Vietnam has experienced several periods of mass emigration in the 20th century, driven by war, poverty, political change and the search for better living abroad. The result is that overseas Vietnamese, or Việt Kiều, are not a homogeneous entity. Groups that left at different periods, for various reasons, bear distinct relationships with the Vietnamese state, and possess varying notions of homeland and nation. Likewise, the state's attitude to each group is markedly different. It is the post-1975 refugees that the contemporary Vietnamese state has the most difficult ties with, especially those in the United States, where almost half of nearly three million overseas Vietnamese reside. This study focuses on second generation Việt Kiều who have relocated to Vietnam over the past decade. The "return" of this generation is unique in that they had left Vietnam as children at the end of the Second Indochina War, following the Communist takeover of South Vietnam. My research was located in the southern metropolis of Sài Gòn, which remains the most popular destination for Việt Kiều returnees.

Contemporary "returns" should be understood in the context of a changing world economy; the globalization of capital; Vietnam’s socio-economic reform and development; and the Vietnamese government's corresponding open policy towards overseas Vietnamese. On the part of the second generation Việt Kiều, they represent a new generation who have never experienced war directly, but whose lives have nonetheless been shaped by their families' and communities' memories and experiences of Vietnam. The younger generation of returnees are interesting research subjects because, although they have not directly experienced the trauma of war and forced flight, they were born into the psychosocial, political and economic context of being a refugee. Members of this generation can also be seen as "going back" to a country which is still governed by the political regime their families' once fled, against the backdrop of the politics of remembrance (anti-communist politics) in the exile community. The narratives indicate that my respondents are largely on journeys of self-discovery, and their migration to Vietnam is fuelled by their self-interests and belief that moving there will help them realize their personal and professional goals.

The research addresses the critical questions of whether and how the "return" to Vietnam contributes to new understandings of home, homeland and belonging among second generation Việt Kiều. From these main thematic issues, a subset of inter-related and mutually reinforcing factors were also addressed. These pertained to identity, security and life-stage linked goals and priorities. In my study, I conceive of transnationalism, diaspora and return migration as categories of practice, rather than as essentialist or deterministic paradigms and analytic categories. Each of these fields can provide a unique lens with which to approach the issue of the second generation overseas Vietnamese who are moving to Vietnam. The research demonstrates how for my respondents, transnational ties and mobility can be liberating and reinforcing in some respects, and stifling and ambivalent in others. The nature of transmigrants' ties and connections with their home countries, and countries of origin (ethnic or ancestral), are subject to change and flux in the following: their life-stage linked personal goals and priorities; specific traits of the local community in each national setting; and wider structural and legislative forces in their home and relocation countries. Conversely, whether "transnationalism" is experienced positively, negatively or ambivalently by transmigrants depends on the above variables.
The study illuminates how the Vietnamese diaspora is multi-faceted, fragmented and complex, particularly along generational lines. The research findings support the view that transnational ties with the homeland do not necessarily "die" with first generation immigrants, but are very much "alive" with the second generation. In the case of the second generation Việt Kiều, they continue to have ties with and are connected to their parents' homeland in ways that are dynamic, complex and continually evolving. At the same time, the study also highlights how the "return" to one's country of origin does not necessarily constitute the end of a migration cycle. Return migration is part and parcel of a circular system of social and economic relationships and exchanges that enable migrants to enhance their socio-economic interests, and attain various forms of belonging and security in different national settings. I suggest the ability to attain different forms of security and belonging in Vietnam is one of the main reasons why overseas Vietnamese continue to make it their home and will continue to do so in the near future.

A key finding in my research is that the nation-state and notion of "national boundaries" are still very much alive and relevant in the contemporary period. Nation-states and national governments play the critical role of setting the boundaries of inclusion, exclusion and citizenship. Returnees still depend on the state for their legal status. They have to abide by state protocol and follow state regulations in order to function normatively in their countries of relocation. The study also highlights the many forms that national membership and belonging can take and that formal recognition of national belonging (i.e. via legal processes) does not necessarily confer belonging on a practical "everyday level." Fundamentally, returnee Việt Kiều learn that being Vietnamese in their home countries does not necessarily make them so in the ethnic/ancestral homeland. The myriad experiences of second generation Việt Kiều in Vietnam not only illuminate the ambivalent nature of citizenship and social and kinship ties, but also demonstrate how these are multi-layered and continually evolving. In turn, their myriad ambivalent social experiences in their home countries and in Vietnam have also enabled different understandings of home, homeland and belonging among my respondents.

Rather than being the migrants' "natural place of belonging," the study highlights how home and homeland for this generation Việt Kiều returnees are essentially sites of cultural (re)construction. Their returns have led to a conspicuous disjuncture between the concept of "home" and "homeland". Vietnam does not have to be experienced as a "homeland" in the idealized form envisioned by diasporas (i.e. "nostalgic" or "mythical" place of origins) for it to be considered a "home" (i.e. liveable and practical space). Through the production of certain cultural spaces and having particular physical places in the city to call their "own", this generation of returnees have been able to create and to feel at "home" in Vietnam in some critical aspects. Sài Gòn's position as a globalizing frontier city and the existence of a specific "community of meaning" allow this generation of overseas Vietnamese to attain different forms of security and belonging there. In Sài Gòn, they are able to fulfill various pursuits and dreams, accept and embrace their ambivalence, and have a sense of ownership and self-confidence. In coming to Vietnam, the "lost generation" has found itself in some important ways.