Introduction

In 1961 the Chinese-Indonesian political activist and scholar, Drs. Oey Hong Lee, published a book called *Asia Menang di Dien Bien Phu* or, “Asia Wins in Dien Bien Phu.”¹ The title alone speaks volumes about the moment following the People’s Army of Vietnam’s triumph over the French Expeditionary Forces in May 1954, a time fresh with the possibilities of non-alignment and for making alliances alternative to hardening Cold War blocs.

Educated in Amsterdam and Paris, Drs. Oey was an observer at the negotiations that produced the Geneva Accords in July 1954 in the wake of the French defeat. By the early 1960s, he had served as a civil servant in the Republic of Indonesia’s Ministry of Information and as lecturer both in Journalism at URECA (*Universitas Res Publica*; since 1965, known as Trisakti U.) and in the Faculty of Law at University of Indonesia. In 1965, however, with General Suharto’s counter-coup and the subsequent massacres of (alleged) leftist political activists and repression of Chinese-Indonesians, Drs. Oey headed back to Europe. He took a post in journalism at Karl Marx University in Leipzig, earned a doctorate at the University of Amsterdam, and taught the Politics of Southeast Asia at the University of Hull until the 1980s. He died in Amsterdam in 1992.²

I mention Drs. Oey’s biography and his conception of Dien Bien Phu to recover historical trajectories in a global corner of post-WWII Asia. Furthermore, by sharing one of his animating

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questions, “Di mana letak DBP?” or “Where is Dien Bien Phu located?” I aim to illuminate alternative spatial imaginaries. Drs. Oey placed Dien Bien Phu in Asia, making the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s victory there a moment of possibility and inspiration for all peoples—Burmese, Indonesian, Filipino, Malaysian, and, of course, Indonesian—emerging from Japanese occupation and European colonialism. Locating these peoples in Asia signaled his admiration for the People’s Republic of China, what he called a “new Asian country” at the vanguard of resisting US imperialism and assisting anti-colonial struggles.

Notably, Drs. Oey does not locate Dien Bien Phu in Southeast Asia. In fact, he treats the appellation “Asia Tenggara” carefully, associating it with John Foster Dulles and the US Secretary of State’s efforts to organize and establish the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in September 1954. He considered Dulles’s efforts tragically misinformed and allied with the “rock-headed” French negotiator at Geneva: by assisting the France the name of anti-communism, the US both facilitated neo-colonialism and erected a Cold War regional bloc against which Drs. Oey wrote. Indeed, it was precisely such American intervention that would contribute to his own displacement and marginalization in 1965. Drs. Oey’s own migrations, therefore, demonstrate both the possibilities of transnational linkages and the limits international military alliances imposed on them.

If Drs. Oey’s biography and writing suggests one way to think about trajectories and spatial frames, then revisiting his animating question—where is DBP located?—provides

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3 Drs. Oey Hong Lee, Asia Menang (1961), 18.
4 Drs. Oey Hong Lee, Asia Menang (1961), 56. The author explores these themes further in his Naga Bangkit (Jakarta: Jajasan Kebudajaan Zamrud, 1962).
another. While Drs. Oey located Dien Bien Phu at a crossroads of competing geopolitical interests, I locate the site in a historically contested frontier. Dien Bien Phu and the surrounding Black River region have long functioned as frontiers; the French were not the first to claim them nor the DRV the first to hold them. Thinking about these sites as historically-contested territory whose borders are ever incomplete and contingently constructed provides another entry point for rethinking boundaries and arguing for novel historical approaches. I argue that Dien Bien Phu provides a site to explore the confluence of two processes embedded in modern state-formation: making its peoples national subjects and remaking its spaces state territory. Just as Drs. Oey himself experienced, the intertwined construction of nation and state in a Cold War context marginalized the peoples of the Black River region.

*What is in a name?*

As with “Southeast Asia,” seemingly neutral place names contain the effects of powerful legitimation work. The name Điện Biên Phủ can be translated as “border post prefecture.”

“Phủ” is an old Sino-Vietnamese term for administrative unit dating back to early 19th century Nguyễn dynasty rule, perhaps even earlier. Although the royal designation of this prefecture as a post (diện) on an edge or line (biên) predates the actual demarcation of the border in the late 19th century, its naming nonetheless staked a powerful territorial claim. From the perspective of Vietnamese court and national center alike, the place name internalizes territory yet

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6 Bernard Fall offers another translation as “Seat of the Border County Prefecture” but I disagree with his assertion that Điện Biên Phủ “is not really a place name” because Mưông Thanh is its “true name.” I argue that both serve as place names and neither one is more “true” than the other. Rather, each comes from different languages and serves different purposes. *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967), 22.


acknowledges its location on the edge of a sovereign domain. Calling this site a “border post prefecture” simultaneously incorporates its territory and marginalizes it.\textsuperscript{9}

Attending to local place names and relations destabilizes what center-periphery relations the official name conceals and reveals. For local Thái speakers, the name Mường Thanh (or, \textit{muang} of heaven) calls to mind the place’s historic centrality.\textsuperscript{10} Indeed, the \textit{muang} is a remarkably resilient form of organizing space, rule, and relations of production: it survives in place names and as the basis for contemporaneous administrative units wherever Thái peoples have settled.\textsuperscript{11} For residents of its plain and surrounding hills alike, the town of Dien Bien Phu serves as a locus of activity in its own right: a provincial political capital, trading entrepot, and cultural center.\textsuperscript{12} Both place names co-exist but each point to outcomes of differently conceived and located political projects. Whereas the place name Đà ện Bển Phủ is a product of a centrally produced, Vietnamese synoptic grid, Mường Thanh is a product of local Thái ideas of space, local rule, agriculture, and community—a central, heavenly \textit{muang}.

\textit{Locating a frontier}

How do I locate Dien Bien Phu? I begin in the Black River borderlands with the making of a political frontier space where the eastern Himalayan massif—what some scholars call Zomia—happens to straddle an intellectual frontier space, where Southeast meets East Asia.

Locating a frontier, I argue, is usefully problematic: just as we must beware accepting and

\textsuperscript{9} I am grateful to H\-t\-m Ho T\-i for encouraging this insight.
\textsuperscript{10} C\-m Tr\-ng, \textit{Ng\-rt Thái ở Tây B\-c Việt Nam} (Hanoi: NXB Khoa hoc Xã hội, 1978), 45, 324-325.
\textsuperscript{11} In order to avoid confusion, I spell this unit according to conventions of the romanized Thái language (i.e., \textit{muang} or \textit{muăng}) rather than the romanized Vietnamese language (i.e., \textit{mưông}). The latter can also signify formal place names (such as Mưông Lai) and a particular ethno-linguistic group (the Mưông peoples). Cf., Jean Michaud, \textit{Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif} (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 171-173.
\textsuperscript{12} One Khu Mu woman in the highland village of Bản Cỏng, Mưông Phăng District described Dien Bien Phu as “dusty, hot, crowded” to explain her reluctance to visit the “city” and her preference for the cool mountain air and comfort of a known community.
reproducing legitimation work contained in place names, investigating their idiom reveals the making, unmaking, and remaking of powerful claims on subjects and territories.

To refer to the Black River region prior to the consolidation of nation-state rule as “northwest Vietnam” is both to use an historical anachronism and to acknowledge a territorial claim projected retroactively. Only in 1954, following the defeat of French forces in May and ratification of the Geneva Accords in July, does locating part of this region within “Vietnam” begin to make sense.\(^\text{13}\) Even then, however, the Accords produced two Vietnams, partitioned at the 17\(^{\text{th}}\) parallel between the DRV in the north and the Republic in the south. Subsequently, the DRV administered the Black River region for two decades as an Autonomous Zone (Khu tự trị), known from 1955 to 1962 as the “Thái-Mèo” and from 1962 to 1975 as the “Northwest.” In 1975, when the two Vietnams merged, uniform territorial administration replaced regional autonomy, recognizing the region as provinces of Sơn La and Lai Châu. In 2004, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam carved from these two provinces the province of Điện Biên.

Long before Vietnam came to be, peoples of the Black River basin developed patterns of social relations, such as trade, tribute, and imperial dominations, distinctive to their own settlement histories and agro-ecological niches. From the 17\(^{\text{th}}\) to the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries, the Sipsongchauthai organized this region and, amidst overlapping claims to its territory and peoples, formed a political center of its own.\(^\text{14}\) Translated from the Thái to mean, literally, the “12 Thai muang or principalities,” the Sipsongchauthai serves for James Scott and others as an exemplar of Zomia: a region in the eastern Himalayas whose incorporation has long troubled

\(^{13}\) The Black River begins in present-day China and its upper watershed is located there. For simplicity’s sake, I use the Black River region to refer to the lower watershed in present-day Vietnam.

lowland state-making projects.\textsuperscript{15} I find Zomia to be a useful heuristic device for problematizing received borders and social categories. Not a transhistorical concept, as Scott argues, its existence ends sometime around World War II with the emergence of nation-state forms of rule. I am most concerned with transitions out of any allegedly Zomian space, i.e. the remaking of its peoples as national subjects and its spaces as state territory.

By drawing a linear boundary line in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, French colonial rule remade this borderlands region into a frontier and, until the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, reoriented local political relations within the bounds of empire.\textsuperscript{16} From a semi-autonomous confederation displaying multiple sovereignty, French colonial rule transformed the Sipsongchauthai into a military territory located inside Tonkin’s boundaries and outside neighboring Laos and China. Even within Indochina’s colonial space, local leaders continued to exert a form of self-rule: Thái powerbrokers supported their own political and economic agenda by leveraging their frontier status and by reproducing local units of production and rule—i.e., the muang. Accommodation and negotiation underlay the making of empire and, later, of nation-state.

The transition from borderlands to frontier was the first of two historical pivot points. In the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century Đèo Văn Trị assisted early French explorers to map the Black River region and the upper Mekong basin.\textsuperscript{17} Not only did the elder Đèo figure centrally in efforts to relocate the territory within Tonkin’s border with Laos and within Indochina’s border against China; he


also positioned himself and his family as the region’s rightful rulers. Through the mid-20th century, this region was administered as, and figured in relations of domination as, an imperial frontier. In 1931, for example, the French Indochinese Union was composed of five “countries” (*pays*), including the two “mixed administration” protectorates of Tonkin and Laos. Mixed administration signified two forms of duality: first, empowering mandarins or “native” (*indigène*) officials to rule indirectly; second, joining military and civil administrations in “military territories” (*territoires militaires*) along Indochina’s northern frontier with China. These administrative distinctions also reproduced what French officials and scholars constructed as binary, environmentally-determinist social categories of “mountains” and “delta.”

Until World War II, colonial officials recognized the mountainous region as the 4th Military Territory and empowered Đèo clan members as officials to rule jointly.

The wake of World War II was a second pivot point, a moment when a reorganizing imperial frontier overlapped temporally and spatially with an emergent national frontier. Between the defeat of Japan and the arrival of allied forces, nationalist leader Hồ Chí Minh declared the DRV’s independence from France in September 1945 and headed its provisional government. His announcement posed a *national* claim to an emergent “Vietnam” configured from colonial territories and populations of Tonkin, Cochinchina, and Annam. Meanwhile, French statesman Charles de Gaulle had announced France’s intention to reestablish a colonial regime and, in 1945, began to (re)organize the Indochinese Federation. In 1948, colonial administrators worked with Đèo Văn Trị’s son, Đèo Văn Long, to establish the Thái Federation.

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18 In addition, Indochina included the colony of Cochinchina, two protectorates of Annam and Cambodia, and one leased holding of Kouang-Tchéou-Wan, a port city on the Pearl River now known as Guangzhou and part of the People’s Republic of China. Cf., Sylvain Lévi, *Indochine*, vol. 1 (Paris: Société d’Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, 1931), 5.

19 Ibid...5-31.

in an attempt to regain control of the Black River region. National and neocolonial political projects were antithetically posed but historically connected. On a frontier reproduced, claimed, and contested by these two projects, renewing local rule within French empire generated contradictions which, in turn, led to support for a national liberation movement.

This longer history provides invaluable context for understanding the remaking of a frontier during a period of armed contest over a political center, a time also known as the first Indochina war (1946-54). In a pattern similar to the late 19th century, the Black River region once again became a site of multiple claims on its territory and population. Unlike the Sipsongchauthai’s amorphous spaces and overlapping claims, however, by the mid-20th century the region’s bounded space structured contests for monopoly rule within a shared regime of territorality. I define “regime of territorality” as a statist imperative to bound territory and rule its internal social space. On the edges of both a reorganizing Indochina and an emergent DRV, the Black River region’s borders placed local residents in particular relationships regarding two centralizing political projects. They had to choose carefully between aligning themselves with one or another, between locating themselves on a frontier of new empire or evolving nation-state.

21 Of course, as Michel Foucault reminds us, “government is not related to the territory, but to a sort of complex of men and things.” I add that the bounded-ness of social relations structures the spatial limits of sovereign disciplinary and regulatory power. I also concur with Donald Moore that the “political technologies” used to exert a regime of territority also “encountered subjects and territories already embedded in ruling relations,” and echo his effort to study “entanglements,” or the “contingent constellations” produced and reproduced by successive political projects. Michel Foucault, Security, Territory, Population, ed. Michel Senellart (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 96; Donald S. Moore, Suffering for Territory (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 5-9.

Militarizing spaces: rear, front, frontier

Drs. Oey’s history of Dien Bien Phu begins in 1953. With good reason: the year or so prior to the battle figured as a time of preparation and increasing local labor recruitment, particularly with regards to building roads and transportation infrastructure.\(^2^3\) In addition to contributing towards making a centralized economy, wartime infrastructure work had long term consequences for binding the Black River region to an emergent Vietnam and its downstream demographic and political centers. A volume published by the Ministry of Defense in 2004 to commemorate Dien Bien Phu’s 50\(^{th}\) anniversary recounts all this preparatory work as “securing logistics.”\(^2^4\) I call attention here to the idea of logistics with reference to emergent spatial categories of front, rear, and frontier.

The making and remaking of the Northwest Zone as military rear and front overlapped with the processes of making and remaking its territory a frontier of Vietnam. In Vietnamese, as in other languages, “rear” is always understood in relation to “front.” During this round of conflict and others subsequently, military operations conducted on the front (mặt trận or tiến tuyến) drew on and reproduced the rear (hậu phương) where, not coincidentally, lay the largely agrarian manpower and resources of the population at large. To paraphrase Mao Tse-Tung, without a rear one cannot sit down and regain one’s strength.\(^2^5\) Etymologically, the Sino-Vietnamese root word for rear (hậu, meaning “back of” or “behind”) is spatially defined in relation to the root for front (mặt, or “face”). Notably, hậu also forms the root both for hậu cần, or logistics, including the work of ordnance, transportation, and food to serve the military; and


\(^{2^4}\) Tổng cục Hậu cần, Công tác Bảo đảm hậu cần trong chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ (Hanoi: NXB QĐND, 2004).

for hậu phương, or rear, the location in which these resources are collected and out of which they flow towards the front (mặt trận).  

Historically, the spatial distinction between, and growing emphasis on, rear and front not only confirmed a growing preoccupation among political elites with military struggle. The distinction also maps onto the DRV’s recently declared Northwest Zone as territory featuring both a singular front as well as multiple rears and fronts simultaneously: as an interior part of Vietnam that faces an exterior space not Vietnam (i.e., Laos and China); and site of multiple interiors and exteriors inside itself (i.e., what territory remained of the Thái Federation; fortified French positions at Nà Sản and, later, Dien Bien Phu).

The Vietnamese language etymology of rear and front has a parallel in English and French. “Frontier” or “frontière” also has roots in the idea of a military front, what Lucien Febvre calls a “line of troops disposed in battle formation facing the enemy.”  

Although this military definition of frontier covers the distinction contained within a singular front (i.e., national/international spaces), it neglects multiply contested terrain within the Northwest Zone itself. It was precisely the presence of multiple frontiers, moreover, that posed such difficulties for legitimizing sovereign territorial control there, particularly in terms of foreign enemies and national friends.

Between 1952-54, then, the emerging Northwest frontier was a Janus-faced construction both within DRV territory and partially outside of its control, at once a site of multiple internalized rears and fronts and an externalized border. In this light, the military project culminating in the battle of Dien Bien Phu intended to singularize multiple fronts and,

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26 Phan Văn Cák, Từ Điển Tiếng Việt (TP Hồ Chí Minh: NXB TP Hồ Chí Minh, 2003), 184.
28 I problematize Carl Schmitt’s distinction between friend and enemy as the generative force of political awareness as stated in his The Concept of the Political (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
consequently, to align an emerging rear with sovereign territory. Territorial expansion of central authority produced both front and rear—the latter reproduced as site, its population as subjects, of wartime mobilization.

The ostensible victory in 1954 ushered in a period of limited autonomy on terms negotiated between loyal Thái powerbrokers and Kinh elites about to remake a political center in Hanoi. For local elites who had sided with the French, like the younger Đểo, migration to Laos, France, and even the US was preferable to public trials, reeducation, or, in some cases, execution in an altered home. For many ethnicized people unhappy with state claims on their agricultural produce (taxes) and labor power (đàn công service), flight to Laos revealed the limits of the DRV’s territorial sovereignty. Overall, making Vietnam in Dien Bien Phu reproduced its peoples—consensually and coercively—as members of a Vietnamese nation on decidedly unequal terms: as “ethnic minorities” ranked inferior to their downstream “majority ethnicity” neighbors.29

Concluding remarks

I conclude with two arguments, historical and historiographic, concerning the making of frontiers in relation to center(s) of power.

If frontiers represent territorial limits and jurisdictional zones of sovereign state power, as Peter Sahlins and Lucien Febvre suggest, then I would add that for makers of centralized state,

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frontiers represent also a *potential*, i.e. the expansive capacity of their sovereign power. Yet to dwell on only one center tends to privilege one (powerful) perspective among others. Further, how to tell a history of a frontier exhibits a narrative tension between projecting backwards already-achieved, spatialized relations of power or tracing forward the contingent, uncertain process of making and transforming social relations in space. Historians of the American west have shown that the term “frontier” carries analytical baggage: pointing to the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, critics of his “frontier thesis” of 1893 highlight its underlying telos, “denoting a triumphalist and Anglocentric narrative of continental conquest.” These critics contribute towards a broader historiographic shift, endeavoring to decenter nationalist or statist narratives of steady and inevitable territorial expansion. In so doing, they enrich an analytical vocabulary, offering an idea of “borderlands” to signify multiply contested spaces, amplify the agency of local peoples, and restore contingency to historical trajectories.

Although frontier and borderlands share similar properties, I follow this historiographic turn by offering definitions to highlight a historically specific transformation. “Borderlands” refers to a lived center whose undefined space lies at the edges of multiple, overlapping

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33 The piece by Adelman and Aron stimulated a lively and productive debate. John R. Wunder and Pekka Hamalainen responded these authors “focus on a game of imperial chess” and neglected to account analytically for native American agency; they argue, instead, to understand native American history on its own merits. Evan Haefeli responded by calling for a more rigorous analytical distinction between borderlands and frontiers informed by comparative historical studies. I take these insights seriously by attending to local expressions of agency, and the structural limits encountered and negotiated; and by understanding that the Black River region’s historical movement from borderlands to frontier as a sequential pattern nonetheless displayed periods of overlap and was by no means pre-determined. Cf., Wunder and Hamalainen, “Of Lethal Places and Lethal Essays,” and Evan Haefeli, “A Note on the Use of North American Borderlands,” AHR Vol. 104 No. 4 (Oct., 1999), 1229-1334, 1222-1225.

34 Frontiers and borderlands alike signal social relations in space existing on the fringes of, but always in relation to, centers of power. Neither given as such nor “empty” spaces, frontiers and borderlands are settled, if sometimes sparsely, by peoples who think of their melded social and natural environment as their own lived center. For another perspective on borderlands, cf., Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, “Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands,” Journal of World History vol. 8 no. 2 (Fall, 1997), pp. 211-242.

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sovereign claims. “Frontier” denotes a lived center whose delimited space lies on the edges of a singular claim. Frontier, then, means a transformed borderlands where one political center negotiates with local rulers to singularize rule and interiorize its territories and peoples.\textsuperscript{35} If French empire transformed the Black River borderlands and produced a frontier in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, then opposing political projects—reorganizing French empire and emerging nation-state—converged on the initial transformation and, therefore, reproduced a frontier in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century. Notwithstanding this shared regime of territoriality, the DRV political project diverged from its predecessor regarding the terms and tactics of legitimation as well as the means and ends of production.\textsuperscript{36}

To take these historical and historiographic concerns seriously renders locating a frontier in space and time usefully problematic. Locating a frontier speaks both to competing political claims on its territory as well as to multiple histories of its subjects and their collective (dis)placements. Referring to “it,” as a given social fact in terms of contemporary or stable place

\textsuperscript{35} I avoid the terms “interior” and “exterior” because this distinction accepts as social fact what (may) result territorially from the process of making singular rule. Although frontiers exist on the spatial margins of state control, I consider “periphery” an inadequate descriptor because “center-periphery” approaches tend to over-simplify the complexities of frontier politics. Cf., Andrew Walker, \textit{The Legend of the Golden Boat} (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 3-17.

names, is not a neutral exercise. One’s very choice of place names often betrays an a priori “conquest of illegibility,” or the effects of a political project to standardize and encode territory according to a synoptic administrative grid. Spatial practices and representations are embedded in, and enabling of, powerful claims to territory. The lived experience of space is always multiple, yet relations of domination tend towards its singular, ideologically-inflected representation. How we know a given space’s dimensions, names, or cartographic location reflect inherently political—and contingent—outcomes in power-laden processes of spatial production. To describe a frontier uncritically, therefore, risks accepting and reproducing the hegemony of one particular claim among others.

To recite one place name among others indicates the effects of one political project among others. Only by deconstructing the idea of “Northwest Vietnam” can we begin to understand how agreement on the transformation of borderland to frontier structured antithetical projects of imperial reconstruction and nation-state making. Only by demystifying the spatial representations of imperial and nation-state rule can we begin to understand how their projects came to be locally institutionalized, legitimized, and enforced in an evolving spatio-temporal context. Describing how a frontier came to be and where it happens to be located, therefore, illuminates historic and ongoing processes of making relations of rule. Understood as such, frontiers are exemplary sites for the study of state formation.

“If we end our story here,” wrote Drs. Oey in Indonesian six years after Asia’s ostensible victory in Dien Bien Phu, “then there is an apparent ‘happy end.’” “But there is a different

reality,” he continued, and argued that ongoing partition of Vietnams into north and south reflected escalating US military and political interventions and contributed to delaying any such closure by preventing the fulfillment of Vietnam’s “freedom struggle.” Just as his English “happy end” signifies his cosmopolitanism, so too does his Indonesian “perjuangan kemerdekaan” underline Vietnam’s significance for his local readers. By taking his question seriously—how to locate Dien Bien Phu—I hope to have followed Drs. Oey’s example: both to problematize hegemonic power relations and to offer conceptual tools for rethinking alternatives.

40 Drs. Oey Hong Lee, Asia Menang (1961), 136.