

SPECIAL FOCUS

Collective Care in Three Vietnamese Contexts: The Intersection of Health, Community, and the State

Introduction


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Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Vietnam was initially featured in the world news media as a triumphant success story in its fight against the coronavirus. Scholars drew attention to the public health policies and practices of the government (Le 2021; Quang *et al.* 2022) and a society whose collective sense of self-worth was derived from entrenched practices of looking out for one another (Su *et al.* 2021). This special focus uses the pandemic as a launching point to investigate the idea of collective care in contemporary Vietnamese society. It does so by looking at the contexts of three different communities: the Vietnamese nation as a whole, a Vietnamese diasporic community in Germany, and an ethnic minority group in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

With the remarkable economic growth experienced in Vietnam since market reforms were introduced in 1986 (Đổi Mới), many scholars have focused on the incredible transformations that economic growth has engendered, such as the rise of a middle class (Earl 2014) and the emergence of new forms of urban living (Harms 2011; 2016) and gendered consumption (Hoang 2015). More recently, individualized dimensions of affective care have begun to make an impact on critical Vietnamese studies. Anthropologists such as

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Merav Shohet (2021) and Allen Tran (2018) have shown how Vietnam's intensifying middle class have transformed notions of love, care, and emotion in neoliberalizing Vietnam. This special focus builds on the emerging interest in collective approaches to care, an issue that the pandemic also brought to light.

Max Müller *et al.*'s paper, "Vietnamese Carescapes in the Making: Looking at Covid-19 Care Responses in Berlin through the Affective Lens of Face Masks"—about how overseas Vietnamese hand-sewed masks for their compatriots as well as threatened Berliners—demonstrates how Vietnamese collective care has a transnational quality indicative of how responses to the pandemic (like the pandemic itself) do not respect national boundaries. Mirjam Le and Franziska Susana Nicolaisen then write in their paper, "Narrative and Framing of a Pandemic: Public Health Communication in the Vietnamese Public Sphere," about the Vietnamese state's methods and language driving "crisis communication" during the pandemic. Propaganda messaging brought together Vietnamese people along collective care lines but also divided them as the government's approach to the Omicron outbreak unraveled and social inequities came to the fore. Finally, Kang Yanggu takes us beyond the pandemic to look at collective care among the ethnic Raglai, in "Appropriating State Techniques for Effective Rituals: Funerals of the Raglai in Contemporary Vietnam."

While these three papers are diverse in their coverage, they demonstrate at the granular level the complex ways in which the state informs and influences people's ideas and actions on how to care for their collective communities. Whereas Le and Nicolaisen focus on the intent of the state itself, Müller *et al.* and Kang show us that even in communities that exist beyond the direct or firm reach of the state, approaches to collective care still reflect or engage with state concepts—be that the proper way to perform rituals, as in the case of Kang's paper, or the sense of gratitude that one owes one's home country, as in the case of the work of Müller *et al.*

In conclusion, all these papers illustrate the complex ways in which "Vietnamese communities," in the broadest sense of that term—from communities of ethnic Vietnamese in Vietnam or in the diaspora to non-Vietnamese ethnic groups in Vietnam—navigate through a world of state policies and economic inequities to find ways to care for those most in need.

The three papers in this special focus were originally presented at the conference on "Engaging With Vietnam: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue." This is an annual multidisciplinary conference focusing on "Vietnam" as both a place and a concept, for scholars working in the social sciences, arts, and humanities. Now in its 14th year, the conference has traditionally attracted upcoming and early-career scholars. The papers in this special focus are representative of the type of work that gets presented at this conference, and

they are also representative of some of the topics that young scholars are researching these days.

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