’, *Health Policy and Planning*, 25:6 (2010), pp. 467–75.

<sup>64</sup> For HIV/AIDS, dynamics *other* than securitisation were at play. HIV/AIDS was initially regulated by the state’s conservative language of ‘social evils’ (*tệ nạn xã hội*) that framed the disease as a moral vice or toxin for the health of ‘the people’, which can be ‘purged’ through ‘moral education’ – punishment and discipline. However, this regime has largely been made obsolete and antiquated through various factors pushing for harm reduction and individual responsibility rather than punitive, collective stigma. After years of institutional advocacy for and demonstrated success in a more medicalised approach in line with global ‘best practices’, the ‘social evils’ apparatus had been sidelined in contemporary Vietnam and was not prominent in articulations of Covid-19 policies. See Alfred Montoya, ‘From “the people” to “the human”: HIV/AIDS, neoliberalism, and the economy of virtue in contemporary Vietnam’, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 20:2 (2012), pp. 561–91 (pp. 569–78); Nadine Voelkner, ‘Affective economies in the governance of trafficking and sex work in Vietnam’, *Global Society*, 28:3 (2014), pp. 375–90 (pp. 381–90); Alfred Montoya, ‘Becoming MSM: Sexual minorities and public health regimes in Vietnam’, *Open Anthropological Research*, 1:1 (2021), pp. 33–45 (p. 40).

<sup>65</sup> See Bui Thi Thu Ha, La Ngoc Quang, Tolib Mirzoev, Nguyen Trong Tai, Pham Quang Thai, and Phung Cong Dinh, ‘Combating the COVID-19 epidemic: Experiences from Vietnam’, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17:9 (2020), p. 3125; Trang Nguyen Thi and Kahlan Ahmed Alradhi, ‘Coronavirus pandemic in Vietnam: An effective response model’, *Social Identities*, 27:6 (2021), pp. 682–97.

<sup>66</sup> For a deeper exploration of collectivism, see Dinh and Ho, ‘How a collectivistic society won the first battle against COVID-19’.

<sup>67</sup> Bill Hayton and Tro Ly Ngheo, ‘Vietnam’s coronavirus success is built on repression’, *Foreign Policy* (12 May 2020), available at {<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/12/vietnam-coronavirus-pandemic-success-repression/>}; Trang and Alradhi, ‘Coronavirus pandemic in Vietnam’; David Hutt, ‘Some thoughts on Vietnam’s COVID-19 repression’, *Asia Times*, available at {<https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/some-thoughts-on-vietnams-COVID-19-repression/>}.

This section presents the different themes found in the Vietnamese state's securitisation of Covid-19. It first outlines key securitising moves in chronological fashion, in the process foregrounding how the securitisation drew upon the 'historical resources' outlined in the previous section as well as emphasising the role of social media channels as a key part of the 'activation architecture'. It then highlights the way this securitisation led not only to public acceptance, but also mobilisation of the citizenry, who moved from being a passive 'audience' and began themselves to serve as securitising actors. Beyond the more overt discursive and non-discursive symbolic manoeuvres, other more 'silent' factors can also be discerned; these include how securitisation of Covid-19 tapped into the collective psyche of Vietnamese society's collectivist culture, which scholars conclude to be conducive to public compliance with Covid-19 'state of emergency' regulations and community supervision, summing up that 'the Vietnam government's ability to rally the public around sentiments like nationalism and heroism in the fight against a common enemy ... was a powerful force in generating solidarity and support for response measures.'<sup>68</sup>

### *The Covid-19 'invader'*

The first and most prominent securitising move is the invention of the slogan 'fighting the pandemic like fighting an invader', which was introduced in a government emergency meeting on 27 January 2020, just four days after Vietnam recorded the first two cases of Covid-19 infection. Adopting an authoritative tone, then-Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc directed the officials at the meeting to 'fight the pandemic caused by the coronavirus like fighting an invader'. He tapped into the country's historical resources to succinctly underscore the imminent threat of a new pandemic to the Vietnamese audience, drawing upon the invader analogy within Vietnam's tradition of resisting foreign invaders. First, the phrase personifies the coronavirus, allowing the audience to associate the unseen pathogen with a tangible threat – an enemy, one that is malicious and potentially destructive. Here, the coronavirus is directly compared to *giặc* – 'individuals who organise into armed forces that terrorise and commit atrocities against an area or a country'.<sup>69</sup> In this context, wherein an infectious disease originating abroad had encroached into Vietnam's territory, *giặc* could be understood as referring to an 'invader'.<sup>70</sup> Through this comparison, the coronavirus became the latest in the list of foreign invaders that Vietnam had fought against throughout history. Second, drawing a connection to how Ho Chi Minh rallied the nation against the hunger invader, the illiteracy invader, and the foreign invader in the past, Vietnam once again used the 'invader' metaphor to frame a non-military issue.

By framing Covid-19 as a potentially existential crisis that warranted emergency measures beyond normal political processes, the Vietnamese government justified extraordinary policies. Following the introduction of the slogan 'fighting the pandemic like fighting an invader', then-Prime Minister Phúc emphasised the government's willingness to sacrifice economic gains to protect the people's health and lives.<sup>71</sup> The statement not only conveyed a sense of exigency but also implied that policies disruptive to national production and commercial activities were not off the table. An immediate and drastic response accompanied Prime Minister Phúc's securitising move. One day after the emergency meeting, he issued the first directive on Covid-19, which stated:

<sup>68</sup>Kris Hartley, Sarah Bales, and Azad Singh Bali, 'COVID-19 response in a unitary state: Emerging lessons from Vietnam', *Policy Design and Practice*, 4:1 (2019), pp. 152–168 (p. 159); and Dinh and Thanh, 'How a collectivistic society won the first battle against COVID-19', p. 513.

<sup>69</sup>'What is "giặc"? The meaning of the word Giặc in Vietnamese dictionary' ('giặc' Là Gì? Nghĩa Của Từ Giặc Trong Tiếng Việt. Từ Điển Việt-Việt), *Vtudien*, available at: {<https://vtudien.com/viet-viet/dictionary/nghia-cua-tu-gi%E1%BA%B7c>} accessed 9 April 2022.

<sup>70</sup>Another common English translation is 'enemy'. However, the word 'enemy' does not fully capture the connotations of 'giặc' because an enemy is not necessarily a violently hostile individual.

<sup>71</sup>Đức Tuấn, 'Prime Minister: Fighting the pandemic like fight the invader!' (Thủ Tướng: Chống Dịch Như Chống Giặc), *Vietnam Government Portal News* (28 January 2020), available at: {<http://baochinhphu.vn/Tin-noi-bat/Thu-tuong-Chong-dich-nhu-chong-giac/385922.vgp>}.

Ministries, branches, and localities must not be complacent, not to let the epidemic spread, and must treat epidemic prevention and control as ‘fighting the invader’ ... [We must] mobilise the entire political system to participate in the prevention and control of the epidemic in order to protect the health and life of the people, and minimise deaths caused by this epidemic.<sup>72</sup>

To underscore the severity of this strategy, it is worth noting that at this point, Vietnam had recorded no deaths and only two cases of Covid-19 infection, who were Chinese tourists, not Vietnamese citizens.<sup>73</sup> Only on 30 January did Vietnam identify the first case of a citizen contracting the virus, and the Vietnamese state formed the National Steering Committee for Disease Control and Prevention of Covid-19 (NSCDCP) on the same day.<sup>74</sup> The committee was behind key Covid-19 prevention policies such as the suspension of flight authorisation for all flights from China and other Covid-19 epicentres to Vietnam and vice versa; restrictions on public gatherings; suspension of upcoming festivals; regulations for wearing masks in public; and mandatory health declarations for foreign tourists.<sup>75</sup> Notably, according to Vũ Đức Đam – then-Acting Minister of Health and head of the NSCDCP – Vietnam was the first country to require a mandatory health declaration for those travelling from epidemic zones into the country.<sup>76</sup> At the time, Vietnam’s response went beyond recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>77</sup>

Following the first emergency meeting and the issue of the first directive, government officials began echoing the slogan *Chống dịch như chống giặc* through extensive and well-established communication channels, including state and social media. This well-constructed ‘activation architecture’ allowed for the swift adoption of the slogan as the overarching guideline and action motto for Vietnam’s national Covid-19 strategy, and this first securitising move precipitated further efforts to frame the pandemic as a war against an invader.

### ‘The nation entering wartime’

After framing Covid-19 as an invader, Vietnamese leaders continued to tap into historical resources by using shared militaristic lexicons to narrate the pandemic as an unfolding story of how the nation and its people fight back against the Covid-19 invader. If the pandemic was the enemy, then healthcare workers were the heroes, who are, as mentioned above, key figures in Vietnamese historiography, thereby drawing on the existing tradition of heroism. On 27 February (Vietnam’s Doctor Day), in a speech at Hanoi Medical University, Phúc hailed Vietnamese medical staff as strike-force members in the frontline battles against Covid-19 and called them ‘white-blouse soldiers’

<sup>72</sup>Directive 05/CT-TTg 2020 Prevention of Acute Respiratory Infections Caused by Corona Virus (Chi Thị 05/CT-TTg 2020 Phòng Chống Dịch Bệnh Viêm Đường Hô Hấp Cấp Do vi Rút Corona Gây Ra), *Thư Viện Pháp Luật* (28 January 2020), available at {<https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/The-thao-Y-te/Chi-thi-05-CT-TTg-2020-phong-chong-dich-benh-viem-duong-ho-hap-cap-do-vi-rut-Corona-gay-ra-433384.aspx>}.

<sup>73</sup>A comprehensive picture of COVID-19 infection cases in Vietnam until March 12, (Toàn cảnh các ca nhiễm COVID-19 tại Việt Nam tới ngày 12.3), *Thanh Niên* (28 January 2020), available at: {<https://thanhnien.vn/post-934287.html>}.

<sup>74</sup>Ministry of Health, ‘Decision Number 170/QĐ-TTg by the Prime Minister: On Establishing the National Steering Committee on Prevention of Acute Respiratory Infections Caused by the New Strain of Corona Virus’ (Quyết Định Số 170/QĐ-TTg Của Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ: Về Việc Thành Lập Ban Chỉ Đạo Quốc Gia Phòng, Chống Dịch Bệnh Viêm Đường Hô Hấp Cấp Do Chủng Mới Của vi Rút Corona Gây Ra), available at: {[https://moh.gov.vn/web/dich-benh/cac-van-ban-chi-dao-cua-dang-nha-nuoc/-/asset\\_publisher/zRev3D15XCJB/content/quyet-inh-so-170-q-ttg-cua-thu-tuong-chinh-phu-ve-viec-thanh-lap-ban-chi-ao-quoc-gia-phong-chong-dich-benh-viem-uong-ho-hap-cap-do-chung-moi-cua-vi-ru?inheritRedirect=false](https://moh.gov.vn/web/dich-benh/cac-van-ban-chi-dao-cua-dang-nha-nuoc/-/asset_publisher/zRev3D15XCJB/content/quyet-inh-so-170-q-ttg-cua-thu-tuong-chinh-phu-ve-viec-thanh-lap-ban-chi-ao-quoc-gia-phong-chong-dich-benh-viem-uong-ho-hap-cap-do-chung-moi-cua-vi-ru?inheritRedirect=false)}.

<sup>75</sup>Bui Thi et al., ‘Combating the COVID-19 epidemic’.

<sup>76</sup>Đương Hải and Duy Linh, ‘Why did Vietnam win the COVID-19 pandemic?’ (Tại sao Việt Nam chiến thắng dịch COVID-19?), *Sức khỏe và Đời sống* (14 June 2020), available at: {<https://suckhoedoisong.vn/video-tai-sao-viet-nam-chien-thang-dich-COVID-19-169175647>}.

<sup>77</sup>Bui Thi et al., ‘Combating the COVID-19 epidemic’.

(*chiến sĩ áo trắng*).<sup>78</sup> A month later, he wrote an appreciation letter to thank ‘white-blouse soldiers’ for their sacrifices and contributions in the fight against Covid-19.<sup>79</sup> As noted earlier, the idea of honouring courageous citizens as new heroes is a legacy of past revolutionaries in Vietnam – something that has been popularised through emulation campaigns.

The next securitisation move was to frame Vietnam’s encounter with Covid-19 as a wartime plot, using militaristic terms to announce the developments in Vietnam’s Covid-19 situation as if the nation were going through different stages of war. Statements by then-Acting Minister of Health Đam were most illustrative, clearly referencing Vietnamese strategic cultural and military tactics. In February 2020, when the first patients identified in Vietnam hitherto – only 16 of them – were cured, then-Acting Minister of Health Đam claimed that Vietnam had won the first battle in its war against Covid-19.<sup>80</sup> Subsequently, following the detection of the 17th infection case, he reiterated the first victory before noting that ‘the enemy’ (*kẻ thù*) was ‘quietly ambushing’ (*âm thầm mai phục*) the country.<sup>81</sup> Serving as the chief ‘strategist’ behind Vietnam’s war against Covid-19, Đam warned that if Vietnam failed to respond effectively, the situation could be one of ‘attacks on both fronts’ (*trong đánh ra, ngoài đánh vào*). This referenced a tactic used by the VCP during the national revolution against French colonial rule and during the 1968 Tet Offensive against South Vietnamese and American targets, which combined external military strikes against the enemy’s strongholds and internal mobilisation of public support against the enemy’s governing body. This caught the enemy by surprise and exhausted their resources, as they had to deal with threats on two fronts. In using the phrase ‘attacks on both fronts’, Đam alluded to the combination of threats of infection from both domestic and imported cases, representing a dreadful situation for Vietnam’s health system. In March 2020, the NSCDCP outlined a ‘two-spearhead attack’ (*hai mũi giáp công*) strategy, which called for the pursuit of pandemic prevention in tandem with maintaining socio-economic development.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, during the Vietnam War, the VCP conducted a ‘three-spearhead attack’ (*ba mũi giáp công*) strategy (political, military, and psychological warfare) against opposition forces.

Social media channels, especially Facebook, Vietnam’s most popular social media platform, were utilised as a narrative-weaving instrument, thereby becoming a key component of the activation architecture to tap into pre-existing but dormant historical narratives. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government had been publishing daily updates on Covid-19 and key official statements and decisions from the top leadership on Facebook. These include the securitising moves initiated by leaders such as Prime Minister Phúc or Acting Minister of Health Đam. Thus, the narrative of Vietnam’s war against Covid-19 was promulgated widely to the public, especially the youth, 84 per cent of whom consumes daily news via social media.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Thiên Diệu, ‘Prime Minister sent letters to encourage “white-bloused soldiers” in the fight against COVID-19’ (Thủ tướng gửi thư động viên ‘chiến sĩ áo trắng’ trong cuộc chiến COVID-19), *Tuổi Trẻ* (25 March 2020), available at: <https://tuoitre.vn/news-20200325210522504.htm>.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ministry of Health, ‘We have only won the first battle so we still have to stay vigilant’, (Chúng Ta Mới Thắng Trận Đầu Nên Vẫn Phải Đề Cao Cảnh Giác) (25 February 2020), available at: [https://moh.gov.vn/hoat-dong-cua-dia-phuong/-/asset\\_publisher/gHb1a8vOQDuS/content/chung-ta-moi-thang-tran-au-nen-van-phai-e-cao-can-h-giac](https://moh.gov.vn/hoat-dong-cua-dia-phuong/-/asset_publisher/gHb1a8vOQDuS/content/chung-ta-moi-thang-tran-au-nen-van-phai-e-cao-can-h-giac).

<sup>81</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Vũ Đức Đam: ‘We have won the first COVID-19 battle, we will certainly win the war!’ (Phó Thủ Tướng Vũ Đức Đam: Chúng Ta Đã Thắng COVID-19 Trận Đầu, Nhất Định Phải Thắng Cả Cuộc Chiến!), *Người Lao Động* (9 March 2020), available at <https://nld.com.vn/trich-dan-nong-pho-thu-tuong-vu-duc-dam-chung-ta-da-thang-COVID-19-tran-dau-nhat-dinh-thang-ca-cuoc-chien-20200309101828144>.

<sup>82</sup> Trần Mạnh and Đình Nam, ‘“Two-spearheaded” attack in prevention of COVID-19’, (Hai Mũi ‘Giáp Công’ Trong Phòng Chống Dịch Bệnh COVID-19), *Báo Điện tử Chính phủ* (14 February 2020), available at: <http://baochinhphu.vn/Tin-noi-bat/Hai-mui-giap-cong-trong-phong-chong-dich-benh-COVID19/387561.vgp>.

<sup>83</sup> Amy Mitchell, Katie Simmons, Katerina Eva Matsa, and Laura Silver, ‘Publics globally want unbiased news coverage, but are divided on whether their news media deliver’, *Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project* (11 January 2018), available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/01/11/publics-globally-want-unbiased-news-coverage-but-are-divided-on-whether-their-news-media-deliver/>.



**Figure 1.** The cover photo of the Facebook page of the account *Thông tin chính phủ* on 28 March 2020. The slogan *Chống dịch như chống giặc* (Fighting the pandemic like fighting the invader) is printed on the cover photo of the account.

The government's official Facebook page, *Thông tin chính phủ*, was the primary account used to promote the securitisation of Covid-19. For instance, on 28 March 2020, *Thông tin chính phủ* changed its cover photo to a photo of a government meeting on Covid-19, with the printed caption *Chống dịch như chống giặc* (see [Figure 1](#)). On Vietnam's Doctor Day in 2020, the same day that Phúc spoke highly of 'white-bloused soldiers', the account shared excerpts from Đam's speech at a conference hosted by the Ministry of Health. A quote from the speech was chosen as the caption for the photo uploaded along with the post: 'We only won the first battle, so we should remain vigilant' (see [Figure 2](#)).<sup>84</sup> As noted, this was something that he had been stressing to the public.

The most declamatory securitising move made on Facebook by *Thông tin chính phủ* is a note entitled 'The nation entering wartime', uploaded on 15 March 2020.<sup>85</sup> The note appears essentially as a call to arms, as the writing was imbued with militaristic imagery that aimed at delivering a central message: Vietnam was waging war against another invader. In the note, the government implored the whole nation to take a proactive approach towards containing the virus and prepare for 'Spring Offensive 2020'. The term 'Spring Offensive' (*Cuộc tổng tiến công mùa Xuân*) is a reminiscence of the 1975 Spring Offensive – the final military campaign by the North Vietnamese in the Vietnam War that ended with the unification of the country. This deliberate choice of term carried with it a promise of a total victory, one that would return Vietnam to its pre-Covid-19 days – an ideal ending to the story of Vietnam's war against Covid-19. Citing then-Prime Minister Phúc, the note stated that 'even women fight when the invaders come' (*giặc đến nhà đàn bà cũng đánh*) and that 'every citizen is a soldier in the battlefield against the pandemic' (*mỗi người dân là một chiến sỹ trên mặt trận phòng chống dịch bệnh*). Here, Phúc took a leaf out of the VCP's military playbook used against the French from 1946 to 1954. At that time, Ho Chi Minh and other communist leaders mobilised the population to fight for their nation with the famous slogans 'each village is a fortress' (*mỗi làng xã là một pháo đài*) and 'each citizen is a soldier' (*mỗi người dân là một chiến sỹ*).<sup>86</sup> The former was eventually incorporated into Vietnam's Covid-19 strategy, with then-Prime Minister Phúc stating

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Thông Tin Chính Phủ, 'The nation entering wartime' (Đất Nước Chính Thức Bước Vào 'Thời Chiến') (15 March 2021), available at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/407466676922178/> accessed 9 April 2022.

<sup>86</sup> Anh Tuấn Trần, 'The Dien Bien Phu victory: A victory of the comprehensive, people's war revolutionary path' (Chiến Thắng Điện Biên Phủ – Thắng Lợi Của Đường Lối Kháng Chiến Toàn Dân, Toàn Diện), *Tạp chí Cộng sản* (28 April 2014), available at: <https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/ky-niem-60-nam-chien-thang-ien-bien-phu-/2018/27014/chien-thang-dien-bien-phu---thang-loi-cua-duong-loi-khang-chien-toan-dan%2C-toan-dien.aspx>.



**Figure 2.** A photo uploaded to Facebook by the account *Thông tin chính phủ*, which shows Acting-Health Minister Vũ Đức Đam making a speech. The caption of the photo reads: 'We only won the first battle, so we should remain vigilant'.

in an official meeting in April 2020 that 'Every business, every citizen, every residential area must be a fortress to prevent the epidemic.'<sup>87</sup>

Non-discursive wartime symbols and propaganda tools embedded within Vietnamese history also featured in the government's pandemic communication strategy, showing the breadth of both historical resources and activation architecture. The community loudspeaker system created during the Vietnam War became a channel for local authorities to disseminate information and urgent messages regarding Covid-19, especially during periods of social distancing.<sup>88</sup> From the 1960s to the 1970s, as American forces intensified war efforts in North Vietnam, authorities relied on the loudspeaker system to warn citizens about incoming American bombing aircraft so that they could seek immediate shelter. This time, amid the war against Covid-19, the loudspeakers urged people to 'seek shelter' from the virus. Another wartime relic revived was the traditional iconography of propaganda posters, a prevalent art form in the Vietnam War era. As elaborated below, this use of historically significant symbolism intersected with another feature of Vietnam's securitisation of Covid-19 –widespread public mobilisation to reinforce the securitisation narratives.

<sup>87</sup> Linh Pham, 'Why does Vietnam gain international praise for fight against COVID-19?', *Hanoi Times* (10 April 2020), available at: <https://hanoitimes.vn/why-does-vietnam-gain-international-praise-for-fight-against-COVID-19-311680.html>].

<sup>88</sup> Hương Lê, 'Public loudspeakers: Old weapons in a new war', *Việt Nam News* (12 September 2020), available at: <http://vietnamnews.vn/talk-around-town/1027617/public-loudspeakers-old-weapons-in-a-new-war>].



### Public acceptance of and participation in the securitisation of Covid-19

The Vietnamese government's securitisation of Covid-19 was distinctive, eliciting a unique comparative significance. It deeply resonated with the public – 81% of Vietnamese participants in a poll in February 2020 said their government acted appropriately, while only 9% thought Vietnam overreacted, an exceptional figure compared to other Asian countries researched.<sup>89</sup> Another survey conducted from 18 November 2020 to 10 January 2021 showed that 96.6% of respondents from Vietnam approved of their government's response to Covid-19, which was the highest among Southeast Asian countries.<sup>90</sup> Beyond acceptance, the Vietnamese citizenry exhibited a different character of agency than what is interpreted within securitisation theory, going beyond acceptance to participation. Vietnamese public participation took on a particularly martial character, as seen in various spectacles of spontaneous mass salutes to healthcare workers and commemoration of Covid-19 'fighters' and 'victims' in wartime-like fashion.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, the interaction between the audience and this specific form of activation architecture precipitated this new character of agency, where social media platforms' interactive nature enabled the public to participate in reinforcing these narratives, especially in Vietnam where usage of social media is high.

The slogan 'fighting the pandemic like fighting the invader' was reiterated not only by government-affiliated accounts but also netizens' individual accounts across various social media platforms. Commenting on and sharing posts, ordinary citizens extended the state's initial securitisation efforts, living up to the spirit of 'every citizen is a soldier' by being themselves (mini-)entrepreneurs of securitisation discourse. For example, Facebook users helped spread the narrative of Vietnam's war against Covid-19 by sharing and interacting with Facebook posts by *Thông tin chính phủ*. The *Chống dịch như chống giặc* cover photo of the account, shown in [Figure 1](#), received more than 10,000 positive reactions (like and heart reactions) and 207 comments, most of which either lauded Vietnam's response or urged the authorities to implement tougher measures.<sup>92</sup> These figures tower over previous cover photos since the page's first one published in 2015 received no more than 1,000 reactions and 60 comments, showing a identifiable shift in public interest. Similarly, the Facebook note 'The nation entering wartime' became viral, receiving more than 15,000 positive reactions, 487 comments, and more than 1,700 shares. In April 2020, to support the 'Together we win' photo challenge initiated by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (the youth branch of the VCP) of Hanoi, netizens shared photos of themselves practicing social distancing with the hashtag #onhalyeuquoc (#stayinghomeislovingyourcountry) on Facebook.<sup>93</sup>

The Vietnamese public – the 'audience' – was not only receptive to the government's securitising moves but also actively built upon them within popular culture through mediums beyond speech, exploiting visual imagery and aural landscapes. The contributions by Vietnamese artists are most illustrative, as seen in the participation of Vietnamese artists in the aforementioned propaganda-poster design contest. Inspired by the government's calls to arms against Covid-19, Vietnamese artists actively collaborated with the authorities and reiterated this style of painting, becoming

<sup>89</sup>Blackbox Research Team, 'Coronavirus: Asia on edge', *Blackbox* (20 February 2020), available at: <https://blackbox.com.sg/everyone/coronavirus-asia-on-edge/>.

<sup>90</sup>Sharon Seah, Hoang Thi Ha, Melinda Martinus, and Pham Thi Phuong Thao, 'The state of Southeast Asia: 2021 survey', *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute* (2021), available at: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2021-survey-report/>.

<sup>91</sup>Thiên Diệu, 'Prime Minister sent letters', *VietnamPlus*, 'Gathering commemorates deceased victims of COVID-19', *VietnamPlus* (19 November 2022), sec. Society, available at <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/gathering-commemorates-deceased-victims-of-covid19/244139.vnp>.

<sup>92</sup>Thông Tin Chính Phủ, Facebook (28 March 2020), available at: <https://www.facebook.com/912918568785331/photos/a.912921905451664/2850707551673080/>.

<sup>93</sup>Minh Châu, 'Spreading the message: Staying at home is loving your country' (Lan Toà Thông Điệp: 'Ở Nhà Là Yêu Nước') (2 April 2020), available at: <https://dangcongsan.vn/tu-tuong-van-hoa/lan-toa-thong-diep-o-nha-la-yeu-nuoc-551870.html>.

securitising actors themselves.<sup>94</sup> In March 2020, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MoCST) hosted a propaganda-poster design contest that saw 103 submissions from artists nationwide. The MoCST selected 14 among the submissions as official posters to be printed and hung in streets across Vietnam. A total of 700,000 copies were produced and delivered to 10,732 commune-level committees.<sup>95</sup> As a result, propaganda posters could be seen in many corners of Vietnam (see Figures 3–5). These posters raised public awareness about the pandemic and reminded people to take preventative measures, reinforcing the securitisation narratives by calling for the spirit of solidarity in time of war and echoing the historical resources of nationalist themes and the glorification of heroic figures.

Musicians also contributed, as hundreds of songs on Covid-19 were released, conveying messages of raising awareness of Covid-19 prevention and control and further reinforcing the military metaphor of doctors being on the frontline. Importantly, these songs were not commissioned by the government but were initiatives undertaken by Vietnamese artists in support of the government's efforts. Their agency was not merely to accept the government's extraordinary policies, but to further extend the government's securitisation discourse, particularly the 'fighting the pandemic like fighting the invader' slogan and the glorification of medical staff as frontline soldiers. Notable examples of these songs include *Chống Giặc COVID* (Fight the COVID Invader) by Lê Ngọc Thuý, *Diệt Giặc Corona* (Destroy the Corona Invader) by ĐạtG and DuUyên, and *Màu Áo Trắng Anh Hùng* (Heroes in White Blouses) by Vicky Nhung.

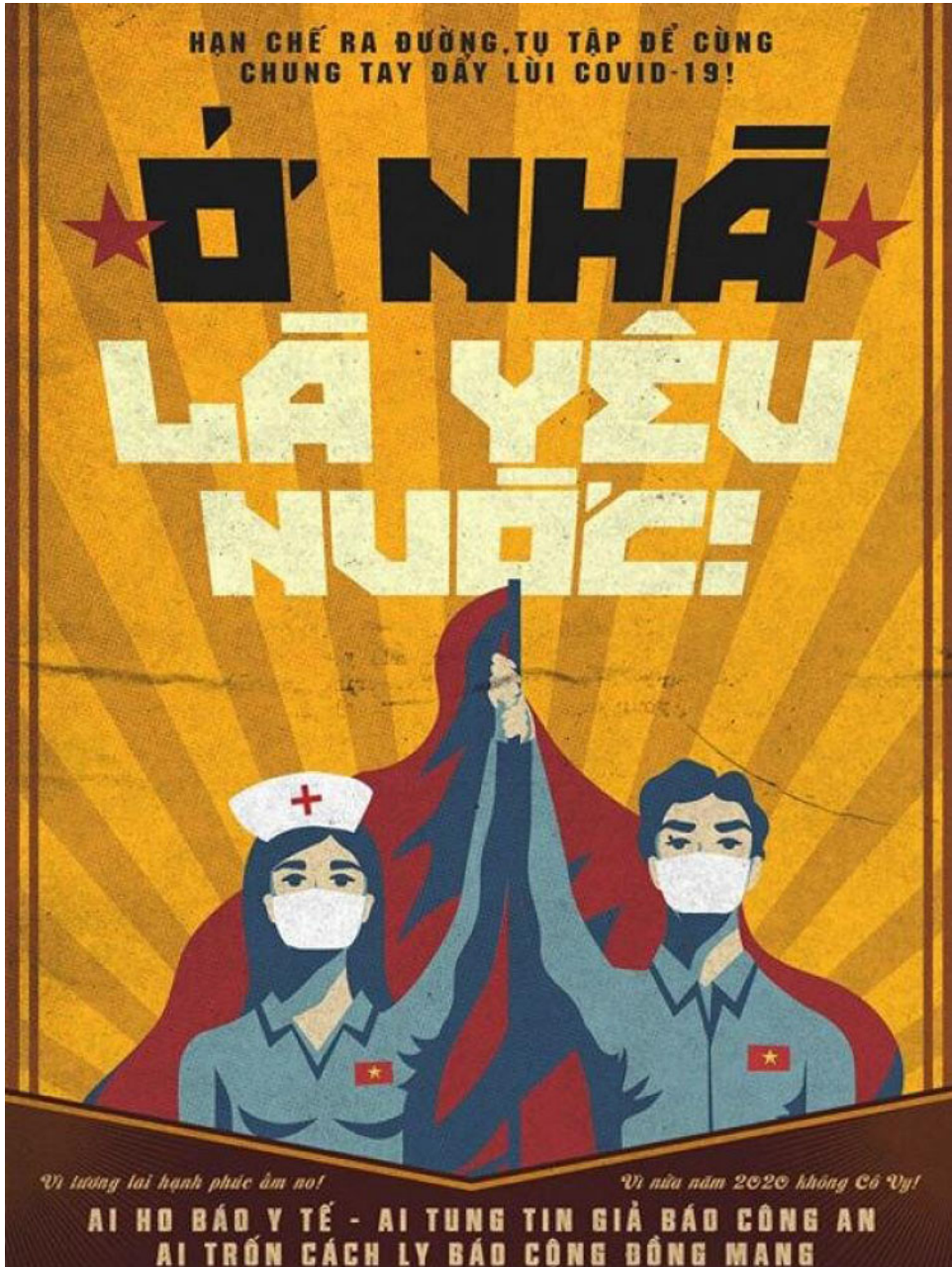
One of the earliest and most popular songs during the early phase of the pandemic is *Đánh giặc Corona* ('Fighting the Corona Invader'), released on 9 February 2020. The chorus of the song narrates Vietnam's war against Covid-19 while simultaneously calling for Vietnamese people's solidarity:

Fighting the Corona invader  
 Uniting our nation  
 Fighting the Corona invader  
 From young to old  
 Fighting the Corona invader  
 The medical sector is the frontline  
 Pledging to win the pandemic  
 Singing in unison with one song.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>94</sup>Chris Humphrey, "'In a war, we draw': Vietnam's artists join fight against COVID-19", *The Guardian* (9 April 2020), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/09/in-a-war-we-draw-vietnams-artists-join-fight-against-COVID-19>.

<sup>95</sup>'700,000 propaganda posters on preventing and combating COVID-19 delivered to localities' (700.000 Tranh Cổ Động Tuyên Truyền Phòng, Chống Dịch COVID-19 Đưa về Địa Phương), *Báo Sài Gòn Giải Phóng* (30 March 2020), available at: <https://www.sggp.org.vn/content/NTUxMzky.html>.

<sup>96</sup>TS Lê Thống Nhất, 'Fighting the corona invader: Joining hands to win the pandemic!' (Đánh Giặc Corona—Chung Tay Quyết Thắng Đại Dịch!), YouTube (10 February 2020), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ne7eR6MR0GY>.



**Figure 3.** Vietnamese artist Lê Đức Hiệp's propaganda poster with the message 'To stay at home is to love your country'. Humphrey, 'In a war, we draw'.

The song garnered millions of views across different social media platforms, with hundreds of covers of the song published on YouTube within 10 days of its release.<sup>97</sup> Another arresting

<sup>97</sup> Đăng Nguyễn, 'The teacher who composed the song about the coronavirus is pleased that it has been well received' (Thầy giáo sáng tác bài hát về virus corona: quá hạnh phúc vì được đón nhận), *Thanh Niên* (18 February 2020), sec. Giáo dục, available at: <https://thanhnien.vn/thay-giao-sang-tac-bai-hat-ve-virus-corona-qua-hanh-phuc-vi-duoc-don-nhan-185926584.htm>).



**Figure 4.** A propaganda-style Covid-19 poster in a street in Hanoi with the message: ‘Wear mask regularly and correctly to prevent the Covid-19 pandemic effectively’. Eric San Juan, ‘Vietnamese propaganda art sees revival in fight against COVID-19’, *Agencia EFE* (24 April 2020), available at: <https://www.efe.com/efe/english/portada/vietnamese-propaganda-art-sees-revival-in-fight-against-COVID-19/50000260-4229603>.



**Figure 5.** An electronic screen displays a propaganda poster with the slogan *Chống dịch như chống giặc* (Fighting the pandemic like fighting the invader) in Ho Chi Minh City. The drawing here was inspired by a propaganda poster produced during the Vietnam War. ‘VIETNAM-HEALTH-VIRUS’, Getty Images, available at: <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/an-electronic-screen-displays-a-message-relating-to-the-news-photo/1233881950>.

phenomenon was how social media mediated the emergence of securitisation within popular culture, which itself led to a cascading reinforcement of the discourse, as seen when the song was reimagined by other musicians and used in flash-mob dances of youth volunteers in Covid-19 prevention and control campaigns.<sup>98</sup> While the lyrics read like government propaganda, they were actually written by Dr Lê Thống Nhất, a maths-professor-cum-musician. When asked why he composed the song in an interview, Professor Lê said: ‘If we cannot be in the frontline of the fight against the epidemic, then composing music is a way for people like me to contribute to the common fight.’<sup>99</sup> These sentiments clearly capture the spirit of the ‘each citizen is a soldier’ slogan promulgated by the government.

Professor Lê, then, was not merely part of the ‘audience’, but also a securitising agent, and he was hardly an exception. In April 2020, the Vietnam Association of Musicians initiated a songwriting campaign to encourage citizens to combat the spread of Covid-19.<sup>100</sup> The campaign yielded more than 200 compositions, out of which 100 songs were curated for a collection entitled *Niềm tin* (Faith). The association also livestreamed a concert named *Niềm tin – chúng ta là người chiến thắng* (Faith – We are the victors) in three major cities, and, like Professor Lê’s song, the show echoed the government’s promise of an eventual victory of the Vietnamese people over the pandemic.

### Conclusion: Future research

This paper has unpacked Vietnam’s early response to Covid-19, looking at how it managed to *securitise* the pandemic by engaging in language and symbols embedded in wider shared historical narratives. The contributions that this paper makes are twofold. First, it contributes to understandings of Vietnamese politics, culture, and society, for example, discussions over whether Vietnam’s initial success in pandemic management was achieved due to unilateral state repression or state–society cooperation. Our research does not dispute the role of coercion but emphasises factors beyond political centralisation. Second, by exhibiting the various shapes in which securitisation might occur, this case study invites the reconsideration of a key category within securitisation theory – the audience. The paper shows that the success of securitisation is conditioned by the use of ‘soft’ resources, such as the depth of shared historical memory and the ability to utilise it, and problematises the way that the audience is conceived of by the Copenhagen School. From this, the notions of ‘historical resources’ and ‘activation architecture’ were developed.

There are several routes that, springing off this paper, future research can explore. Two are gestured at here. First, attending further to Vietnam, specifically the period directly following the one that we study, might be productive. This period saw a gradual shift in narrative from fighting the invader to ‘safe adaption, flexibility, and effective control of the virus.’<sup>101</sup> The metaphors this paper explores have been deemphasised and replaced by a call for resilience and ‘normalisation.’<sup>102</sup> While some continuities remain, especially the praise of medical workers, the wartime language has died down. Many reasons explain this change;<sup>103</sup> to highlight just one, there appears a ‘fatigue’

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

<sup>99</sup>Lê Sơn, ‘Meeting with the teacher who supports the fight against COVID-19 with music’ (Gặp người thầy truyền sức chiến đấu chống COVID-19 bằng nhạc), *Báo Tin Tức* (20 November 2021), available at: <https://baotintuc.vn/news-20211120075217047.htm>).

<sup>100</sup>Musician Do Hong Quan: “Music Is a Strong Source of Motivation to Fight Covid-19” (Nhạc Sĩ Đỗ Hồng Quân: Âm Nhạc Là Nguồn Động Viên Tinh Thần Mạnh Mẽ Chống Covid-19), *VOV.VN* (9 September 2021), available at: <https://vov.gov.vn/nhac-si-do-hong-quan-am-nhac-la-nguon-dong-vien-tinh-than-manh-me-chong-covid-19-dtnew-295935>).

<sup>101</sup>Resolution: Issuing the Provisional Decision “Safe Adaption, Flexibility, and Effective Control of the Virus” (Nghị Quyết: Ban Hành Quy Định Tạm Thời ‘Thích Ứng An Toàn, Linh Hoạt, Kiểm Soát Hiệu Quả Dịch COVID-19’), *Thu Viện Pháp Luật* (11 October 2021), available at: <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/The-thao-Y-te/Nghi-quyet-128-NQ-CP-2021-Quy-dinh-tam-thoi-thich-ung-an-toan-linh-hoat-dich-COVID19-490931>).

<sup>102</sup>Viet Tuan, ‘Vietnam prepares to live safely with COVID: PM’, *VN Express* (5 September 2021), available at: <https://vnxpress.net/news/news/vietnam-prepares-to-live-safely-with-COVID-pm-4351981.html>).

<sup>103</sup>Zachary Abuza, ‘What explains Vietnam’s current COVID-19 struggles?’, *The Diplomat* (15 June 2021), available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/what-explains-vietnams-current-COVID-19-struggles/>).

problem in securitisation, as the mobilisation of the public drained civic energies, and prolonged lockdowns significantly strained state resources. This raises questions about ‘desecuritisation’ processes, whether state of exception can be imposed indefinitely without diluting the sense of urgency and exception, even in states with a high degree of historical resources and efficient activation architecture.<sup>104</sup>

Second, collectivism as an analytical category has been hinted at in this paper. The connotations of term are suggestive, as it may perform the conceptual linkage that allows the mode of securitisation exhibited to hang together and also opens avenues for comparative studies. This deserves a deeper exploration and more theoretical and historical legwork, including a fuller discussion ripe with comparisons with other collectivist societies, primarily those of an East Asian cultural lineage. This also intersects with the role of particular political parties – based on its revolutionary credence, the VCP has long projected itself as the inheritor of Vietnam’s thousand-years-long tradition of fending off invaders, and thereby also a key symbol in the nation’s collectivist identity.<sup>105</sup> The legitimacy of the VCP and the collectivist ideology therefore intertwine, and disentangling and clarifying the relationship in both Vietnamese and other cases is also crucial and can be productive for reflections on securitisation theory.

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<sup>104</sup>See, for example, Jonathan Luke Austin and Philippe Beaulieu-Brossard, ‘(De)securitisation dilemmas: Theorising the simultaneous enactment of securitisation and desecuritisation’, *Review of International Studies*, 44:2 (2018), pp. 301–23.

<sup>105</sup>See Martin Grossheim, ‘Nationalism and historiography in socialist Vietnam’, *H-Soz-Kult* (13 September 2021), available at: <http://www.hsozkult.de/debate/id/diskussionen-5257>.