2. Exile and Return: Unbinding Diasporic Space

In the early 1970s, the overseas Vietnamese population numbered only around 100,000, and was located mostly in Vietnam’s neighbours Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, as well as in its former colonial master, France. Today there are around 2 million people of Vietnamese origin in the developed countries. Relatively speaking, the formation of this diaspora was not a gradual process but an explosion, the result of the traumatic events of 1975, the depredations of the “closed door” [dong cua] period (1975-1986) and the uncertainties and opportunities of the “open door” [mo cua] one. Consequently, the Vietnamese diaspora in the West has tended to be seen as a victim diaspora, following the classic Jewish model of a population scattered to the winds by a single catastrophic event - i.e. national reunification under the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and its aftermath. While on the one hand this is a fair and necessary interpretation, on the other it has important limitations. As Cohen (1997) demonstrates, even the Jewish experience of diaspora has tended to be too narrowly interpreted. While the grand narratives of exodus and suffering have a basis in real events, they form a mythology that obscures a diversity of diasporic experiences and identities. In the Vietnamese case, the “one way” trajectory of the fleeing refugee and teleology of deferred return of the exile have operated as a hegemonic spatio-temporal frame for diasporic identity. We now need to complement our understanding of these narratives with one that incorporates “back and forth” transnational trajectories and teleologies. Perhaps the major critique offered by the transnationalism literature - and it is one which has often been presented polemically - is
that the social scientific production of knowledge about migrant identities has tended to be limited or distorted by the application of territorially bounded social science categories to identities which are in practice constituted across boundaries. Theoretical point scoring aside, there is much to be gained analytically from unbinding the spatial categories through which overseas Vietnamese identities have traditionally been thought. The bulk of the literature on the overseas Vietnamese conceptualises them as ethnic minority communities settled in host nations, and analyses of the processes of identity formation are firmly situated within this local context. A small number of studies comprehend the diasporic dimensions of overseas Vietnamese identity, but by and large reproduce the elite-sponsored assertion that the Vietnamese diaspora is an insular exile one. The blanket application of dichotomising paradigms such as forced vs voluntary migration tends to close off the possibilities of transnational mobility and cross-border identification. In this chapter, I wish to address these issues both theoretically and empirically through an examination of the transformations which exile, as a politics of return, has undergone as a result of Doi Moi and normalisation. I will argue that, while exile identity and the related metaphor of refugee identity retain a great deal of affective force, the “ethics of immobility” implied in these territorially delimited subjectivities has been thoroughly challenged by a heterodox politics of return. We shall see how overseas Vietnamese have, in their peregrinations, begun to rewrite the master narratives of diasporic identity, bringing about the privatisation and pluralisation of this once public and singular politics.
Waves of Migration from Vietnam

In order for us to get a better understanding of the heterogeneity of those leaving Vietnam, and thus offer a critique of the totalising narratives sketched above, I wish to briefly recount the history of mass migration from Vietnam to the West. This history, although short, is complex and composed of a bewildering number of waves. I will attempt to periodise it here in terms of events in Vietnam.

Pre 1975

Prior to the fall of Saigon, a small number of RVN elites, including students, adoptees, academics, bureaucrats, and military trainees were resident in the US, Australia and other wartime allies of the South (see Reyes 1999: 107-9). In 1975 there were some 500 Colombo Plan and privately funded Vietnamese students in Australia.

Fall of Saigon (1975)

The fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975 to advancing communist forces precipitated the departure of a first wave of evacuees. This group consisted of around 135 000 individuals, mostly military and government elites having close ties to the US, where the majority of them were resettled.

Closed Door Period (1975-1986)

Subsequent to the fall of Saigon, a second wave of refugees, the so-called “boat people”, began to depart Vietnam. This group comprised a broader cross-section of the population,
including peasants and workers as well as members of the petite bourgeoisie and middle and upper classes. It included a disproportionately high number of members of ethnic minorities, particularly the Chinese Vietnamese. Amongst this group were many who had had the prior experience of displacement, even multiple displacements, as internal refugees during wartime. Members of this group typically experienced stays of up to several years in refugee camps in regional countries. It has been estimated that up to 50% of those who left Vietnam by boat in this period were lost at sea.

The years 1975 to 1978 saw a trickle of departures by boat. The nationalisation of the southern economy and contingent persecution of ethnic Chinese Vietnamese in 1979 saw this trickle swell into a flood, such that by the end of 1979 some 400 000 “boat people” had left Vietnam. In order to deal with this crisis, an International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees (ICICR) was convened in Geneva. It was decided that boat arrivals in regional countries would be given temporary refuge in camps before being resettled in third countries (principally the US, Australia, France and Canada). For its part, Hanoi signed an agreement with the UNHCR to permit legal emigration from Vietnam through an Orderly Departure Program (ODP). The disorganised exodus peaked in 1981, and by 1984 ODP departures outnumbered illegal departures for the first time (Thayer 1989: 45-6). Thus the first half of the 1980s saw a decrease in the number of refugee arrivals in countries of resettlement and an increase in those arriving as migrants. The ODP migrants were a heterogeneous group, including family reunion migrants, the so-called Amerasians, former political prisoners, and those who had been associated with the old regime, the US military and other American institutions in Vietnam (Rutledge 1992: 65).
Post Doi Moi (1986 to present)

In 1987, the trend towards legal over illegal departures was reversed. In 1986 disorganised departures numbered 20,000, in 1987, 48,000 and in 1988, 48,000 (Thayer 1989: 46). This wave was, unlike the previous one, a nation-wide movement, not a predominantly southern one. This new, post-reform wave of illegal deportees coincided with increased rejection rates and lowered intakes in the countries of resettlement, and a less sympathetic attitude in regional countries of first landfall. A policy of accepting all arrivals as political refugees (arguably an ideologically motivated stance on the part of the US and its Cold War allies, aimed at destabilising communist Vietnam) gave way to a more critical application of the UN criteria for refugee status. Nguyen Co Thach, Vietnam’s Foreign Minister, remarked in 1989 “Western countries over the last ten years considered them [the boat people] political refugees in order to encourage their departure. Now, these countries consider them economic refugees so as to force their repatriation” (in Thayer 1989: 51). A second ICICR in 1989 saw the adoption of a Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA). The key elements of the CPA were maintenance of first asylum, screening of new arrivals to determine their status, resettlement of those meeting the criteria for refugees, and provision for voluntary repatriation of those not meeting the criteria.

The context of emigration in post reform Vietnam was complex. The economic situation in the country was chaotic, and it appears that decisions to emigrate were strongly connected to the experience of poverty. Amongst migrants arriving in Hong Kong in 1989 from north and central Vietnam, where economic conditions were
particularly bad, only 10-12% met the UN criteria for refugee status. Higher rates of eligibility applied to those departing from the south, however (ibid: 52). Alongside poverty, we should also consider the more liberal environment of post Doi Moi Vietnam as a factor in creating this wave. An easing of restrictions on movement and a decrease in internal surveillance and policing created more opportunities for flight than had existed previously. We might also cite consumer aspirations created by an influx of foreign commodities into Vietnam’s newly opened markets as having fuelled the desire to escape to a better life overseas (see Hitchcox 1994). Cao Ngoc Quynh notes that possibly hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese nationals took advantage of the relative ease with which exit visas from Vietnam and tourist and student visas for the former Easter Bloc countries could be obtained in the 1990s. If the post-1975 refugees were termed the boat people, the economic migrants/refugees who became illegal immigrants in these countries (as a stepping stone to Western Europe) might be termed the “air people” (in Hoang Khoi Phong 2001).

The ICICR decided to formally conclude the CPA in 1996. In 1998, the port of first asylum policy was scrapped in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand, and since then Vietnamese arrivals in ASEAN countries have been treated as “illegal immigrants” rather than as legitimate claimants to asylum. In the early 1990s, the policy of voluntary repatriation shifted to one of forced repatriation on the part of regional countries. In 1991, the Hong Kong government secured the agreement of the Vietnamese government to an Orderly Repatriation Program (ORP) - allegedly under pressure from China to empty the Vietnamese refugee camps before the handover. Claimants to refugee status were forcibly
repatriated, frequently with violent resistance, from camps across Southeast Asia throughout the nineties. The UNHCR monitored and assisted returnees until 2000.

The early 1990s saw a mini-peak in migration to the US, largely the result of an influx of former and current re-education camp detainees under an agreement with the SRV (Zhou and Bankston 2000: 4). Since the mid 1990s, Vietnamese migration to the US has changed in character. While a substantial proportion of entrants still come as refugees, family reunion migration is becoming more dominant, and is expected to eventually eclipse the refugee intake almost entirely (Zhou and Bankston 2000: 4). In Australia, the extreme tightening of family reunion quotas in favour of an increase in places for skilled migrants has seen Vietnamese immigration drop off dramatically. Boat arrivals from Vietnam on Australian shores have virtually ceased.

The advent of forced repatriation, alongside a relative improvement of economic conditions in Vietnam, has ushered in what some scholars refer to as a “post-refugee” era of Vietnamese migration (Project Diaspora 2001). Increasingly, those leaving Vietnam are doing so not as refugees or emigrants, but as sojourners, students and workers, particularly to perform contract labour in East Asian nations such as Japan and Taiwan.

The Social Space of Exile

Despite claims for its universality, consensuality and naturalness, the anticommunist conception of the diaspora as being “in exile” [lưu vong] is essentially a middle class one, espoused most rigorously by a core of first-wave political refugees who brought with them considerable symbolic capital from the old society, and by later arrivals with like attributes. This wave consisted of some 135 000 refugees who left
around the time of the fall of Saigon, principally for the US. They were distinctly different from subsequent waves in that:

They were by comparison, better educated, wealthier, and had political connections within the US government. Many spoke English or at least had a working familiarity with the language. They included high-ranking soldiers, professional people who had worked with American personnel or companies in Vietnam, ethnic Vietnamese who had been educated within the United States educational system, and individuals who had family ties to America (Rutledge 1992: 3-4).

A small number of these refugees came to Australia (539 arrived in 1975) (BIPR 1994: 3; see also Viviani 1996: 102, Lewins and Ly 1985). Members of this group were able to use their educational and professional capital, as well as their anticommunist credentials, to establish dominance over community politics and media from the early days of overseas settlement (McCoy 1996: 168-197, Viviani 1996: 102, 120-121). Later arrivals that shared their attributes were able to become members of the elite, thereby enlarging it and reinforcing its dominance. Key to this process have been arrivals who have suffered internment and “re-education” [hoc tap cai tao] at the hands of the socialist government in post-unification Vietnam as a result of their wartime allegiances. Such immigrants have served to reinforce the image of communist Vietnam as an oppressive dictatorship, buoy up the elite’s (self-conferred) exile status, and feed the elite-sponsored representation of the Vietnamese diaspora as an anticommunist, refugee one.
Multicultural ideologies in the various host nations have played a role in promoting the hegemony of a refugee/exile identity. Humphrey notes how “the official homogenising constructions of multiculturalism can be used by ‘community’ representatives both to legitimate their political claims to speak for others and to constitute the group” (Humphrey 1998: 158-9). Historically, those in diasporic Vietnamese communities with the requisite cultural capital to speak for and constitute the group have been political refugees. But while the Vietnamese “refugee” label has been a self-conferred classification, highlighting persecution at the hands of the communists, it has also been an other-conferred one, imposed by the immigration bureaucracies of countries of settlement, a process which begins in the refugee camps. Claiming it has in the past been a political imperative in securing communal rights and citizenship in the face of racist sentiment in countries of settlement, often expressed in the accusation that the arrivals were not “real refugees” (“Tham Viet Nam...”, DfE 1980: 37). In Australia the state has in the past supported the formation of a refugee identity, chiefly as a means of justifying the settlement of a large group of Asian entrants to Australia in the face of anti-Asian sentiment. On the other hand, however, it has set limits to the pursuit of an anticommmunist homeland politics, especially when this has clashed with Australian foreign policy (for instance over trade and diplomatic normalisation with Vietnam (see Chapter Five)). One must also keep in mind the context of the ongoing efflux of boat people from Vietnam, who through the late 1980s were increasingly designated “economic migrants” and refused asylum by their countries of landfall. Overseas Vietnamese communities continued to represent these emigrants as victims of the regime and to lobby for them to be granted refugee status well into the 1990s. With the
resettlement of the last few hundred asylum seekers still remaining in camps in Hong Kong in 2001, it appears that this politics has come to an end. Currently, the most pressing migration-related concern of Vietnamese community associations in Australia is to reverse cuts to family reunion migration quotas made by John Howard’s Liberal government in the 1990s.

While diasporic organisations and host nation institutions have clashed about the granting of refugee status to post Doi Moi emigrants from Vietnam, they have nevertheless shared an understanding that a “refugee” subjectivity implies what we might call an ethics of immobility. Refugee status suggests a temporary but complete severing of links with a place one had to leave under compulsion and to which one cannot return. According to this orthodox definition, a refugee identity implies a single trajectory: that of flight from the homeland into exile. The true refugee cannot return until the situation leading to his or her exodus - a natural disaster, war, persecutory political regime etc - has been ameliorated. One who returns before this dilutes his or her refugee status, and leaves him or herself open in the eyes of the country of asylum to be seen as an economic refugee or migrant. These classifications reflect in turn upon his or her fellow refugees, and thus there exists a communal imperative to remain true to one’s refugee trajectory. Return is not a private but a public matter. These conceptions have acted to firmly “place” overseas Vietnamese within a local constituted by the national fields of the host societies and/or the diaspora itself as an imaginary nation. Indeed, this emplacement has in the past been supervised both by the host society and organisations and individuals in the community.
Representations of Diasporic Identity in Host Nation Scholarship

Scholarship on the Vietnamese diaspora has typically acknowledged that there exist significant intra-communal differences stemming from differences in motivation for leaving Vietnam and in “vintage” of arrival. Yet this individuated view tends to yield to a communal perspective in which the public identity of the community is defined as a refugee one. While most studies acknowledge the symbolic violence of elites in imposing a politicised refugee identity on overseas Vietnamese, they also tend to naturalise this identity by representing it as being ultimately consensual and universal. Mandy Thomas, for instance, speaks of a “mutual code of exile” (Thomas 1999: 24), while Nancy Viviani asserts that overseas Vietnamese are bound together by the experiences they share as refugees ((in Thomas 1999: 21). Malkki notes a tendency that exists in the intellectual project of defining “the refugee experience” to

seize upon political or historical processes and then to inscribe aspects of those processes in the bodies and psyches of the people who are undergoing them ...

Almost like an essentialised anthropological “tribe”, refugees thus become not just a mixed category of people sharing a certain legal status; they become “a culture”, “an identity” ... “a social world” ... or “a community” (Malkki 1995: 511).

Thus Adelaida Reyes, in order to constitute her object of study in her work on music and the Vietnamese refugee experience, excludes those such as the ethnic Chinese Vietnamese and the “1.5” generation, whilst defining the heterogeneous group that
arrived under the Orderly Departure Programme (ODP) monolithically as refugees (Reyes 1999: 5). While many of these migrants no doubt underwent various degrees of persecution prior to departing the SRV, defining the entire ODP group as refugees is a distortion, to say the least. Strictly, it is inaccurate to assume that even those resettled as “refugees” prior to the advent of the ODP fit homogeneously into this category. An unknown proportion of the “boat people”, that broader cross-section of the population which departed Vietnam after the military and governmental evacuees, were in fact people who were not at risk of being singled out for political persecution in Vietnam. Rather, they were so-called economic refugees who took advantage of an ideologically motivated US policy to classify all comers from communist Vietnam as political refugees until this was made more selective in the mid eighties (Viviani 1996: 29, Palumbo-Liu 1999: 238-9). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that even among the first wave evacuees, there was a significant proportion of “opportunists” (Kelly 1977: 1-2).

In foregrounding this, I don’t intend to question the legitimacy of Vietnamese emigrants’ self-identification as refugees, or dispute the validity of their claims to resettlement and citizenship. In the current political climate in Australia, the critique I am seeking to make is a sensitive one indeed. As a matter of policy the Australian government now systematically contravenes the terms of the International Convention on Refugees, of which it is a signatory. The Australian state imposes mandatory detention on asylum seekers arriving unannounced on its shores, denies them access to judicial review of their applications, and subjects them to forms of physical violence such as forced sedation and the use of water cannons. In my own politics I favour a more flexible set of UN criteria for refugee status, an end to mandatory detention and a radical increase in
humanitarian and family reunion intakes. Thus my critique is not meant to suggest that some among the Vietnamese in Australia and elsewhere are not “real” refugees and thus do not deserve citizenship. Rather, I wish to make the point that refugee identities are not essential, but rather are constituted both in the process of leaving and arriving. A public refugee identity is an amalgam of the motivations for and context of departure, and of the experience of being “hailed” in state, community and social scientific discourses on arrival.

Historically, this hailing has had two effects. One is to flatten out differences in mode of departure from Vietnam, motivation for departure, and self-identification in the overseas context. The second is to place overseas Vietnamese within a bounded space of exile that cuts off “active” links with the homeland. The application of territorialised social science categories has compounded this process, effectively making invisible both the diasporic and transnational aspects of overseas Vietnamese identity. This has meant that overseas Vietnamese populations have typically been treated as isolated refugee or ethnic minority communities contained entirely within the boundaries of their host nations (see for instance the overviews Haines 1989, Rutledge 1992, Viviani 1996). Cunningham and Nguyen (2000) are an exception in having approached the overseas Vietnamese as a diaspora, but focus on solidarity and exchange between diasporic populations - specifically, media flows from the diasporic centre of cultural production in California to “peripheral” diasporic communities like those in Australia. They do this at the expense of exploring the relationship between diaspora and homeland, other than as a “passive” link constituted through cultural maintenance in the diaspora. They, like other scholars, have tended to accept an elite-sponsored exile paradigm, where the diaspora is
seen as possessing a self-sufficient culture and identity. Such idealised representations have often been mediated for non-Vietnamese social scientists by community gerontocrats or “1.5 generation” elites. Smith and Tarallo have looked at the overseas Vietnamese as “transnational refugees” who maintain a cultural bifocality. However, they assert that, in contrast with voluntary migrants, this bifocality becomes the source of much “psychic pain”, because the refugees’ “ability to return or to move between ‘here’ and ‘there’ has been precluded by military defeat” (Smith and Tarallo 1995: 53). This interpretation, again, conforms to the orthodox exile spatial imaginary. Mandy Thomas (1997) seems to be alone in having begun to explore the issue of “crossing over” the border between diaspora and homeland.

**Heterodox Spatial Stories**

In insisting on “transnationalising” our understanding of overseas Vietnamese identities, I do not wish to challenge the fact that anticommunism is still a powerful affective force in the diaspora. Indeed, as we saw in the Tran Van Truong protests, this politics has the power to unify - albeit momentarily - generations which are all too often in conflict over other issues of identity. I should also point out that I wish in no way to belittle the trauma of the horrific experiences of war, oppression and flight that many overseas Vietnamese have undergone. In the passage from individual histories to a communal narrative of identity, however, these experiences are selected, reinterpreted and mythologised to form a doxa that centres some diasporic subjectivities while marginalising and making abject others. Exilic nationalisms, as Nacify (1993: 162) notes,
are discourses that act to *suppress* internal differences, producing a (momentary) unity or intensity around an affective symbol.

The intracommunal difference that such identities suppress inevitably reasserts itself. The dominance of exile and refugee as public identities has always existed alongside a plurality of alternative, subaltern conceptions of the diaspora’s relationship with the homeland - ways of relating to Vietnam far less grounded in political and nationalist ideals and more in complex personal histories, trans-border familial solidarities, economic necessities and entrepreneurial opportunities. The subsequent arrival in the diaspora of second, third and fourth waves of less politicised refugees (the “passive hurt”), economic migrants, family reunion migrants, northerners and ethnic Chinese Vietnamese (Viviani 1996: 104); the processes of generational change, integration and assimilation; and the advent of the Doi Moi program of economic reform and reglobalisation in Vietnam, have all served to disrupt and challenge narrow, essentialising definitions of the diaspora as a militantly anticommunist refugee or victim one. The make-up of the diaspora has been gradually transformed from without, to the extent that refugees now make up only around 65% of the Vietnam-born population of Australia (BIPR 1994: 2). Adding the second generation dilutes this figure further. The end of the outflow of refugees from Vietnam in the nineties means that this proportion will further decrease in the future. As we saw above, the trend towards a tightening of immigration controls in Australia and other First World nations means that refugees and family reunion migrants will most likely be joined by sojourners rather than permanent migrants. The heterogeneity of these trajectories to (and from) the diaspora means that there exists a plurality of spatial stories within it, and not only those of flight and exile.
In the decade subsequent to the end of the war, elites’ moral and executive authority over the diaspora’s relationship to the SRV and the politics of return remained virtually unquestioned. This state of things was guaranteed by the fact that the political situation in Vietnam was such that return was near impossible, as well as by the support the exile position received from the host nations’ Vietnam policies. The US continued its war with Vietnam by economic means, pursuing an embargo on trade and strongly discouraging US citizens from visiting Vietnam. These measures were observed by most of the other host nations. In this period, exile politics were dominated by visions of a glorious armed return to fight the communists. A key function of elite-dominated Vietnamese Community Associations was (and still is) to “maintain the correct political line on the homeland, which is no contact, no support and no return until the communist government falls” (Viviani 1996: 121). This mostly took the form of symbolic violence, but in some cases erupted into physical violence, including cases of assault, arson and the “sentencing” and execution of those deemed to be procommunist by groups such as the Vietnamese Nation-Building Party for the Extermination of Communists (see Awanohara 1990, Reyes 1999: 114-5, Bousquet 1991: 6-8).

Events in Vietnam were however to upset this political balance. In addition to effecting a partial opening up of Vietnamese markets to foreign inputs, the Doi Moi reforms also saw an opening up of the country to overseas Vietnamese tourism. This meant that from the mid 1980s, the possibility of relatively safe and easy return to Vietnam for family visits, holidays and business had come into being. Elites found that for the first time their moral authority and hegemonic vision of diasporic identity was being seriously challenged. In response to the advent of return trips to Vietnam,
Vietnamese Community Associations initially took a hard stand, and fought to prevent people going back. They even more sternly opposed any economic and trade links. A convention on relations with Hanoi held in Sydney in April 1987 “passed several resolutions which called for storekeepers to boycott the importation or sale of any items from Vietnam, asked the community to boycott any stores which persist in selling these items and to show ‘personal judgement’ in the provision of remittances to family members in Vietnam so that the transfer of finance wouldn’t assist the Hanoi government” (McCoy 1996: 185). These measures were accompanied by (unofficial) threats of violence made against returnees, as well as plans to boycott individuals and businesses with ties to Vietnam. When a picture of the first group of returnees from Australia was featured on the front page of the Melbourne Vietnamese language newspaper Chuong Saigon, the paper’s editor received complaints from members that such exposure might lead to their being victimised (Interview with editor, 1997). Returns, however, steadily increased. In 1986/87, only 44 Vietnamese Australians had openly returned to Vietnam. By 1989/90 approximately 3500 had returned, by 1992/3, 15 000, and by 1995, 40 000, or one in five Vietnamese Australians (McCoy 1996: 184-194). Gradually, the Vietnamese Community in Australia changed its position and stated that “the decision to return, though regrettable, was a personal one”. McCoy notes “the policies of political leaders on returnees gradually changed from a vitriolic condemnation of any returnee in 1986 to reluctant acceptance of returnees in the 1990s” (ibid: 190).

Since at least the late 1980s, then, overseas Vietnamese have contested an elite-imposed taboo on return to Vietnam, forcing diasporic community and political associations to allow decisions on return to secede from the public sphere into the private.
Returnees have been able to use their rights as citizens of western host nations, and Vietnam’s willingness to have them, their skills and their capital back, to chart new trajectories and teleologies of return to Vietnam that refuse the hegemony of exile. This should not be read however as an outright rejection of an anticommunist refugee identity. Those who may be seen as transmigrants insofar as they return to Vietnam, and/or remain connected to it through transnational networks of solidarity, support and economic interdependence, typically retain an identification with a non-homeland, refugee identity. However, their refractory transnational practices have resulted in the separating out of this identity from a teleology and ethics that forbid contact with the SRV.

**Exile, Diaspora, Transnational Community?**

Note that I do not wish to suggest any such thing as that the overseas Vietnamese have become a “neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’” transnational community. The boundary between the diaspora and the SRV remains vitally important as a reference for diasporic identity, and it would be a gross distortion to suggest that it had been melted into air by a postmodern transnational social space that collapses difference and distance between home and diaspora. The majority of overseas Vietnamese are firmly settled in their host countries, experiencing, perhaps like the Salvadorian Americans described by Mahler, a local lived reality punctuated by transnational events (Mahler 1998: 80). In the Vietnamese case, it would seem that the mobility of goods and information are as if not more important than bodily mobility in maintaining bifocality. Return visits to Vietnam are supplemented by remittances, telephone conversations, mail and email. The low socio-economic status of overseas Vietnamese communities means that their
transnationalisms are far less mobile and entrepreneurial than, for instance, those of overseas Hong Kong Chinese. Vietnamese experiences of social mobility and integration within the host nations have been somewhat polarised. Overseas Vietnamese in Western nations have on the one hand achieved high rates of entry into tertiary educational institutions, but on the other have experienced high rates of unemployment and welfare dependency. In American and Australian cities they have experienced high levels of residential concentration in socio-economically disadvantaged areas as a result of the structure of labour and housing markets, the experience of racial discrimination and, more positively, the desire to rebuild homely “national” spaces or ethnoscapes (see Chapter Five). If transmigrancy is an identity often necessitated by difficulties in attaining citizenship, such as for Central and Southern American sojourners in the US, this is not the case for the majority of overseas Vietnamese in the West, who have (until recently) been successful in achieving stability in countries of resettlement. Success in attaining citizenship and pursuing community formation, as well as a relatively successful integration into and advancement within host societies, means that overseas Vietnamese are strongly “grounded” in the host nations (Viviani 1996, Smith and Tarallo 1995, Viviani, Coughlan and Rowland 1993).

Clifford stresses the need to maintain a distinction between diasporas and transnational communities. The latter, he argues, inhabit a bi-local social space formed by a single cross-border migration circuit. Diasporas, by contrast, connect dispersed communities across a plurality of boundaries, i.e. they link communities in various host nations with each other as well as with the homeland. The two also differ in that the flexibility of the border is significantly greater for transnational than for diasporic
populations. A sense of diasporic identity usually presupposes “longer distances and a separation more like exile: a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future” (Clifford 1994: 304). The two forms also differ in their structures of extranational identification. Transmigrants see themselves as the distant constituents of a contemporary nation-state, while diasporic subjects tend to articulate their presence in diaspora as itself constituting an Imaginary or Cultural Nation. While continuously maintained links to a homeland are typically cited as a defining feature of diaspora (e.g. Safran 1991), diasporic identity must also in a sense be finally separable from national identity in the contemporary homeland (as nation-state). Thus these links may be “active”, transnational ones, but “passive” connections to an imaginary homeland are also considered sufficient for a community to fit the definition of diaspora (exile being the extreme example). Even where these links are contemporary and co-operative, the diaspora-as-nation lays a claim the loyalty of diasporic subjects that competes with the claims of the “real” homeland.

For post-1975 overseas Vietnamese communities in the West, the claims of diasporic identity continue, as we have seen, to be significantly stronger than those made by the SRV. Thus, in defining contemporary overseas Vietnamese identity, I would argue that it is appropriate for us to retain both the concepts of diaspora and of exile. We must, however, submit theoretical assumptions about the absolute separability of these formations from the contemporary homeland to a rigorous interrogation. These assumptions have been particularly marked in the case of victim or refugee diasporas. As Malkki notes,
In many works of refugee studies, there is an implicit assumption that in becoming “torn loose” from their cultures, “uprooted” from their homes, refugees suffer the loss of all contact to the lifeworlds they fled. It is as if the place left behind were no longer peopled (Malkki 1995: 515).

If the boundary between homeland and diaspora remains highly pertinent to the formation of overseas Vietnamese identities, neither is it impassable or absolute, nor is diasporic Vietnamese culture self-contained. In the context of Doi Moi and normalisation, we are obliged to reconceptualise this border as a permeable and negotiable one. As I have argued, this is a negotiation that overseas Vietnamese themselves have performed through their cross-border practices and relationships. Below, I wish to bring out some of the empirical diversity of orientations to the diaspora-homeland border in the post Doi Moi era, showing how it has different degrees of flexibility for different diasporic subjects.

The Social Politics of Return

Having sketched out the historical process by which the politics of return has been pluralised, I wish now to look at how Vietnamese Australian subjects negotiate positions within this politics. In doing this I will also attempt to draw something of a social anatomy of orientations to return in the Vietnamese diaspora. I will suggest that a fastidious problematisation of one’s return to Vietnam functions as a kind of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1990, 1990a) in that it distinguishes one in the social field constituted by the diaspora. Cultural capital, for Bourdieu, comprises valued knowledges,
tastes, dispositions, styles and other acquired and inherited social and physical characteristics. Forms of cultural capital are material and symbolic goods that are constituted as having value within the limits of specific fields. For Bourdieu, social fields have a market-like structure, such that individuals and groups compete within them to accumulate and deploy species of capital. My research shows that those occupying or aspiring to elite positions in Vietnamese community associations are most likely to articulate the possibility of their returns to Vietnam in terms of a return taboo or ideology of deferred return, the most socially distinguished positions being those of voluntary and enforced exile. Indeed, it appears that the discursive performance of such positions is an important precondition to gaining prestige within a community organisation. By contrast, those who fail to problematise their returns to Vietnam either intentionally or unintentionally reject the illusio of which the return taboo forms an integral part. In so doing they minimise their distinction within and belonging to the diasporic social field.

The lack of distinction associated with a lax attitude to return is demonstrated by the comments of “Huyen”, a man in his sixties who was formerly a judge in a provincial capital in the RVN. Huyen now works as an agent in a real estate office on John Street, Cabramatta, Sydney, and is active in an international anticommunist organisation. He asserted to me that the people who don’t care about homeland politics are just 30% of the community, the “uneducated people”. When I pressed him to be more descriptive, he merely waved his hand back and forth to indicate the rows of shops, shoppers and majority Chinese-Vietnamese shopkeepers along John St, and said “These people”. He went on, with some distaste, to say that the second generation of overseas Vietnamese have no understanding or interest in homeland politics. “Educated people” don’t go back
to Vietnam because they are aware of the risks that return entails. Others have been forced, unwillingly, to go back because of family (Interview, 1998).

I will proceed by looking at elite and non-elite discourses of “blocked” or problematic return, as well as a variety of non-problematised positions on return. (I will defer discussion of overseas Vietnamese businesspeople and professionals who are actively involved in Vietnam to Chapter Eight). This material is based on interviews I conducted with community leaders and other elites, as well as with non-elite community members. The latter were drawn largely from an English class I taught at the Vietnamese Women’s Association in 1998, which had a mixture of longer-settled refugees (averaging about ten to fifteen years in Australia) and recently arrived migrants (averaging one to two years). Although students dropped in and out of the class, I was able over this period to form acquaintances with a number of the women and their families, who I interviewed in their homes about the issue of return to Vietnam. This familiarity meant that I was able to get beyond superficial, ideological statements about return in my discussions with them.

Elites

*Voluntary Exile*

Elites almost invariably practice the “purest” social politics of return. While few in the mainstream of community politics advocate the glorious armed return still espoused by a minority of radical ex-military organisations, many will not allow themselves the luxury of a personal return trip to Vietnam to visit family. Most do not, however, discourage others from doing so. The head of the Vietnamese Community in
Australia said to me, in a democratic spirit, that he would not dream of preventing people returning to Vietnam to visit family. Refusing to return as an individual is seen as something of a quixotic gesture, a penance that one imposes on oneself because of ideals. A Vietnamese-Japanese journalist told me, despite the fact that he wanted to go back to Vietnam, he hadn’t done so because he felt that he owed it to his readers to stay true to his exile politics. Often enough, this meticulousness proves to be that “little bit extra” that distinguishes one from one’s contemporaries as an anticomunist patriot. Note that this stance of voluntary exile is not found exclusively amongst the “aristocrats” of the field (professional, literary, ex-military and other elites who have been successful in converting symbolic capital accumulated in the pre-communist Republic of Vietnam), but may also be articulated by those who were too young to “be anyone” in the old society. Thus, for example, the head of a Vietnamese student association in her early twenties, and the thirty year old head of the Australian chapter of the Free Vietnam Alliance, both align themselves with this position of voluntary exile, thus demonstrating its reproduction across generation (Interviews, 1998). Appadurai (1996: 76) talks about this phenomenon in terms of the accumulation of a social “patina”, i.e. the simulation by the younger generation of the anguish experienced by first generation elites over the loss of a way of life to which they had a special relation.

_Involuntary Exile_

A further modality of non-return is that of enforced exile. The ability to say that one does not return to Vietnam because one fears persecution, imprisonment, torture etc at the hands of the state carries with it perhaps an even higher currency than that of
voluntary exile (in fact, many represent themselves as variously being subjects of both types of exile, depending on the context). An Australian example of such an exile is Nguyen Vi Tuy, editor of the newspaper Viet Nam Thoi Nay. Vi Tuy was blacklisted at the Vietnamese embassy in Canberra after having attempted to throw himself under the car of then foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach on his first visit to Australia in 1984, and has not been able to obtain a visa since (Interview, 1997). Other examples of such exiles include high-profile political and cultural figures who have defected from Vietnam (such as Bui Tin), as well as dissidents who have been permitted to leave the country on the condition that they don’t come back (like poet Nguyen Chi Thien).

This dissident/defector status is powerful enough to overcome other distinctions such as the pervasive north/south one. Recent northern arrivals have tended to be marginalised from the mainstream of community associations and activities. In my English class at the Vietnamese Women’s Association, I was able to observe this in the dislike some of the students expressed towards a recent arrival from Hanoi. “Thu Ba” was a tertiary educated woman in her late thirties whose educational capital and skill at picking up English were resented by the older, less well educated refugees in the class, who complained that she was taking up all of my attention with her questions. One of the refugee students told me that recent migrants shouldn’t be permitted to use the resources of the Women’s Association, and later confessed that she had stopped coming to the class because she didn’t like to mix with “northern trash” [Bac ky]. In Sydney, there is even a tendency for northerners to gravitate towards a separate community centre, Marrickville. US observers also cite low rates of participation in community associations by recent northern migrants (Smith and Tarallo 1993). In this light we might consider the
distinction between Song Ngoc, a north Vietnamese water puppet troupe that defected recently while touring in Australia, and “Long”, Thu Ba’s husband, himself also a recent migrant from Hanoi. Having been granted asylum, the water puppet troupe has been embraced by the leadership of the community, becoming a cause célèbre at official meetings and events. By contrast, Long, after an unsatisfactory attempt to participate in a public meeting on political change in Vietnam (on a pro-democratisation platform), has had little more to do with the official institutions of the community. Clearly, the case of the puppet troupe gives support to the Cold War fantasy of defection and bamboo curtains, while Long’s quite legal migration and subsequent ability to go back and forth between Vietnam and the “free world” undermine it, making his voice an unwelcome one.

“Supervisory” Return

The one modality of “return without compromise” open to elites is returning as part of a supervisory delegation, for instance to look into human rights or health. On a return such as this, the returnee is empowered by another nation’s sovereign status or by the mandate of an international body like the UN. It is thus that one avoids returning to the scene of the loss of one’s national status as a powerless, stateless individual. Rather, one returns as the empowered judgemental subject of a foreign power. Hence the head of the NSW Free Vietnam Alliance returned to Vietnam in his capacity as a UNHCR representative (to escort some Chinese Vietnamese repatriates home), but won’t return as an individual for fear of harassment by the authorities for his political activities (Interview, 1998).
Charity

A further type of "return without compromise" that has recently gained the support of community associations is that of sending aid to the victims of natural disasters (such as the recent Typhoon Lynda) back in Vietnam. While such efforts were in the recent past controversial, it seems that they are now no longer so. This is due no doubt to a growing solidarity among diasporic Vietnamese with ordinary people in Vietnam, but also perhaps because sending aid packages to Vietnam involves a certain condescension, whereby overseas Vietnamese are able to assert their wealth and modernity over the poverty and backwardness of socialist Vietnam. Articles discussing the relief effort point to the inadequacy of meteorological facilities in Vietnam, and the failure to take advantage of satellite images to predict the storm and warn fishermen beforehand ("Cuu tro nan nhan bao lut"). Critics also highlighted the slowness of the government’s reaction to the crisis. It was a full five days after the typhoon, one writer claims, before the Ho Chi Minh city executive committee organised a mobilisation for the relief of storm victims ("Doi tu do cuu dong bao bi lut"). Further, such relief efforts compromise the sovereignty of the current administration to the extent that their acceptance is an admission of its inability to deal with an internal crisis using internal resources. Overseas Vietnamese commentators were particularly anxious that victims should know precisely from whom the aid they received was coming, calling for the details of aid packages to be broadcast by the mass media, and for representatives of contributor organisations to supervise directly the distribution of the aid. These measures
would at once preclude the possibility of the siphoning off of aid by corrupt officials as well as "directly striking at the propaganda front of the communists aimed at smearing overseas Vietnamese" ("Cuu tro nan nhan bi bao lut"). The idea that by sending aid home one is undermining the enemy rather than giving him comfort and succour was evidenced in the Ho Mai Sister City debate (see Chapter Five) in suggestions that rather than uniting with the relatively affluent District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City, Ho Mai should have united Maribyrnong with an area that had suffered typhoons and flooding. While all did not agree with this idea, it seemed to be universally thought less objectionable than what was actually proposed, a union in which business contacts and investment opportunities were prioritised.

Non-Elites: Refugees

All of the non-elite refugees I interviewed had made return trips to Vietnam, and all of them problematised their returns in some way. Perhaps the overriding metaphor was one of unconsummated return, where full enjoyment of one’s homecoming was blocked by the presence of the communist regime. Interviewees all minimised the enjoyment they experienced upon their returns to Vietnam, and maximised the interference of the state in their daily lives while visiting relatives in Vietnam. “Mai” (a home-worker in her forties married to a process worker), who arrived in Australia in the mid eighties, spoke of feeling insecure whilst in Vietnam, of the fear of arbitrary arrest, and the indignity of having to show one’s ID everywhere. She and her husband came back to Australia after only two weeks of their 1996 visit because her husband became so furious. Similarly, “An”, a semi-employed handyman in his fifties, told of how his
experience of returning to visit family was ruined by his being “pushed around” by the authorities. “Uyen”, a nurse in her thirties who was forced to return with her sister to relocate their mother’s grave from the path of a proposed highway, describes her trip as one of unrelenting sadness, one which made her wish there was no liberation, and that her family could go back to the way it was before 1975, happy and united. In the end the highway was not built, and her return to the scene of a disrupted family life and, for her, a broken romance, was all in vain. “Hoanh”, a process worker in his mid twenties, returned to Vietnam with family in his early teens, but says he fears to go back because he is unsure he will be able to control his temper in Vietnam. Returning overseas Vietnamese often find it expedient to bribe customs officials at the airport so that their bags will not be exhaustively searched. Hoanh says that if this happened to him, he would lose his temper immediately and do something he would later regret. His family, knowing his temper, have counselled him not to go back.

While no doubt overseas Vietnamese returning to Vietnam are subject to a certain amount of harassment by the state, what seems to be happening in the interviews is the foregrounding of this experience, to the extent that it becomes the totality of the return visit, and no happy memories of family reunion are brought forward. We might read this emphasis as a strategy of asserting the problematicity of one’s return, something which in turn reaffirms one’s “refugee” identification in the face of the (tacit) challenge posed to it by the imperative that “refugees don’t go back”. Likewise, despite the evidence hundreds of thousands of overseas Vietnamese return unmolested every year, interviewees insist on repeating that return is dangerous. Untroubled experiences of return are put down not to the fact that return has become safer but to the fact that “I was lucky”.  

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Recent Migrants

Recent arrivals to the diaspora are typically already incorporated into a critical perspective on the Vietnamese regime prior to their departures, although the way in which they relate to diasporic anticommmunist culture is of course dependent on the history of their coming to subjectivity in Vietnam. The former subjects of the RVN were denied the possibility of a full identification with the reunified nation (Hardy 2000). Thus many of these people have retained identifications with the former regime, with the south [Nam Bo], or with the diaspora, especially where they have relatives living overseas. Take the example of “Hoa”, a middle-aged woman who was sponsored by her estranged husband, a lawyer in the former RVN now practising in Sydney, to migrate from Ho Chi Minh City to Sydney in 1998. Hoa declared that the diasporic media “Say out loud what we always knew” about the Party. Another example of this predisposition to an anticommmunist subjectivity is “Nghia”, a man in his early twenties from a catholic Saigonese family closely associated with the old regime, who had come to Australia to study. Nghia told me after a few months of living with his uncle in Sydney that the former president of the RVN Ngo Dinh Diem, himself a catholic, had been a “great man” who could, had he been allowed, have solved all of Vietnam’s problems.

“Thu”, a home-worker in her early twenties who came to Australia in the late 1990s on a prospective spouse visa, expressed some regret as to the drop in the material standard of her life on coming to Australia. At this point in the interview her sister in law chimed in: “She’s from a wealthy family, really spoilt, she had everything! I’ve been to her house”. Thu’s comment is interesting in the way it breaks with the diasporic idée fixe

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that Vietnam is an abjectly poor and backward place in which life could not possibly be as comfortable as it is overseas. Similarly, Hoa noted a significant drop in her standard of living. In Vietnam she was the manager of a branch of Saigon Tourist, the state tourist agency, and had a car and multi-storey house. In Sydney she is unemployed and lives carless in a granny flat in the outer southwest. While Hoa seems on an ideological level to have been quickly incorporated into the anticommunist imaginary of the diaspora, she does not share many of the binarisms it employs to differentiate between Vietnam and the diaspora, for instance those of underdeveloped/developed, commodity poor/commodity rich, pre-modern/modern, and so on. We might read her anticommunism as being partially motivated by the need to make sense of and redeem something from her unsuccessful migration, as well as in relation to her aspiring to participate in the administration of a community association (the Vietnamese Women's Association).

Thu also reflected that Vietnam would be a better environment than Australia in which to bring up her children because of the support of extended family available there. This is in sharp contrast to “refugee” interviewees, who without fail express horror at the thought of their children’s being raised and educated in Vietnam. Indeed, refugees most often cite their children’s futures as the main reason for their having left Vietnam. Thu’s ability to speak in terms of the practicalities of raising children divorced from ideological considerations signals quite clearly her distanciation from the “refugee” illusion. Thu also said that supposing her husband got a good job in Vietnam, she would return with him without hesitation. She lives relatively isolated from the main Vietnamese community centres, does not follow diasporic media, and participates in no community associations or activities. Her single link with the Vietnamese community is through family contacts.
Further, although she disagrees with communism as an ideology ("It’s unnatural"), the fact that she comes from an old Viet Minh family who supported the communist National Liberation Front in the war puts her in a very different relation to the "liberation" of the south in 1975 and the post-war regime than the refugee interviewees.

"Long" and "Thu Ba" (already discussed above), a middle-aged couple who migrated recently from Hanoi, signal their distance from the orthodoxies of community politics more formally. While both proclaim themselves disenchanted with the communist regime - one that in their eyes was once truly revolutionary but is now corrupt and self-serving - their migrations are more economic than political. One a party member and high ranking transport engineer, the other a Russian-Vietnamese interpreter at a hydroelectric plant, both were made redundant by the transformations which took place in Vietnam with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the advent of a market economy. Long is critical of Vietnamese communities in Australia for persisting in "useless" political activities such as the yearly protest on the national "Day of Shame" [Ngay Quoc Han], April 30, anniversary of the fall of Saigon. He said:

If you want to know the way Vietnamese should live here, then they should help each other and unite, to contribute to building Australia into a fine country, and not unite against the communists. This doesn’t contribute anything to the life of the Vietnamese here.

While the couple live close to Cabramatta shops, and on occasion participate in "non-political" community activities, their relation to the homeland is definitely heterodox.
Long says that he only ever saw himself staying in Australia for a few years, and is even now thinking of returning to Vietnam. Thu Ba says that she would be happy to return with Long. Regardless of whether this statement of intention to return is “sincere” or not, it signals a “non-blocked” relationship to the homeland, as somewhere to which one can return in a practical and quotidian way.

Finally, “Hung”, a man in his mid twenties, holds Australian citizenship but spends most of his time in Saigon. In Sydney he is at a loose end because his English is poor and he cannot find work. In Saigon he works in his sister’s laserdisc import and pirating business, returning to Australia only sporadically. Hung professes to hate the communists, but prefers his life in Ho Chi Minh City to that he leads in Sydney, where his isolation, boredom and lack of proficiency in negotiating the urban system are apparent. By contrast, in Saigon he represents himself as being something of a master of the city, a connoisseur of cafés and nightspots with a wide network of friends and contacts, skilled in manipulating the bureaucratic apparatus, bribing the right people the right amounts to stretch out his three month family visit visas to a full year. For Hung, the dominant binarism of diaspora as the “land of opportunity” and of Vietnam as dead end is reversed. Australia is nothing but a place in which to kill time, somewhere where there is nothing for him.

The interview subjects reveal a range of positions, from those who meticulously maintain a literal exile, to those for whom exile as an identity is divorced from the issue of physical return, to those who appear not to identify with an exile identity beyond an in-principle opposition to communist ideology. With the exception of the exile “aristocrats”, I would argue that the concept of exile now functions for overseas Vietnamese
principally as a symbolic resource with which to "think" the distance and difference between diaspora and homeland. Exile is also, I have suggested, a form of cultural capital that is valuable within the social field constituted by the diasporic community (but not in the majoritarian social field of the host culture). Problematising one’s return to Vietnam generally indicates a desire to maintain a social identity within this field. Exile elites distinguish themselves from others by the purity of their exile: they have never gone home, no matter how tempted they have been. Those identifying as refugees typically distinguish themselves from other returnees on the basis that they return in a "non-collaborationist" or even “dissident” way, as opposed to those who return to self-interestedly “make a buck” [làm ăn] with the communists. Recent migrants were the least likely to represent the boundary between Vietnam and diaspora as being in some way “impassable” - physically or symbolically - suggesting a lesser investment and involvement in the discourses and institutions of “community”.

In understanding the various positions on return, we should also bear in mind that adopting an exile identity can be a compensatory or justificatory strategy. The socio-economically marginal, without the capital to achieve mobility between Vietnam and their host countries, may assert an exile identity as a means of compensating for their immobility - making a virtue out of a necessity, as Bourdieu has it (1984: 372-396). In this way one may assert moral and social superiority over those (objects of secret envy) who can afford to return to Vietnam every year for Tet. As one Viet Luan reader complained in a letter to the editor:
Between the wallet and nostalgia for home amongst the overseas Vietnamese, there’s a favourable exchange rate that’s entirely apolitical. The more money they have, the more people “miss” Vietnam, and the more they return (Pham Truong Giang 2000).

In addition, adopting a stance of exile may be a means of denying to oneself the extent to which one has assimilated to life overseas, or the fact that the promise of return has made the transition from being a politics to being a mythology. Given that a diasporic political identity is not yet realisable in Vietnam, however, I would argue that the Vietnamese exiles have not yet truly had to face the choice of whether to return or to remain in the diaspora, with all of the ramifications that that decision entails.

Conclusion

I began by suggesting that the communal “refugee” identity attributed to the Vietnamese diaspora in the West had been overdetermined by the political contexts of emigration and resettlement. This is not to question the legitimacy of emigrants’ reasons for leaving Vietnam or their right to settlement and citizenship in the host nations. Rather, my purpose has been to bring out the diversity and contradictions in a collective identity too often reified in the discourses of diasporic elites and host nation scholars. Reyes, who characterises Vietnamese Americans fairly homogeneously as forced migrants, argues that for them, relations with the home country are a public matter. She opposes this paradigm to that which applies to communities of voluntary migrants, for whom homeland relations are a matter of individual choice (they may be contestatory or
amicable, maintained or dropped) (Reyes 1999: 171). Those who seek to speak “for” the diaspora, and thus to define its relationship with Vietnam, are of course still liable to public censure. However, I would argue that overseas Vietnamese no longer feel constrained by group sentiment in negotiating their individual relationships with Vietnam. To suggest that they are subject to a coherent morality which would condemn them for returning is to reify the fantasy of statehood nurtured by the exile elite. In fact, this moral authority has been fractured and diminished since normalisation. The fact that the border has varying degrees of flexibility for different subjects speaks of a privatisation and pluralisation of the politics of return.