
In the previous chapter, we saw how the exile imaginary potentially functions as a resource for resisting the “capture” of diasporic community space by the dominant narratives of nation and globalisation in Australia. In this chapter, we shall shift the focus from the “defence” of the space of exile to the problem of reproducing exile consciousness through time. An important part of the reaction to Mother (see Chapter Four) was the way it was perceived to put the intergenerational transmission of exile identity, and hence the project of national restoration, at risk. I wish now to look more closely at how practices of cultural pedagogy are conceived in the context of the contestatory transnational politics we have already explored. I shall address these issues through an ethnography of the Vovinam overseas Vietnamese martial arts school in Sydney.

About Vovinam

Vovinam is a martial art that is currently practised both in Vietnam and in Overseas Vietnamese communities around the world. The name is a compound of Vo [Martial (Arts)], and vinam [a contraction of Vietnam]. It is also known as Viet Vo Dao, i.e. Vietnamese/Transcendent [Viet] Martial [Vo] Way [Dao]. Vovinam synthesises a tradition of indigenous Vietnamese martial arts with techniques taken from other
disciplines, particularly Kung Fu, Judo, Taekwondo, Aikido and Karate-do. Practitioners attribute responsibility for founding the discipline to Grand Master Nguyen Loc, who is said to have performed his research into traditional fighting techniques in the colonial Vietnam of the 1930s, and then to have syncretised them with extraneous forms, officially establishing the discipline in 1938 (Nguyen Van Sen 1992: 10-12). Nguyen Loc supported the Vietminh in the French anticolonial struggle, but turned against it when the communist faction suppressed its partners to achieve total control of the movement. In 1954 he chose to migrate south to the RVN. There, after briefly falling foul of the Diem regime, Vovinam was to become an institutional part of the anticommunist state, being taught in schools and adopted by the police force and armed services. After the fall of Saigon, Vovinam was banned and its senior leadership either fled or was imprisoned (the Grand Master was not released until 1988). Vovinam “Halls” [Vo Duong] were established by these exiled instructors in the new overseas Vietnamese communities, the earliest being in Houston in 1976 (although schools had existed in France prior to 1975). Currently, Vovinam is practised in at least 14 countries, including: Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Morocco, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, the USA and Vietnam.

Vovinam was established in New South Wales in the 1980s. It was located first in Campbelltown, and then later moved to Fairfield. From Fairfield the school moved to Bankstown and Cabramatta, the current loci of its activities (These are Sydney’s two largest Vietnamese Australian residential centres (see Chapter Five)). It was in these two schools, together having a combined membership of over one hundred, that I carried out the research for this chapter. I attended classes as a practising member of the group twice
a week over a six-month period. The classes were held on Wednesday and Friday evenings in a community hall in Bankstown, and on Saturday mornings at the Police Youth Club in Cabramatta. A typical attendance was around thirty members. Around 50% of those attending an average session would be primary school students, 25% high school students, and 25% those in their late teens and early twenties, comprising university students and those not in tertiary education, most of whom worked in skilled blue collar jobs. The proportion of males to females was typically around 70% to 30%. The only adult women regularly attending were the Master’s two daughters, in their early twenties. Classes were typically led by the Master, a retired process worker in his sixties, and his next in rank, an IT professional in his forties.

**Pedagogic Anxiety**

The founder and current Master of the NSW school is a Saigonese political refugee who was imprisoned after the fall of Saigon in 1975 for his involvement in designing Vovinam training programs for the RVN’s army and police force. The Master is a figure in many ways typical of the elite of middle-class supporters of the collapsed RVN that continues to wield a considerable influence in overseas Vietnamese community organisations (See Chapter Two). It is this elite that takes upon itself, in the course of its “natural” duties, the role of vanguard in the endeavour of cultural reproduction. The perceived urgency of this task is evidenced by a near-universal fear that the young are becoming increasingly alienated from their cultural origins. This pedagogic anxiety suggests a collective awareness, in one form or another, of the instability to which the projects of cultural and communal reproduction are subject in the context of
displacement. Note that this instability persists in countries like Australia, Canada and the U.S. despite these liberal multicultural states’ relative “tolerance” of the reproduction of non-mainstream ethno-specific lifestyles. It is an uncertainty perpetuated by the continuing existence of assimilatory pressures and compounded by the absence or extreme attenuation of the institutions, contexts and cultural forces which would in the “territorialised” past have guaranteed the greater probability of the coalescence of “normative”, “traditional”, “historically continuous” identities/identifications. In such a context, there are no guarantees that the younger generations will invest in the collective identifications of their elders.

These anxieties are woven into the official discourse of the school. The text below is taken from the newsletter of Vovinam International, California.

Young people want to return to their origins, but that is painfully sad and pitiful. They don’t remember anything any more. They can be called “handicapped” [written in English], a word Americans reserve for people who have been crippled. They haven’t lost legs or arms but they are crippled with respect to language, customs and habits ... They are burning their lives up in clouds of cigarette and cannabis smoke, drugs, alcohol ... They whirl around to the beat of New Wave and Rock’n’Roll music in order to obliterate the past and abandon the future (“Viet Vo Dao voi the he than nien hai ngoai”).

In this scenario, the disaster of “reproductive failure” appears to have already occurred. The young have realised the error of their ways, but it is too late. They are forever
alienated from their true origins, and cannot return. Reading on, we find that the situation is not, however, entirely hopeless. "The young generation of overseas Vietnamese", the author continues, "must return to its roots and rediscover the heritage of its motherland in the house of Vovinam: a source of vitality, a firm foundation, an indomitable will, an invincible spirit born of almost 5000 years of culture" (ibid.). It becomes apparent that the dystopic imagery of the first quotation is merely a rhetorical strategy calculated to make the pedagogic task seem all the more urgent. Particularly striking about this passage are the images of bodily corruption it employs: crippling, addiction, entrancement. Such imagery suggests an anxiety that the de-acculturating effects of the host society are not merely symbolic, but are actually physically threatening forces capable of disrupting the integrity of the body. Fighting fire with fire, the discipline of martial arts practice is considered necessary to counter the forces of corruption, restore the integrity of the bodies of the young and, ultimately, avert the potential disaster of reproductive failure.

That members of the school believe in the alleged rejuvenating power of martial arts practice can be illustrated by the fact that a pupil in his early twenties, "Nam", regularly brings an age-mate's younger brother to training. The sixteen year-old is getting into serious trouble at school and flirting with petty crime, and his mentor Nam brings him to Vovinam in an attempt to "straighten him out" by incorporating him into the ethically bounded conception of Vietnamese identity that he clearly feels the group offers. The boy's waywardness is understood in terms of harmful assimilation to the poor moral values of the host society, and the cure is conceived in terms of re-assimilation or
secondary socialisation into the proper values of the home culture through the “body-
work”, both physical and symbolic, performed in Vovinam training.  

Building the Generation, Building the Nation

The project of ensuring the transmission of a Vietnamese cultural heritage to the young also needs to be contextualised within the discourse of “defending” and “building” the diaspora-as-nation. As I pointed out in Chapter Four, the perceived loss of authentic Vietnameseness in the homeland (due to the transformations wrought by communism) turns the task of cultural maintenance overseas into something of a sacred mission. The young “become” the homeland, or alternatively the possibility of some day restoring it. According to this logic, building the Vovinam school means building the generation which means building the nation: “A generation of Viet Vo Dao youth/A powerful, independent nation” (Trinh Minh Duong 2001). Vovinam is particularly suited to the task of producing a generation of nation-restorers since it is the only martial art that can claim to be authentically Vietnamese. Despite its syncretic nature, Vovinam signifies indigeneity in a way none of the other martial arts practised in Vietnam or the diaspora is capable of doing. The slogans “Vietnamese [must] study Vietnamese Martial Arts” [Dan Viet hoc Vo Viet] and “Not practicing Vovinam is not to be Vietnamese” [Khong hoc Vovinam khong phai la nguoi Viet] were originally used in Vietnam in the anticolonial struggle against the French, and resuscitated during the anticommunist war to promote

19 See Alter (1992: 103-5) on the link between exercise and moral, ethical and spiritual development in a north Indian wrestling school.
the school. Fiercely nationalistic Vovinam adherents were involved in protests against the Army of the RVN’s (ARVN) adoption of Taekwondo as its official and sole martial art (reportedly after making a deal with the South Korean government). Their complaint that the banning of Vovinam in favour of a foreign martial art was unpatriotic eventually saw the ban lifted.

Needless to say, the school’s history of anticolonial and anticommunist nationalism (or at least its history as reconstructed overseas) lends itself particularly well to an exile politics of national restoration. The Cabramatta-Bankstown Vovinam group is often present at the more important community ceremonies. One does not have to make a great leap of the imagination to see the serried ranks of blue-uniformed “disciples”, heads bowed before the RVN and Australian flags which are invariably displayed on the stage, as the phantom army of the ghost state of Free Vietnam. Although this nationalist fantasy is not made explicit in the everyday discourse of the school, it is ever-present as an imaginative resource with which members might conceptualise their martial arts training. All of the students identify, at least as a matter of symbolic ethnicity, with the anticommunism of the instructors’ generation; and at least one teenage member had, of his own volition, sewn the RVN flag onto the shoulder of his uniform. Certainly, this exile imaginary competes with other ones, such as those imbibed through students’ avid consumption of Hong Kong martial arts movies. There exists a tension between the cultural nationalist agenda of the instructors’ generation and the students’ own appropriations and recodings of the cultural meaning of the training they undertake. Their different positioning towards exile, host nation and East Asian cultural formations finds an interesting confluence, however, in the group’s use of the theme music from *Once Upon a Time in China* to
accompany and dramatise displays at community ceremonies. Directed by Chinese Vietnamese emigre Tsui Hark, the film depicts the role of martial arts in anticolonial resistance (and accommodation) in 19th century China.

Reproducing Vietnameseness: The Vietnamese System of Person Reference as a Structurating Principle

Cultural reproduction in the context of displacement always involves an ideologically motivated selection and adaptation of national traditions and attributes. In this section and the next, I wish to look at the way in which the kinship-based Vietnamese system of person reference is conceptualised as a key object of cultural transmission in the Vovinam school. Thus we shall take a brief linguistic turn, before moving on to an analysis of the way in which the structurating principles underlying the system are transmitted as bodily dispositions.

Alonso points out that the nation, in addition to being territorialised in space, is substantialised in the body (Alonso 1994: 384). The tropes of blood and kinship are a key means by which this latter process takes place. As Schneider shows, "The solidarity that is supposed to exist among nationals rests on tropes of kinship, reproduction, 'shared substance' (biogenetic and psychic), and 'codes for conduct'" (in Alonso 1994: 385). Kinship tropes act to substantialise hierarchical social relations and imbue them with an emotive and moral dimension, thus naturalising the dominance of elites, and mystifying age and gender hierarchies in general. Strategies of substantialisation are, for Alonso, particularly successful in producing a structure of nationalist affect because of the way they effect a "fusion of the ideological and the sensory, the bodily and the normative, the
emotional and the instrumental, the organic and the social” (ibid: 386). She points out that an understanding of the integrative effects of kinship, a vertical trope of national belonging, may serve as a corrective to Anderson’s emphasis on the love of nation as being born of a “deep, horizontal comradeship” [emphasis added] (Anderson 1991: 7).

As we shall see below, the idiom of kinship organising the Vietnamese system of person reference is capable of incorporating both the solidary/competitive dimension of national belonging (fraternity) as well as the hierarchical and biogenetic (filialness).

The Overseas “custodians” of Vietnamese culture universally consider a competent grasp of the complex Vietnamese system of person reference, with its dozens of terms, to be essential to participation in Vietnamese social life. For Luong, “the rules regulating the usages of Vietnamese person-referring forms are inextricably bound to the fundamental structural principles of the Vietnamese sociocultural universe - structural principles which constitute the core of native models of and for sociocultural reality” (Luong 1990:5). The largely kinship-based terms used in the system are linked to ideal roles, obligations and protocols of deference and authority. One can’t enter into Vietnamese as a linguistic subject without being “hailed” by this system. To speak Vietnamese is to negotiate, in every interaction, one’s relative position in a matrix of social relations vis-à-vis one’s interlocutors: “Is she an ‘older sister’ or an ‘aunt’?” “Do I refer to myself as an equal, ‘toi’, or a subordinate, ‘em’ (‘younger brother’) with him?” Inadequate mastery of such negotiations will “inevitably raise doubt regarding the speaker’s qualification for full participation in the Vietnamese sociocultural system” (ibid: 127). It has been my experience that younger Overseas Vietnamese who have poor Vietnamese vocabularies, lack fluency and are illiterate in Vietnamese will nevertheless
have a good practical knowledge of how properly to address their seniors, relatives, parents' friends, people dealt with in Vietnamese shops and restaurants, peers, and so on.

The system of person reference is popularly understood to be a system of rules which, when applied correctly, will produce an ordered and proper state of social relations. Here, "the use of Vietnamese kin terms involves not merely the fit of words to the world (i.e. the use of words to describe an existing universe), but also the fit of the world to words (i.e., the structuring of reality in accordance with the person-referring terms in use)" (ibid. 39). This understanding about the power of the observance of protocols of person reference to alter lived social relations most probably has its origins in the central Confucian concepts jen and li. In the Analects of Confucius, jen is used to describe "the highest ethical ideal that encompasses all individual desirable qualities" (Wong 1996:19). Li refers, in its broadest definition, to "all traditional and customary norms governing conduct between people, especially as the occupants of interrelated social positions" (ibid. 20). Jen is cultivated, then, through the proper observance of li. What is interesting here is the suggestion that by the observance of li, we may in fact acquire and feel that which we lack in jen. Thus where the "proper" feelings of respect and deference were lacking towards an older person, the use of the appropriate honorific for that person might, through repetition, give rise to these feelings.

The perceived rectifying properties of the system take on a vital importance in the politics of identity in the migrant context, where the system of person reference is understood by the older as being able to furnish those attributes they typically believe the younger to lack, i.e. "what one simply knows how to do and be" (Dreyfus 1991:95) when one is socialised in the home country. In this logic the system of rules, experienced as a
self-contained entity that can be transported across space and time, makes up for the lack of shared history by grounding the younger and older generations in a common sociocultural matrix. The projected outcome of this pedagogic fantasy (which I do not claim to be entirely unreal) is that the generations will agree once more upon what it means to be Vietnamese, as they did in the idealised pre-communist era in the homeland.

Structural Oppositions in the Vietnamese System of Person Reference

Luong (1990) identifies in the Vietnamese system of person reference a marked structural opposition between two modes of sociocultural structuration beyond the kinship domain: gerontocratic structure and meritocratic structure. The gerontocratic mode of social structuration is the more rigid. It represents something of a colonising of the sphere of social relations beyond the kinship domain by the male-oriented model of Vietnamese kinship relations [ho]. Here age and gender become principles of hierarchisation in interactions between non-relatives (older/younger :: male/female). The gerontocratic model stresses the stable and enduring quality of biogenetically founded hierarchical relations, wherein the dominant sense of self is not as monadic individual, but of self as primordially constituted in a system of relations forming an organic whole. The intimidation exercised by the senior over the junior, and men over women, is typically misrecognised as benevolent authority or, put another way, solidarity-in-hierarchy. Thus while juniors are enjoined in a popular saying to “defer to your superiors”, they are able to exert pressure upwards by means of the injunction to seniors to “yield to your juniors” [Kinh tren nhuong duoî].
The meritocratic model of social structuration is less rigid. It challenges the enduring and stable nature of hierarchical relations based on age and, more problematically, gender. It does this by making merit the basis of authority within a hierarchical social structure in which mobility is possible. This problematises the euphemisation of gerontocratic power relations as benevolent authority/solidarity by recasting social relations as competitive. The meritocratic mode of structuration highlights individuals and their different attributes and abilities.

The contradiction between these principles of structuration of social relations is, put simplistically, born of the fact that the status conferred by the age and gender of an addressee does not always conform to the status conferred by the position he or she occupies in a given meritocracy. Clearly, the capitalist system of social classes is the meritocracy most important to the contemporary tension between the meritocratic and gerontocratic models. This tension did not come into existence, however, only at the historical moment of the clash between the indigenous system and the expanding capitalist world system, with its ideological emphasis on competition and individual merit, via French colonisation. Rather, it can be dated back to (at least) the 12th-15th centuries, when the establishment of a Chinese-style centralised bureaucratic state and Confucian examination system formed an alternative paradigm of social status based on individual excellence. In pre-1945 northern Vietnam, the competing principles of status were conceptualised as “heavenly titles” (age) versus “secular titles” (bureaucratic ranks and examination degrees) (Luong 1990:133-5). Luong concludes that the structural tension between the gerontocratic and meritocratic hierarchical paradigms “has long constituted an integral part of the native system” (ibid. 135). I would add that this tension
ought to be read not as invariant but as having been continually reinscribed, reformulated and reinvented in different historical and geographical settings.

In the following section I will explore a particular instance of this structural opposition, i.e. that found in the embodied forms of an Overseas Vietnamese martial arts school. I should point out first that I do not mean to suggest that the linguistic structures identified by Luong provide a master code for the analysis of non-linguistic practice. As Luong himself points out, a Vietnamese linguistics must understand language as being grounded in experience and everyday coping in the social world. One cannot separate the Vietnamese system of person reference from the social contexts in which it is meaningful. This is true to the extent that Luong’s analysis puts into question the analytical distinction between knowledge of language and knowledge of the world. Thus language can in no sense be said to be “prior” to background practices, but rather is intrinsically bound up with them.

Contrary to the popular practical understanding, I will not treat the principles identified by Luong as consciously or even unconsciously held rules or models governing behaviour. Rather they are seen, after Bourdieu, as prediscursive embodied dispositions acquired through experience. Embodied dispositions are capable of producing, in the manner of Chomsky’s generative grammar, an infinite number of responses to an infinite number of situations (Bourdieu 1990: 9). In this understanding behaviour is not rule-governed, since one could never have a sufficient number of rules to meet every situation, but strategic. Strategies of action produced by habitus are not primarily consciously formulated plans created by agents with perfect foresight, but rather are reactions to states of play initiated in the heat of the moment (Bourdieu 1990a). Thus what one learns
(amongst other things) in Vovinam training is not a system of rules of deference, but rather a feel for the game of deference.

An instance of the strategic use of the Vietnamese system of person reference was reported to me by a female speaker, “Thuy”, who spoke of the difficulty she has in relating to older men. In Vietnamese, lovers call each other anh (older brother), and em (younger sister). These terms are also, however, kinship-based terms of address used between non-intimate male-female acquaintances when the man is older or of equal age. The use of anh and em between a man and woman connotes however the future possibility of there existing a love relationship between them. Thuy reported that men sufficiently older than her to shift their mutual reference to the kinship terms chu [uncle] and chau [niece], had strategically used the terms anh and em in a flirtatious way. As a means of countering the men’s definition of their interpersonal relations, Thuy persisted in using the terms chu and chau, attempting to redefine their relationship as members of different generations in a kinship idiom, free from sexual connotations. In another example, a man in his early twenties told me that he disliked it when his elders “bumped up” his status by referring to him as anh (older brother), and not as em (younger brother), because when he was referred to as anh he was expected to behave as a serious, adult equal, while when referred to as em he could “play up” like an irresponsible child.

Juniors do not learn to be mechanically obedient to their elders in a way that would make the power-laden relations between them appear in a naked light. Rather they learn how to be “natural” with their superiors. When one has truly mastered the principle of deference one can happily “be oneself” in the presence of elders, because deference has become part of the definition of one’s happiness. Things are as they should be. Of
course, embodied principles generating deferential behaviour can be represented in the form of rules. For Heidegger, it is when transparent action fails that one may have to invoke a rule (Dreyfus 1991:75). When things no longer go without saying, and relations between junior and senior are not “as they should be”, these relations may have to be explicitly formulated. This thematic intentionality must, however, take place on a background of transparent coping. This is to say that “rules” are not the primordial existential modality of the principle of deference.

Structure, Body, Space

Lessons begin with the senior instructor commanding the class to perform the four movements of the bow or lay. Students place their right hands over their hearts, bow to mid chest height while keeping their eyes fixed on the instructor, straighten their bodies, and return their hands to their sides. The expression cung dau cung co [obstinate] is translated literally as “hard of head, stiff of neck”. Len mat [haughty] is translated literally as “elevated of face”. “Right behaviour” is thus defined in terms of body hexis as being pliant of neck and lowering one’s head. The act of bowing at the beginning of lessons might be read as putting students into a state of obedience and receptiveness by “loosening their necks”, thus establishing the stable, hierarchical, monological relation that tradition dictates between pupil and teacher in all modes of Vietnamese pedagogy (see Nguyen Xuan Thu 1988).20 During the lesson pupils must be prepared instantly to

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20 Observing this, one begins to see why martial arts technique has been found useful in modern Western experimental theatre as a solution to the problem of how to obtain in actors “that state of good faith,
obey an instructor’s summons, for example when he or she points to a pupil and then to a spot on the floor, indicating that the instructor wants the pupil to stand there at the ready. Members of the class must endure the many small humiliations to which the instructor subjects them during the practicing of aggressive and defensive routines. These include the infliction of just a little more pain than is necessary, holding a pupil in a demeaning pose (e.g. sprawled on the floor with an arm twisted up behind the back), parodying the way an imperfect pupil performs a move, and so on. Surveillance of posture and disposition of the body is keen throughout the lesson, such that a pupil can be demanded to account for his or her conduct or demeanour at any moment. Rest is permitted but one must sit cross-legged and straight-backed. Play and slacking are discouraged and may be punished.

The *lay*, described above, is perhaps the most succinct expression of the gerontocratic principle. Other forms realising this principle are those that are done in unison, and therefore don’t involve competitive interaction and the asymmetrical disposition of bodies. Each class commences with about half an hour of orchestrated movement, where the entire group follows the instructor’s commands. This includes warm-up, stretching exercises, the practicing of techniques of empty-handed combat and, finally, practice of the attacking strategies, comprising ten basic series of hand-foot combinations. The universal performance of these movements at the command of the instructor, producing identical movements among pupils disposed in evenly spaced rows, represents a highly idealised expression of the gerontocratic principle.

submission, humility, which ... depends upon ... proper training” (in Zarilli 1995: 182-3).
During orchestrated collective practice, pupils are not primarily addressed as individuals with different levels of accumulated knowledge, different rates of progress, differently shaped bodies and different abilities, but as the parts of a gestalt corporate body. When pupils are singled out for correction during collective practice, this is typically accompanied by a sense of embarrassment and even shame. While the instructor will publicly test and correct (or praise) pupils of primary school age, older pupils have the privilege of being exempt from this symbolic violence during orchestrated practice. The sense of shame associated with being singled out during orchestrated practice is linked, I would argue, to the breakdown in transparency of the organic unity of the group that it heralds. While the “problem” of the inadequate individual is being fixed, the de-individuating gerontocratic experience of solidarity-in-hierarchy becomes unavailable. The smooth functioning of the sociocentric machine of orchestrated practice is upset by the thematic reflective awareness of the fact of individuals of different abilities and standards. The gerontocratic and meritocratic principles clash unsettlingly, and “the group” momentarily breaks down into a collection of individuals - until the problem is fixed and transparency regained.

In the course of a normal lesson, pupils are not primarily addressed as individuals until the culmination of orchestrated practice. At this point the group breaks up into smaller units, based on equivalence of experience and ability, each of which goes to a different part of the room. In a musical idiom, the structure of practice goes from harmony to polyphony. The group displays an internal logic of self-structuration whereby the senior/junior structure of orchestrated practice is replicated in smaller units. While in orchestrated practice a yellow belt is subject to the authority of a higher yellow belt or red
belt, he or she becomes the instructor when with a group of lower belts. The organising principle is the same, but with a higher level of complexity.

Meritocratic difference is acknowledged in this “middle” part of a typical lesson. Here pupils receive tuition that takes account of their individual needs - their different body sizes, for example (“You can use that move on someone the same size as you, but not someone bigger. Against someone stronger you should use such and such a move”). In this period there tends to be more opportunity for pupils to practise moves “in their own time”. This may be done alone, or involve simulated combat between pupils. Here, competition and the asymmetrical disposition of bodies are central. Older male pupils are encouraged to push the limits of mock fighting, escalating the speed and force with which they attack to the point where punches and kicks sometimes accidentally connect. This competitive model finds its strongest expression in the practice of free fighting, in which heavily padded opponents engage in improvised combat. The only time I have seen members of the group practice free-fighting is at grading ceremonies, moments at which the durability and immutability of the group’s structure is most “officially” open.\(^\text{21}\)

Victory in the free fight is explicitly connected to the promise of mobility within the hierarchy.

This is opposed to the disposition of bodies at the school’s ceremony of ancestral rites [ngay gio], where occupancy of the privileged position before the ancestral altar is decided by the level of belt possessed. This criterion is, notably, gender-blind. While authority in the hierarchical structure of the actual patrilineal kinship unit [ho] is

\(^{21}\) Apart from unofficial moments of openness or “communitas” (see Luong 1990), where solidarity is momentarily foregrounded over hierarchy.
conferred bio-genetically (by age and gender), it is conferred in the “simulated” *ho* that is Vovinam by merit. By way of contrast, this gender-blindness was emphatically not the case at a number of *ngay gio* I observed in a middle-class household in Hanoi - a home which accommodated three generations and multiple conjugal units, was the seat of the patrilineal ancestral altar [*ban tho*] and residence of the patrilineage chief [*truong ho*]. At none of these were women (apart from the wife of the *truong ho*) seated at the main table under the ancestral altar, junior males being preferred over them.

Those possessing yellow, advanced belts light the incense and occupy the space in front of the altar while the supplication to the founder is made. Blue belts watch from a seated position, in front of spectators, and then file up to the altar and make a collective bow after this crucial part of the ceremony has been performed. It is perhaps in the *ngay gio* that we find the best practical solution to the tension between the meritocratic and the gerontocratic models. While membership of the “elite” before the altar is won meritocratically, signifying the fluidity of structure, relations between it and the non-elite, at a distance from the altar, are expressed through spatial practice as static and enduring. A more perfect solution is found only in the person of the Master, the eldest man in the Sydney Vovinam school. In him the gerontocratic and meritocratic principles are felicitously united in such a way as to conceal the contradictory structure of the principles and give the greatest appearance of natural distinction.

Other forms that I would describe as gerontocratic include the prearranged patterns [*quyen*], which may be performed as dual drills [*song luyen*] and solo drills [*don luyen*]. These are similar to the *kata* of karate, which are:
made up of ‘imaginary combats’ against, in most cases, relatively slow-moving real or imaginary opponents. They are constructed of sequences of basic, intermediate or advanced techniques that are meant to be performed with technical accuracy. They are studied so that their nature, purpose and the teaching implicit in them may be understood. They are practised as much for the perfecting of technique as for the aesthetic experience to be derived from ‘beautiful movements’. They may be described as a choreography of attack and defence, a ‘ritual’ of technique and movement ... All the kata must be begun and ended with a bow to the master and his assistants” (Frederic 1991: 104).

The quyen may be performed singly or by a number of pupils in synchronisation, with or without weapons. They, likewise, idealise the harmony of non-competitive hierarchical relations, and euphemise the intimidation implicit in the superordinate position of the Master by presenting his superiority as natural and benevolent.

At the end of each lesson, the gerontocratic principle of unity-in-hierarchy is re-established by the assembly of the group into the corporate pattern assumed for orchestrated practice. As the “send off”, a small number of co-ordinated movements are performed, each involving a command from the master and a response from the class (e.g. he shouts: “Sit!” [ngoï], and the class responds “Down!” [xuông]). At the command to “Kneel to fix uniforms!” [qui chuán bi dong phuc], pupils go down on one knee to rearrange their tunics, which often fall open during practice. This gesture might be read as completing the reintegration of the group, thus returning it to “uniformity”. The final
act of the Master is to pose to the class the question “How do you feel?” [Dang lam?], to which it responds in a single, swelling cry, “Strong!” [Khoe!]

While it is true to an extent that the forms analysed here are typical of all schools of martial arts, I would point out that things such as the specific type of tension between group and individual address identified above are linked in a profound way to the Vietnamese habitus. By way of a counter-example, let us consider a class that is taken by a non-Vietnamese Vovinam instructor, “Andy”. In Andy’s class, individual and group address oscillate in a very different way during orchestrated practice. He typically tells pupils to perform moves just learnt “in their own time”, in addition to having them move in synchronisation. Here the principle of the differential abilities of individuals is built into the practice of group tuition in a very “Western” way. This is one no doubt equally full of contradictions, but one in which being addressed as an individual before the gaze of the group does not carry the same connotations as in the gerontocratically constituted group. Andy also tends to emphasise the processual aspect of martial arts practice by requiring pupils to put moves together in unfamiliar ways. This is opposed to the repetition of pre-arranged, objectified forms Vietnamese instructors usually require pupils to perform. In Andy’s class the feeling of being addressed as a Vietnamese subject is, tellingly, less strong.

Despite the contradictions inherent in the schemas that are taught by it, the school functions very much as an idyllic site in which the bodily and cultural disorder of the outside world can be momentarily bracketed off. During the pedagogic fantasy of practice the realities of cultural hybridisation, assimilation, and the pedagogic elite’s failure to transmit in toto its own habitus to the young, is suppressed. We find this same
desire to refuse and thwart change, but in a much exaggerated form, in those pathological cases of Vietnamese Australian men who, having returned to Vietnam to marry, refuse once back in Australia to let their wives leave the house for fear that exposure to its culturally alien atmosphere will somehow corrupt or dilute their authenticity.

Vovinam and the Dominant National Culture: Resistance?

Thus far, this chapter has focused largely on intracommunal processes of social classification, in which the generational split is the most significant division. I want to proceed by attempting to position these processes in an intercommunal perspective. How might they relate to the ways in which Vietnamese bodies are classified, racialised and gendered in the dominant national culture? The small volume of work that has to date asked this question has typically operated within a politics of recognition model, holding that the largely negative classifications of Vietnamese bodies produced by the host culture are internalised by Vietnamese subjects, and come to mediate their experiences of their own bodies. Thus the young Vietnamese woman in Mandy Thomas’ anecdote who admonishes an elderly woman for squatting on a bench seat in Cabramatta “as though she were still in Vietnam” can be read as having assimilated the Anglo gaze, in which the unassimilated Vietnamese body is constituted as “matter out of place” in the dominant spatial order (Thomas 1999: 29, see also Jakubowicz 1994). While I acknowledge that there appears to be evidence for processes of this type, I have argued elsewhere that in analysing Vietnamese subjectivity in the Australian context the putative effects of the politics of recognition have tended to be overemphasised (Carruthers 1995). This is so in that the processes by which members of ethnic minorities are named as “other” in the
dominant national imaginary have most frequently been read in isolation from
community-specific processes of self-definition such as those found in the Vovinam
school. Any analysis of the workings of the politics of recognition ought to take account
of how members of subaltern groups’ situatedness in discourses of self-definition might
act to mediate their relations to the dominant systems of classification that act to deny
them recognition, or offer it in distorted forms.

To take the Vovinam example, the incorporation through practice of what are
experienced as traditional, authentically Vietnamese body-images might be read as
offering an alternative to, and in some sense a resistance to, the dominant figurations of
the Vietnamese body in multicultural Australia (as disease-carrying, violent, criminal,
treachery, etc). While Vietnamese bodies are marginalised in general, there exists a
specific type of marginalisation within the bodily codes of masculinity. This is so in that
while the perceived general smallness and slimness of Vietnamese women can be
inscribed, albeit ambiguously, into a global economy of desire in which the ultra-thin
bodies of the supermodels are the ultimate capital (cf Thomas 1999: 29-40), the perceived
smallness of Vietnamese men is devalued by the “Western” ideal of a massive masculine
body, one which dominates not only heterosexual but also gay masculinity (at least in
what Maud Frances calls the “homo-normative” field (1995)).

The principle of *cuong nhu*, literally firm/flexible, central to Vovinam technique
(see Nguyen Van Sen 1992), stresses the philosophy of yielding to greater strength (by
deflection and avoidance), and then using one’s own strength, speed and accuracy to
strike once an attacker has been put off balance or positioned disadvantageously by the
channelling of his or her own force.
When a bamboo or willow branch is laden down with snow, it yields; it is flexible towards the new “circumstances”, and by yielding it allows the snow to fall to the ground, preserving its own existence and springing back into place with more force and speed than was employed in its yielding and bending action (Frederic 1991:65).\(^{22}\)

While this is a general tenet of many martial arts (jujitsu, judo, karate), I would argue that in the migrant context it takes on a special significance. Apart from its suggestiveness vis-à-vis the maintenance of ethnic identity through outward accommodation, the principle of *nhu* [Sino-Japanese *ju*], “pliancy”, becomes in countries such as France, Australia, Canada and the US a means of addressing the inequity in the sizes of Asian and European bodies. This is achieved not by demanding that combatants adopt weights training and bodybuilding programs to attempt to match the strength of European assailants. Rather, it pits the speed of a smaller body against the strength of a larger one, and concentrates on techniques that turn the force of the attacker’s blow against him (also a motif of anticolonial guerrilla warfare). Few of the pupils in the Sydney Vovinam chapter work out with weights, and a pupil of South American origin who was into body building was advised by the instructors to stop doing it, since his size and weight were slowing him down too much. Here the image of the ideal martial arts

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\(^{22}\) Vovinam Master Nguyen Van Sen adds that “bamboo grows in a grove in which root is linked to root ... united in strength and difficult to eradicate, difficult to destroy ... [bamboo] bends with the wind but then scornfully snaps back to its old shape” (1992: 43).
body performs a reversal of the bigger is better logic of dominant masculine ideology. In Vovinam a slight body can do mighty things.

Now, while Vovinam practitioners may be situated in an institution that is effectively an anti-racist one (in that it offers them modes of relating to their bodies which have the potential to resist racist ones imposed from the “outside”), they by no means escape being positioned normatively as subjects of culture, i.e. as subject to certain “subaltern” modes of symbolic violence such as “this gendered bullshit” which, as a Vietnamese Australian woman wrote to me, “should have drowned during the voyage” (personal letter, 1996). Such sites are, as I hope that I have shown, full of their own euphemised intimidations and misrecognised forms of oppression. It seems therefore inappropriate to read them, as much post-colonial writing is wont to do, as resistant or liberating in themselves. Rather, it should be said that the ways in which the subaltern and mainstream fields become articulated through specific dynamics of domination and struggle open up the possibility of a resistance that is at best ambivalent.

**Vovinam as Transnational *Ho*: Continuity and Disjuncture with Vietnam**

The *Vovinam Viet Vo Dao* website features a list of the addresses of *Vo Duong* in fourteen countries around the world. They are found in the North American, Western European and Antipodean communities formed by post-war refugees and migrants, in the Eastern European communities formed by the migration of contract labour and students, and, somewhat bewilderingly, in a North African former French colony. Also included are the addresses, phone numbers and, in some cases, email addresses, of some fifteen *Vo Duong* located in practically every district in Ho Chi Minh City. Vovinam’s founder,
Nguyen Loc, once expressed the hope that the discipline would evolve from being a Vietnamese Martial Art [Viet Vo Dao] to a Human Martial Art [Nhan Vo Dao]. The imagined global community constructed in the Vovinam address book at www.vovinam.com would perhaps have gone some way towards satisfying the old Founder’s utopian internationalism.

This vision of global Vovinam unity is, however, disrupted by internal divisions. The hottest topic of debate within the organisation is how to achieve the unification of the school. At present there is no single leadership or unified federation. Rather, there are several federations and associations, some of which co-operate amiably and some of which don’t. A subset of this debate is around what policy overseas Vovinam organisations should pursue towards Viet Vo Dao in Vietnam. Some among the younger generation of leadership are in favour of formalising the support of overseas Vovinam Vo Duong for the “Ancestor Hall” [To Duong] in Ho Chi Minh City, arguing that they should remit a percentage of their revenues. At present, contributions to the To Duong are made individually and on an ad hoc basis, comprising minimal amounts. Most overseas Vovinam groups regard the To Duong, the hall in District 10 where Nguyen Loc taught, as being the site where the school’s authentic heritage is lodged. This “sacred site” has the symbolic status of the house of the family chief [truong ho], where the main ancestral altar of a lineage is located. However, some groups are not loyal to the To Duong.

Vovinam was banned in reunified Vietnam until 1978, and after that its activities were viewed with suspicion. Reportedly, the school was considered “reactionary” by the Ho Chi Minh City city council. In 1994, a Viet Vo Dao Commission, headed by a government official who was not a Vovinam adherent, was established to monitor and
control the school’s activities. Training centres under the direction of the old, pre-1975 Masters were excluded from the commission and banned (Interview with Vovinam instructor, Ho Chi Minh City, 1996). Many overseas Vovinam federations refused to accept this “puppet” commission and its head.

Even among associations that remain loyal to the To Duong, co-operation with Vovinam in Vietnam is minimal. More junior members of the school are critical of the leadership for failing to forge closer ties with Vovinam in Vietnam and to play a role in its development there. The more senior members’ attitudes tend to be tempered by their anticommunist politics, but also by a sense of the real difficulties of co-operation and developing the sport in Vietnam. The movement remains chronically under funded, and still suffers from conflict with the authorities. It does not enjoy the same profile of Taekwondo, which is estimated to have some 12 000 adherents in Ho Chi Minh City while Vovinam has some 4 000. The underdeveloped state of Vovinam in Vietnam and the difficulty of active links with overseas associations no doubt in part a function of official obstruction of the movement.

While I was in Ho Chi Minh City in 1996 I met up with “Trung”, a mid-ranked member of the Bankstown school in his late twenties. The Master, back in Sydney, had asked him to learn an advanced sequence that only the Grand Master in Ho Chi Minh City was qualified to teach. Trung was despondent, because no one had shown much interest in him at the school in Thanh Da, by the palm-lined banks of the Saigon River on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. Despite its exotic appearance (which to my eyes didn’t cede much to the temple of Shaolin), not much was happening out there. The school’s license to practise had been put on ice due to its refusal to be integrated into the Ho Chi
Minh City sports union. A student had been assigned to teach Trung the moves, but hadn’t really mastered the sequence himself, and thus couldn’t transmit anything of worth to Trung. Watching a group from Vinh Long warm up for a tournament one night, one of them asked Trung, who was speaking English with me, “Are you Vietnamese, or what?” [Anh nguoi Viet Nam hay gi?]. “Vietnamese!” [Nguoi Viet Nam!] replied Trung, defensively. This challenge to his authenticity as a Vietnamese subject seemed for him to emblematise the indifference and rejection he had experienced at the Vo Duong in Thanh Da. After it, Trung told me that he regretted having wasted time and money on the trip to Vietnam. He wished he’d gone skiing in Australia instead.

If there are significant disjunctures between Vovinam organisations overseas and in Vietnam, the discipline also holds out the possibility of bridging the gap between diaspora and homeland. According to this vision, Vovinam forms a transnational “brotherhood”, its practitioners united by their knowledge of the same movements and routines. This shared language of movement is even conceptualised as being able to stand in for linguistic communication between a non-Vietnamese-speaking second generation overseas and their brothers/sisters in Vietnam. Like the system of person-reference, the bodily matrix of Vovinam takes on a productive character, acting to create a communicative rationality - only this time between parallel generations of Vietnamese youth separated by space rather than successive generations separated in time. To better realise this vision, the need to standardise terminology between the various schools and between nations is considered to be an issue of priority.

While in Trung’s experience communicative rationality fails between Sydney and Ho Chi Minh City, practitioners frequently insist on the identical nature of Vovinam as
practised in Vietnam and overseas. This (fantasy of) identity extends the imaginary ho of Vovinam transnationally, such that all of the various Vo Duong are conceived as the members of a single patrilineage, with its central altar in the To Duong in Ho Chi Minh City. While this may appear entirely contrary to the desire to maintain a rigid separation between exile and homeland cultural forms which we saw in Chapters Three and Four, this identification does not in fact betray the principle of exile, since the authenticity of the To Duong is rooted in an anticolonial and anticomunist past. Thus, rather than threatening the erasure of exile identity, Vovinam may be experienced as a means of effecting social and political transformation in Vietnam.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how the Cabramatta-Bankstown Vovinam school is imagined, principally by the instructors’ generation, to operate as an institution of cultural maintenance. Key to this maintenance is the embodiment of the cultural values perceived to be embedded in the Vietnamese system of person reference. In addition to resisting the pressures of assimilation, this pedagogy is also imagined in terms of diasporic nation building. Maintaining an authentic Vietnamese culture is seen as a means of building the generation that will one day restore Vietnam. Thus the reproduction of “traditional” modes of address is experienced to counteract the loss of tradition in socialist Vietnam, where the subtle social nuances of the personal pronoun system were (at one time, at least) suppressed by the use of the single term “comrade” [dong chi]. We have also seen the way in which the modes of embodiment made available through Vovinam potentially function as means of resisting the dominant encoding of Vietnamese Australian bodies in
the host nation public sphere. Finally, we have looked at the way in which overseas Vietnamese Vovinam schools and practitioners conceive their relationship to the SRV through the metaphor of Vovinam as a transnational *ho*. This metaphor may at times imply continuity and oneness, and at others disjuncture and separation.