

Life and liminality during COVID-19: An ethnography of pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam



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Abstract

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus pandemic on 11 March 2020. Since then, COVID-19 has caused taken-for-granted structures of life to be suspended worldwide. Viral containment measures such as quarantines, isolation, and distancing have disrupted social relations and public discourses of stigma, danger, fear, and loss have exacerbated existing social divides. Ethnographers have been urged to study the social complexities of the pandemic (Bear et al 2020; Higgins et al 2020; Napier 2020; Pillay 2021). However, travel bans, institutional restrictions on face-to-face research, the difficulty of making plans to study an unfolding crisis and the relatively recent emergence of the coronavirus phenomenon mean that accounts of the pandemic's social dynamics that involve extensive ethnographic engagement are relatively few.¹ This study will add to these accounts by producing an ethnography of pandemic in an urban neighbourhood in Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam. The project is informed by ethnographic observations (Tough 2021b) from earlier fieldwork when Vietnam's coronavirus case rates, long among the lowest in the world (Dong, Du and Gardner 2020, 533-534), rose rapidly, bringing widespread social disruption.

Liminality is characterised in the anthropological literature as the quality of ambiguity and disorientation and also by the rites and rituals of separation and re-incorporation that begin and end a liminal period (Turner [1969] 2008). As an anthropological concept liminality has been noted for its "...capacity to provide explanatory and interpretative accounts of seemingly unstructured situations" (Horvath et al 2015: 3). By applying the concept of liminality to analyse data from my study of social life during the COVID-19 crisis, this research will contribute to developing conceptual and analytical tools for understanding and engaging with reality in the COVID-19 era, as called for by Soto Bermant and Ssorin-Chaikov (2020). The scale or intensity of a liminal moment or period is an important variable. In this study, following Horvath et al (2015: 50), I delineate the COVID-19 period as one of 'pure liminality' - a liminal experience intensified "...as the personal, group and societal levels converge in liminality, over extended periods of time or even within several spatial entities". Timely social analysis must address the unpredictable, so I will employ participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and life histories in a flexible way to account for the implementation of any fresh social distancing measures, potentially generating methodological insights into conducting rapid response anthropology. Responding to an appeal from Jarvis (2021) for studies relating to constructed temporalities of COVID-19 beyond UK political discourse, the enquiry will also analyse political speeches, statements, and public information materials emanating from the Vietnamese government during the liminal period of pandemic using discourse analysis.

Introduction

This research responds to calls for anthropological studies that document the quotidian practices of the pandemic (Steenberg and Steenberg Rehye 2020) and its temporal dimensions (Andits 2020; Irons 2020; Sarkar 2020). The main aim is, through extended ethnographic engagement, to develop a detailed understanding of everyday experiences of the extraordinary COVID-19 period among members of an urban neighbourhood in Hồ Chí Minh

¹ Notable exceptions are Ekeland 2021; Sumesh and Gogoi 2021; Tan and Lasco 2021; Zuev and Hamman 2021.

City (Sài Gòn), Vietnam's most populous city and the country's economic engine.² The research at hand is urgent. The unfolding pandemic has brought profound social upheaval including the authorities forcing - sometimes physically, usually under threat of public censure - infected or potentially infected citizens into 'liminal communities' (Turner 1969 [2008]: 96) removed from mainstream society in guarded facilities or behind barricaded front doors. However, anthropological research on the coronavirus phenomenon in Vietnam is lacking, local researchers having been affected by lockdowns and long-standing curbs on interprovincial travel and foreign researchers unable to gain access due to Vietnam's closed border policy, in place since March 2020. This means that, where they do exist, understandings of the COVID-19 period in Hồ Chí Minh City to date reflect only "...broad generalisations about institutions, rules or ways of doing things (that) do little by way of revealing what they are. Instead, it is how these institutions, rules, and ways of doing things manifest in the everyday and are encountered by a community – i.e., the manner in which they happen – that reveal what they stand for" (Abu Lughod 1993:13). I therefore seek to engage with city dwellers in their own community as a participant observer to understand the everyday manifestations of rules and of 'ways of doing things' during COVID-19.

Latent orientalism including the emergence of the concept of 'mask culture' (Zhang 2021) in Western public discourses during the pandemic means that the successes of Asian countries including Vietnam of controlling the virus have not received sufficient public and scholarly attention. This could lead to lessons for future pandemic preparedness not being learnt by Western nations with much higher case and fatality rates. An ethnography of pandemic in Vietnam's biggest city may produce findings that can contribute to redressing this situation. The research will be conducted primarily on alley 158 off Đoàn Văn Bơ street, ward 9, district 4 (see 'case study' for further details) – one of the city districts hardest hit by COVID-19. Initial fieldwork findings suggest that access to vaccines, the severity of lockdowns, the stigma attached to COVID-19 outbreaks and the level of support from public authorities have varied considerably across a city still riven by political, economic, and cultural divides almost fifty years after the end of the 'Vietnam War'. Additional data collection will therefore take place in other neighbourhoods so that Đoàn Văn Bơ street residents' experiences can be compared to those of city dwellers elsewhere. Residents of provincial towns who commute into Hồ Chí Minh City will be interviewed to understand how they perceive being excluded from the city during the fourth wave of infections.

As well as observations from March to July 2021 before the deteriorating COVID-19 situation forced a five month break in fieldwork, this study is informed by the knowledge of Vietnamese society I gained working in Hồ Chí Minh City for seven months in 2003-2004 and whilst living with a Vietnamese family in Chợ Lớn (Chinatown) for six months in 2005. Since then, I have maintained a strong network of Vietnamese contacts whose insights I have drawn upon to design this study. Many are graduates although some such as my former alleyway neighbours are employed in blue collar jobs. I anticipate being able to access different social strata for this study by drawing on these existing relationships. As I will be able to evaluate this study's findings in light of my earlier observations, I may achieve deeper reflections than a first-time visitor. In January 2020 I completed a scoping visit to the War

² Latest census data records a city population of 8,993,082 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2019). However, this figure does not account for several million internal migrants who reside in the city without official permission, working in key sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and hospitality.

Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City to inform the year-long ethnographic study I was due to commence there in April 2020³. Just one week after I returned to the UK, Vietnam reported its first COVID-19 case. The subsequent closure of the national border prevented me from entering Vietnam until March 2021. Like other public institutions in Vietnam, this museum could not host overseas researchers during the pandemic, so I also had to change field site and base myself in the community I am studying instead.

The remainder of this paper introduces the research questions, provides some basic context for the enquiry, and presents the case study. The paper then offers a review of the areas of literature that the study draws on, highlighting throughout where the research contribution will be made. Thereafter, the key concept guiding the enquiry is outlined and the role of language is discussed before the research design is explained: methods and participants involved in addressing the research questions, and the study's epistemological stance. Finally, the paper will discuss issues of data analysis and ethics.

The main questions guiding this research are:

What does it mean to experience the COVID-19 pandemic in Hồ Chí Minh City?

During COVID-19 in Vietnam, which spaces and times are liminal, and what are people doing in them? What are the rituals of separation and re-incorporation that people undertake to transit in and out of them?

Do the values and practices of various liminal communities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Hồ Chí Minh City present an alternative to broader social structures? If so, how?

How do different varieties of permanent liminality in a society affect the development of situations of 'pure' or 'civilisational' liminality, such as the COVID-19 pandemic?

Context

Vietnam was a remarkable COVID-19 success story, logging zero cases for months on end and keeping life close to normal for much of the population. For much of the pandemic, cases, and deaths per 100,000 remained among the lowest in the world (Dong, Du and Gardner 2020: 533-534) winning Vietnam plaudits from the World Bank (2020) and global health experts (Pollack et al 2021). Vietnam has a history of successfully managing pandemics: it was the second country after China to face SARS and it was the first country declared SARS-free by the World Health Organization (WHO 2003). Many interventions relied on by Vietnam during the SARS epidemic – aggressive contact tracing, quarantining, isolation - have been used to respond to COVID-19. In addition, in early 2020 Vietnam-linked hackers reportedly obtained data on the spread of COVID-19 within China, giving the Vietnamese authorities a head start in preparing for the virus (Stubbs and Satter 2020).

On 27 April 2021, however, Vietnam's deadly fourth wave began (Vietnam Government Portal 2021). The highly transmissible Delta variant spread rapidly among a largely

³ Kinship terms are an integral part of Vietnamese culture. During all previous visits to Vietnam, I had referred to myself as em (younger sister) as did all others I encountered who I did not perceive me to be older than them. During my January 2020 scoping visit were the first occasions when I have been addressed, and started referring to myself as, chi (older sister). This is an important shift in status according to Vietnam's highly descriptive kinship terminology. This is because em is also used to refer to a romantic partner or wife and in Vietnamese culture women and men do not typically enjoy equal status in relationships. Em can also be used to devalue someone as a joke.

unvaccinated population of 98 million. Government decisions to allow Vietnam’s national reunification day holiday (30 April) and nationwide elections (early May) to proceed as planned have since been blamed for hastening the spread of COVID-19. During the fourth wave, Hồ Chí Minh City became the locus of struggle against the virus: amid mass testing many thousands of cases were logged daily. Social distancing measures that had helped to control previous variants proved ineffective against a more infectious strain and in mid-July, the Hồ Chí Minh City Center for Disease Control signaled that the city’s COVID-19 response would now concentrate on treating the sick entering hospitals (HCDC 2021).

A citywide surge in cases ended the practice of sealing off outbreak areas while life in other areas continued as usual. From July to October 2021, Hồ Chí Minh City’s population lived under one of the world’s most restrictive lockdowns (Hale et al 2021). Under directive 16, citizens were banned from leaving home except due to medical emergencies. Food, medicines, and essential items were distributed by community service staff, volunteers and the military including 34,000 troops sent from Hanoi to join the ‘pandemic fight’ (Vu 2021). This proxy shopping system was soon overwhelmed. City residents had no choice but to turn to informal means to obtain basic goods while sheltering in place. Via notes pinned up inside apartment blocks and instant messaging groups, residents able to bring food into the city from surrounding provinces began to sell produce to their neighbours, converting apartments into makeshift stores and take-aways.

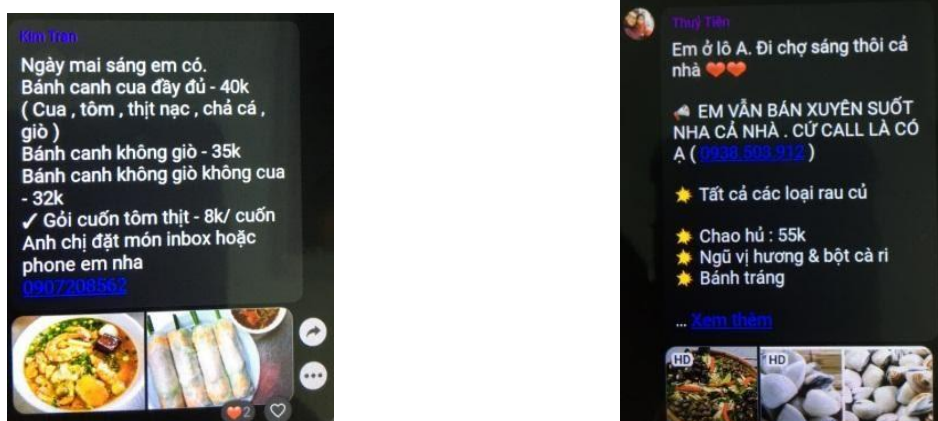


Figure 1: Daily meal choices from Tân Phước apartment ‘pop up’ store ZALO chat group, Aug 2021. Screenshots sent to the author by research assistant based in Hồ Chí Minh City⁴.

Lockdown measures were eased in Hồ Chí Minh City on 01 October. As soon as travel outside Hồ Chí Minh City became possible again, many thousands of jobless migrant workers fled the city en masse, bound for their distant hometowns. City leaders estimate that 40 per cent of the city’s workforce is now absent and have urged migrant workers to return. The economic impacts of COVID-19 have been stark. For the July-September 2021 period, Vietnam's gross domestic product dropped 6.17 per cent on the previous year - the first quarterly decline since 2000 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2021). Over the same period, Hồ Chí Minh City’s gross regional domestic product contracted by 24 per cent to

⁴ Selling food on ZALO is technically illegal but selling food on the street in normal times is also illegal (a legacy of the authorities’ pre-reform hostility towards ‘bourgeois’ petty traders). As these ZALO groups reflect the reality of trading in Vietnam’s socialist-oriented market economy and as they helped individuals to overcome the authorities’ arguably unethical measures that hindered food purchasing, it is considered ethical to discuss ZALO group data in the study.

minus 6.7 per cent, the worst economic performance recorded since 1986 when Vietnam was emerging from the so-called ‘special period’ (thời bao cấp) of post-reunification rationing and U.S.S.R. subsidies (Cong and An 2021). The pandemic has cost the city over VND273 trillion (US\$11.8 billion) according to the municipal people’s council (Tuoi Tre 2021).

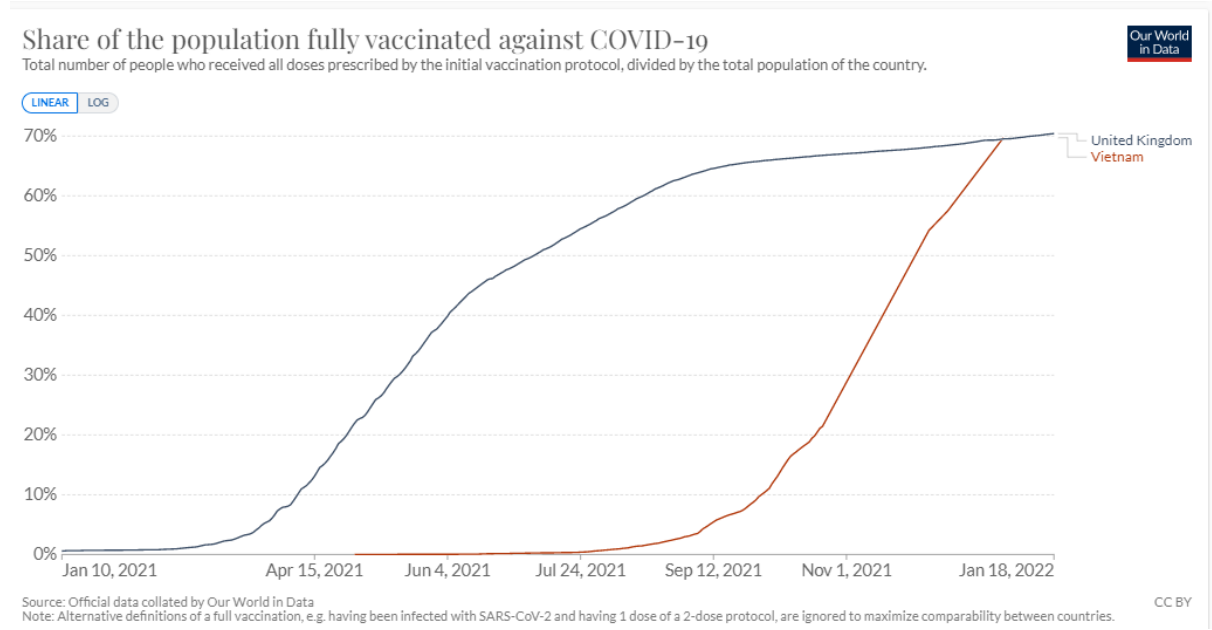


Figure 2: Comparison of 2021 vaccination rates (fully vaccinated) – Vietnam and United Kingdom

On 01 July 2021, just 3.7 per cent of Vietnam’s population had received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine. But by 05 January 2022, this figure had increased to 79.6 per cent, overtaking first vaccination rates in the United Kingdom (76.1 per cent). By 30 December (the latest date for which Vietnam data is available on Our World in Data) 69.5 per cent of the population of the United Kingdom had been fully vaccinated compared to 69.7 per cent of Vietnam’s population. Data on the booster campaign that started in December are not yet available. While the vulnerable and medical workers nominally have priority for vaccinations, ideological allegiance, personal connections, and place of residence also determine when a citizen gets vaccinated and which vaccine they receive.

Case study

The research will be conducted primarily on a 100 metre section of alley 158 off Đoàn Văn Bơ street, ward 9, district 4 in Hồ Chí Minh City, alleys being renowned as centres of quotidian action (Gibert-Flutre 2020). This section contains eighteen dwelling houses, approximately half of which also host small businesses. The entire alley is 300 metres in length with a sharp right turn 100 metres from Đoàn Văn Bơ street. District 4 is a working-class inner-city district of 4 Km² separated from the rest of the city by the Sài Gòn and Bến Nghé rivers and the Te canal (see figure 3). In the 1980s and 1990s, district 4 was the city's centre of mafia activity: until his incarceration and subsequent execution in 2004, Nam Cam ('Godfather of Saigon') controlled the district including the brothels and gambling dens near Sài Gòn port that had originally been set up to cater to U.S. troops during the 'Vietnam War'. Nowadays, modern high-rise developments, slums, alleyway neighbourhoods and traditional markets exist in proximity and the district is slowly shedding its reputation as a hive of criminal activity. District 4 is one of Hồ Chí Minh City's most flood-prone districts. It is not anticipated that flooding will disrupt the research until the six-month rainy season begins in May when travel in the neighbourhood may be impeded and interactions with participants outdoors may need to be cut short when rains start.

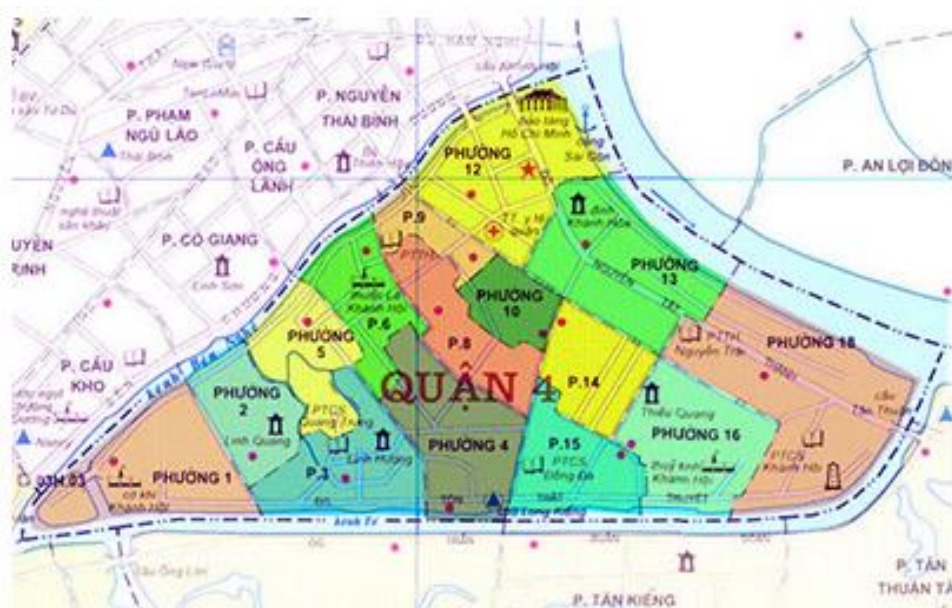


Figure 3: Map showing the fifteen wards of district 4

An estimated 85 per cent of Hồ Chí Minh City residents live along an alleyway (Gibert-Flutre 2020) although master-planned residential developments are increasingly popular places to live (see Harms 2016). For six months in 2005 I lived in an alley in neighbouring district 5 with three generations of a Vietnamese family. During that time, I observed the alleyway's pivotal role as the interface of public and private life. My study is concerned with how an urban neighbourhood evolves and adapts to the prevailing challenges of the pandemic. To enable me to develop relationships within the community and conduct extensive participant observation of local life, I will purposively base myself in a traditional tube house (nhà ống) - the third in a row of five owned by the same Vietnamese family - off Đoàn Văn Bơ street, a typical alley of free-standing shophouses. Tube houses are typically around four metres wide, three times as deep and five or six storeys high. Noteworthy for anthropology, according to

Appadurai (2020), is the concession by states that they cannot face the coronavirus crisis without the help of society at large. Living in the community I am studying will enable me to closely observe and participate in the everyday co-operations and accommodations that take place locally as part of society's response to COVID-19 in one alley in Hồ Chí Minh City. The alley is well populated during the day as many residents run small businesses from home or work nearby, returning home for meals. As a participant observer in this neighbourhood, I may act as an informal English teacher or babysitter, receive help from neighbours to improve my intermediate level Vietnamese, or become someone to hang out with.



Figure 4: Đuối văn bơ street, district 4, Hồ Chí Minh City lined with shophouses

Literature review

In this section I locate my study in the literature on infectious diseases and then on the COVID-19 disease specifically. Thereafter, I discuss local accounts of pandemic drawn on by this research and review applications of liminality in anthropological studies to date. The pandemic has subjected frustrated people everywhere to restrictions of various kinds that have stymied plans and brought delays in all areas of life. The sub-field of studies on the liminal experience of waiting is therefore of particular interest to this enquiry and I end by highlighting this study's contribution to this emerging body of anthropological work.

Anthropologists have a history of contributing to better understandings of infectious diseases, including cholera (Lincoln 2021), tuberculosis (Greene 2004), HIV/AIDS (Farmer 1990), SARS (Siu 2008), Zika (Diniz 2016) and Ebola (Brown and Kelly 2014; Gomez-Temesio 2018). Anthropological analyses of the COVID-19 pandemic to date have focused on its impacts on human health (Chirikure 2020; Gamlin et al 2021), the environment (Angelo et al 2021; Eitel 2020; Magnani et al 2021; Schofield et al 2021) and the economy (Webb 2020) as well as specific social concerns including xenophobia and racism (Chuvileva et al 2021;

Zhang 2021), the gendered dimensions of the pandemic (Enguita-Fernandez et al 2020) and human relations (Strong et al 2021). There have been numerous recent appeals (Bear et al 2020; Higgins et al 2020; Napier 2020; Pillay 2021) for ethnographers to conduct detailed studies of the pandemic's social complexities. However, travel bans, institutional restrictions on face-to-face research, the difficulty of studying an unfolding crisis and the relatively recent emergence of the coronavirus phenomenon mean that accounts of the pandemic's social dynamics that involve extensive ethnographic engagement are relatively few.⁵ It is by providing such an account that this study hopes to contribute to the emerging body of anthropological knowledge on COVID-19's social impacts.

As well as observations from fieldwork conducted in Hồ Chí Minh City between March and July 2021 and discussions with Vietnamese interlocutors since then, this study is informed by local researchers' accounts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nguyen's report on her two weeks in a collective quarantine camp outside Hanoi explained how this facility functioned as a liminal space, which prompted occupants to behave differently – "...as if they were on a school trip" (2021: 200). Victor Turner's scholarly work on liminality is discussed in more detail in 'key concept'. Suffice to say here that Turner (1969: 96) has noted "...a sense of egalitarian camaraderie and community that exists within liminal spaces or among liminal beings...it consists not only of the alternative values and practices embedded in liminal communities, but an alternative to broader social structures themselves" terming this *communitas*. A combined reading of Nguyen's recent account and Turner's seminal text have prompted this study's interest in quarantine camps as liminal spaces and their links to the development of different types of *communitas*. Negative *communitas* reportedly developed in some quarantine camps during Vietnam's fourth wave of COVID-19 and this study will attempt to understand which conditions caused this to happen and the significance of it.

Thoi (2020) and Van Luong (2021) have explored the Vietnamese government's remarkably successful early response to the threat of COVID-19. The coronavirus pandemic is a rapidly evolving phenomenon and Vietnam has since suffered significant coronavirus deaths. Public support for the authorities can be said to have wavered. Considering these reflections from Vietnam's period as a COVID-19 exemplar will enable me to evaluate my findings on people's current perceptions of official measures to combat COVID-19 in their proper context. Nguyen et al (2021), through their research on the impact of lockdown measures on Hồ Chí Minh City street food sellers, found that their interpersonal networks enabled them to mitigate risk and generate trust and support within the community even when street trading was officially banned. This study will explore these types of relationships that city residents relied on during the city's harsher later lockdown and ideas about socialness and connection. More detail on how this and other liminalities will be researched is found in the research participants and methods section.

This study also draws on and will contribute to the literature on liminality – an influential concept in anthropology. A discussion of this concept's origins and its dimensions follows in 'key concept'. In terms of its application, researchers have applied this concept to study various 'betwixt and between' situations across many fields and topics: Beech (2011) to analyse identity construction; Graburn (1978) to study tourism; Helsel (2009) and McGuire and Georges (2003) in examinations of death-related care; Mackay Yarnal (2006) to study

⁵ Notable exceptions are Ekeland 2021; Sumesh and Gogoi 2021; Tan and Lasco 2021; Zuev and Hamman 2021.

ageing; Madge and O'Conner (2005) in an exploration of the sociality of cyberspace; Marinaro (2020) to research insecure housing; Riggan (2011) to study statelessness; Rumelili (2003) in a study of international relations; St John (2008) in the field of religion; Tempest and Starkey (2004) for understanding bureaucracies; Yang (2000) for making sense of social movements and Willett and Deegan (2001) to study disability. In this enquiry, which has taken inspiration from Bell's (2021) desk-based application of this concept to make sense of various pandemic-related uncertainties, liminality will be used to think through the COVID-19 pandemic as a concrete case of social transformation. Thomassen has lamented that studies of public liminality do not feature prominently in ethnographic and anthropological theory (2014). This ethnographic study applies liminality to study the social dynamics of a public health crisis and may therefore make a contribution in that area.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced periods of waiting on populations worldwide, with Vietnam no exception. Waiting, as Sutton et al (2011) highlight, is more than simply a matter of mathematical 'clock time'. It is seemingly mundane yet is a complicated phenomenon and a subjective experience involving power relations, bureaucratic processes, and rituals. The development of an industry of distractions to temper the frustrating experience of waiting, as Schweizer (2008) and Ayaß (2020) have noted, speaks to its ubiquity in modern society. Anthropological studies have explored the liminal experience of waiting: for climate change (Baer 2018), for the death penalty (Kohn 2009), to access state services (Auyero 2012), to migrate as a nomad (Tan 2009) and to give birth (Kowal 2009). And a few ethnographic studies (Andits 2020; Cai et al 2021; Sarkar 2020) have explored waiting during COVID-19. Despite its commonality, however, theoretical and empirical explorations of waiting are lacking, and waiting remains an embryonic concept. This study, in its focus on temporality and specifically through its interest in participants' perceptions of time's speed during the coronavirus pandemic to date, will generate data on waiting that may contribute to developing this concept further. Bandak and Janeja (2018) have pointed out that the ethnographic method itself entails various forms of waiting. By reflecting on my experiences of waiting while producing this ethnographic study, I may further contribute to an ethnography of waiting.

Key concept

So far, this study's key concept of liminality has been expressed within the research questions. Other concepts may be added during fieldwork. There follows an introduction to this anthropological concept and an explanation of its dimensions of subject, space, and time and their basic subdivisions. Following earlier in person and remote fieldwork, I have identified a variety of liminal spaces, moments and experiences that have come into existence or taken on new significance during the coronavirus pandemic in Vietnam. How and why these will be researched in this study is discussed in the methods and participants section, organised according to Bell's (2021) classification of COVID era liminalities: temporality, embodiment, intermediation, mobility, relationships, and identity.

Arnold Van Gennep originally coined the term liminality in 'Rites de Passage' [1960] (2019) in which he developed the concept of liminality in the context of rites in small-scale societies and introduced a three-fold structure of rites of passage he claimed to be universal across societies. Turner argued for a wider application of the concept, beyond tribal societies, and also introduced the notion of *communitas* to describe the camaraderie that develops between

groups undergoing the same liminal experience. As well as problematising Turner's notion that liminal situations have uniformly positive connotations, Horvath (2013a) and Thomassen (2009) have employed liminality to theorise periods of political and social change, both contemporary and historical.

Thomassen (2015: 48) outlines the various dimensions of liminality as follows:

“Three different types of subject experience liminality:

- 1) single individuals*
- 2) social groups (e.g., cohorts, minorities)*
- 3) whole societies or populations (perhaps even civilizations)*

The temporal dimension of liminality relates to:

- 1) moments (sudden events)*
- 2) periods (weeks, months, possibly years)*
- 3) epochs (decades, generations, maybe centuries)*

The spatial dimension of liminality concerns:

- 1) specific thresholds (a doorway in a house, a line separating holy from sacred in a ritual, specific objects, in-between items in a classification scheme, parts/openings of the human body)*
- 2) areas or zones (border areas between nations, monasteries, prisons, sea resorts, airports)*
- 3) countries or larger regions, continents (meso-potamia and the medi-terranean; Ancient Palestine in between Mesopotamia and Egypt; Ionia in Ancient Greece, in between the Near East and Europe).”*

Thomassen (2015: 49) further outlines how these different dimensions can function together in various combinations - see table 2.1 on page 13 which provides examples of liminal experiences according to type of subject and temporal dimension. He cautions that some of these analytical distinctions are somewhat arbitrary – it is not easy to determine when a moment turns into a period, for example, especially as there may be no clear transition rite. Societies continue to race to vaccinate their populations against coronavirus but when the pandemic will become endemic is not known. The COVID-19 experience, entering its second year, has arguably moved beyond a moment to a period without a distinguishable rite signalling this shift. Thomassen's suggestion that liminality's dimensions should be seen on a continuum will therefore be taken into account by this study that considers an ongoing uncertain situation.

Also of particular relevance to this study are works by Horvath (2013b) and Horvath and Szakolczai (1992) that conceive of communism as a specific 'third stage' variety of permanent liminality. Vietnam, after all, remains committed to the full realisation of socialism (Quat 2003) – a system that shares many attributes with communism. During Vietnam's fourth wave of COVID-19, I observed blaming of 'covid suspects' in state media and power struggles within government around the pandemic response (Tough 2021b). This

suggests that the scapegoating mechanisms and continuous schisms that Horvath and Szokolczai believe communist societies are inherently prone to have come into play during the pandemic despite an infectious disease by its nature being difficult to control and its spread not necessarily the fault of anybody in particular. I propose an analysis of political speeches, statements, and public information materials emanating from the Vietnamese government during the pandemic to understand how these tendencies have played out during the COVID-19 crisis. Modernity is another variety of permanent liminality. In the 35 years since market reforms under *đổi mới* (renovation), Hồ Chí Minh City has been transitioning at pace into a global megacity, the accelerated pace of change evoking "...a world of contingency where events, ideas, and 'reality' itself can be carried in different directions..." (Thomassen 2009, quoted in Tough 2021a). One of this study's research questions is therefore concerned with understanding the role that pre-existing layers of liminality in Vietnamese society have played in the development of the recent situation of 'pure' or 'civilisational' liminality - the COVID-19 pandemic. This notion of 'pure liminality' (Horvath et al 2015) follows Szokolczai's argument (1998) that the degree to which liminality is experienced can vary. Weber and Foucault each underwent puberty during one of the two world wars and Szokolczai cites the intense liminality they experienced as having shaped their lifeworlds and life trajectories. Critics of liminality highlight its potential to be applied too broadly – to almost any 'in-between' situation (Balduk 2008). In the research methods and participants section and throughout this paper, however, I have aimed to explain how this concept is ideally suited to understanding the ongoing liminal period of global pandemic, due to its "...precise and technical capturing of the imprecise and unsettled situation of transitoriness" (Horvath 2013b: 83).

Table 2.1. Types of Liminal Experiences

Time	Subject		
	Individual	Group	Society
Moment	-Sudden event in one's life (death, divorce, illness) -Individual ritual passage (baptism, ritual passage to womanhood, e.g., among Ndembu)	-Ritual passage to manhood (almost always in cohorts) -Graduation ceremonies	-Transitions in the passage of time (New Year celebrations) -A sudden event affecting a whole society (invasion, natural disaster, plague) and erasing social distinctions and normal hierarchy -Carnivals -Revolutions
Period	-Critical life stages like puberty or adolescence	-Ritual passage to manhood, which may last weeks or months in some societies -Group travels	-Wars -Revolutionary periods
Epoch (or lifespan duration)	-Standing "outside society" by choice or assignment -Monkhood -Remaining "dangerous" because of a failed ritual passage -Being a twin (twins are permanently liminal in some societies)	-Religious fraternity -Ethnic minority -Social minority -Transgenderedness -Immigrant group membership (betwixt and between old and new culture) -Living on the fringe of "normal structures," often perceived as both dangerous and holy	-Prolonged war -Enduring political instability -Prolonged intellectual confusion -Incorporation and reproduction of liminality in social and political structure -Modernity as "permanent liminality"

Thomassen (2015: 49)

Research design

Language

Acquiring local language skills will enable me to get closer to the social reality under study, develop relations of trust with my interlocutors and immerse myself in local life. I will build on my current intermediate level of Vietnamese by attending four hours of SOAS online language classes per week until May 2022, supplemented by weekly face-to-face private classes. Interviews will be conducted either in English or Vietnamese depending on the relative proficiency levels of interviewer and interviewee. I have selected a Vietnamese research assistant based on their English language ability, qualitative research experience, and knowledge of city bureaucracy to provide support with community introductions, archival research and producing Vietnamese transcripts. The research assistant's family was marginalised following the fall of South Vietnam and this may affect how he translates Vietnamese words and terms into English. This and other important aspects of his positionality that will impact on data collection will be discussed in the thesis.

Research participants and methods

In this section I provide an indicative account of this study's research participants and research methods grouped according to the six themes identified by Bell (2021). Her account of COVID-19 liminalities common across cultural, geographic, economic, and political contexts.. Bell's (2021) framework has been derived through a non-participant observation approach of 'arm-chair anthropology' involving the study of online news websites, blogs, and social media posts. She maintains that her study of expressive culture enables her to understand the "stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (Geertz 1973) remotely. Anthropologists including Mead et al (2000), Robben (2009), Kucera (2012), Lindholm (2002) and many other have studied societies inaccessible to direct observation online and through literature, film, informant interviews and projective techniques. To collect ethnographic data when access has been blocked during the pandemic, researchers have had to be methodologically flexible. During interruptions to fieldwork, I engaged ethnographically with interlocutors in Hồ Chí Minh City via instant messaging and email and sought to understand the development of the COVID-19 pandemic at my field site through news websites, blogs, and social media. Marcus and Mascarenhas (2005: 15) observe "...the temporal immediacy of electronic communication has made the pursuit of fieldwork in new contexts of timespace possible." The data I have obtained through remote engagement will be used in the thesis.

However, in this study, face-to-face fieldwork, recognised by Stocking (1983: 7) as "...the basic constituting experience not only of anthropological knowledge but of anthropologists...a shared archetypal experience..." is the primary means by which ethnographic data will be gathered. The area I reside in has coffee outlets, street food kiosks with plastic stools and tables, nail salons and a variety of shops that will enable different types of encounters and bring opportunities to conduct participant observation and interviews in a range of settings. Bell's approach has its limitations - the full and rich detail of lived human experience arguably cannot be experienced through a screen – so I use her framework merely as a starting point for approaching data collection and I anticipate that this study's findings derived from face-to-face fieldwork may contribute to refining it.

Temporality: ideas about time, speed, contours, and cadence

To understand the changing contours of time during the COVID-19 pandemic, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with alley residents including but not limited to traders, ward officials, municipal workers, nail salon staff, my landlord and their family and, for comparison, with some participants in other parts of the city such as my Vietnamese teachers and long-standing acquaintances. I seek to understand how participants have perceived time's speed, immediacy and delay, the passage of time and time's dimensionality during the pandemic to date. Engaging in participant observation of alley life may enable differences between interviewees' responses and behaviour to be identified. My focus on alley residents includes their life trajectories and subjectivities. I will therefore conduct life histories with at least five local residents to produce a thick description of the context and the lives of residents before and during the pandemic. Life histories may involve the interviewee identifying a number of 'life chapters', key events, stresses and problems, personal ideology, core life themes, significant people and/or a 'future script' (McAdams 1993).

The ability to control and manipulate temporal rhythms and meanings lies at the heart of power, of state discipline and governance (Bourdieu 2000). It is therefore important to analyse political speeches, statements and public information materials using discourse analysis – aided by NVivo - to explore the significance of constructions of temporality including significant dates, memory, and tropes within the Vietnamese government's discourse on the COVID-19 crisis. Through the systematic cataloguing of COVID-19 materiality – posters, murals, hand sanitiser dispensers, discarded personal protective equipment - using the KoBo Toolbox app as it appears, disappears and/or remains in my local community and in prominent city spaces, I will be better able to understand how transitions in the passage of time of the pandemic period are visible in the materiality of the city with university students generating additional data by documenting COVID-19 materiality in their own neighbourhoods through participatory photography. The researcher will provide an initial training session and circulate a youtube video discussing this method and its benefits. A lead student will coordinate the group's work and report back to the researcher. Students will be asked to read and, if content, sign the participatory photography consent form that has received ethical approval before commencing. This explains how images will be shared, stored and used in the thesis and in any publications or other outputs arising from the research. The liminal experience of waiting during COVID-19 will be explored through my autoethnographic reflections on waiting to enter a 'closed' country during pandemic and through interviews with Vietnamese diaspora members stranded abroad from my existing friendship and professional networks, waiting to return to their homeland.

Presence and embodiment: ideas about bodies, being, and stuff

Daily rituals have been transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic, including in my local neighbourhood. I will study the everyday manifestations of 'ways of doing things' during COVID-19 and of new rules that regulate residents' behaviour through the core method of participant observation, focusing on community life in the neighbourhood where I will reside and on domestic life in neighbouring properties, on public spaces and on the daily lives of city residents known to me. I will conduct semi-structured interviews and potentially life histories with community members including traders, officials, municipal workers, and others to understand how the pandemic has unsettled their daily routines and habits and how it fits into their life trajectories. To understand conceptions of danger and risk during COVID-19, I

will accompany local residents on errands around the neighbourhood and will then be able to identify discrepancies with responses they have given during semi-structured interviews on the same topic.

Intermediation and services: ideas about managing the seams and transitions

During Hồ Chí Minh City's citywide lockdown in particular, transitions that had previously been invisible to many were suddenly visible, vulnerable and problematised, even perceived as dangerous. Insights into the functioning of underground supply chains that brought food into the city from the Mekong Delta and kept the city fed during directive 16 may be obtained through semi-structured interviews (and participant observation in the event of more lockdowns) with pop up store proprietors and customers in Tân Phước apartment. De facto borders sprung up around the perimeter of Hồ Chí Minh City in July. Residents of provincial towns who normally commute into the city for work or education were long prevented from doing so. To understand how these hastily erected borders were understood by and are now remembered by provincial dwellers I will conduct interviews on this topic with university students in Tay Ninh and other towns surrounding the city to get a better understanding of their experiences of being barred from the city, from the perspective of the town they were confined to.

Mobility: Ideas about what can, should and will move

Throughout the pandemic, Vietnam has adopted a 'fortress mentality', sealing its national border in March 2020 and permitting only a trickle of foreigners to enter the country since. Despite several decades of reform, Vietnam remains one of the most bureaucratic countries in South East Asia⁶ with the pandemic prompting a range of new bureaucratic processes designed to control the spread of disease. I will provide an insight into this bureaucracy through autoethnographic reflections on my attempts to enter a 'closed country'. In Hồ Chí Minh City during lockdown, what was essential and to whom and why it is essential was hotly contested. Delivery apps including Grab and Gojek (known collectively as 'shippers') have become increasingly popular with middle class urban households. Under directive 16, shippers were at various times maligned as vectors of disease, barred from neighbourhoods by some residents, forced to undergo daily covid testing, fined for transgressing previously unenforced district boundaries, forced to wear stigmatising armbands, and given little to no notice of rule changes affecting their jobs. The public service they provided during the citywide shelter in place order was belatedly recognised by the authorities and they were among the first in the city to be vaccinated. I will conduct semi-structured interviews and participant observation with shippers based in the neighbourhood to understand their formative experiences during the liminal lockdown period and how they perceive their new social roles and status. I will interview senior Grab marketing executives to get a corporate perspective on the way perceptions of the workforce have shifted post-unlocking. Through discussions with people in my neighbourhood, I will learn what residents deemed essential and how the role of shippers in supporting the beleaguered city or potentially in spreading COVID-19 is understood.

Relationships: ideas about socialness and connection

Vietnam's approach to viral containment has involved extensive use of quarantining (in hotels, military camps, requisitioned high schools and in dedicated hospital wards), home isolation and cordons sanitaires (sealing buildings, alleys, wider neighbourhoods, entire

⁶ In 2019, civil servants numbered 4,226,000 in a country of approx. 98,000,000 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2018).

wards and the city at large), these cordons sanitaires being a practice designed to isolate spaces rather than bodies associated with infection for as long as the social body inside is deemed infectious (Bashford 2004). To understand the liminal experience of quarantine and how the rites of separation and reincorporation involved have been understood e.g. being sprayed with disinfectant on arrival at work daily, being forced to wear *quần áo bảo hộ* (protective health suit) when transiting from airport to quarantine facility, having a red sign affixed to your front door when isolating at home with COVID-19, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with affected apartment dwellers, alley residents, ward officials, traders, returning students, incoming foreign experts, medical staff working in quarantine facilities, once hospitalised COVID-19 patients, and others. I also generated autoethnographic data during two weeks in quarantine in Vietnam in March 2021 and in December 2021.

When case rates were extremely low, quarantine was a stigmatising experience akin to ‘social death’ (Gomez-Temesio 2018) and being removed to a collective facility was feared by most. After COVID-19 entered general circulation and it became untenable to corral vast numbers in centralised facilities, the stigma has lessened. I will therefore seek to interview participants who were classed as liminal before, during and after Hồ Chí Minh City’s fourth wave of COVID-19 to obtain a variety of perspectives and enable comparison across the liminal period of pandemic. Initial fieldwork in December 2021 suggests that some communities proactively cut themselves off from the rest of the city (rather than being sealed off by the city authorities) to keep the virus out, banning shippers and visitors who may have been infected the virus, with ageing former soldiers either acting unilaterally or in cooperation with the ward official to create makeshift barriers. If barricades return, I will conduct participant observation with traders, my landlord, other neighbours, and shippers to understand how these are negotiated, enforced, transgressed from a vantage point close by (drinks stand) and will systematically catalogue this and any other new COVID-19 materiality using the KoBo Toolbox app. If not, I will seek to understand how barriers are remembered through discussions with traders based near where they were. As discussed in ‘context’ with regard to the pop up store in Tân Phước apartment and in Nguyen’s (2021) account of quarantine camp, social solidarity or *communitas* has also been evident among people assigned liminal status during COVID-19. Through the aforementioned semi-structured interviews, I will seek to understand what values and practices emerged within these liminal communities and whether interviewees believe these will go onto influence Vietnam’s broader social structures post-pandemic.

Identity: ideas about who and what we are

Until community transmission became widespread in April 2021, most new cases of COVID-19 in Vietnam were imported. For well over a year, the authorities fixated on a foreign point of origin for the virus - Chinese and Cambodian irregular migrants were regularly denounced in state media for illicitly spreading it – thereby creating a ‘geography of blame’ (Schoch-Spana 2006, 26). Westerners (người Tây) have at times also been eyed with suspicion, subject to unannounced extensions of compulsory quarantine in response to the Omicron variant, for example. However, following delays in the approval of Vietnam’s domestically produced vaccine, vaccines purchased and donated by the United States, United Kingdom, China, Cuba, and Russia have been used in the city. To understand how citizens’ perceptions of the nation and what it means to be Vietnamese have changed in response to Vietnam’s COVID-19 response, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with members of my

neighbourhood, participant observation of local booster vaccine distribution and participant observation and interviews with students in Tay Ninh, a town near the Cambodian border with significant cross-border migration. I will also catalogue COVID-19 propaganda materials ubiquitous throughout the neighbourhood and wider community through photographs and notes and will seek alley residents' interpretations of these during regular walks around my own neighbourhood. I will also invite University students to engage in participatory photography of these objects in other city neighbourhoods.

In this study, I adopt a relatively flexible research design to let participants guide the research and to ensure that I can adapt my ethnographic practice to account for any new restrictions on daily life implemented as part of the city's pandemic response. Participants and/or methods may be added or dropped depending on the reality encountered during fieldwork. I will record interviews using a mobile phone app and will be as flexible as possible about interview location, depending on interviewee preference. I will take these steps to try and put interviewees at ease and reduce the impact of what may be perceived as a difference in status between researcher and research participant on the data.

Epistemological stance

Ethnographic research is a naturalistic design (DePoy and Gitlin 2016) whereby the researcher is not assumed to be the 'knower' and there is no hypothesis derived from theory to test. My research approach is informed by the view that social reality is intersubjectively constructed by those participating in it, rather than a set of objective facts to be discovered (Geertz 1973). From such an interpretive standpoint, an understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic for those living in the local community must be obtained from the research participants themselves. My epistemological position informs my proposed research methodology, which involves long-term ethnographic fieldwork including interviews, participant observation, participatory photography, and language study. An ethnographic approach will allow me to get as close as possible to the phenomenon under study and my choice of methods allows for the construction of knowledge from people's own experience in their own context.

Data analysis

Data will comprise interview transcripts, participant observation notes, autoethnographic reflections, information materials and speeches emanating from the Vietnamese government, copies of archival documents, instant messages from contacts who consent to their use and posts to public ZALO groups. I will use narrative analysis, aided by tools such as NVivo, to discern how meaning is constructed in data. During the descriptive phase I will summarise narratives' content, identify key features and narrative linkages, sub-plots and their interconnections and look for commonalities and differences across narratives. In the interpretive phase I will identify how narratives are structured and where these sit in the broader context. Visual and qualitative data from photos and KoBo Toolbox will be subject to interpretive analysis. Street names will be blurred when including maps of collected data in the thesis or publications and household addresses and/or any other identifiable content will be erased as will any breaches of public health regulations in force at the time, such as compulsory mask wearing outdoors, and any illegal activities such as gambling. Key themes will be identified and brought into dialogue with the other data.

Performing discourse analysis of Vietnamese language materials on COVID-19 presents challenges despite the researcher's Vietnamese language skills. Some terminology will be specialised, and, despite the language skills of the researcher, the full meaning of particular words and phrases will only be grasped by a native speaker. Including original Vietnamese language materials in the thesis as well as their translations will ensure author accountability and permit readers to view the original data on which analysis is based. As with other studies involving discourse analysis of translated materials (Paltridge and Wang 2010), the thesis will include the selected texts and a detailed analysis of each aspect examined in the appendix. The methodology section will explain and give details of each category of analysis so that a reader could take these categories and re-analyse the data in the same way, thus ensuring the external reliability (or replicability) of the study. In the presentation of Vietnamese data I will provide English translations so that a reader who cannot read Vietnamese would be able to follow my analysis and the arguments and claims made. I recognise that any transcript or translation is "a selective rendering of the data" (Atkinson and Heritage 1999: 12) - the researcher must weigh their desire to remain faithful to an original recording against time and resource considerations and the need to obtain a readable final document. How these factors have been weighed will also be discussed in the thesis.

Ethical considerations

My status as a Western PhD researcher brings connotations of being highly educated and an 'expert' in the subject I am investigating despite having only just begun doctoral study. This is in part due to the difference in status between the UK as a rich country and Vietnam as a country that ranks medium on the United Nations human development index, having recently been lowly ranked. The UK's history as a white, colonial Western power and sixty years of French colonialism in the relatively recent past are also important reasons why the perception of Westerners as having a somehow higher status than Vietnamese people remains. I have sought to minimise through the design of my research methods how the above factors will affect the data I collect and the conclusions I draw. I employ participatory photography, for example, to enable participants to represent their own social realities and may use additional participatory methods. During fieldwork, I will share interview transcripts or field notes and could share links to blogs, articles, and publications. I will offer to send final copies of my thesis to participants and to my contacts. While I recognise the pandemic as an opportunity to learn more about human responses to a traumatic event, I am also cognisant of the ethical aspects of observing this historical process from a perspective of anthropological scrutiny. The research will not focus on recent COVID-19 deaths or mourning.

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