Christine Ngo studies the political economics of developing countries. In 2011-2012, Ngo worked as a junior economist for the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development in Geneva. The job aligned with her research and put her at the center of much diplomatic activity. She learned a great deal from the experience, but it was a photo exhibition in the UN’s main hall that motivates her work to this day.

“The photo exhibition featured the traumatic effects of the Arab Spring, which started the year before,” said Ngo, assistant professor of economics. “I had to walk by this hall every morning to go to work and would see these images of crying men and women in desperation every day.”

“It was a conflicting experience being in a wealthy city such as Geneva, and walking within the marvelous grandeur of the UN’s marble hall and there were images of human suffering,” she said. “I was touched deeply and frequently thought of our mission as UN employees to help the world in some small ways.”

Ngo worked with a group of researchers, informally named “the dream team” for their reputation and research capability, on a project that focused on analyzing the cooperation and integration of Southern (or developing) countries. The team observed that cooperation among developing countries has important, positive implications to the growth and development of these countries as well as the global economy.

Ngo was brought onto the team partly because of her research on the economic development of Vietnam, and because of her training at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London where she was pursuing a PhD in economics.

Today, her research focuses on alternative approaches to development analysis, technological change in emerging economies and the role of the state in development processes.

“Because the issues of development are manifold, my research cuts across many disciplines including law, economics, politics and public policy,” said Ngo, who also has a Juris Doctor from the University of California, Hastings College of the Law.

Her upcoming book, Industrial Development in Planned Economies: Rent Seeking and Politico-Economic Interplay in Vietnam, conceived during her PhD, looks at the key drivers of Vietnam’s industrial success.

“Before 2012, Vietnam was considered to be the next ‘Asian Tiger’,” said Ngo, who was raised in Vietnam. “In the book, I analyze the economic transformation in Vietnam.
particularly in three industrial sectors: telecommunications, textile-garment and motorcycle industries. Each industry’s success is highly specific to the historical, political and institutional contexts of that industry.”

“One of the book’s main conclusions is that industrial strategy that aims at stimulating economic growth in poor countries must adapt and respond to specific market constraints and the political economy of the industry and the economy,” she said.

A political economy, according to Ngo, reflects the way politics influence economic policies and government decisions, and vice versa. For instance, a political group or party may acquire economic benefits and distribute them to its network so that the group retains its controlling power within the society.

Ngo has developed an analytical framework to analyze economic development of industries based on political, institutional and economic factors that influence local firms’ productive efforts and technological upgrading.

“Developmental Rent Management Analysis (DRMA) is designed for case study analysis and is intended to be inductive,” said Ngo. “In developing countries, statistical data is seldom credible even if it is available. Therefore, analytical case studies are key to studying transformative events and development processes.”

“DRMA allows for a more systemic analysis of an industry’s transformation from political, institutional, and economic perspectives, and thus it offers scholars, field researchers, and policy makers an alternative analytical approach that can help them significantly better understand the binding constraints of an industry, the complexity of a country’s political economy and historical episodes of economic transformation,” she said.

Prior to joining the University of Denver in 2014, Ngo had worked as an economist, a consultant, a researcher and a teacher. “I think academia suits me best for its intellectual freedom and the ability to interact with students while critically thinking through some of the economic problems without the restriction of certain political and economic agenda,” she said.

“At the personal level, my father was an educator – he was a high school mathematics teacher. Watching him giving lectures as a child taught me a great deal about teaching and how to be a good teacher,” she added. “I also realized very early the impact of education on a student’s personal and intellectual development.”