You Can Come Home Again:
Narratives of Home and Belonging among
Second-Generation *Việt Kiều* in Vietnam

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Over the last decade, increasing numbers of second-generation overseas Vietnamese or *Việt Kiều* have returned to Vietnam to live and work. These are children of first-generation immigrant parents, who fled the country following the communist victory over South Vietnam in 1975. Since the 1990s, the government has implemented new laws and policies to encourage overseas Vietnamese to return to invest, work and live in Vietnam. However, recent state initiatives have also been hampered by substantial ambiguities and bureaucratic inefficiency. The narratives of second-generation *Việt Kiều* living in Hồ Chí Minh City reveal how — apart from state discourse and policies — personal motivations and pragmatic considerations also have an important bearing on their sense of "home" and "belonging" in Vietnam.

Keywords: *Việt Kiều*, diaspora, second-generation, return migration, home, belonging, security.

Over the last decade, increasing numbers of second-generation overseas Vietnamese, or *Việt Kiều*,[1] have moved to Vietnam to live and work. This generation comprises those who were born overseas to first-generation immigrant parents from Vietnam, or who had left the country during their formative years.[2] The majority of my informants left Vietnam as children at the end of the Second Indochina War, following the communist defeat of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975. Their decisions to return now should be understood in the context of a changing world economy, the globalization of capital, Vietnam's socio-economic reforms and development, and

the state's corresponding open policy towards overseas Vietnamese.[3] They represent a generation that never experienced war directly, but whose lives have been shaped by their families' and communities' memories and experiences of Vietnam. These second-generation *Việt Kiều* are going back to a country still governed by the political regime that their families once fled, against the backdrop of the politics of remembrance — that is, anti-communist politics — in the diaspora.

This article examines state and returnee *Việt Kiều* narratives of home and belonging in Vietnam. The first section provides an overview of the formation of Vietnam's diasporic communities, focusing on the second generation whose members are now moving to Vietnam. The second section examines aspects of the Vietnamese state's attempts to encourage a (greater) sense of belonging and home among members of the diverse diaspora. The final section of the article addresses returnees' sense of home and belonging in Vietnam. Drawing on the first-hand narratives of *Việt Kiều* returnees, the discussion illuminates the extent to which state initiatives have enabled or hindered the development of these sentiments. My main contention is that, while recent legislation has made it easier for *Việt Kiều* to return to Vietnam and work there, substantial ambiguities and bureaucratic inefficiency have undercut these measures. In turn, my respondents' experiences with state policies have led them to adopt a cautious, wait-and-see approach towards the country. Conversely, the narratives also illuminate the ways in which a range of factors, such as having more fulfilling and meaningful job and social experiences in Vietnam, have worked to foster *Việt Kiều* returnees' sense of belonging and home in the country.

Overseas Vietnamese Diasporic Communities

Vietnam has experienced several periods of mass emigration during the twentieth century, provoked by war, poverty, political change and the search for better lives and education abroad. Although wartime or post-war refugees comprise a significant part of the Vietnamese diasporic community, overseas Vietnamese should not be lumped

into a single undifferentiated category. They vary with respect to class background, period of departure from Vietnam and political stance. These differences have significant bearing not only on their engagement with Vietnam, but also on their notions of homeland and nation. Likewise, the Vietnamese state's attitude to each group is markedly different. Before 1975, Vietnamese living overseas numbered around 600,000 (Committee for Overseas Vietnamese 2004, p. 8). According to official statistics, there are currently over four million Vietnamese living in more than one hundred countries around the globe (*Việt Báo* 2012), although it is not clear how and through what means this statistic was derived. According to Vietnam's current nationality law, Vietnamese citizens (*công dân Việt Nam*) and persons with "Vietnamese origin" (*người có nguồn gốc Việt Nam*) who are permanently residing overseas are considered "overseas Vietnamese" (Law on Vietnamese Nationality 2008).

The earliest Vietnamese emigrants went to countries in the region, such as China, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. These emigrants left Vietnam as a result of shifting dynastic fortunes, local wars or religious oppression by Vietnamese kings, and the determination to search for a better livelihood overseas (Committee for Overseas Vietnamese 2006, p. 7). Under French colonial rule (1859–1954), Vietnamese emigrated to far-flung locations across the globe. A number went to France and other parts of Europe as students and factory workers. Many chose to stay on after the Second World War. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the French also transported prisoners from Vietnam to New Caledonia and the New Hebrides. In later years, plantation and mine workers followed these prisoners (see Hardy 2002, p. 92; Hardy 2005, p. 102). During the early twentieth century, Vietnamese emigrants also began to travel for a new purpose.[4] In order to strengthen their nascent movements, Vietnamese anti-colonial nationalists established revolutionary bases throughout Asia. The movement's leaders and their supporters relocated to Japan, China, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Refugees also left Vietnam because of the dislocations and hardships of the 1920s and 1930s, of the Second World War and of failed revolts

against the French. Many resettled in Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. This regional community of *Việt Kiều* tends to be sympathetic towards the communist movement and leadership in Vietnam (Goscha 1999, p. 288).

France was, however, home to the first politicized Vietnamese diaspora (Bousquet 1991, p. 5; Hardy 2004, p. 8). The metropolis was the most popular destination for Vietnamese students seeking further education from between the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth. Some of Vietnam's earliest patriotic and political overseas organizations were also established in France. These organizations included the Groupe des Patriotes Annamites, founded in 1919, which counted among its members two of the nation's most famous nationalists, Phan Châu Trinh and Hồ Chí Minh (cf. Bousquet 1991, p. 47; Tai 1992, p. 68). In her study of the *Việt Kiều* community in France, Gisèle Bousquet noted that there were two distinct factions within this community. The older cohort of immigrants who arrived in France before 1975 tended to be inclined towards leftist ideology, and were generally pro-Hanoi. Those who arrived after 1975 as post-war refugees tended to be staunch anti-communists (Bousquet 1991, p. 10).

The Second Indochina Conflict (1954–75) resulted in a mass exodus of Vietnamese overseas. In the years following the end of the conflict and national reunification, more than one million former soldiers, civil servants and teachers from the Republic of Vietnam were subjected to "re-education" (*học tập cải tạo*), a form of imprisonment whereby detainees were subject to intense political indoctrination and gruelling labour in secluded camps, sometimes for years. Another one million were forcibly relocated to the New Economic Zones (*khu kinh tề mới*). The regime nationalized businesses and industries, collectivized agriculture, imposed currency reform and confiscated private property wholesale. As relations between China and Vietnam became increasingly estranged, Chinese businesses and schools in Vietnam were closed in 1976, and ethnic Chinese in South Vietnam were required to register their Vietnamese citizenship (Godley 1980, pp. 36–37; Chang 1982, p. 200).[5] Family members of former military personnel and administrative staff of

the South Vietnamese government faced discrimination in education and employment, as did Chinese and Amerasians (Desbarats 1990, pp. 57–58; McKelvey 1998, p. 29; N.H.C. Nguyễn 2009, p. 30). As a result of the deprivations of the post-war period, some 1.75 million Vietnamese fled the country between 1975 and the mid-1990s; 900,000 of them ended up in the United States (Committee for Overseas Vietnamese 2004, pp. 8–9).

Vietnamese left the country in three distinct waves during this period. The first wave, in 1975, included over 130,000 people leaving the South, mostly political leaders, army officers and skilled professionals escaping the communist takeover. They were mostly from the urban upper classes, well-educated and familiar with American lifestyles (Rutledge 1992, p. 4). The second wave of refugees fled Vietnam between 1978 and 1981. This wave of departees numbered almost 400,000 (Zhou and Bankston 2000, p. 9). Because many of these refugees fled the country on board overcrowded, under-equipped and poorly constructed boats, the popular misnomer "boat people" became a term of reference for all Vietnamese refugees. Ethnic Chinese made up seventy per cent of the members of the boat people wave (Amer 2011, p. 216). The third wave left Vietnam as part of the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), initiated in 1979 to facilitate the departure of people associated with the former Republic of Vietnam government and military who had been subjected to years of imprisonment and systematic discrimination. By the mid-1990s, over 200,000 Vietnamese had entered the United States through the ODP. The 1988 Amerasian Homecoming Act and the 1989 Humanitarian Operation Program led to the further exit and resettlement of children fathered by American military personnel and the last remaining Republic of Vietnam prisoners, respectively (cf. Rutledge 1992, p. 133; Freeman 1995, p. 35; S. Chan 2006, p. 94). Each wave faced complex contexts of exit and resettlement that affected family dynamics and adaptation processes (Espiritu and Trần Thơm 2002, p. 395).

By the end of the 1990s, the vast majority of Vietnamese refugees were eventually resettled in the United States. Others found homes in far-flung countries, including Australia, Belgium, Canada, China,

France, Great Britain and Germany (Robinson 1998, p. 127). The contemporary Vietnamese state has a difficult relationship with the post-1975 refugee diaspora, particularly those in the United States, where almost half of the diasporic population reside. It should also be pointed out that refugees were not the only category of people to leave the country following the fall of South Vietnam. Since the mid-1980s, there has been a diversification of emigrant categories, as the country has embarked on economic renovation and the Vietnamese government has permitted legal emigration. In the 1980s, Vietnamese were also sent to work and study in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Many opted to stay there after the collapse of the Soviet Union, although they retained their Vietnamese passports. In recent years, Vietnamese have also left the country as economic migrants seeking work in more industrialized countries such as China, Taiwan and Japan. The rise in cross-border marriages between Vietnamese women and men from East Asian countries also constitutes part of the contemporary out-migration trends (see Wang 2007; Lu 2008).

The post-1975 refugees are neither the only — nor the first — group of overseas Vietnamese to return to Vietnam. In the past few decades, French Vietnamese, those from former Eastern Bloc countries, Vietnamese living in China and neighbouring Southeast Asian countries have also returned to Vietnam to live, work and re-establish social-familial ties (Bousquet 1997; Chan 2005, pp. 221–27; Schwenkel 2014, pp. 251–54). During the mid-1980s, only 8,000 *Việt Kiều* returned to Vietnam for short visits annually (MOFA 2005). Throughout the 1990s, the figure grew to 250,000. By 2004, the number of returning *Việt Kiều* doubled again. In addition, on special occasions such as Tết, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year holiday, up to 200,000 *Việt Kiều* visited during a two-week period. From 2008 to 2011, the number of *Việt Kiều* tourists visiting Vietnam rose to 500,000–600,000 (Vietnam Net Bridge 2011).

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" (Vietnam Investment Review 2011).

To date, however, precise or reliable statistics on the number of *Việt Kiều* visitors who are engaging in business, investment or professional activities while in Vietnam or, for that matter, on the number who actually stay on to live and work in Vietnam have not been available. Also unavailable are statistics on the national origins and educational or professional backgrounds of returnees. Anecdotal evidence indicates that increasing numbers of second-generation *Việt Kiều* are returning to Vietnam, specifically to Hồ Chí Minh City, to live and work.[6]

Second-Generation *Việt Kiều*

In the United States, home to the most populous community of Vietnamese outside of Vietnam, second-generation Vietnamese Americans constitute the largest population of refugee children in American history. Theirs is the first generation to be born in the United States or raised in American culture during most of their childhoods (Zhou 1998, p. 17). The younger generation are also bringing a new perspective to Vietnamese American identity. They see themselves primarily as Americans, not as Vietnamese exiles in America. They have few memories of Vietnam, and, although they have grown up with the sadness and nostalgia that ran through their parents' lives, they generally have a fresh, more impartial view of Vietnam.

According to a younger cohort of Vietnamese American scholars and activists, the anti-communist ideology in the Vietnamese American community has increasingly become an Achilles heel (Lê Long 2011, p. 1). Linda Võ, a Vietnamese American scholar and well-known community activist, has pointed out that, even though homeland politics was "still of primary importance" to and adopting fervent anti-communism ideologies "mandatory" for members of the Vietnamese community in the United States, it did not "necessarily represent the needs or voice of this extensive community" (Võ 2003, pp. xv–xvi). Consequently, the accepted formulas and narratives are no longer sufficient in capturing or reflecting ongoing transformations in the community (See Võ 2003, pp. xvi–xviii; Nguyễn-Võ Thu Hương 2005, p. 172; Dương 2005, pp. 82–83; Espiritu 2005, pp. xvii–xxi; Lam 2008).

Chan's research on Vietnamese American youth between the late 1970s and the early 1990s revealed that, long before legal travel to Vietnam became possible, second-generation Vietnamese-Americans were already indicating that they wanted to visit the country someday. Chan's respondents were already expressing curiosity about their ancestral homeland and the desire to return to Vietnam to see for themselves what life was like there (S. Chan 2006, p. 254). Likewise, Packard (1999, p. 102) has observed that members of the younger generation, the children of Vietnamese exiles, are likely to chart the most interesting and innovative trajectories of engagement.

Between early 2008 and 2010, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Hồ Chí Minh City on the narratives of home, homeland and belonging among second-generation *Việt Kiều*. In all, thirty-eight *Việt Kiều* living in the city became involved with my project. The majority of my respondents were from the United States, although others came from Canada, Australia, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the West Indies. They tended to be in their early- to mid-thirties, to possess college degrees and to work in white-collar professions such as banking, finance, information technology and health care, or to work for non-governmental organizations. At the time of our interviews, most of them had lived and worked in the country for more than three years, with the shortest period of residency being a year and the longest sixteen years. Most of my respondents had originally come to Vietnam on a "two-to-three year" plan to try out life in the country. And those who remain in Vietnam now claim to have no plans to leave the country yet.

My respondents generally left Vietnam as young children. Therefore, they have few or no memories of the country and its people, except for the stories told to them by the parents or elders of the community when they were growing up. In part, therefore, the quest to find out more about the past — so as to be able to answer the lingering questions about their personal identities, family histories and cultural belonging — motivated their decisions to relocate to Vietnam. Intrinsic factors leading to the move include respondents' profound sense of not belonging in their home countries, search

for identity and need to understand their pasts, and the quest for adventure and meaning. Extrinsic factors related to specific features in Vietnam's socio-economic and cultural landscape that make it appealing for this generation of *Việt Kiều* to migrate there (Koh forthcoming).

State Policies towards Overseas Vietnamese

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, p. 236). In liberalizing the economy, and to a lesser extent promoting 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.[7] In the context of economic development and integration into the world economy, Hanoi sees overseas Vietnamese as important resources. Through diaspora-as-bridge, the state seeks access to things such as hard currency (through remittances and foreign direct investment), knowledge and technology transfers, entry into overseas markets and even political influence in the host nations via ethnic community politics (Carruthers 2007, p. 197).

It is the post-1975 community — the so-called refugee/exile community — which constitutes a substantial segment of the Vietnamese diaspora and with which the Vietnamese state has the most problematic relations. The majority of the members of this community reside in developed countries of the West. They possess the much needed financial capital and intellectual expertise to facilitate Vietnam's socio-economic development. How does the government court a community with which it has had troubled and tenuous relations in the past? More importantly, how can members of this community be enticed to contribute their skills and financial resources to Vietnam? Over the last two decades, the state has implemented a number of policies and drawn on specific affective themes — such as those having to do with "bloodlines", "origins" and "homeland" — in official discourse towards overseas Vietnamese (Koh 2012,

p. 112). It has also passed a series of laws with the goal of drawing overseas Vietnamese to return to Vietnam and to live, work and make investments there. These measures can be construed as the state's attempt to reach out to the diverse overseas Vietnamese communities, to encourage an increased sense of belonging and, more importantly, to increase *Việt Kiều* contribution to national development.

"An Inseparable Part of the Nation": The State's Rehabilitation and Reconfiguration of *Việt Kiều*

The term *Việt Kiều* originally had positive connotations in Vietnam, particularly during the period between the 1950s and the mid-1970s, when the Hanoi government actively courted financial support from, and anti-war campaigning on the part of, overseas Vietnamese (Đặng Phong 2000, p. 185). *Việt Kiều* was often used in conjunction with the adjective "patriotic", as in *Việt Kiều Yêu Nước* or Patriotic Vietnamese. The "*Việt Kiều* problem", as Đặng Phong terms it, emerged during the late 1970s. "[T]he very word *Việt Kiều* became problematic, bearing complex and emotive connotations" (Đặng Phong 2000, p. 184). During the post-war period, the term *Việt Kiều* took on negative and somewhat derogatory connotations, as it was primarily refugees — economic and political — who were leaving the country in droves.[8] More specifically, the term was applied to returnees from the capitalist bloc, who continued to be thus designated after their return (Diệp Đình Hoa 2000, p. 9).

Anecdotal evidence indicates that a significant segment of the Vietnamese diaspora do not like calling themselves — and persistently resist being called — *Việt Kiều*. Some object to the term on the historical and political grounds that it was and remains a term imposed by the communist regime. Others resist the term because they feel that it discriminates or makes distinctions between them and Vietnamese in the homeland.[9] Because of the rapid socio-economic changes in the country, people in Vietnam no longer view *Việt Kiều*, nor do *Việt Kiều* view themselves, in the same parochial way as in the past. A comment that kept coming up in my conversations with *Việt Kiều* returnees and others in Hồ Chí Minh City was that, with so many *Việt Kiều* coming back and Vietnamese going overseas

for work and travel, being a *Việt Kiều* was "not a big deal" and "no longer special" (Koh 2012, p. 103).

One way for the Vietnamese government to resolve the contradictions between its past and present treatment of *Việt Kiều* is to emphasize cultural and racial heritage more than political belief. To craft its relationship with *Việt Kiều*, the Hanoi regime has combined the notions of nation, bloodlines and race into official discourse to make nationalist claims on emigrants. Since *đổi mới*, the regime has been strongly inclined to offer a new, broadened and flexible definition of overseas Vietnamese, in part to expunge the history of past criticisms of those who fled the country and in part to set the stage for a more active relationship with sympathetic communities abroad (Stern 1992, p. 18). From the mid-1990s, the terms that it used in place of or alongside the term *Việt Kiều* to foster a sense of closeness to the Vietnamese homeland and community proliferated. These terms have included *người Việt Nam ở nước ngoài* (Vietnamese living overseas), *kiều bào ở nước ngoài* (overseas compatriots), *người Việt xa xứ* (Vietnamese living far away from their homeland), and *Việt Kiều Yêu Nước* (patriotic overseas Vietnamese). In his study of the economic and social implications of the return migration of overseas Vietnamese, Ivan Small points out that such terminological innovations were "metaphorical constructions", intended to serve as bridges linking overseas Vietnamese "to their primordial origins, even in a globalized era of widespread long-distance mobility and out-migration" (Small 2012, p. 239).

More important than terminological innovations, contemporary state discourse has positively reconfigured overseas Vietnamese as an integral and inseparable part of the national body. That state has, it seems, rehabilitated and reinstated *Việt Kiều* to their positions of pre-war glory and esteem. A plethora of national idioms and political slogans now refer affectionately to overseas Vietnamese, frequently using idioms for consanguinity:

> *Những tấm lòng của bà con Việt kiều nước ngoài luôn đau đáu hướng về quê mẹ* [Overseas Vietnamese always have their hearts turned towards the motherland] (*Nhân Dân* 8 May 2013);

> *Họ là một bộ phận không thể tách rời của dân tộc Việt Nam*
> [They are an inseparable part of the Vietnamese nation] (CPV
> Politburo 19 July 2006);
> *Đồng bào mình là máu của màu Việt Nam, thịt của thịt Việt Nam*
> [Our overseas compatriots are the blood of blood, the flesh of
> flesh of Vietnam] (Committee for Overseas Vietnamese 2006,
> p. 711).

"The majority who left", argues Hanoi historian Phạm Xuân Nam
(1997, p. 45), "still have strong feelings [*nạng long*] to their homeland
and country". The well-known local scholar of overseas Vietnamese
Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn asserts that overseas Vietnamese, "even though
no longer holding Vietnamese citizenship, they still carry Vietnamese
blood, Vietnamese feelings, and so ought to be treated more warmly
than foreigners" (Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn 1997, p. 257).

The use of affective terms of reference and primordial themes in
contemporary state discourse on overseas Vietnamese indicates an
attempt not only to overcome the negative connotations associated
with them, but also to expand the definition of who belongs to
the nation and to export Vietnamese nationalism abroad. More
specifically, it can also be understood as an attempt to galvanize
Vietnamese identity from something that might be based on region,
place of origin or political or class background into a new "imagined
community" (Anderson 2006). This renaming removes the old stigma
attached to *Việt Kiều*, even as the insistence on primordial racial
or cultural links to the motherland is retained (Ong 1999, p. 43).
The central message implicit in contemporary state discourse is that
overseas Vietnamese remain essentially Vietnamese wherever they
are, regardless of when they left the country, or for that matter,
whether or not they were born in Vietnam.

Legislative Measures to Promote "Home" and "Belonging"

Since the mid-2000s, the Vietnamese government has implemented
a number of laws to encourage overseas Vietnamese to return to
Vietnam and participate in national life. These recent legislative
measures represent an attempt on the part of the Vietnamese state
not only to create greater parity between overseas Vietnamese and

citizens at home in some aspects of national life, but also to foster unity beyond national boundaries. In theory and on paper at least, the laws have been envisioned as one of the most important means of fostering a sense of belonging and membership in Vietnam's national community among overseas Vietnamese. Through these laws and initiatives, the Vietnamese government has attempted to demonstrate to the diverse — and fragmented — diaspora its sincerity about making good on its oft-stated dictum that the government regarded overseas Vietnamese as an integral part of Vietnam's national community.

Nghị Quyết Số 36/NQ-TW, more commonly referred to as Resolution 36, is heralded by the state as the landmark document concerning official policies towards overseas Vietnamese. Passed in June 2004, Resolution 36 is the first open resolution of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) addressing a comprehensive list of issues relating directly to *Việt Kiều*. Among the goals of the resolution was the creation of favourable conditions and provision of support for overseas Vietnamese to "stabilise their life, integrate into the society of residing countries and maintain close links with the homeland" (Ministry of Justice Vietnam 2009). Most significantly, this document represented the Party's first clear articulation of the fact that it considered Vietnamese people both at home and abroad as equally important to national unity. In 2010, former minister for foreign affairs Nguyễn Dy Niên reiterated the point that the goal of state policies towards overseas Vietnamese was to defend the latter's "legitimate rights and benefits both in the country and in their resident countries[,] so that they feel that Vietnam is truly their home and their guardian" (*Báo Mới* 2010*b*). In line with the stipulations of Resolution 36, a number of laws have been passed during the last decade. The most important such legislation relates to visa exemptions, home ownership rights, a single price system for all Vietnamese, and dual nationality.

Visa Exemption

As of 1 September 2007, overseas Vietnamese have been eligible for a five-year visa exemption certificate. The exemption applies to three categories of overseas Vietnamese: those who retained

Vietnamese nationality; Vietnamese people of foreign nationalities; as foreigners who are wives, husbands, children of Vietnamese or of Vietnamese who hold foreign nationalities. To qualify for the visa exemption, individuals need to prove that they are of Vietnamese origin. Among some of the documents required in the application process are copies of their Vietnamese citizenship certificate, birth certificate or family registry book (MOFA 2007).

Single-price System and Tax Incentives

Decision 114/2001/QD-TTg (31 July 2001) revised and supplemented some provisions of Decision 210/1999/QD-TTg (1999), which called for the application of the same prices for services to overseas Vietnamese, Vietnamese holding foreign passports and accompanying family members as to local Vietnamese. Furthermore, the Investment Law of 2005 provided a number of incentives for overseas Vietnamese business people and investors. These included preferential land rents, loans, investment credit guarantees and reductions in corporate income tax, personal income tax, and tariffs on machinery import (Vietnam Laws Online Database 2005).

Property Ownership

According to the most recent legislation on housing, Decree 71/2010/ND-CP (issued on 8 August 2010), two categories of overseas Vietnamese are eligible to purchase and own property in Vietnam. The first category includes those who hold Vietnamese nationality, while the second category is intended to include those with "Vietnamese origin". In general, individuals in these two categories are permitted to own one house in Vietnam. Individuals who are permitted to own more than one house include those who return to make a direct investment in Vietnam; those whose work the relevant state agencies deem a contribution to Vietnam's national development; or those whose spouses are Vietnamese nationals living in Vietnam (DTI News 2010).

Dual Nationality

In late 2008, the Vietnamese government announced its plan to abolish the prevailing law and make it possible for overseas Vietnamese to

(re)claim Vietnamese nationality while retaining foreign citizenship.[10] According to the new law, dual nationals would be "assured of all rights of citizenship and must obey all citizens' duties toward the state and society according to its laws" (*People's Army Newspaper* 2008). More concretely, this change in legislation would allow overseas Vietnamese to purchase and own property more easily, have access to investment privileges and possibly even hold public office in the future (Vietnam Net Bridge 2010).

The Vietnamese state hopes that these changes in policy regarding visas, price and tax incentives, property ownership and nationality would lead overseas Vietnamese to find it easier and more enticing to return to and contribute to Vietnam. In part, it passed these laws to address some of the long-standing complaints about — and frustrations with — visiting and doing business in Vietnam among overseas Vietnamese. However, the overall success of recent state endeavours has been ambiguous at best. A conspicuous lack of clarity, blatant inconsistencies in legal initiatives and bureaucratic inaptitude have affected the efficacy of state policies and legislation towards overseas Vietnamese. Even though they now find it easier to return to, work in and invest in the country, they still face significant difficulties in claiming state-conferred rights and privileges. More importantly, as a result of these limitations in the implementation of its policies, the Vietnamese government seems to be sending mixed signals to overseas Vietnamese about the veracity and sincerity of its claims truly to want to "close the past and look to the future" (Weinraub 2005) and to treat overseas Vietnamese as equals in certain important aspects of national life.

"*The door's been opened, but only a crack*"[11] — Limitations in the State's initiatives towards Overseas Vietnamese

Despite the official proclamations issued and laws passed over the past decade, the number of overseas Vietnamese taking advantage of the opportunities and incentives offered by the state has fallen significantly short of official expectations and predictions. The likely reason is the lack of directives from central administrative bodies

on when and how *Việt Kiều* can apply for certain incentives (Thanh
Niên News 2010). The result of this lack of directives has been the
inconsistent and uneven implementation of state policies regarding
the *Việt Kiều* throughout the country (*Vietnam News* 2010). A lack
of clarity in the laws has led to confusion and reluctance on the part
of local authorities to approve applications from overseas Vietnamese
for home ownership or the restoration of Vietnamese nationality.
The weakness of the rule of law in Vietnam means that overseas
Vietnamese may experience difficulty in securing the recognition
of the rights ostensibly granted to them by the state, since one can
never be sure that local-level bureaucracies will implement laws
made at the national level.

   Việt Kiều reportedly encounter numerous bureaucratic hurdles
when attempting to buy property or to reclaim Vietnamese nationality.
For instance, having proper documentation, such as that needed to
prove one's Vietnamese origins, often presents a major problem. The
majority of my respondents pointed out that they did not have the
necessary documents to qualify them for home ownership in Vietnam,
either because these documents were lost when their families fled
Vietnam, or because the documents they did have were forgeries
obtained by their families in order to leave the country. Most of
them found the process of proving their Vietnamese origin too
cumbersome and time-consuming to be worthwhile. Such was the
case for "Văn" who moved to Hồ Chí Minh City from Boston with
her husband and young daughter in 2007. District officials rejected
Văn's application to purchase property in 2010. The officials took
issue with the conspicuous disparities in the dates of birth stated
in her Vietnamese birth certificate and her American passport.
Although the officials appeared sympathetic to her predicament,[12]
they declined Văn's application because she did not have "sufficient
documentation" to prove her eligibility to purchase property in
Vietnam.[13] Her husband "Tóan" encountered similar reticence from
a local property development company at the end of 2011. He was
interested in buying an apartment at a new condominium project
located in Phú Mỹ Hưng, an up-and-coming residential zone located

in the suburbs of Hồ Chí Minh city. Even though he possessed all the required documentation and met the stipulated criteria to buy property in Vietnam, the company declined his application. Tóan recalled how staff at the property development company appeared embarrassed and apologetic about the situation, explaining to him in hushed tones that the housing law was new and there were still no specific guidelines from the "top" — that is, the relevant ministries — on precisely which *Việt Kiều* could buy property, or on where and what kind of property they could buy.[14]

Many *Việt Kiều* have found means to own property in Vietnam without depending on the rights granted to them under policies intended to encourage overseas Vietnamese to return. These means include registering property under the name of a local relative or through their businesses. Cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, inconsistent application of government policies and a general *Việt Kiều* aversion to coping with discriminatory practices and taxes explain not only the dismal number of home buyers and investors relative to the size of the diaspora, but also the fact that informal networks continue to be the preferred mode of financial engagement among overseas Vietnamese (EAER 1998, p. 21). Overseas Vietnamese investors would rather run the risk of being cheated by the front person for their investments than face exorbitant taxes, high rates for government-provided services, restrictive real estate laws and various other administrative obstacles and pitfalls (Trần Kim Trí and Nguyễn Trung Bình 1999). At the same time, legal disputes between overseas Vietnamese and their local counterparts in Vietnam are fairly common and indeed frequently highlighted in the local and diasporic press (Vietnam Express 2007; Đỗ Trinh 2005; Boudreau 2008). These legislative pitfalls have the potential to alter not only the nature and extent of remittances to the country but also social relations between overseas Vietnamese and those in the homeland.

The heart of the problem, according to Nguyễn Chơn Trung, chairman of the Committee for Overseas Vietnamese in Hồ Chí Minh City, is that "people in the country still regard them [the *Việt Kiều*] as if they are still foreigners, *người nước ngoài*". Therefore,

he points out, the country's policies regarding overseas Vietnamese are "just like those for foreigners". "This mistake", he surmises, "has had deep ramifications in our way of thinking and has persisted for more than 20 years" (Nguyễn Chơn Trung 2006, p. 914). At the end of the day, it seems, overseas Vietnamese are "Vietnamese" when it suits the government and "foreigners" when it does not. Overseas Vietnamese are given access to visas and to travel and investment opportunities more favourable than those enjoyed by non-Vietnamese foreigners, less favourable than those enjoyed by Vietnamese nationals. They are permitted to benefit from "more" national belonging than non-Vietnamese foreign nationals, but are denied the same degree of belonging enjoyed by Vietnamese nationals (cf. Carruthers 2001, pp. 211–13; Carruthers 2002, pp. 428–31).

This conclusion matches observations from diverse settings such as Grenada, Haiti and the Philippines. As is the case of Vietnam, national discourse accords heightened status and honour to emigrants who remit money to these countries. However, as Basch et al. (1994) points out, ties between these emigrants and the governments of their homelands are characterized by ambivalence. While these governments have been explicit in their rhetoric and efforts to expand national belonging beyond national borders, implicit in state directives is the desire to control the nature and extent of their diasporas' engagement in homeland politics and economies. In other words, while the homeland governments actively court diasporic financial contributions, permanent relocation of former nationals, much less the latters' advice on how to run the country, is not desirable (Basch et al. 1994, p. 136).

In the case of Vietnam, the state's desire to co-opt overseas subjects' capital and professional skills to its own nation-building project is coupled with a fear of diasporic forces' "pursuing their plot of 'peaceful evolution' by hurling the disguise of 'democracy' and 'human rights' to cover their intention to interfere in … internal affairs" (Thayer 2009, p. 200). "Peaceful evolution" refers to alleged plots by hostile external forces, in alliance with domestic dissidents, to take advantage of human rights and democratic concerns in

order to overthrow communist rule. While CPV conservatives are circumspect in publicly identifying exactly who the "hostile external forces" are, *Việt Kiều* living in the United States are clearly their target (ibid.). In mid-2009, for instance, Party conservatives initiated a campaign against "the threat of peaceful evolution" with the goal of "protecting national security" (Thayer 2010, pp. 200–201). The recent arrests of pro-democracy activists in Vietnam — labelled "terrorists" because their agenda and activities were perceived as a threat to national interests and security — underline the point that the actual and potential political threat of *Việt Kiều* to the CPV regime remains a real issue for the Vietnamese state (Vietnam Plus 2010; Radio Free Asia 2014). In fact, the precise rights and obligations of dual nationals are currently being debated in national discourse (Vietnam Net Bridge 2013).

Tensions and ideological disputes within the Communist Party of Vietnam have contributed to the apparent inconsistencies in the state's policies and attitudes towards overseas Vietnamese. The period since the late 1980s has seen constant debate between CPV hardliners (dogmatic conservatives) and soft-liners (progressive reformers) over the ideology and structure of the Party on one hand, and the pace and direction of reform in the country on the other. To this day, a sharp ideological difference of opinion on the overseas Vietnamese and their utility to Vietnam persists (Thayer 2010, p. 199). To a significant extent, the state's inconsistent policies and attitudes towards overseas Vietnamese reflect these ideological and intra-party tensions. The conflicting aspirations of the regime with regard to *Việt Kiều* have also resulted in ambiguous laws and in their uneven implementation on the ground. In turn, this ambiguous legislation shapes *Việt Kiều* returnees' sense of home and belonging in Vietnam.

Việt Kiều Returnees' Sense of Home and Belonging in Vietnam

For overseas Vietnamese, both returnees and non-returnees alike, the lack of clarity about their precise status — quasi-nationals or

foreigners — is of significant concern. Beyond issues relating to the right to own residences and businesses, the extent to which their legal and political rights are safeguarded and upheld in Vietnam also concern them. For instance, many *Việt Kiều* whom I met in Hồ Chí Minh City wondered if they would be treated as Vietnamese citizens or foreign nationals if they found themselves in trouble with local officials and even arrested as a result. They worried that, in Vietnam, they would not be entitled to a fair trial and representation, as they would in their home countries. The arrest and indictment of overseas Vietnamese tax evaders and political dissidents in recent years have done little to assuage their concerns.[15] The stories and experiences of *Việt Kiều* business people serve as sombre reminders to other *Việt Kiều* that, in all their ventures and endeavours in the homeland, *Việt Kiều* are liable to find themselves on the losing end when up against the state.

Confidence that their political and legal rights and economic well-being will be protected constitutes an important form of security for these returnees. After all, this form of security is also fundamental to their perception of a place as "home". But a consensus among my informants held that Vietnam's current political and legal system was plagued by the communist regime's persistent lack of transparency, its corruption and its mismanagement. Vietnam could not provide them with a sense of political or economic security in the long run. For these reasons, it represented a "practical home" for them. They considered it the "best" place for them to be "for now", because they were able to make a living and "do things" there that they would have more difficulty doing in their home countries. These possibilities relate specifically to the greater availability (and feasibility) of job prospects, business opportunities, creative projects and diverse lifestyles. At the same time, many also felt that their "real" and "safe" homes were where they "came from" — the United States, Canada, Australia, and so on. In their minds, these countries offered more political and legal accountability. These multi-layered and complex conceptualizations and senses of "home", "security" and "belonging" are illuminated in the narratives of "Hoàn" and "Quỳnh".[16]

Hoàn

Hoàn moved to Vietnam in 1998.[17] He initially came to help his father set up a transportation company in Hồ Chí Minh City, and would later go on to establish his own logistics firm. During the first twelve years of his stay, Hoàn always carried a return ticket to Australia in his wallet, out of fear that "things" could suddenly turn for the worse and see him thrown in jail, or get into deep trouble for "whatever reasons". He also lived in hotels for the first ten years that he spent in Vietnam. Then, he recalled, he was always on the go, ready to "take flight" anytime. He never bought anything that implied "long-term" residence or had to do with establishing a permanent home. A television, a suitcase full of clothes and a chair were all that he owned. In the back of his mind, he knew that he did not want to plant roots in Vietnam or to become too comfortable or complacent. Hoàn wanted to have the freedom to pack up and leave at any time. In the late 1990s, both Hoàn and his local business partner found themselves investigated, harassed and heavily fined by the "economic cops" for "illegal" business conduct, even though the accusations against them concerned the normal "modus operandi" for business operations throughout the country at the time. These events only stoked Hoàn's fears. Although his "paranoia" about local law enforcement has dwindled over the years, Hoàn told me that he remained vigilant about his surroundings, and was always careful that his business dealings were within the bounds of legality. "You always have to think ten steps ahead, because you never know", he mused.

Only five years ago did Hoàn commit himself to buying a home. The government had passed laws allowing overseas Vietnamese to own businesses and to buy property. Hoàn was able to purchase a residential property in downtown Hồ Chí Minh City through the enterprise in which he had invested. This is an instance in which we see the manner in which changes in government policy influence the ebb and flow of the lives of returnee *Việt Kiều* and the nature of their engagement with the country. In Hoàn's case, recent state legislations have permitted a stronger sense of commitment to the country than he could feel before.

> In the early years, my attitude was more touch and go. The country
> was just opening up, and there were so many opportunities, but
> also so many risks and uncertainties.… I have to give credit to
> the government for taking concrete steps to encourage *Viet Kieu*
> to come back and invest, even though there's obviously plenty of
> room for improvement in this area. [As a result of these policy
> changes,] I think I started to breathe more easily over the past
> years.… I could see a future for myself here — once I had a sense
> of ownership, of my own business and home.[18]

Despite his lack of faith in Vietnam's political structure and economic
management, Hoàn pointed out that he still saw his future lying
in Vietnam. It offered abundant opportunities for innovation and
creative ventures. More than in Australia, or anywhere else, he felt
a creative buzz there. He felt more alive and driven. He originally
intended to stay in Vietnam for only two years. "I never intended to
stay in Vietnam for this long. Two became five years. Ten. Fifteen.
Eighteen. The years just rolled on", Hòan reflected. He said there
was something "magical" about being in a dynamic and changing
society and country like Vietnam:

> Not many countries are like Vietnam — that has just come out of
> the brink of war and rebuilding itself. It's too rare an opportunity.
> You are reminded of that everyday just by walking around on the
> streets. You know that you are part of the wheels of change, of
> history, right here in Vietnam. And you are part of that history
> itself.[19]

Being in Vietnam at this point suited Hoàn's lifestyle and personal
goals more than living in Australia. He was interested in helping
develop the Vietnamese media and entertainment industries. He
found it satisfying and meaningful to be able to make a difference
and help these industries in Vietnam. Moreover, Hoàn also pointed
out, Hồ Chí Minh City differed from other cities. He had a unique
community of friends and a social network unlike anywhere else.
This community was made up of fellow *Việt Kiều*.

> Most of them are Việt Kiều like me. We share similar backgrounds
> and life trajectories. You know the whole refugee-immigrant
> Vietnamese parent thing. Being neither here nor there. Never
> really belonging anywhere. We [*Việt Kiều*] all come with a certain

amount of "baggage" and "issues". So we sort of empathize with each other's position and background, instinctively. Here, there's no need to explain who we are, why we look Vietnamese, and yet are not quite. Why we may speak Vietnamese, but not like locals do. Why we are more comfortable with English or do things the "Western" way. We don't have to explain who we are. Just say you are Việt Kiều.… That puts an end to all the questioning and curiosity. There is something liberating and comforting about being here — to not have to explain our convoluted backgrounds and to have this community of people here just like us and who "get" us.[20]

Like Hoàn, most of my informants had come to accept being regarded as *Việt Kiều* in Vietnam and to refer to themselves as such. This acceptance was due in part to the myriad experiences in Vietnam that had led them to realize that Vietnamese did not consider them "Vietnamese enough". It was also due to their recognition of the many ways in which they were not (just) Vietnamese, but rather Vietnamese-and-something-else. Over time, most returnees had come to adopt their categorization as *Việt Kiều* both as a mode of self-identification and as a way of distinguishing themselves from non-*Việt Kiều* Vietnamese and non-*Việt Kiều* foreigners. Conversely, as a social category and cultural designation, "*Việt Kiều*" could also serve as a basis of commonality both with other *Việt Kiều*, because of shared historical trajectories and cultural experiences, and with local Vietnamese, because of shared descent, in Vietnam.

At present, Hoàn maintains two residences, one in Hồ Chí Minh City and the other in Sydney. He articulated feeling at home both in Vietnam and Australia, and enjoying what both worlds provided him. "I consider it a luxury, and in fact my fortune to be based in Vietnam and yet to have the option of going back to Australia every so often, to enjoy what life has to offer there too. It really is a privilege to be able to enjoy these two worlds simultaneously."[21]

Qùynh

Qùynh, a doctor from Boston, Massachusetts, returned to Vietnam in the fall of 2007.[22] A friend had told her about a possible position in

the medical field in Vietnam. Qùynh thought that the job description looked challenging and that the position might serve as a good opportunity to apply her training in a different cultural setting. She also thought it would be easy for her to adjust to Vietnam because she spoke Vietnamese and was familiar with the cultural landscape.

> I like to help people in general. Being in this profession enables me to find work in many places. So, technically speaking, I could be based anywhere. I took up the job in Vietnam because I am familiar with the culture, the people … that's also the same reason why I would not leap at a job opportunity in say Africa, because I would have to make bigger cultural adjustments there.[23]

Qùynh found that the most fulfilling and challenging part of her job was establishing rapport with patients, many of whom lacked access to basic healthcare and financial resources. Through her work, she came to know her patients and their families, and Qùynh felt that she was able to bring more to the job because of her understanding of Vietnamese language and culture. For this reason, she said her job in Vietnam brought more meaning and satisfaction to her than did her work in the United States. Qùynh said she felt a great sense of connection to Vietnamese people and culture, and the sense that the work she did was helping to make a much greater difference in people's lives than in the United States. Qùynh recently set up a private clinic with other medical practitioners and is excited about bringing new treatment and services to local patients.

Yet, like Hoàn, Qùynh had doubts about Vietnam's economic and political security in the long run. The roots of her lack of faith and insecurity in the country lay in her family's history. Like many ethnic Chinese in the country, her family lost much following national reunification and during the regime's relentless campaign to bring socialism to Southern Vietnam. To this day, Qùynh has vivid recollections of that dark period. "My family lost everything after 1975. The house that we lived in, the business that we owned, and all of our hard earned money. All of that taken away from us overnight."[24] A number of her relatives were sent to jail for "financial misdeeds", and others spent years in re-education camps for years.

To compound the situation, as children of ethnic Chinese business owners, Qùynh and her siblings could not gain admission to higher education institutions because of their ethnic and class backgrounds. That situation served as the final blow to her parents, who had hitherto made the decision to stay on in the country when so many others had left, determined to ride out the tough times. In 1988, a relative living in the United States sponsored her family's immigration. The events in her family's life following 1975 fostered a strong sense in Qùynh that "nothing" belonged to her family, that things could be taken away from them at "any minute". She likened that lingering fear to always having "the feeling that you are standing on a rug that could get pulled from under you any moment".[25] Recently, an unsuccessful financial investment involving local business partners and government stakeholders served as a bitter reminder to her about the tenuous nature of commercial partnerships and investments in the country.

> I felt like I had been badly burned in that deal. I was played out by my business partners. And there's nothing much I can do about it except to accept it, learn my lesson and move on. I think that experience has made me more cautious and realistic about any financial engagements made here.[26]

Although she was not sure about where her permanent home would be, Qùynh said that home for her at some point in the future was likely to be in the United States. Qùynh felt that the United States was a better place to raise a family than Vietnam because it had better health care facilities and a better education system. Hồ Chí Minh City was, however, her home "for the foreseeable future". It was a viable home base, where she enjoyed her work and social relationships with local staff, friends and patients. She also wanted her young daughters to be well-acquainted with the Vietnamese language and culture, something which she felt they could only achieve in Vietnam.

> It just makes practical sense for us to be based here for now. For our girls to learn about their culture. For our careers too, it makes better sense to be based here. We both agreed that our

careers had more potential to grow and help make a difference in
society here [than in the United States]. I guess that really makes
a difference, knowing that what you do goes towards helping
society. It's the satisfaction and meaning your job brings to you
and those around you that really matters.[27]

In the future though, Quỳnh was not opposed to the idea of becoming
an "astronaut" mother, wife and doctor, and shuttling regularly
between Vietnam and the United States at various intervals of each
year, both for personal and professional reasons.

Hoàn's and Quỳnh's narratives demonstrate the diverse and
multilayered connections that returnees have with Vietnam. They
highlight the paradox of home, security and belonging that many
overseas Vietnamese, not to mention non-Vietnamese expatriates
and returning migrants in general, confront. An individual's sense of
security comes in many forms, and varies with her or his priorities,
goals and stage in life. While Australia and the United States provided
them with a sense of political and economic security, Hoàn and
Quỳnh also found those countries bereft of creative challenge and
social meaning. Vietnam, on the other hand, was full of creative
opportunities and had a vibrant social life. Yet its political system and
economic infrastructure failed to give them a sense of political and
economic security. No single setting meets and protects one's best
interests and security in totality. Having two homes and possessing
multiple, and differentiated, senses of belonging therefore represents a
desirable and practical transnational strategy on the part of diasporics
and returned migrants like Hoàn and Quỳnh.

The narratives also reveal the roots of my informants' sense of
insecurity in Vietnam. Hoàn's and Quỳnh's narratives demonstrate the
lack of faith and trust in the country's legal and political system that
was the source of their uncertainty about "home" and their futures in
Vietnam. In part, this fear and insecurity were an inheritance from
their parents' generation, whose members lost so much when they
fled the country more than three decades ago. The narratives suggest
that having a sense of security — in this case, politico-legal and
economic security — is an important prerequisite to my informants'

considering a place home. At present, neither the current ambiguities in state laws regarding overseas Vietnamese nor the general malaise affecting certain aspects of governance foster a sense of security among returnees. Central to my informants' concerns was the fear that their economic — business and property — rights and civil rights would not be safeguarded and upheld in Vietnam. Civil rights pertain to the right to a fair trial, and the existence of proper channels of legal recourse and representation. Conversely, only when the government addresses these concerns and takes concrete measures to ensure that the civil rights of not just overseas Vietnamese, but all Vietnamese nationals in the country are upheld will Hoàn and Qùynh consider Vietnam "home" in a deeper sense.

Home was also where Hoàn and Qùynh wanted to be. My informants continued to make Vietnam "home" because it fulfilled specific needs that they considered important at the current stage of their lives and that they found lacking in their home countries. Beyond political and legal rights, returnees' sense of home was also manifest in their desire for greater meaning and opportunity in life. In moving to Vietnam and choosing to stay there, my informants may have found a different form of belonging and security, one that they felt was absent or hard to attain in the countries in which they had grown up. This sense of belonging manifested itself in job opportunities and satisfaction, in being part of a larger community of fellow *Việt Kiều* and co-ethnics. This sense of ethnic belonging is expressed in the sentiment, "Here, I am among my own people. People who look like me."[28] I suggest that being among their "own kind" gives this generation of returnees a sense of community and belonging that they never had in their home countries. My informants also pointed out that living and working in Vietnam has also increased their self-confidence and enabled them to have a sense of purpose or meaning in their lives. They seemed to be in a "transition" of sorts with regard to their life stages and personal goals and ideals. Their relocation to Vietnam has enabled personal growth and a change of perspective that would have been impossible, had they remained in their home countries or moved elsewhere.

Conclusion

During the last two decades, the Vietnamese state has implemented a number of policies with the goal of reaching out to the diverse overseas Vietnamese communities, of encouraging a greater sense of belonging, and of increasing *Việt Kiều* contributions to national development. The underlying assumption in contemporary state discourse is that overseas Vietnamese are essentially Vietnamese — wherever they are, regardless of when they left the country and for that matter, of whether or not they were born in Vietnam. Discursively, the state has made an effort to embrace overseas Vietnamese as an important and equal part of the nation-family. However, the analysis presented here has also shown that state policy towards and treatment of overseas Vietnamese have been far from consistent. The state has the conflicting desires both to embrace overseas Vietnamese and yet to keep vigilant watch over certain "troublesome" segments of the diasporic community. The state also seems to have its own reservations and fears about opening up all the valves for overseas Vietnamese to return and participate in nation building. The result of this uneasy juxtaposition is evident in the conspicuous disparity between the "open spirit" of official policies and their actual implementation "on the ground". The ambiguities and inconsistencies in state policies may, in part, be symptomatic of the persistent fear of the political threat that overseas Vietnamese can pose to the regime.

More importantly, as a result of these inconsistencies and ambiguities the state has yet to demonstrate and convince overseas Vietnamese — whether those living in Vietnam or those in the diaspora — that the regime is sincere in its desire to "close the past and look to the future". Through its obliqueness and failure to address past actions and misgivings in a direct manner, the Vietnamese government continues to alienate a significant segment of the diaspora. One of the basic challenges facing the Vietnamese government is to create a connection to overseas Vietnamese that takes into account the diversity of political, cultural, regional and generational identities that exist within and outside of Vietnam.

Unless the state begins to address and court each segment of the diaspora differently, and to acknowledge past misgivings directly, the receptivity among overseas Vietnamese to the state's overtures is bound to remain limited, lacklustre and sceptical. The outcome of the state's decisions, and the manner in which it implements them, will no doubt have a significant bearing not only on the number of *Việt Kiều* coming back to Vietnam and reclaiming Vietnamese nationality, but also on Vietnam's future socio-economic and, possibly, political development.

The narratives of second-generation *Việt Kiều* returnees illuminate the fact that its members define home and belonging in myriad and complex ways that refute simplistic answers to questions about the connection among place, culture and identity. My informants perceived Vietnam as "home-for-now" because it fulfilled specific needs for security that they considered important at the current stage of their lives and that they found lacking in their home countries. This sense of security relates specifically to job opportunities and satisfaction, and to the sense of belonging to a community of *Việt Kiều* and co-ethnics. Individuals' senses of security and belonging vary and come in many forms in different national settings, communities and generations. No one setting meets and protects one's best interests and security, in totality at least (cf. Eriksen et al. 2010). Informants' seemingly paradoxical ability to feel at home in Hồ Chí Minh City while remaining rooted in their home countries represents a strategy through which second-generation *Việt Kiều* mitigate insecurities inherent in both home country and host country, even as they enhance their socio-economic positions and life opportunities.

Recent research on return migration to the Caribbean, Italy, Greece and Japan (Potter 2005; Wessendorf 2007; King and Christou 2008; Tsuda 2009) reveals that second-generation migrants are in search of both "roots" and "routes" (cf. Clifford 1997, p. 78), made possible by economic conditions in both the sending and receiving countries. The second generation's multi-stranded ties and connections to their home countries and to their familial homelands together provide safety nets for them not effectively

granted in the social, legal and political systems of each national setting (cf. Smart and Smart 1998, p. 108). In returning to their families' country of origin, they do not exchange one form of membership in a national community for another but rather enact various aspects of their lives across borders (cf. Massey and Jess 1995, p. 64; Levitt and Waters 2002, p. 124). The ability to attain different forms of security and belonging in Vietnam is one of the main reasons that overseas Vietnamese continue to make it their home and will continue to do so in the near future.

The wide and varied experiences of second-generation *Việt Kiều* in Vietnam not only illuminate the ambivalent nature of citizenship and social and kinship ties, but also demonstrate that both citizenship and these ties are multilayered and continually evolving. This finding resonates with current research on diasporic return migration in other national settings (cf. Marjowitz and Stefansson 2004; Potter and Conway 2005; Tsuda 2009; Wessendorf 2007). The article, however, illustrates not just the ambiguous aspects of the homecoming process, but also its transformative aspects. In particular, it highlights the agency of second-generation *Việt Kiều* in recreating home and belonging in their parents' homeland. It demonstrated that "home" for my informants was a "lived space", one "continually created and recreated through every day practices" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 23). Such homemaking practices include having meaningful work and social lives in Vietnam. Over time, this "space" has become a meaningful "place" and "home" for the majority of my respondents.

The discussion here has also highlighted two important dimensions of the Vietnamese diaspora and the nature of transnational ties. First, the Vietnamese diaspora is multifaceted, fragmented and complex, particularly along generational lines. Through the lens provided by the experiences of the second-generation *Việt Kiều* in Hồ Chí Minh City, the discussion has shown not only that this segment of the diaspora has dynamic and complex relations with the ancestral homeland, but also that such relations are continually evolving. Its members' engagement with Vietnam has little or nothing to do

with state discourse on "homeland" and "primordial ties", or with furthering the goals of exile politics. Their decision to move to and stay in Vietnam is above all a matter of furthering personal interests and goals linked to their stage in life. Second, the discussion has also demonstrated that transnational ties with the homeland do not "die" with first-generation immigrants. Rather, they remain very much "alive" with the second generation (cf. Kasinitz et al. 2002, p. 119; Portes 2001, pp. 189–90; Rumbaut 2002, p. 90). Second-generation *Việt Kiều* remain connected to their parents' homeland in ways that are dynamic, complex and continually evolving. Likewise, members of this generation of *Việt Kiều* seem better positioned to learn about and to experience contemporary Vietnam in ways that are much more flexible and varied than members of their parents' or grandparents' generations have been or are able to. Although Vietnam may not be the perfect "home" for second-generation *Việt Kiều*, living and working there has enabled them to create and to feel "at home" in some critical respects.

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NOTES

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 "to reside temporarily away from home". *Việt Kiều* is a popular term of reference for overseas Vietnamese used by the state and people in Vietnam for overseas Vietnamese. In my research, I use the terms *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.

2. There remain unresolved issues surrounding the precise definition of who comprises the second generation in population and migration studies (King and Christou 2008, p. 2; Espiritu and Trần Thơm 2002, p. 376; Rumbaut 2004, p. 1162). According to Portes and Rumbaut (2002, p. 350), the second generation refer to offspring of the first generation: who are either born in the new country, or who arrive and experience their formative development there. Most of my informants left Vietnam as

children, although there are a handful who were born overseas. In order to maintain clarity and brevity throughout the discussion, I refer to my informants as second-generation overseas Vietnamese.

3. I use the term "state" to refer to the "totality of political authority in Vietnam" (Heng 2004, p. 144). In Vietnam, political power is concentrated in one political party, the Communist Party of Vietnam. It dominates the government and thus 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, p. 3). Due to the Party's political dominance and pervasiveness, Vietnam has also been described as being a Party-state (cf. Heng 2004).

4. For instance, *Đông Du* (Go East) was a Vietnamese political movement established by Phan Bội Châu at the start of the twentieth century that encouraged young Vietnamese to go to Japan to study, in the hope of training a new era of revolutionaries to rise against French colonial rule. Other notable proponents of *Đông Du* included Phan Châu Trinh and Cường Để (See Goscha 1999, pp. 7–8).

5. For Chinese residents in South Vietnam, failure to register their Vietnamese citizenship could lead to a range of detrimental repercussions, such as incurring heavier taxation, being barred from certain trades and occupations, and having their food rations significantly reduced (Chang 1982, p. 200).

6. According to local press reports, nearly two million overseas Vietnamese reside in the city, which has a total population of ten to twelve million (*Cong An* 2013). This percentage is much higher than other urban centres in the country, and it reflects the fact that most *Việt Kiều*, especially those from Western countries, have family ties in Southern Vietnam. Apart from being the commercial heart of the country, where economic opportunities and job possibilities abound, Hồ Chí Minh City is also a bustling metropolis and a globalizing city with vibrant social and cultural spaces.

7. For information on the origins and impact of *đổi mới*, see Boothroyd and Phạm Xuân Nam (2000).

8. *Việt Kiều* took on derogatory connotations, such as those of being traitors, carpetbaggers, arrogant show-offs, people rich beyond belief, and the know-it-all types who thought that they were better than other Vietnamese.

9. See for instance the illuminating discussions related to the use of *Việt Kiều* in Vũ Dũng (2007). See also the discussion on the use of *Việt Kiều* in the academic forum, Vietnam Studies Group (2001).

10. Official statistics indicate that about seventy-five per cent of the total overseas Vietnamese population hold two or three nationalities. Therefore,

the recent revisions to the country's nationality law were construed as a pragmatic as well as a timely move on the part of the government (*CPV Online Newspaper* 2008).

11. Lương Bạch Vân, the liaison committee's chairwoman, referring to recent amendments to the Housing Law (*Báo Mới* 2010*a*).

12. Văn explained to the officials that the reason for the disparity was that her family lost many important personal identification documents when they left Vietnam in the late 1970s. At the refugee processing centre in Malaysia, Văn's parents had to provide an "estimated" date of birth for Văn and her siblings for documentation purposes. In all, it took her over a year to track down the relevant authorities in the Mekong Delta, where she was born, and obtain paperwork proving that she was born there.

13. Interview with "Văn", July 2009, Hồ Chí Minh City. In order to protect the anonymity of my respondents, pseudonyms have been used for individuals and any defining characteristics that might inform their identity have been altered or excluded.

14. Interview, March 2011, Hồ Chí Minh City.

15. Throughout the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, there were a series of high-profile arrests of overseas Vietnamese business people and dissidents. In 1997, Nguyễn Trung Trực, a Vietnamese-Australian, then managing director of Peregrine Capital Vietnam, was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison on charges of illegal investment and tax evasion. The following year, Vietnamese-Dutch Trịnh Vĩnh Bình served eighteen months in prison and had his investments and assets, which were worth US$20–30 million, confiscated. Although the allegations against him were later proven false, Trịnh never received an official apology for his wrongful incarceration. Neither did he recover the assets that had been confiscated earlier (Đỗ Trinh 2005). In 2003, Vietnamese-French Nguyễn Gia Thiều's US$40 million business, Dong Nam Telecom Services, was targeted for a state crackdown on charges of tax evasion by local rivals with strong Communist Party connections (Johnson 2003). During this period, dozens of overseas Vietnamese were also arrested and imprisoned under charges of political treason, subversion, and more recently, "political terrorism" (see Hua 2006; Thayer 2008, pp. 15–16). In turn, these scandals have become the stuff of urban legend, serving as cautionary tales to would-be overseas Vietnamese investors about the unpredictability of Vietnam's judicial system and the lack of accountability and recourse for financial and legal conflicts.

16. While Hoàn's and Quỳnh's narratives do not encapsulate the full spectrum of the sentiments and experiences of home and belonging of all my informants or, for that matter, of all *Việt Kiều* returnees, they do highlight a number of

recurrent and salient themes. All of my informants went to Vietnam with "flexible" plans to try out life in the country for two or three years; none had arrived with the expectation of finding "home" or "belonging" there; and all made the choice to remain in Vietnam despite their ambivalent sentiments and their ambiguous experiences there. Furthermore, Hòan's and Qùynh's narratives clearly demonstrate that changes in socio-economic environment or personal circumstances can bring about shifts in career plans, individual goals and notions of "home" and "belonging".

17. Interview, May 2008, Hồ Chí Minh City.
18. Interview, June 2008, Hồ Chí Minh City.
19. Interview, October 2008, Hồ Chí Minh City.
20. Interview, August 2008, Hồ Chí Minh City.
21. Interview, June 2008, Hồ Chí Minh City
22. Interviews with Qùynh, September 2008–June 2009, Hồ Chí Minh City.
23. Interview, September 2008, Hồ Chí Minh City.
24. Interview, January 2009, Hồ Chí Minh City.
25. Interview, January 2009, Hồ Chí Minh City.
26. Interview, January 2009, Hồ Chí Minh City.
27. Interview, June 2009, Hồ Chí Minh City. Qùynh's husband is Vietnamese-American and runs an IT consulting company in the city.
28. Interview, January 2009, Hồ Chí Minh City.

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