Introduction

Explain to your dad that he could come home to Vietnam. Nothing bad will happen. It gets easier
everyday... It doesn’t matter if Vietnam is poor, or if Vietnam is prosperous... It is still our homeland.
We survive together... For a Vietnamese person, no matter where you live, nothing compares to our
real home in Vietnam. Uncle Hai to Doan Hoàng in the documentary Oh, Saigon.

In 2000, a young Vietnamese-American woman, Doan Hoàng, began filming interviews with her
family in America, and kept the camera rolling as they journeyed back to Vietnam over the next few
years. The product was Oh, Saigon, an autobiographical documentary of a family torn apart by the
Vietnam War attempting to reconcile after decades of separation and political division. The motivation
for making this documentary was intensely personal. Doan, the film’s narrator and director, wanted to
trace the roots of her family’s underlying dysfunction. She also desired reconciliation: between her
family members in the US and in Vietnam; and with the irretrievable past and the imperfect present. “If
I could put my finger on the moment my family fell apart,” Doan says at the beginning of Oh, Saigon, “it
would be April 30, 1975, the end of the Vietnam War.” The film is a poignant and deeply moving
narrative about a young Vietnamese-American’s attempt to make sense of her family’s troubled
history. Despite her parents’ best efforts to forge ahead and create a better future for themselves, and
in spite of the glaring self-imposed silence about her family’s life in Vietnam before arriving in the US,
the “past” still continued to cause a rift in the relations between her family members. The past
continued to haunt Doan’s father, a former military personnel in South Vietnam’s armed forces.

Nam Hoàng, the filmmaker’s father, was born and bred in a time of war. Defending South Vietnam
from Communism had been his lifelong mission. When South Vietnam fell to the Communists in 30
April 1975, he not only lost his country but his raison d’être in life. Nam never acclimated to his new life
in the US. He found American society alienating, and its cultural values and norms strange. Although
Nam Hoàng physically lived in the US, his heart and mind continued to live in the past, in Vietnam.
Despite having lived in the US for nearly three decades, he remained emotionally and spiritually
disconnected from his adopted home country. There are many “living ghosts” like Doan’s father in the
US and among other diasporic Vietnamese communities around the globe: physically they may
continue to exist and survive in their adopted homes, yet their hearts and minds remain in the past.

Oh, Saigon depicts several themes central to my research on the “return” of the second generation Việt
Kiều, or overseas Vietnamese, to Vietnam: that of reconciliation, reconnecting with the past, and the
search for identity and belonging. Like Doan, the majority of my respondents were born in Vietnam
but “remade” elsewhere. For them, an unbearable silence surrounding the past often resulted in an
incomplete understanding of where they came from and who they were. This feeling of being
incomplete was an important component of their decision to move to Vietnam. In “coming back” to
their parents’ homeland, many were in fact often embarking on journeys of self-discovery. Their
decision to return, particularly for Vietnamese-Americans, was made more difficult by community

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1 Việt Kiều is a Sino-Vietnamese term. ‘Việt’ refers to ethnic Vietnamese, whilst ‘kiều’ is a transliteration of the Chinese word ‘qiao’, which
means to ‘sojourn’ or ‘reside temporarily away from home’. Việt Kiều is a popular term of reference by the state and locals in Vietnam for
overseas Vietnamese. The etymology, social meanings and understandings of ‘Việt Kiều’ are addressed in Chapter 2. In my research, I use
the term Việt Kiều and overseas Vietnamese interchangeably, with specific reference to Vietnamese who left the country after 1975 and their
offspring born in the receiving countries.
pressure to stay out of Vietnam. There was a time when simply talking about returning to Vietnam – whether to visit, conduct business or to live – could get Vietnamese in certain parts of the US into trouble with ardent anti-Communists within the community.

During the 1980s and the early 1990s, mafia-like tactics ranging from death threats, arsons, beatings and shootings were used to deal with those suspected of being Communist sympathizers – or for not being “anti-Communist” enough. The trenchant anti-Communism espoused by respected community elders, who were often former military personnel and political leaders from South Vietnam, not only dictated public discourse on ethnic community politics and identity, but also curtailed private decisions on travel to and business with Vietnam. No one dared to challenge the hegemonic discourse of open vilification of the Communist regime in Vietnam and the policy of non-engagement with the country. Fast forward to the first decade of the twenty-first century: “returns” are no longer taboo or subject to public backlash in the exile community as they were before. As Yến Đỗ, editor and publisher of Nghệ sĩ Việt (the oldest and largest Vietnamese language newspaper in the US) put it in 1993, “Now, everybody is going in and out of Vietnam. You can’t hide it anymore because you see your neighbours from Orange County in the streets of Saigon.”

Situating Returns – The Global and Local

More than three decades after the end of the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese diaspora appears to be drawing slowly but surely back into Vietnam’s orbit. What has changed over the last decade? The answer is both complex and simple; related to the developments in the global and domestic economic settings on the one hand, and to rational calculations and intensely personal motivations on the part of those migrating to Vietnam. 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. Members of this generation likely possess different political viewpoints from their parents’ generation. What makes the post-1975 refugees an interesting and possibly illuminating case study (in comparison to other returnees to Vietnam, or the return of former refugees to post-conflict societies in general) is that they are going back to a country still governed by the political regime they once fled, against the backdrop of the politics of remembrance (i.e. anti-communist politics) in the exile community. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the most interesting and innovative engagement trajectories will likely be forged by the younger generation, the children of the exiles (Packard 1999: 102).

2 In the 1980s, a vigilante group calling themselves the Vietnamese Organization to Exterminate the Communists and Restore the Nation (VOECRN) claimed responsibility for a string of arsons and summary executions of purported Communist propagandists. The most publicized occurrence was the death of journalist Phạm Văn Tạnh, who was killed when arsonists set fire to his newspaper office located in Little Saigon on August 9, 1987. See “Vietnamese Editor Latest to be Threatened by Rightists,” http://articles.latimes.com/1990-03-24/news/mn-715_1_vietnamese-editor; “Flag Inflames Old Passions in Little Saigon,” http://articles.latimes.com/1999/jun/24/news/na-1214 (Accessed 7 May 2011).
After the end of the Second Indochina War, or what is commonly known as the Vietnam War, close to 1.75 million Vietnamese fled the country. More than half resettled in the US. It is also this community that tends to have the most complicated ties with the Vietnamese government and homeland. Between 1975 and 1994, Vietnamese in America could not legally travel to, invest in, or remit large sums of money to Vietnam, as the American administration considered Vietnam an “enemy nation” under the Trading with the Enemy Act. During that period, Vietnam was out of reach for most Vietnamese-Americans, particularly the second generation, who had very little, if any, direct experience with their parents’ homeland. In recent times though, changes in the diplomatic and economic relations between the United States and Vietnam have enabled Vietnamese in the US to re-establish social and economic ties with their former country.

Initiated in 1986, đổi mới, or renovation, signalled the country’s transition from a centrally planned socialist economy to a “free-market” post-socialist economy (see Kshetri 2009). From liberalizing and opening up the economy, and to a lesser extent the gradual democratization of the political system, the đổi mới spirit of openness has affected almost all spheres of Vietnam’s national polity and society. The state sees Việt Kiều as a major source of financial and intellectual capital. Over the past decade, it has attempted to woo Việt Kiều back by giving them preferential treatment in several key areas: quicker approval for business permits, lower tax rates, low interest loans and visa exemptions. The notorious two-tier pricing system has also been abolished. Since 2003, Việt Kiều can also legally own businesses and real estate. In this manner, Vietnam can be seen as a repositioning state: the same regime that was responsible for exiling their diaspora was now seeking a rapprochement and courting their investment (Gillespie 1999: 624). Since the mid-1990s, trade and diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the US have also witnessed rapid expansion and rapprochement. These developments have made it possible for Vietnamese-Americans to resume familial ties and engage in socio-economic activities in Vietnam. They also demonstrate how governmental decisions (on both sides of the Pacific) can radically affect the decision-making processes and actions of individuals “on the ground,” an example of the way global politics are intertwined with community politics and the everyday experiences of people (cf. Thomas 1997: 155).

At the start of the 1986 đổi mới reforms, only 8,000 Việt Kiều returned to Vietnam annually (Nguyễn Phú Bình 2005). Throughout the 1990s, the number grew to 250,000 returning annually. By 2004, the number of returning Việt Kiều doubled again. In addition, during special occasions such as Tết, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, up to 200,000 Việt Kiều visited during a two-week period. From 2008 to 2011, the number rose to 500,000-600,000 tourists. Referring to investment and professional visits, a recent press report states, “more than 300 Việt Kiều experts return to Vietnam every year to work and live,” and “thousands of others seek investment opportunities in this country.” To date, however, there are no precise or reliable statistics on how many of the visitors are engaging in business, investment, or professional activities while in Vietnam, or for that matter, how many actually stay on to live and work in Vietnam. Also unavailable are statistics on the national origins, educational or

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4 “Post-socialism” is term used by Evans (1998) to refer to the so-called socialist governments who have retained their power and continue to use the label and rhetoric of socialism for legitimacy, but no longer implement clearly socialist policies.

5 For information on the origins and impact of đổi mới, see Boothroyd and Pham (2000).

professional backgrounds of returnees. Anecdotal evidence indicates that increasing numbers of the 1.5 and second generation are returning to Vietnam, specifically to Hồ Chí Minh City (formerly called Sài Gòn), to live and work. These people range in age from their mid-20s to early 40s, and are predominantly white-collar professionals with college degrees. The majority are from the US. While precise statistics on the number and types of returnees are hard to come by, their economic importance to Vietnam is easier to gauge since such figures are frequently cited in the local and international media.

Remittances and investment from overseas Vietnamese are seen as important sources of foreign capital. To date, there are reportedly over 3,200 overseas Vietnamese-invested projects in Vietnam, with a total investment capital of US$5.7 billion. From 2000 to 2008, monetary remittances to Vietnam more than tripled, reaching about US$7.4 billion per year, approximately 8% of the country’s GDP. During the early 2000s, Vietnamese-American lobbyists and entrepreneurs played an important role in promoting economic activities and trade ties between Vietnam and the US. Nguyễn Phú Bình, Chairman of the National Committee for Overseas Vietnamese, has pointed out that the large increase in exports from Vietnam to the United States can be partially attributed to the Việt Kiều community residing there (Nguyễn Phú Bình 2005). More importantly, their intellectual capital is perceived to be the key means through which overseas Vietnamese can have the largest impact on Vietnam’s economy, since Vietnam’s educational institutions and capacity to innovate still greatly lag behind its economic reforms (Dinh 2010). According to official accounts, 300,000 overseas Vietnamese (approximately 10-15% of the total diaspora) are university or post-university graduates specializing in sectors such as technology, electronics, aviation and telecommunication – all areas in which Vietnam lags behind more developed nations.

Why Hồ Chí Minh City?

Hồ Chí Minh City remains by far the most the popular destination for Việt Kiều returnees. According to local press reports, nearly two million overseas Vietnamese reside in the city (which has a total population of roughly 10-12 million), a ratio much higher than other urban centres across the country. As a testimonial to how populous and prevalent the second generation Vietnamese-Americans are in the city: California State University, Fullerton, has formed a Hồ Chí Minh City alumni chapter. The geographic concentration reflects the fact that most Việt Kiều, especially those from Western countries, have family origins in southern Vietnam. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the majority of diasporic remittances and investments tend to be concentrated in the south, particularly in Hồ Chí Minh City. To date, the city has disproportionately benefited from these transnational activities (Phạm 2011: 14). Over 100 out of the 140 homes that were bought by Việt Kiều are located in the

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8 After the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, Sài Gòn was renamed Hồ Chí Minh City. The city continues to be colloquially called Sài Gòn by many diasporics, Vietnamese nationals and non-Vietnamese expatriates living in Vietnam. In the dissertation, I use the both names interchangeably. See Appendix 1: Map of the City’s Administrative Units.
metropolis since the new property law was promulgated in 2006.\(^\text{13}\) Therefore, in no small manner, Việt Kiều investments have enabled Hồ Chí Minh City to remain the commercial engine of Vietnam.

Apart from being the commercial heart of the country, where economic opportunities and job possibilities abound, Sài Gòn is also a bustling metropolis and globalizing city that encapsulates vibrant social and cultural spaces. There, Việt Kiều, locals and non-Vietnamese foreigners from all walks of life, cultural backgrounds and world views are able to meet, socialize and build their lives simultaneously.

**The Research**

My research examines the “return” experiences of the 1.5 and second generation Việt Kiều in Vietnam. The former category generally refers to those who were born in Vietnam and left the country as young children, while the latter refers to those who were born overseas to first generation immigrant parents from Vietnam. Sociologically speaking however, there is little that distinguishes the social experiences and cultural outlooks of the 1.5 generation Việt Kiều from those of the second generation. The inherent problems in finding the appropriate descriptive terms and analytical categories within which to place my respondents become immediately apparent in my research. This classification dilemma will be addressed in Chapter 1. In order to maintain clarity and for the sake of brevity, I refer to my respondents as being members of the second generation throughout the discussion. Likewise, “return,” “home country,” “home” and “homeland” are also ambiguous and problematic concepts in my research, and constitute terminological and analytical dilemmas. I will address these issues in greater detail in Chapters 1, 6 and 7.

Regardless of their disparate national origins, cultural outlooks and relationships with Vietnam, what binds this generation are their unique historical and life trajectories which have all been inextricably shaped by the Vietnam War. The younger generation of returnees is interesting for research, 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 (Cornish et al. 1999: 267). The second generation also occupy unique paradoxical and ambivalent positions in both their home countries and Vietnam: they are neither completely native nor completely foreign; they belong and yet do not belong. Finally, even though members of this generation have neither first-hand experiences of the war or personal memories about Vietnam, they have somehow inherited memories and nostalgia for Vietnam from their parents and from members of the ethnic Vietnamese community living overseas.

This study focuses on second generation overseas Vietnamese who have made a conscious commitment to move to Vietnam for an extended length of time to live and to work. One of the critical issues that will be addressed in this research is whether – and how – the “return” experience alters my respondents’ sense of identity, belonging and home. In particular, it puts to task prevailing assumptions about the nature of the second generation’s engagement with their parents’ homeland. For instance, this study questions Carruthers’s assertion that exile politics will remain a “defining feature of diasporic identity” despite the “shifts that may occur in community and homeland politics”\(^\text{13}\)

It also challenges sceptics' assumption that transnational ties will likely “die” with first generation immigrants (cf. Levitt 2002: 124).

By examining the myriad “return” narratives, my research will demonstrate how this generation of overseas Vietnamese “returnees” conceive of themselves as a community vis-à-vis the wider national and diasporic community. Above all, these narratives illuminate the intensely personal nature and complex motivations for their migration to Vietnam, and their reasons for staying there. For the most part, their “returns” have little or nothing to do with furthering the political agendas of the exile community. Neither do my respondents see themselves as operating within what Carruthers has termed a “transnational exilic space” in Sài Gòn. 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.

As a case study, researching Vietnam’s returning Việt Kiều is useful in understanding other diasporic groups that have followed similar trajectories. Their “return” experiences teach lessons about cultural change, the construction of communities and the evolving meanings of identity, home and culture. These narratives also shed light on the various forms that national membership and belonging can take shape. The research aims to underscore on everyday notions of practical belonging and cultural citizenship to show that constructions of home, belonging and identity are embedded in the “micro-politics” of returnees’ everyday life on the one hand, and in state policies and the official discourse, which frame the “return” experience. In so doing, the study aims to provoke further work in the burgeoning and vital field of the return migration of second and third generations, which will provide deeper and more concrete understanding of questions concerning ethnic affiliation, notions of belonging, and diasporic homecomings.

The discussion in the following chapters seeks to address the critical questions of whether and how the “return” to Vietnam contributes to new understandings of home, homeland and belonging among the second generation overseas Vietnamese. In what forms do such new understandings take shape? Given that contemporary states still shape the legal, social, political parameters and interpretations of return, the role of the state in creating homelands is thus critical to understanding the returns. An informed understanding of how the second generation of overseas Vietnamese construct home, homeland and belonging in Vietnam requires an analysis of the complex interplay between state policy, official discourse, global repositioning and the specific cultural context and meanings this group of “returnees” give to their experiences in Vietnam.

Methodology

My fieldwork was carried out in Hồ Chí Minh City over a 24-month period from early 2008 to early 2010. During this time, I was able to meet, socialize and become acquainted with Việt Kiều from diverse backgrounds. The city is home to Việt Kiều of various nationalities, from different age-groups and generations who possess a variety of social experiences, cultural outlooks and socio-economic standings. By “hanging out” at various social gatherings and entertainment venues frequented by Việt Kiều, I was able to observe Việt Kiều social behaviours and take note of their interactions with other Việt Kiều, non-Vietnamese expatriates and locals. In addition, I was able to make important acquaintances for my project. More importantly, through these observations and interactions, I was
able to grasp the issues and themes that returnees were most concerned about and which had relevance in their daily lives.

Through the snowballing method, I was able to meet and become acquainted with Việt Kiều who became the key informants in my study. I had known two of my respondents since 2001, when I was living in Hà Nội. By chance, both of these acquaintances had also relocated to Sài Gòn by the time I moved there for my fieldwork in 2008. It was primarily through these two contacts that I was able to meet other Việt Kiều in the city and “entice” them to become involved in my project. After a few months, I was able to narrow down the pool of respondents and eventually get 38 Việt Kiều to become involved in my study. Of this number, I was able to meet up with half of this group of respondents for several follow-up sessions and conduct in-depth life history interviews.

The Respondents

To capture the diversity of the Việt Kiều who are living and working in Vietnam, I sought and selected respondents who had different motivations for migrating, and espoused varying cultural outlooks and perspectives about the country. My primary criteria for respondents were as follows: Việt Kiều who had made the commitment to stay in Vietnam (for whatever reasons or length of time); and who were willing and able to share their stories. As it turned out, the majority of my respondents fall under the category of “second generation” Việt Kiều. There was also a handful who left Vietnam as teenagers, and constitute what is usually considered the “first” or in-between “1.5” generation. That my pool of respondents was comprised primarily of second generation of Việt Kiều is not only reflective of the kind of social network I had established in the city, but is also indicative of the specific categories and the kind of Việt Kiều who are living in Hồ Chí Minh City.

The majority of my respondents are from the United States, although others are from Canada, Australia, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the West Indies –reflecting not only the wide variety of Việt Kiều moving to Vietnam, but also the diverse human make-up and cosmopolitan nature of Hồ Chí Minh City.¹⁴ They tend to be in their early- to mid-30s, possess college degrees, and work in white-collar professions (e.g. banking, finance, Information Technology or IT, non-governmental organisations, and healthcare). Nine of my respondents claimed Chinese ancestry: seven of them had parents who were both ethnic Chinese, and the other two had at least one ethnic Chinese grandparent on either the paternal or maternal sides of the family. If ambivalence characterizes the return experience of Việt Kiều (who are predominantly ethnic Vietnamese or Kinh), this is even more so the case for ethnic Chinese returnees. The socio-economic and political history of the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam can be described as tumultuous and volatile. The experiences of the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam in the period leading to their massive exodus during the late 1970s and early 1980s were marked by tragedy and immense loss. Like my ethnic Vietnamese respondents, their families’ experiences in Vietnam instilled profound distrust and scepticism among this group of returnees towards the Vietnamese Communist regime. Yet, despite their troubled pasts with the country, a significant number of ethnic Chinese are still “returning” to Vietnam, a place they

¹⁴ See Appendix 2: Respondent Profiles.
considered their parents’ homeland. In many ways, the experiences of this group of respondents epitomize the ambivalence of home, homeland and belonging for Việt Kiều.

At the time of the interviews, the majority of my respondents had been living and working in the country for more than 3 years: with the shortest duration being a year and the longest, 16 years. Most of my respondents had originally come to Vietnam on a “2-3 year” plan to try out life in the country. At present, those who remain in Vietnam claim to have indefinite or flexible time schedules, and have no plans to leave the country as of yet. For all of them, this is not their first trip back to Vietnam; they had been back a number of times since their youths and as young adults. Nine of my respondents have since left Vietnam: two returned to the US to continue their graduate studies; three got posted or received job offers elsewhere; two are currently backpacking in the region (and considering their next plan of action); one has become a shuttle migrant across the Pacific; whilst the last individual returned to the US to recuperate his health, and indicated that he was keen to “come back” to Vietnam in the near future.

The Interviews

The interviews were conducted in English, and ranged from an hour to 3 hours long each time. Typically, these sessions took place in cafes, restaurants and bars in the downtown area because these venues were not only the most convenient and easily accessible venues for my respondents, but were also spaces my respondents were familiar with and felt comfortable in. With the exception of two sessions (which were tape-recorded), all interviews were manually recorded in my fieldwork journal immediately after the sessions. This was done to encourage a relaxed and open atmosphere during the interviews, without having my respondents be overly conscious of the recorder or feel they had to censor their responses.

The interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended in nature. They sought to cover the major life domains or areas associated with migration: i.e. personal/family migration histories; experiences growing up in their home countries; motivations for migrating; and sense of cultural identity(ies) and of “home” prior to and since their relocation to Vietnam. One of the benefits of the life-story method of interviewing, it has been pointed out, is that it can provide a historical dimension to the experiences and choices of migrants in new settings, highlighting their recollections of the past and how the past continues to have an impact on their present life (cf. Ghorashi 2003). The life-course (Kley 2009) or biographical (Halfacree and Boyle 1993) approach to studying migration can be particularly relevant and insightful with regards to understanding the “return” motivations of the second generation Việt Kiều. These approaches suggest that the meaning of migration, the sense of belonging (or not) and the idealization for the “other” place was usually established over long time spans. Through in-depth life-story narratives, the research has illuminated the key issues that shaped the “homecoming” experiences of my respondents; such as their lives in their home countries prior to the return; how they articulated their motivations for return; and their multi-faceted and diverse experiences of living and working in Vietnam.
The interviewing process varied widely: some respondents needed to be prompted with specific questions, whereas others spoke at great length on their own. Some chose to cover the span of their lives, whereas others focused on specific events that were particularly important to them. Since the interviewees did not always spontaneously interpret the meaning of their day-to-day routines, I enquired “around” the subject by asking interviewees to identify people, personal experience(s) or events which were significant to them throughout their life courses (cf. Halfacree and Boyle 1993: 338). As this is an interpretive study that emphasizes the meanings and understandings of respondents, I also used a “bottom-up” interview approach to capture the full range of their experiences. This approach assumes that researchers should not define the areas of research interest and theoretical importance prior to data collection. Rather, they should follow the issues and themes that respondents suggest are important, thereby allowing theoretical explanation to emerge from the data. The emphasis is on the understandings of those being studied rather than the a priori assumptions of researchers. During the interviews or what I called “chat” or “catch-up” sessions, my respondents were allowed to develop the content of the interviews, and in so doing have the opportunity to describe what was important to them.

It is imperative to remember what life history and narrative analysis remind us about how people make sense of their life stories. When a person tells his or her life story, the information has been edited and events selected to create a story that is compatible with the present (Clausen 1998; Giele and Elder 1998; Josselson and Lieblich 1995). Therefore, my respondents were not simply recalling facts but also interpreting the past in the light of the present. One important advantage of the life-narrative approach is that it reveals the common themes or plots in the data from a collection of stories (cf. Polkinghorne 1988). The transcribed interviews were read closely, and recurring themes linked with identity, belonging, home and homeland across cultural and national settings were extracted for analysis. Future questions were adjusted or adapted to pursue emergent topics and issues. However, it cannot be ascertained from the sample respondent pool how prominent (or relevant) the issues raised are for all returnee Việt Kiều, that is both beyond the scope and resources available for this project. The purpose of this research is to describe these emergent themes and what they suggest about the (changing) notions of home, homeland, identity and belonging for second generation Việt Kiều.

The State and the State Media

In my research, I use the term “state” to refer to the “totality of political authority in Vietnam” (Heng 2004: 144). In Vietnam, political power is concentrated in one political party, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV): the government of Vietnam is dominated by the CPV, and the latter heavily influences the affairs of the state. The Party exercises hegemonic control over state institutions, the armed forces and other organizations in society through the penetration of these institutions by Party cells and committees (Thayer 2008: 3). Due to the Party's political dominance and pervasiveness, Vietnam

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15 As the force controlling the system, the CPV exercises leadership in all matters. The government manages state affairs through a structure that parallels the Party's apparatus, but it is incapable of acting without Party direction. All key government positions are filled by Party members.
has also been described as being a Party-state (cf. Heng 2004). To understand the key features in
the contemporary state’s policies towards overseas Vietnamese, I examined various outlets of the
state-owned media, e.g. state legislations, news reports, and academic publications. It is important to
point out that in Vietnam, the role and function of the press and academia are intrinsically tied to those
of the state. Therefore, in Vietnam, the press and academia can be considered to serve as both
mouthpieces of and watchdogs for the state (cf. Thayer 2008). According to anthropologist Alexander
Soucy, academic works in Vietnam are expected to “reflect the policies of the state rather than the
personal expression of the writer.” There, policy is “handed down by the government, and the
academy and the press are expected to conform to these policies in whatever subject they are writing
about, be it ethnic minorities or women” (Soucy 2000: 121).

Use of the New Social Media: Blogs and Facebook

Fieldwork is a rite of passage for the would-be anthropologists, and increasingly, materials to carry
out this rite are publicly available. Over the past decade, the constantly evolving and dynamic new
media has served as a valuable research tool in the field of anthropology. Research via new media
can foster participatory ethnography and enhance access to both potential informants and rich
ethnographic data (cf. Chenail 2011: 250). Specifically, the proliferation of new media forms such as
online blogs and social networking sites has provided anthropologists with invaluable access and
voyeuristic insight into lives and minds of the people they have sought to study. The contemporary
adaptation of ethnographic tools for online research has enabled researchers to further understand
how people present themselves in real life and in anonymous spaces, or engage in performative
identity projects (Turkle 1995). Cyber-ethnography, as a method, has grown as ethnographers have
gone online to study new communities (Robinson and Shulz 2009). Recent papers by Hookway
(2008) and Wakeford and Cohen (2008) are good places to learn how to initiate and maintain this
approach to data collection and generation.

Between 2005 and 2011, I followed the blogs of Việt Kiều authors, including both “returnees” and
“non-returnees” alike. These blogs provided me with invaluable insight into the issues that second
generation Việt Kiều were concerned with and which had a bearing on their daily lives. Since 2008, I
also became a member of “Việt Mới” and “VKs in Saigon” groups on the popular social networking site,
Facebook. Việt Mới, in particular, has been an important research resource. Membership in this group
not only gave me the opportunity (and alibi) to attend social events and gatherings organized by Việt
Kiều, but also enabled me to meet and network with other Việt Kiều living in the city (some of whom
eventually became my key informants). In addition, blogs and membership in social networking
groups also provided me access to alternative sources of primary and secondary data, such as online
discussions, forums and photos.

The Researcher

I am not what one might consider a complete outsider or total newbie to Vietnam. Since the late
1990s, I had been “back and forth” to the country, for both academic and personal reasons. During
this time, I was able to meet and make acquaintances with Việt Kiều from various countries and
across different generations. All these encounters and exchanges have shaped and inspired my current research interest: there are so many “kinds” of Việt Kiều and understandings about Việt Kiều. Therefore, even though I arrived in the field in 2008, in truth, I had collected a treasure trove of Việt Kiều anecdotes prior to that.

I also entered the field with certain “inherent” traits, which on hindsight, not only helped me gain easier access to informants, but have also added a certain “peripheral” depth to my ethnographic encounters in the field. Apart from possessing “decent” knowledge about Vietnamese history and culture, and being fairly proficient in the Vietnamese language, I also passed off as Việt Kiều in Vietnam. Due to my physical appearance (apparently I have a “Pan-Asian” look that makes me look “native” enough in most Southeast Asian countries), and proficiency in both the English and Vietnamese languages, Việt Kiều, locals and non-Vietnamese foreigners alike, tended to assume I was Việt Kiều. I had, however, always made it a point to be forthcoming about my national and cultural identity, and had never lied about being “Việt Kiều” or Vietnamese for that matter. Still, there were numerous occasions when people (particularly the locals) felt that I was “really” a Việt Kiều and/or had Vietnamese ancestry. For the most part though, my clarifications about my “real” cultural identity and roots only made people more curious about me and my research interest. The Việt Kiều I have met generally expressed curiosity – and at times admiration – as to why someone who is non-Việt Kiều or non-Vietnamese would be so interested in studying them or Vietnam.

On hindsight, being mistaken as a Việt Kiều was of great ethnographic value to my project. It has provided me an “insider” perspective and access to information that I would otherwise have had more difficulty attaining had I been, say a “white” male researcher. As an Asian female researcher who possessed background knowledge about Vietnam, I was perhaps less threatening and more relatable to my informants. At the same time, as someone who has spent the past decade leading what one might consider a nomadic existence outside of my “homeland” and being the cultural oddity/hybrid that Singapore – or being Singaporean – epitomizes (See Chua 1998); I could empathize with some of the key issues faced by this generation of Việt Kiều. Like my research subjects, I too encountered many moments of cultural frustration, ambivalence and what is known as “Vietnam fatigue” (characterized by the paradoxical sentiments of “hating and loving” Vietnam simultaneously; and the desire to get away from the country and yet not being able to for some “inexplicable” reason). I too, have had moments of feeling “lost” and not knowing what my “true” identity is and where home lies. My status as the “partial insider/outsider” has also enabled me to see and understand the country from a similar perspective as my respondents. Overall, these shared experiences have enabled me to bring to the work a perspective that is implicit, intuitive, and which is informed both by my own positionality and experiences in the field and those of my respondents as well.

The Research Experience

The Stalker and The Stalked
Sociologist John Van Maanen once described ethnographic fieldwork as a stupendous and seemingly no-brainer procedure in which otherwise “promising students go squat on an island for a couple of years and gossip with the natives.” Among “natives,” anthropologists occupy a somewhat anomalous position: they appear to be the “talkative but unproductive native” whose real work is neither completely fathomable nor measurably productive. He also likened the role of the anthropologist to that of a stalker, “stalking the wily native in his native habitat.” Van Maanen described ethnographic fieldwork as a “relentless, intrusive/obtrusive, almost creepy research method that has become the cornerstone of anthropology” (1988: 14).

Based on my fieldwork experiences, I both concur with and can relate to Van Maanen’s candid observations. My research subjects, the returning Việt Kiều, are “natives” who lead extremely busy, hectic and mobile lives. Throughout the research process, I found that I had to “stalk” my respondents to schedule a specific time and place to meet, sometimes weeks or even months ahead of time. During the first year of my fieldwork, I made it a point to attend as many social gatherings and events organised or attended by Việt Kiều. There were therefore numerous occasions when I have found myself surrounded by Việt Kiều with whom I had previously shared conversations about my research and/or interviewed all in the same room or congregating at some event. Apart from highlighting that, “the world is indeed a very small place” (which tends to get even smaller the longer you live in a particular setting!), such encounters also made me feel somewhat suffocated and uneasy. I not only felt very visible as the nosey-researcher-stalker type (who did not seem to have much else to do but stalk Việt Kiều in the city and to turn up wherever there were Việt Kiều to be found!), but there was also no escaping the “native” in my professional and private life. Even if I was not intentionally out “hunting” them, they were always a constant presence wherever I was. Moreover, passing as “Việt Kiều” inextricably bound me further to my project: I was regarded and treated as a Việt Kiều by locals, and at times Việt Kiều, regardless of my intentions or desire.

**Interview sessions as Reflexive and Reflective Processes**

*Life-story Interviews as Therapy:* Information flows and exchanges in the field is rarely a “one-way” traffic. Throughout the research process, my respondents also asked me questions and sought to learn more about the “return” experiences of other Việt Kiều. Many Việt Kiều, whom I have met in the city, were also curious and wanted to learn more about state policy towards them. Often times, I shared and explained my findings and knowledge with them, as they shared their life stories with me. The research process has also been an intensely personal and at times emotionally engaging experience; one in which it is difficult for me as a researcher, to remain a detached or impartial “observer.”

Through our “chat” or “meet-up” sessions, my respondents shared thoughts, feelings and experiences with me that they had hitherto had little chance (or reason) to reflect upon, and which they rarely shared with friends or other Việt Kiều.16 This is probably because of their hectic lifestyles and the

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16 With my respondents, I referred to our sessions as such because I wanted our meetings to seem less formal and perhaps less intimidating than what the term ‘interview’ would typically imply. Moreover, the terms ‘chat’ or ‘catch-up’ are more true to the nature of the contact.
common assumption among returnees that Việt Kiều ambivalence was a “known” fact, so much so that it had become something of a cliché and moot point for discussion. At times, our chat sessions involved sharing painful or difficult parts of their pasts. While most had vague or little memory of their early years in Vietnam, there were a handful who possessed startlingly vivid and lucid memories of their departure from Vietnam. The latter were able to recount and relate to me intensely personal and sometimes heart-wrenching accounts of how they and their family members fled the country. The myriad accounts revealed the untold human costs, and the lingering emotional guilt and pain that the second generation still carried: the incarceration of relatives at re-education camps; being thrown in jail for trying to escape; the shocking betrayal of family members and trusted family friends; death of loved ones at sea; months and sometimes years languishing at refugee camps; separation from family for years because of the war; and the experiences of racism – blatant or covert – in their adopted countries.

There were also moments when I felt that these sessions seemed more like therapy or counselling sessions. Often times, I found myself having to probe my respondents to look into the past and to reflect on their lives: so that they could better understand (and explain to me) why they chose to relocate to Vietnam; why they felt the way they did about Vietnam; and why they were still there for that matter. In so much as I was able to gather data from my respondents through these chat sessions, my respondents also had the opportunity to reflect upon their past and present lives. Narrating one’s life story can be a deeply reflexive and reflective process that enables us to make our lives coherent, understandable and meaningful (Atkinson 1998). I recall one respondent referring to me – in a playful manner – as the “Oprah Winfrey of Việt Kiều” in the presence of other Việt Kiều at a social event. Another respondent, Long, came to refer to our meetings as therapy sessions. At the end of each session, he would ask (half in jest no doubt), “So, when’s our next therapy session?” This exchange highlights the dialogical, personal and to some extent emotional nature of the research process. Listening to their life stories, it is impossible and perhaps counter-productive to remain the detached researcher who relentlessly gathers scientific data from the field and remains stoically “objective” in encounters with the “native.” The interview sessions elicited both introspection and retrospection on my part; enabling new understandings of the concept of home, homeland and belonging on an academic and personal level.

In many respects, my responent’s stories struck a familiar chord with me. Years before, I had worked with Karenni youth at a refugee camp along the Thai-Burmese border. The Karenni are one of the many ethnic groups to suffer under Burma’s brutal military dictatorship. There were many parallels between the experiences of the second generation Việt Kiều and the Karenni youth. Members of both groups had first- and/or second-hand memories of fleeing their parents’ homelands; of immense loss; of growing up in a foreign land and feeling like the perennial outsiders; and of not knowing where they belonged. Listening to their stories elicited a sense of deep despair and sadness in me. In the case of the Karenni, those sentiments were more profound because their horrific experiences were still in recent memory. In many ways, their experiences are particularly tragic because of the impunity in
which the Burmese regime continues to abuse its power and terrorize the local populations into fearful silence and acquiescence. Despite encouraging political developments in the country, young refugees from Burma will likely find a return to their parent's homeland a difficult and complicated process in the foreseeable future.

Being based in Hồ Chí Minh City throughout the time of my fieldwork and after, during the write-up stage, has also given my project extended breadth and depth. I was able to witness the continuing “ebb and flow” of my respondents’ personal lives. Throughout my time there, my respondents had achieved different milestones in their personal and professional lives: some had ended long-term personal relationships; embarked on new relationships and careers; or left the country. I have also been able to witness a corresponding change or development in their perspectives of and relationship with Vietnam, and in their understandings of home, homeland and belonging. In order to protect the anonymity of my respondents, pseudonyms have been used for individuals and any defining characteristics that might inform their identities have been altered or excluded. This is so as to avoid unwanted visibility and attention on the part of my respondents, particularly in a small and densely populated city like Sài Gòn, where “everyone knows everyone,” especially within the overseas Vietnamese and general expatriate community. Throughout the discussion, I use diacritic marks to denote the Vietnamese names of people and places.

The following chapters examine the return experience from the perspectives of the Vietnamese government on the one hand, and from the second generation overseas Vietnamese:

Chapter 1 presents a theoretical background and highlights the key issues in my study.

Chapter 2 provides a brief historical overview of Vietnamese overseas migration and an analysis of the changing social meanings of the term “Việt Kiều.”

Chapter 3 examines the state’s perception and policies towards overseas Vietnamese from 1954 to the current period. Throughout the period under examination, the relationship between the state and the overseas Vietnamese has tended to vacillate between profound distrust and pragmatic understanding. With each historical period and under different socio-economic contexts, the term “Việt Kiều” has come to embody shifting meanings and ambivalent connotations. The second part of this chapter highlights the specific policies and measures the Vietnamese state has taken in order to (re)create home, homeland and belonging for Việt Kiều. In turn, these policies also have significant bearing on returnees' sense of home, homeland and belonging in Vietnam. The goal of Chapters 2 and 3 is to set up socio-economic and political contexts for returning Việt Kiều.

Chapter 4 focuses on the “lost generation” who are migrating to Vietnam. The discussion also explores the diverse motivations influencing the second generation Việt Kiều decision to relocate to Vietnam. To a significant extent, these motivations also shape their expectations of Vietnam, and in turn, frame their “return” experience.
Chapter 5 examines the various experiences of the second generation Việt Kiều in Vietnam, highlighting in particular, specific aspects of their social and work lives. These experiences have contributed to re-evaluations and new understandings about identity and belonging for my respondents.

Chapter 6 explores how their myriad return experiences have (re)shaped my respondents’ sense of home, homeland and belonging.

Chapter 7 deals with how my respondents have attempted to (re)create unique “spaces” within certain physical and social locations that they can call their “own” in Sài Gòn and to feel some degree of belonging, security and “homeliness” there.

Through this study, I hope to do justice to the narratives told to me by my respondents and those whom I have met in Vietnam. I also hope to convey the polyphony of voices as well as the diversity that characterizes returnee Việt Kiều, their return motivations, social and work experiences in Vietnam, and their evolving relationship with the country. In so doing, my study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how the second generation Việt Kiều conceptualize home, homeland and belonging.