7. Discourses of Deterritorialised Nation-Building in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Are our overseas compatriots an internal or an external resource?

They are a part of our internal resources overseas.

Nguyen Ngoc Ha, Head of the Committee on Overseas Vietnamese, Ho Chi Minh City.\textsuperscript{23}

The state and exile discourses we have examined thus far are largely boundary-drawing ones, oriented to defending the specificity and difference of “national” communities in the face of globalisation. In this chapter and the next, we shall focus on more explicitly transnational imaginaries in Vietnam and the diaspora. These imaginaries are best understood as an extension of rather than as being in opposition to national imaginaries. They are still oriented, I will argue, to nation-building projects. However, they differ from the boundary-drawing national imaginaries with which they co-exist in that they cognise the fact that the “nation” has been deterritorialised by transnational flows and affiliations. Instead of attempting to exclude these flows, they essay rather to bring them within the purview of the state’s hegemonic project. We might say that transnational imaginaries differ from national ones in that they are not coercive (in

\textsuperscript{23} In Hong An (1998) Emphasis added.
keeping undesirable flows out) but rather are productive. In a Foucaldean idiom, they tend more towards the panoptic rather than sovereign form of state power.

**Green and Grey Matter: Vietnamese Discourses of Deterritorialised Nation**

Prior to the 6th Party Congress in 1986, post-war Vietnamese emigrants living in the developed world were generally read under the sign of the Western enemy, and referred to in official communications as reactionary [phan dong] and as American Puppets [My-nguy]. Hanoi’s policy priorities vis-à-vis the “anticommunist” diaspora revolved around monitoring and defending against possible anti-regime activities. Overseas Vietnamese were permitted to remit money and send gifts to relatives during this “closed door” period, but the regime envisaged no greater economic role for them than this. With the onset of economic reforms, however, Hanoi began to look towards the post-war diaspora as a source of capital for its program of economic revitalisation. Stern notes that:

During the first two years following the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the regime went to great lengths to attract the economic attention of potential Viet Kieu investors with ambitious programs of tax incentives, liberalised rules governing business participation by Overseas Vietnamese, and public displays of affection. Hanoi charged local administrative committees with increased powers to make returning Overseas Vietnamese feel at home, and to legislate favourable terms for joint venture participation (Stern 1992: 16).
Something of a backlash against these reforms occurred in 1989. A poor response from overseas Vietnamese, alongside the re-emergence of security concerns in the context of events in Eastern Europe, led to a return to a more cautious policy. The Politburo acted to roll back some of reformer Nguyen Van Linh’s more unorthodox initiatives, reasserting control over the media and on other aspects of everyday life. The movement against “social evils” [te nan xa hoi], which we explored in Chapter Three, was an important means by which the centre sought to re-establish its slipping hegemony (Stern 1992: 19). Nevertheless, a fundamental shift in conceptualising the role of the overseas Vietnamese had occurred, and it was not to be reversed. The possibility of rehabilitating overseas Vietnamese as patriotic investors and as loyal transnational subjects had come into being, and the postwar diaspora was no longer beyond the pale.

**Overseas Vietnamese Investment in and Remittances to Vietnam**

Vietnam has since 1986 looked to its overseas population as a source of both remittances and FDI. As for China, FDI has been and continues to be key to the success of economic reform in Vietnam. Overseas Chinese investors have been a major force behind China’s economic takeoff, providing 70-80% of a total of 60 billion in FDI, and the same in loans, since 1979 (Hsia Chang 1995: 957-8). Vietnam is by no means under the illusion that the overseas Vietnamese have any such investment potential as the Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and elsewhere (Murray 1997: 66, Pham Khac Lam 1997). However, Vietnam clearly has a significant interest in mobilising what potential is there. Murray (1997: 20) cites the estimate that the Overseas Vietnamese
earned $US 17 billion after tax in 1994, more than the GNP of Vietnam. Recent estimates put Overseas Vietnamese earnings as high as $US 30 billion (Kim Tri and Trung Binh 1999). Yearly remittances to Vietnam from the overseas Vietnamese are officially $US 1.2 billion, but may in fact be as high as $US 3 billion. Much of this money is in unofficial or "contraband" investment, and the state is currently faced with the problem of how to transform it into official FDI. At present, more than 400 overseas Vietnamese enterprises with a total capital of $US 27.7 million are operating in Vietnam under the Domestic Investment Law. These enterprises are mostly involved in export-import, advertising and tourism. In addition, Vietnamese nationals living outside Vietnam have invested $US 200 million in 50 projects under the Foreign Investment Law ("More Than 400 Overseas Vietnamese Enterprises..."). These represent just over one half of one percent of a total of around $US 42.2 billion in foreign investment.

As well as having its eye on overseas Vietnamese capital, the SRV also seeks to tap the knowledge of the diaspora. Hanoi claims now to be placing a higher currency on the value of overseas Vietnamese "grey matter" than it does on "green matter" ("Mau Xanh, Chat Xam"), although the mechanisms for professional and educational exchange remain limited compared to those facilitating investment. In homeland scholar Tran Trong Dang Dan’s *Overseas Vietnamese*, which includes an entire chapter on "Vietnamese intellectuals in the capitalist countries" (1997: 183-200), the author states that the potential of the Overseas Vietnamese lies "mainly in the sphere of grey matter, in intellectual potential, in managerial skills, in the ability to amass useful experience of the world with which to offer suggestions at home, in their advisory and professional skills" (Tran Trong Dang Dan 1997: 250). In the same vein, Pham Xuan Nam notes "There are
around 400,000 Vietnamese living overseas who have tertiary and higher degrees... 
Through them we might reach out and grasp the latest achievements of science and industry, including the sciences of management and business” (Pham Xuan Nam 1997: 298). The overseas Vietnamese are even seen as having the potential to bring Vietnam into the space age! Dan points out that there are 200 overseas Vietnamese researchers in the Texas facility of NASA alone, and that there has even been an overseas Vietnamese astronaut, Dr Eugene Trinh, who flew in Columbia (Tran Trong Dang Dan 1997: 125). Currently, about 200 academics return to Vietnam each year to give lectures or work as consultants for domestically invested projects (“More Than 400 Overseas Vietnamese Enterprises...”).

**Metaphors of Incorporation**

As in conventional modalities of nation-building, the dimension of affect is central to the processes of transnational nation-building. Diasporic investors and professionals are asked to “contribute” to the nation not simply in a self-interested or economic rationalist way, but rather to take risks and put up with lesser returns for the sake of love of their homeland. Can Tho University, for instance, asks overseas Vietnamese academics to come as visiting scholars in return for free transport from Ho Chi Minh City airport, accommodation, meals, and a sightseeing tour in the Mekong Delta(!) In order to make such propositions palatable, discourses of transnation must successfully produce “homelands of identification” in which diasporic subjects can invest their desires. This process euphemises the more exploitative dimensions of transnational
nation-building, as well as suppressing the disjunctures between and within overseas and domestic populations.

The most sophisticated representation of a Vietnamese transnation yet to emerge came out of the Eighth Party Congress in 1996. There, it was resolved that “Overseas Vietnamese are an inseparable part of the community of the Vietnamese dan toc” - dan toc being translatable variously as race, nation or people (SRV Party Central Committee 1996: II(4)). It was explained that the state seeks, through this recognition, to better “mobilise the strength of the entire dan toc, including Vietnamese overseas, for the goal of a wealthy people, a strong country and a just and civilised society” (Tran Trong Dang Dan 1997: 5). The final phrase of this formulation is of course the official slogan of contemporary Doi Moi Vietnam [Dan giau, nuoc manh, xa hoi cong bang, van minh], a somewhat troubled attempt to steer through the contradictions of a socialist society with capitalist markets, and to colour the disjunctures of the Doi Moi reforms as an “extension” of the socialist revolution (Greenfield 1997: 124).

Unlike other nations identified in the literature as “deterritorialised”, the kind of national belonging extended to the Vietnamese diaspora is not strongly predicated on a spatial metaphor. Perhaps such an expanded conception of national space seems to Vietnam’s leaders somehow sacrilegious. Soil plays its role in all nationalisms, but the value of physical territory in Vietnamese nationalism is particularly high, given the long struggle for independence and reunification. There remains a strong sense that national belonging can be conferred only by having stood firm on Vietnamese soil (albeit on the right bits of it and facing the right enemy), and the act of leaving is heavily stigmatised, the destinations highly politicised as the Other Side in the Cold War. Thus in the official
formulation “Overseas Vietnamese are an inseparable part of the community of the Vietnamese dan toc”, an appeal is made not to a shared territory, if only an imaginary one, but rather to the temporal notion of a unified racial/national/ethnic community [cong dong dan toc]. Note that the term dan toc is used in preference to nhan dan, which signifies a social (and socialist) collectivity rather than one of blood ties. Le Sy Giao notes that “in thought and feeling, when we speak of the community of inhabitants of Vietnam, using the concept of Dan toc Viet Nam creates a closeness, an intertwining, a unity greater than the concept of Nhan Dan Viet Nam” (Le Sy Giao 1999: 35). This distinction is comparable to that in Chinese between renmin (denoting a political community) and minzu (denoting an ethnic nation). Significantly, this formulation invites the overseas Vietnamese to participate in a sense of Vietnamese communitas rather than in a political community, thus foregrounding ethnic and racial similarity over ideological and historical differences.

This formulation is much more sophisticated than earlier metaphors, such as “a piece of [our] heart distant a thousand li” or “our Vietnamese compatriots far from the Land of their Ancestors”. These representations take a somewhat patronising tone by foregrounding the distance and alienation of overseas Vietnamese from the national community, thus constructing them as deracinated subjects. By contrast, the idea of a global community of blood ties does not privilege Vietnam as the sole site in which legitimate Vietnamese identities can be formed. Neither, arguably, does it claim a monopoly over the nationalist identifications of diasporic subjects, but rather accommodates their ties to the host nations. In its attempt to further a loyal, homeland-referring identity in the diaspora the state has even begun to articulate multiculturalist
discourses of diversity and enrichment. Thus the journal *Que Huong* [Homeland] speaks with pride about overseas Vietnamese who integrate with US society and play an increasingly important role in it, “but at the same time preserve and live their culture, contributing to the enrichment of the multicultural society of that country [the US]” (“Đoan uy ban…”). Importantly, the idea of the “loyal” overseas Vietnamese subject does not exclude this subject’s identification with the host nation (“integration”). Rather, it is the identification with a diasporic exile culture that must be broken. Conceptualising the overseas Vietnamese project of cultural maintenance within the ideology of state multiculturalism (rather than in terms of an oppositional project of “national restoration”) has the desired effect of doing just this - discursively, at least. Multiculturalism, it has often been noted, acts to transform difference into consumable diversity, setting limits to the political power of collectivities structured in difference. Thus while the host nations have offered limited support for community formation and cultural and linguistic maintenance, they have at the same time sought to depoliticise and dehistoricise overseas Vietnamese identities by acting to curtail the homeland political aspirations of the overseas Vietnamese and expecting them in the post Cold War era to act like voluntary, not involuntary, migrants. As we have seen, overseas Vietnamese community associations, media and individuals have resisted this re-interpellation, refusing to give up their refugee histories and exile status and conform to the foreign policy objectives of host states (see Chapter Five).

In *Que Huong*, however, the overseas Vietnamese are idealised as good rather than bad multicultural subjects. These ideal subjects are integrated into US society, and do not seek to challenge the host nation’s will via a refractory homeland politics. They
also preserve their culture, but in an apolitical and non-threatening form, thus making it available for consumption by the host society. In this way, an exile politico-cultural project turns into an ethno-cultural one that can then be reappropriated by the homeland, since the “national will” of the diaspora has been broken. Consequently, Que Huong, in the same issue, is able to speak of Vietnamese cultural performers “from Vietnam and overseas” as having introduced a Vietnamese “ethnic culture” [van hoa dan toc] to appreciative American audiences through events such as the Asia Pacific Day (Nguyen Hai Duong 2000). (This article conveniently neglects to mention that most homeland cultural performances in the US are picketed by overseas Vietnamese protestors (see Reyes 1999: 161)). By taking pride in “ethnic” (not diasporic) Vietnamese culture’s appreciation by the host nation, the state claims for itself the status of legitimate source of, heir to and protector of this 4,000 years old national culture, in the same move displacing the claim to a distinct diasporic culture.

A recent shift in official terminology from Viet Kieu, a term with potentially negative connotations, to “Overseas Vietnamese” [Nguoi Viet Nam o nuoc ngoai ], parallels a Chinese shift from huaqiao to haiwai huaren. According to Nonini and Ong, with this move “China is reinstated as primal source and centre, the Middle Kingdom, fons et origo of ‘Chinese culture’” (Nonini and Ong 1997: 9). Similarly, we might point to the Vietnamese state’s attempt to regain its position as the absolute referent of Vietnamese nationhood and culture, thus displacing the defunct RVN as the locus of diasporic nationalism. Viet Kieu, a Sino-Vietnamese term, was originally used to describe Vietnamese nationals living overseas before 1975. More specifically, the term was applied to returnees from the capitalist bloc, who continued to be thus designated after
their return. It was only after the advent of Doi Moi, and particularly in the 1990s, that
the term was applied to all Vietnamese living abroad, irrespective of whether in the
socialist or capitalist world (Diep Dinh Hoa 2000). Diep Dinh Hoa points out that the
term *nguoi Viet Nam o nuoc ngoai* creates an imaginary unity amongst the overseas
Vietnamese insofar as it doesn’t distinguish between those who retain Vietnamese
nationality and those who don’t, the country of residence, time of departure or reason for
departure (ibid.).

Clearly, these are all metaphors that assume an almost perfect degree of racial
homogeneity, and put forward a self-evident definition of an “overseas Vietnamese”.
Those belonging to ethnic minorities, those of mixed ancestry, and those claiming a
cultural membership of the nation are ambiguously positioned, if not excluded outright.
Paradoxically, “1.5 generation” overseas Vietnamese who may speak no Vietnamese at
all are included on the basis of their racial belonging. One feels in Vietnam little hint of
such largesse as that shown by Chinese academic Tu Wei Ming, who would include in
the Chinese national community non-ethnic Chinese intellectuals, businesspeople and
others who are engaged in serious intercultural dialogues with China (Tu Wei Ming
1991: 2).

**Proselytising in the Diaspora**

It seems clear that Vietnam sees diasporic anticommunist elites as its enemies in
the endeavour to woo the overseas Vietnamese. The state is well aware that anti-regime
elites control the diasporic media and community organisations, and is addressing the
problem of how to reduce their influence, particularly on those recently arrived as
economic or family reunion migrants. Indeed, there is evidence that Vietnam sees itself
as being in struggle with elites in the diaspora not only for influence over the overseas Vietnamese “masses” in the Western countries, but also for the loyalty of the communities in the former Soviet bloc. The state has quite consciously cast itself as the defender of communal rights of overseas Vietnamese, most particularly the right to extranational loyalty to the homeland, and also to more basic rights such as those of linguistic and cultural maintenance. In this it seeks to usurp the role of elites as the guarantors of these communal rights in the host nations (see, for instance, Nguyen Dy Nien 1998: 3, Tran Trong Dang Dan 1997: 267-8).

While diasporic elites stress the “naturalness” of the anticommunist orthodoxy, and promote idealised, essentialised representations of a unified refugee diaspora, homeland scholars represent the anticommunist element as a small but powerful minority that has self-interestedly seized control of diasporic media and community organisations, and which has even enlisted host nation media such as the BBC World Service and Voice of America to voice its anticommunist views. The picture most frequently drawn here is of an exploitative elite, drawn strictly from the military and administration of the old regime, foisting its outmoded Cold War politics on a silent majority of homeland patriots that does not identify with this exile identity (Tran Trong Dang Dan. 157-181, Pham Xuan Nam 1997: 298). Homeland scholarship usually emphasises the disunity and internal contradictions of the diaspora, authors stressing that those leaving Vietnam left at many different times and for many different reasons, and thus have diverse orientations to the homeland. It would appear that anticommunists in the diaspora are aware of this state-sponsored interpretation of overseas Vietnamese community politics. Thus, as we have seen, any public demonstration of diasporic disunity with regard to the homeland
question is criticised vehemently by exiles, who hold that the perpetrators are furthering this (mis)representation, thus aiding the homeland regime in its endeavour to demonstrate “that the refugees are only ‘a gang of thieves, prostitutes and lickspittles of the imperialists’, and that the true Vietnamese all support them [the communists]” (Le Thanh Luan 1998).

As we saw in the Introduction, the power of the Vietnamese language media in Orange County was amply demonstrated in its role in helping to create and coordinate the huge response to Tran Van Truong’s hanging of the communist flag (Tini Tran 1999). In order to combat this hegemony, the state has sought to bring into being a “loyal” transnational media. The most concrete results of this to date are the magazine Que Huong [Homeland], which runs articles on laws, regulations and policy affecting overseas Vietnamese, and gives rundowns of articles relating to overseas Vietnamese published in Vietnam’s media. The Internet is seen as the most important tool for disseminating information for Overseas Vietnamese about “the situation in-country” (Hong An 1998). Que Huong has its own website, with an online version of the magazine, and there is now also an online version of the Party newspaper, Nhan Dan (http://www.nhandan.org.vn), as well as a number of other SRV organs. There are currently plans afoot to print and distribute 15 Vietnam-based newspaper titles in Europe (“15 bao CSVN...”); and an anticommunist website reports that the homeland newspapers Nhan Dan, Tap chi Cong San, Tuoi Tre Chu Nhat, Thanh Nien, Phu Nu and Lao Dong are being distributed in Canada and the US (“Sach bao CS o My”). The Central Committee for Ideology and Culture also plans to broadcast radio Voice of Vietnam
("CSVN len ke hoach...")", and SRV TV station VTV-4 began in 2000 to broadcast over North America via the telstar-5 satellite.

Models of Modernity

As we saw in Chapter Three, the process of economic liberalisation in Vietnam has created a great deal of anxiety (at least on the part of the authorities) about the influx of damaging foreign cultural influences. Likewise, the influx of FDI has sparked fears about the possible ill effects of rapacious foreign capital and capitalists, causing the nation’s leaders to fear the possibility of the subordination of Vietnamese subjects in their own country before the economic and cultural power of Euramerica and East Asia.

While the state continues to reject a Western model of modernity fairly unequivocally, it is more ambivalent about the East Asian model. On the one hand, Vietnam identifies with the governmental and economic model of the East Asian newly industrialised countries, which are its biggest source of FDI. Vietnamese elites appear to have internalised the Confucian capitalist narrative of Vietnam as a “tiger cub”, an aspiring member of an exclusive club of industrialised East Asian nations (Greenfield 1997: 127). Such a self-image has been encouraged by, among others, Lee Kwan Yew, who has been something of a fan club for Vietnam, asserting its advantages as a Confucian over culturally “soft” neighbours like the Philippines (in Ong 1997: 185-6). Vietnam in turn has been inspired by Singapore as a model for its own information control policy (Taylor 1998: 191), as well as by the image of it as an orderly, disciplined society relatively free of the perceived cultural malaise of the other Confucian capitalists. Taiwan and South Korea, likewise, have served as models for a “soft authoritarianism”
(Mahannaporn 1996: 34). This Confucian capitalist narrative is one that is capable of capturing the imagination of overseas Vietnamese investors and businesspeople. While they typically don’t recognise the legitimacy of the Party, many are in accord with an ideology of “strong” government, and even strident anticommunists will admit in a candid moment that the dead hand of the Party is preferable to the chaos that succeeded the fall of communist rule in the former Soviet Union. Take for instance Nguyen Van Quan, a Vietnamese American who asserts that if Vietnam were to emulate Shanghai’s 12% yearly growth rate then “in five to ten years, Vietnam will be a Tiger, among the tigers of Asia, and not a Philippines, Thailand or Indonesia”. Arriving in Hong Kong, Quan speaks of being moved to see the Vietnam Air hostesses in their ao dai against the ultra-modern background of the city, as though he was seeing the future Vietnam, no longer a cub but a fully grown tiger (Nguyen Van Quan 1994).

On the other hand, however, this identification with East Asia is imperfect and ambivalent. As Mandy Thomas (2000) points out, East Asia is an unstable sign in Vietnamese discourses on modernity, signifying both the West and the non-West. Against a shared sense of belonging to a set of Asian nations and cultures, there is a sense of historical tensions and separations between Vietnam and East Asia. An untrammelled identification with Japan, for instance, is precluded by its Vietnamese colonial history, as well as by the sense that it cannot but be “patronising” in its relationship with Vietnam as an aid donor and economic Goliath to Vietnam’s David (Thomas 2000). While China’s strategy of market liberalisation has served as something of a model for Vietnam (Thayer 1999), the relationship with the People’s Republic is also problematic due, apart from the current economic and military competition, to a long, long history of Chinese
colonisation and cultural transfer. The other East Asian models are also viewed with ambivalence. During the cultural purity drive that gripped Vietnam in 1996 (see Chapter Three), East Asian cultural products were singled out for particular attention. Discourses about “noxious” East Asian culture are accompanied by stereotypes about the exploitation of Vietnamese labour by East Asian investors, as well as by the sexual threat posed by them. Taiwanese men in particular are accused of buying child brides in Vietnam and subjecting them to lives of abuse in Taiwan, a factor contributing to a de facto policy of throwing bureaucratic obstacles in the way of inter-racial marriages (to say nothing of medical obstacles - prenuptial couples are subjected to sanity evaluations as well as a very old-fashioned and intrusive syphilis test).

The fear of these East Asian others is no doubt founded upon an awareness of the ravages which globalisation and intra-regional competition may visit upon Vietnam’s culture and economy. There exist a number of positions on globalisation in Vietnam, ranging from a naive faith in it among tertiary educated urban youth - for whom Bill Gates now rates higher as an icon than Ho Chi Minh - to a dogmatic and/or self-interested opposition to it amongst ideological conservatives in the Party and their clients in the state sector. Pro-globalisation intellectuals acknowledge that Vietnam needs to open its doors to global markets to create the preconditions for development of the national economy, but warn against the hyper-competitive and uneven nature of the global playing field, on which “[s]trong countries exploit their superiority to bully weak

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24 Youths interviewed by Tuoi Tre were three times more likely to choose Bill Gates as their icon than Ho Chi Minh. The issue containing this article was banned (Radio Free Asia 2001).
and developing countries”, stressing the need to keep sight of national interests (Nguyen Minh Hoan 1999).

Compared with these “strangers”, the overseas Vietnamese have seemed attractive, at least at moments, as foreign investors and as alternative agents or intermediaries of modernity. Pham Khac Lam, Vice Director of the Committee on Overseas Vietnamese, has expressed the hope that the overseas Vietnamese may serve as a “bridge” between Vietnam and the rest of the world. When one brackets off the history of the war and the oppositional politics of the diaspora, the overseas Vietnamese appear to be the perfect solution to Vietnam’s problem. Racially, culturally and linguistically they are Vietnamese; but they are also Western, in that they live in the developed world and have some of its attributes: professional, managerial and technological knowledges, capital, and access to markets. Further, investment coming from them can be discursively reconstructed as an internal, not an external resource (see opening quotation), and therefore falls into line with the autarchic principle of “guerrilla” self-sufficiency which still looms large in the Vietnamese national imaginary. Profits made by them may also, according to this logic, be seen as “domestic” profits rather than as money made by foreigners off Vietnamese sweat that will simply leave the country. Here, as opposed to rapacious foreign investors, overseas Vietnamese are seen as patriotic subjects with an affective commitment to seeing the nation rebuilt rather than simply a cold economic rationalist interest in profit. “The majority who left”, argues Pham Xuan Nam, “still have strong feelings [nang long] to their homeland and country” (Pham Xuan Nam 1997: 45). Dan asserts that “Vietnamese, even though no longer holding Vietnamese citizenship, still carry Vietnamese blood, Vietnamese feelings, and so ought to be treated more
warmly than foreigners” (Tran Trong Dang Dan 1997: 257). Consequently, the cultural impact of their presence is imagined to be much less disturbing than that of foreigners in the national community. The overseas Vietnamese are seen as embodying the possibility of a new, true modernisation that will nevertheless leave Vietnam’s “cultural values” (and hence the state’s hold on power) intact.25

Capturing Overseas Vietnamese Capital: Remittances and FDI

Remittances have been sent by Overseas Vietnamese back to Vietnam since the late seventies, reaching the level of $US 700 million per annum by the time Doi Moi was instituted (Nugent 1996: 147). It is currently estimated that $US 1-1.2 billion is remitted to Viet Nam annually through official channels, forming 5% of the country’s GDP or 11% of export earnings, and bringing in more foreign exchange than any other source bar oil exports. Ten years’ accumulated remittances are equal to 10 years accumulated foreign investment in Ho Chi Minh City (Hong Le Tho 1999, Haughton 1999). While Vietnam’s overseas population is around 3-4% of its in-country population, comparable to that of China, remittance flows into Vietnam are far more important, both in per capita

25 The everyday experiences of Vietnamese workers in the employ of overseas Vietnamese do not of course necessarily conform to this imaginary. While the state tends to arrogate the abuse of labour to overseas investors, workers in FDI enterprises are in fact protected by minimum wage and labour conditions in a way that workers in the domestic private sector are not. There is much anecdotal evidence that overseas Vietnamese unofficially fund labour-intensive domestic enterprises such as shoe and garment making, which are headed by their relatives. They are free in this relatively unregulated sector to engage in exploitative labour practices.
terms and relative to incomes, than those into China (Haughton 1999: 32). (Direct investment is however significantly lower for the overseas Vietnamese). Haughton estimates that the typical adult Overseas Vietnamese is sending about $US 500 to family and friends in Vietnam every year, or $US 2000 per migrant household. Mandy Thomas reports that among her Vietnamese Australian research subjects, about 10% of net income was sent back home (Thomas 1997: 171). Of the 300 000 Overseas Vietnamese who return each year (around 15% of the diaspora), most carry gifts of cash and other goods to relatives. (Haughton 1999: 33). Much foreign currency comes into the country illegally. The official route for remittances is via banks or companies registered with banks. Money remitted this way is currently not subject to tax, but is subject to the lower exchange rates offered by banks than on the open market. Unofficial routes include Overseas Vietnamese tourists bringing undeclared cash, sending the money to the bank account of a Vietnamese national employed by an Overseas Vietnamese company and having that person distribute the money (Thuc Doan 1999), or using unofficial cash transfer services available in diasporic residential centres. If one includes such unofficial remittances, the amount remitted annually is estimated to be closer to $US 2-3 billion (Nguyen An 1999, Thai Binh 1999). One homeland commentator has remarked that “money remitted by Overseas Vietnamese is a type of capital that is at once real and illusory” (Thuc Doan 1999). This is so in the sense that perhaps half to two thirds of money sent to Vietnam is remitted unofficially, and thus escapes leaving its residue on the government coffers. It is also so in that much of this unofficially remitted money is probably “contraband” investment [dau tu “chui”], money remitted to friends and relatives by Overseas Vietnamese to invest on their behalves under domestic rather than
foreign investment law. It is estimated that around $US 1 billion is invested in this way (“Vietnam to Expand Rights...”). In this way Overseas Vietnamese “vicarious investors” evade what they see as discriminatory investment laws - to say nothing of unnecessarily complicated administrative procedures and bureaucratic obstructionism. It seems that many Overseas Vietnamese investors would rather run the risk of being cheated by the front person for their investments than face high tax rates, high rates for government-provided services, restrictive real estate laws and various other administrative obstacles and pitfalls (Kim Tri and Trung Binh 1999). Vietnamese policy-makers are currently faced with the problem of how to transform Overseas Vietnamese remittances and vicarious investment into the FDI so desired to stimulate the economy (see Ngoc Huong 1998).

Despite the apparent good faith expressed in the slogan that “Overseas Vietnamese are an inseparable part of the Vietnamese dan toc”, the kind of market citizenship currently offered to Overseas Vietnamese investors is at best partial, and continues to be experienced by them as discriminatory. The poor response by Overseas Vietnamese investors saw in 1993 the implementation of the Promotion of Domestic Investment law (29/CP), the stated aim of which is “To promote and create favourable conditions for Vietnamese residing overseas to invest in and contribute their part to building the nation” (Committee on Overseas Vietnamese 1995: 287). Under this law and subsequent amendments of it, Overseas Vietnamese investing in certain priority areas such as infrastructure, technology and the development of remote areas receive advantages over non-Vietnamese foreign investors such as significant tax breaks, more generous visa conditions, access to some government-provided services at local rates and
the right to set up foreign joint ventures under the same conditions as locals (see also Committee on Overseas Vietnamese 1998). Despite this, a great number of legal and procedural difficulties continue to dog Overseas Vietnamese investors. At a roundtable hosted during Tet 1999 by the Ho Chi Minh City branch of the Committee on Overseas Vietnamese, the following problem areas were identified: restrictive laws on real estate and the right to buy property, irregular visa terms and issuing practices, restrictions on the right to buy shares, inadequate copyright and intellectual property laws, unfavourable terms for remittances, discrimination under Vietnam’s two-tiered price system and discrimination against Overseas Vietnamese under the Citizenship Law (Chanh Khai 1999). A separate conference on the Promotion of Domestic Investment law concluded that “discriminatory investment laws were the major repellent to overseas Vietnamese seeking permanent residence or investment opportunities within the country” (Nguyen An 1999).

The pattern of high levels of remittances and low investment suggest that Overseas Vietnamese desire to bypass the state and its projects in making their capital transfers to Vietnam.26 We shall explore this issue further in Chapter Eight.

26 It is a condition of the BTA between the SRV and US that US investors, including Vietnamese Americans, will gradually be granted parity with domestic investors.
The Limits to Incorporation

There is of course resistance to the SRV’s semiotic manoeuvring in the diaspora, as we have already seen. However, it is important to point out first that there exists a strong domestic ambivalence about the idea of a “transnational Vietnam”.

In the wake of the collapse of Soviet bloc, security concerns began to resurface strongly in the state’s conceptualisation of its relations with the overseas Vietnamese. The Politburo moved to reassert control over the process of reform, and to redress post Doi Moi phenomena such as the breakdown of the propaganda state signalled by the Party’s loss of hegemony over symbolic production (see Lynch 1999). In this uncertain environment, the overseas Vietnamese came increasingly to be seen as potential agents of subversion and political destabilisation (Stern 1992: 19-24). More recently, conservatives have asserted that anti-regime forces have multiplied and found more opportunities to organise as a result of the normalisation with the US and Vietnam’s entry into ASEAN ((Nguyen Chan 1998, “Interior Ministry...”, “CSVN lo so...”). The state’s desire to co-opt overseas Vietnamese subjects’ capital and professional skills for its own project of nation-building is coupled with a fear of diasporic forces “pursuing their plot of ‘peaceful evolution’ by hurling the disguise of ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ to cover their intention to interfere in our internal affairs” (SRV Party Central Committee 1996).

Certainly, there do exist overseas Vietnamese groups who are seeking to exploit the new conditions to undertake clandestine political organisation in Vietnam. However, the regime’s proclivity to “see enemies everywhere” has less to do with empirical enemies, I would argue, than with fears centred on the loss of national sovereignty and territorial integrity.
The state's ambivalence about the overseas Vietnamese is expressed quite literally in the intermediate administrative category they occupy, which puts them between locals and foreigners on a three-tiered system. Overseas Vietnamese are given access to things such as rent, visa, travel and investment conditions more favourable than those enjoyed by foreigners, but less so than those enjoyed by Vietnamese nationals. Thus they are permitted to enjoy more national belonging than non-Vietnamese foreign nationals, but are "punished" for having left the nation-state by being denied the same amount of belonging enjoyed by Vietnamese nationals. The Vietnamese state has its subtle, and not so subtle, ways of constituting Overseas Vietnamese as parvenus to the national community. A Franco-Vietnamese executive working for a foreign petroleum company in Saigon complained to me with some bitterness that when it comes to something like buying air tickets, then the state treats you like a foreigner; at other times, it wants you to act like a Vietnamese - i.e. respect official cultural values and be a docile subject. In short, the worst of both worlds. "OK, let them treat me like a foreigner" he said angrily, "but don't expect me to behave like a Vietnamese at other times" (Interview, 1999). An overseas Vietnamese contributor to Lao Dong complained more humbly "We want to be 'us' [ta] and not 'Westerners' [Tay]" (Hong Le Tho 1999). Finally, a marketing/advertising executive who had only left Vietnam in the late 80s and come back in the mid 90s recounted that, even though gone for only six years, his Vietnameseness had been universally questioned and rejected. He had been constructed as entirely foreign, and told by his Vietnamese counterparts, no matter what he proposed, "You don't understand our way of doing things" (Interview, 1999).
Many overseas Vietnamese returnees report even blunter experiences of hostility, suspicion and resentment on the part of their counterparts in the SRV. For instance, a medical team of Vietnamese Australians recounted having been refused the opportunity to offer criticism of hospitals in Vietnam or to engage in any training of medical staff after having been invited to Vietnam to do just this (Interview, 1998). A Vietnamese American economist advising a government ministry reported being shadowed by security, having his hotel room searched repeatedly, and being brought before a people’s court on bogus charges (Interview, 1998). In a much publicised case, US citizen Dr Ngo Trong Vinh, director of an NGO program on STDs, including HIV/AIDS, was deported because he attempted to visit “dissident” Buddhist leader Thich Quang Do, resulting in the stopping of the $US 30 million project. The Vietnamese American proprietor of a Ho Chi Minh City English school met bureaucratic obstruction to the establishment of his school, despite the fact that what he wanted to do was legally permitted and encouraged by policy. It was not until his plight received publicity in the newspaper Tuoi Tre that the Ho Chi Minh City Central Committee acted on it (Interview, 1999).

We might understand the distance between the inclusivist rhetoric of deterritorialised nation and these experiences in a number of ways. Firstly, there are ongoing factional fights between conservatives and reformers within the regime about whether or not to proceed with such “open door” policies. Secondly, we may see it in terms of the split between policy-making and bureaucratic, administrative and everyday cultures. Inclusivist policy will not necessarily be matched by inclusivist attitudes on the ground. Stern notes that the regime has had to defend its policy on the overseas Vietnamese against media and popular disapproval (Stern 1992: 18). Finally, there exists
a fundamental ambivalence about the idea of having overseas Vietnamese return to the national community, something that is evident in a somewhat schizophrenic discourse on Vietnam as transnation that seesaws from the desire for “grey matter” to the fear of “peaceful evolution”.

Given that the Vietnamese Communist Party’s legitimacy is in large part founded on a history of anti-foreign nationalism, it is unsurprising that the classically conceived nation-state should retain a great deal of affective and symbolic force in Vietnam, or that leaving the national territory should still be understood to constitute an act of betrayal or abandonment. The highly ideologically charged context of post-war emigration from Vietnam reinforces this interpretation. Thus despite the state’s attempt to smooth over the disjunctures and to euphemise relations between itself and the diaspora, the exploitative dimension of these relations is frequently all too clear to returnees, who find themselves paying higher prices than locals and more likely to be targets of bureaucratic obstructionism and of the security apparatus than other overseas visitors. Paradoxically, the experience of travelling, living and working in Vietnam tends to situate overseas Vietnamese inescapably in a diasporic identity, encapsulated in the pejorative use of the term Viet Kieu. The effect of this experience is to reinscribe antagonistic Cold War narratives onto the space of transnational Vietnam, making the project of deterritorialised nation-building all the more fraught.

**Official and Practical National Belonging**

Ghassan Hage (1998: 49-55) makes an important distinction between citizenship, which signifies a *formal* recognition of one’s national status by the state, and *practical*
national belonging, which refers to one's everyday acceptance or non-acceptance as a national subject by the dominant community. The notion of citizenship, Hage argues, is an inadequate way of conceptualising national belonging because it doesn't give us any indication of the degree of acceptance that is granted to different classes of national subject by the dominant national community. The concept of citizenship implies an either/or logic: one is either "fully" a citizen or "fully not" a citizen. Practical national belonging, by contrast, is something which one may possess varying amounts of. "In the daily life of the nation," Hage argues, "there are nationals who, on the basis of their class or gender or ethnicity, for example, practically feel and are made to feel to be more or less nationals than others" (ibid: 52). Hage conceives practical nationality as a form of cultural capital that can be accumulated within the field constituted by the nation, and may be converted into national belonging. "Full" national belonging is not, therefore, bestowed by citizenship. Rather, one is perceived to be as much of a national subject as the national cultural capital one has accumulated.

The incompatibility between the formal and practical recognition of one's nationality is especially marked when there is a "clearly dominant, culturally defined community within the nation" (ibid: 50). The hegemonic ideal of Vietnameseness that underpins the dominant national community centres the north, the DRV and the People's Army of Vietnam [Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam]. Those who supported the RVN, and to a lesser extent those who opposed it by fighting in the southern guerrilla army, the People's Liberation Front [Mat Tran Giai Phong Mien Nam], have historically been marginalised within this dominant community. These internal differentiations become less significant however in relation to overseas Vietnamese, in whose presence the
dominant community becomes “those who stood firm on Vietnamese soil” as opposed to “those who left the national community”. This classification remains fundamental to a definition of Vietnamese national identity, and its effect is such that not only do overseas Vietnamese experience a large gap between the formal and practical recognition of their national belonging, but the formal recognition of their belonging becomes itself an uncertain matter. As we have seen above, the official acceptance that the Vietnamese state grants overseas Vietnamese is partial and ambivalent. As an overseas Vietnamese, one is not formally recognised as a full “citizen”, but as a kind of half-citizen. Further, this part belonging is itself cumulative and unequally distributed, because it is only imperfectly guaranteed by the state. The weakness of the rule of law in Vietnam means that overseas Vietnamese may experience difficulty in having their state-conferred legal rights recognised, since one can never be assured that laws made at the national level will be implemented by local bureaucracies. Witness the case of the owner of the English school, discussed above, who was denied a business license even though there was no legal impediment to his being granted one. Conversely, one may accumulate more official national belonging as an overseas Vietnamese if one is perceived to have made an outstanding contribution to the nation. Those overseas Vietnamese who invest under the Domestic Investment Law (i.e. in certain priority projects identified as being in the national interest by the government) may be granted special “one price” certificates which allow them to pay the same price as Vietnamese citizens for domestic airfares, accommodation, electricity and water, medical care, telecommunications, education, and bus and waterway services provided by State-owned companies (“One price’ foreign
investors...”). If realising one’s formal rights as a Viet Kieu is difficult, being accepted by the dominant national community at a practical, everyday level is even more so.

The Bodily Politics of “Passing”

We may extend Hage’s analysis with that of Lauren Berlant (1991). She argues that the bodies of those who exemplify the ideal of the White, male national subject become, in a sense, “invisible”. Their embodiment signifies as normal and unmarked, as opposed to the abnormal or excessive embodiment that is imposed upon non-normative subjects of the nation (women, racial others, queers etc). Since marked bodies can only mime the legitimate relationship to the nation, the subject who attempts to “pass” for White creates a juridically fraudulent body that is always susceptible to re-materialisation, re-embodiment. In socialist Vietnam, this national corporeal politics is of course radically differently structured. The “people” or the “masses” are envisaged as the legitimate (collective) subject of the nation rather than the “person” or the “citizen”.

Nevertheless, I would argue that it is still possible for us to apply the distinction between “abstract” and “material” national bodies to the category of market citizenship in Vietnam.

Domestic Vietnamese have an extremely finely honed capacity to “spot” a non-national, who is identifiable by the tiniest departure from locally constituted codes of dress, deportment, speech etc. A Vietnamese Australian reports the experience of being singled out:
I travelled in a local bus all the way back from the country to the city ... and when I got off all the cyclo guys yelled "Oh that guy, that Hong Kong guy is mine!"

This interviewee put down his visibility to the fact that he wore “fashionable” small, round glasses and had closely cropped hair. Here, what confounds the capacity to make the body abstract is not racial difference, but the Viet Kieu’s non-local body hexis and technologies of the body. In Vietnam when you check in to a hotel, rent a house, or buy a domestic air ticket, you have to show your identity card or passport. This supervisory mechanism works to identify Viet Kieu, making it difficult to counterfeit “national” status in such transactions. It is only in “street” transactions in the unregulated sector (such as hiring a cyclo) that the game of “passing” comes in to its own. The consequences of being “hailed” as a non-national subject are typically more than just symbolic, since Viet Kieu, like foreigners, are routinely double or triple charged in these transactions. The street traders’ overcharging gains a certain support and legitimacy from a state policy that works to systematically deny Viet Kieu privileged access to the market. Only the Viet Kieu who has expertly (re)assimilated a local bodily hexis is able to mime or perform a “legitimate” national body, thus gaining fraudulent entitlement to full market citizenship.

At other moments, of course, it is not disadvantageous to be recognised as a Viet Kieu. “An”, a Vietnamese Australian working for a company that distributed pharmaceuticals and other products in Vietnam, described how he slipped in and out of Viet Kieu embodiment in various situations when doing market research. When visiting a local company, he had a chauffeur drive him in a car, and represented himself to the boss
as a Viet Kieu who wanted to open a supermarket in Vietnam. The boss, smelling money,
discoursed on his company’s complex distribution network for two hours, and An was
able to go back to his office and write up a report straight away. Conversely, when An
needed to do research at a Ho Chi Minh City produce market, he went on a bicycle, and
tried to establish solidarity with the market people, who would no doubt have given a
Viet Kieu a hard time:

_All of the sellers in the market you know they’re terrible. So I just pretend to slip in with
them, asking like [in a wheedling voice] “Yeah my company asked me to go and do it.
Could you tell me the price? How much do you sell a day”?

“Contraband” investment, whereby a Viet Kieu investor uses a relative or friend who has
Vietnamese citizenship as a “front” for his or her investment, might be seen as another
version of this ruse. In this instance, the Viet Kieu “borrows” the prophylactic national
body of the relative as an illegal means of achieving incorporeality.

If Viet Kieu find it difficult to pass for Vietnamese nationals, they also have
trouble in establishing the authenticity of their non-Vietnamese cultural competences.
Many subjects spoke of the experience of having been approached in the street by
strangers speaking English to someone they thought was a foreigner (a Japanese, Korean
etc). When the addressees revealed they were Viet Kieu, their new “friends” more often
than not lost interest in talking to one so unmasked as an inauthentic foreign subject. The
interview subject on whom these cultural politics impacted most was “Lan”, a
Vietnamese-American _metisse [lai] who worked in an English language school owned by
a Vietnamese-American man. The owner employed white foreign teachers, Americans by preference, and local teaching and support staff, but did not employ any Viet Kieu teachers apart from Lan. She told me that she had heard second hand that her students had complained to the effect that she was not a “real” foreigner. The students apparently felt that the school wasn’t living up to its promise to deliver foreign teachers, and thus they weren’t getting their value for money. Lan suspected that she was being assigned fewer classes than the white teachers because she was perceived as an insufficiently authentic English-speaking subject. In this school, where the teachers’ fate was very much dependent on formal and informal feedback from the students, Lan’s Americanness had been effectively refused. All this despite the fact that she spoke English, her first language, with a distinctly American accent and spoke only basic Vietnamese.

The Uses of Social Distance

We may contrast the Mexican and Haitian transmigrants analysed by Goldring (1999) and Fouron (2000), who return in order to build status in their homelands, with a practice of return closer to the “potlatch” end of the spectrum. A dramatic instance of this is the return of Cuban exiles in the late seventies, an occasion many used to make a conspicuous display of the wealth they had found in America (in many cases on credit). This incident led to a bout of “leave the country fever” that eventuated in the Mariel “boat lift” of 125 000 Cubans to the US (de la Campa 1994: 307). Similarly, the influx of foreign consumer goods, media, tourists and overseas Vietnamese in the mid to late 1980s led, among other factors, to a mini peak in emigration from Vietnam in 1989, including a resurgence in illegal emigration (Hitchcox 1994, Thayer 1989: 46).
These “exilic” transnationalisms would appear to be somewhat crude uses of the social distance that separates Vietnamese migrants from non-migrants. The returnees burn their bridges behind them, as it were, through displays that are calculated to radically devalue locally acquired cultural capital. Returned Viet Kieu professionals, by contrast, tend towards subtler negotiations of the social distance that separates them from locals. These are strategies that are oriented to reaping longer-term social profits by building social networks, accruing favours and so on. While the “potlatch” returnees go out of their way to display their Americanness, those wishing to accumulate “lasting” social and symbolic capital (networks and prestige) must (re)acquire a degree of mastery over locally valued physical and cultural styles and competencies. Possession of this national cultural capital in turn permits Viet Kieu to better negotiate the Vietnamese social space, variously negating and maximising the social distance between themselves and the locals to obtain the greatest social profits.

“Truc” is a Saigonese university graduate in her mid twenties who works as a sales rep for a foreign company that employs several Viet Kieu. She complained to me over a bowl of pho about her boss, a Vietnamese Frenchman who “talks down” to the company’s local employees. According to Truc, the boss performs his job badly because he is completely “out of touch” with the needs and desires of the people who constitute the local market for the company’s product, bench-top stoves and gas bottles. She told me how a local, rival company’s marketing drive had involved giving new customers a free griller fitting for their stoves. In response, her boss had come up with the idea of giving new customers a toy Ferrari as a gift. People had liked the griller, Truc said, because it was especially useful for cooking a number of Vietnamese dishes. The idea of giving
people a “useless” toy as opposed to the useful griller epitomised for Truc her boss’s lack of practical knowledge of the local market – specifically, of the kinds of everyday culinary activities go on in Vietnamese kitchens, and of the economy of scarcity in which Vietnamese households operate. As a counterpoint to her boss, Truc spoke of the few “nice” Viet Kieu who worked in her company. They, unlike the others, didn’t try to talk down to local Vietnamese, but rather spoke to them as equals. Neither did their manners, speech, dress, eating habits - in short, their habitus - single them out over-conspicuously from the locals. Indeed, Truc admitted to having something of a “crush” on a young Vietnamese Frenchman who worked for her company, with whom she was good friends. “To look at him you wouldn’t know he was a Viet Kieu”, she assured me.

The two types of Viet Kieu are effectively accorded different amounts of national belonging by Truc. The arrogant Viet Kieu, according to her, is less of a national subject (“less Vietnamese”) than the one who “goes native”. This is a judgement that she, as a member of the dominant national community (coming from a family with a revolutionary history), feels empowered to make. Of course, given her position as a subordinate in the context of the company hierarchy, Truc’s denial of the boss’s authenticity is something of a “weapon of the weak”. However, when she and others eventually went over the boss’s head to his non-Vietnamese senior to tell him that the boss was out of touch and wouldn’t listen to his local staff, their critique was effective. The Viet Kieu boss was spoken to by the French CEO, and eventually moved sideways. Truc is also responding to the different ways in which her boss and her colleague deal with the social distance separating them from local Vietnamese (we should note that the colleague is closer to her than her boss in this social space). Her criticisms suggest Truc rejects the “arrogant” Viet Kieu’s
assumption that the social distance can be immediately converted into social power. By contrast, she appreciates Viet Kieu who do not “stand on” this social distance.

Significantly, she permits the two types different degrees of social proximity to her: she would never become friendly with the first type, but wouldn’t mind dating the second.

One means that overseas Vietnamese use to negotiate the refusal of their entry into local social worlds is what Bourdieu calls “strategies of condescension”. A strategy of condescension is when one occupying a higher position in the social space denies or negates the social distance that separates him or her from those occupying lower positions. Paradoxically, the symbolic negation of distance implies at the same time a recognition of that distance (“He’s not arrogant ... for a Viet Kieu”), thus allowing one to enjoy both the advantages of proximity that the negation of the distance brings, and also the advantages of an objective social distance that continues to exist despite its symbolic negation (Bourdieu 1990: 127-8). Significantly, while Truc admires those Viet Kieu in her workplace who negate the inequity between themselves and the locals, she also desires the distinction that the existence of this disavowed social status gives them.

Truc’s friends joke that she would never date a mere local Vietnamese; and indeed, her circle of friends and suitors does contain a high proportion of overseas Vietnamese and foreigners.

“Brenda” is the Vietnamese-American manager of a restaurant in Saigon. When interviewing “Phuong” (one of my local informants) for the job of buyer, Brenda refers to herself with the first person pronoun “younger sister” [em], and to Phuong with the second person pronoun “older sister” [chi]. Phuong is in fact a little younger than Brenda, and she is somewhat embarrassed by Brenda’s use of this diminutive self-reference. She
actually becomes physically agitated, shifting in her seat at the false “promotion” she has been given. It would have been unmarked or “natural” for Brenda, the elder and the prospective employer, to have referred to herself as an equal/superior “I” [toi] or “elder sister” [chi]. Conscious of not appearing the haughty Viet Kieu, however, Brenda symbolically places Phuong above her. Ultimately, the social distance that separates the two is not, however, negated. Significantly, Phuong loses this contest of politeness because she is unable to “politely” refuse the elevated status that Brenda has chosen to confer on her.

While Brenda prevailed in this interaction, her authority in the restaurant in general was seriously undermined. Strategies of condescension are perhaps only truly effective when one has the capacity to reassert the authority of social distance. Brenda, it seems, was in many contexts unable to do this. Her “damaged” status as a Viet Kieu, a woman and a métisse meant that her position could be subverted from below. The service in the restaurant was slow and impolite, the quality of the dishes poor, and the prices high compared to other Saigon restaurants serving similar dishes. On most nights it was practically empty. Brenda was being overcharged by her suppliers, and extorted by the local electricity authority, which demanded “supplementary payments” in advance when a wedding reception was to be held. Once they cut the power mid-reception as a punishment for having been paid a few hours late. These difficulties led her father-in-law to recall Brenda from Saigon after only a few weeks.

Brenda’s strategy of attempting to win the staff over by solidarity rather than fear/respect was perhaps motivated by her knowledge that she could not convincingly assert her social authority. When I asked “Minh”, a Vietnamese Australian executive,
how a boss should act towards his Vietnamese staff, he asserted the need to “be sensitive”, but ultimately to maintain aloofness. “Vietnam is a hierarchical society”, he said. “A boss has to act like a boss”. Minh went on to say that, when working in mid-management in an overseas Vietnamese-owned firm, he consciously kept his distance from the local staff.

*Minh: Because in Vietnam everyone expects you to pay everything. And sometimes I’ll be sick and tired because we went to the bar you know, I don’t know that person, they’re just a friend of my friend, and they just come and they expect us to pay for them and I don’t like that ...*

He contrasts his own behaviour with that of a Vietnamese American friend, who doesn’t object to being “used” for free drinks:

*AC: He pays for everyone?*

*Minh: Yeah because he’s got his own agenda. Because he can use them later ... And at the end you know ... they like me, I’m fun to be with but I’m a little bit distant. But another guy you know my god. He, I think he used them but they like it because they can use him. You know just a kind of interdependence. Because he can take care of them some time you know it’s a different thing. And later he can call them up and say “Look, I need a bike now”. And some guy will just say “OK, here’s a bike”, and drive for the whole day whenever you like. And me, I never get anyone to give me motorbike like that. Maybe*
that's a lesson I learned from Vietnam you know. Just give when you can give and later you can ask.

AC: Was this guy getting respect?

Minh: Of course. To get respect. They'll say "Hm, you're a rich man". Because in Vietnam always think the wealth, people listen to the wealthy people. The society still revolves around material things.

While Minh represents the Vietnamese American as in a sense "buying" the loyalty of the locals, one might point out that the possibility of turning drinks bought into favours is dependent on an achieved intimacy or already-conferred status. This conversion of economic into social capital is enabled only when one has negotiated a certain proximity. If one is not to risk "wasting" one's drink money, hoping for favours that will never be returned, one must have achieved acceptance of one's claim to participate as an authentic subject in a Vietnamese social universe, i.e. one must have accumulated a degree of practical national belonging. Overseas Vietnamese appear to be best able to achieve degrees of national belonging by denying their own social difference. Paradoxically, it is only when it is negated that their "First World" cultural capital may be successfully converted.

Conclusion

Transnational nation-building, like traditional modalities of nation-building, works to erase or obfuscate internal differences within the (trans)national community, for instance those between overseas and domestic “citizens”, but also those based on class,
region and gender (Glick Schiller and Fouron 1998: 133). These rifts inevitably re-emerge, however, to trouble and disrupt transnational imaginaries. Conflict over a transnational Vietnam occurs not only between diaspora and homeland, but also within the homeland itself. As sojourners in the Vietnamese national community, the overseas Vietnamese show up variously as insiders and loyal subjects, and as outsiders and agents of subversion. As a consequence, overseas Vietnamese experience difficulty in accumulating both official and unofficial forms of national belonging. The everyday rejection of their legitimacy as members of the national community is reinforced by the state’s own ambivalence, made manifest in an administrative category that positions overseas Vietnamese as not-quite-national-subjects.

State-sponsored discourses of deterritorialised nation cannot but be torn, it would seem, between the desire for territorial integrity and national sovereignty, and for the economic and developmental gains one can make by relinquishing degrees of these commodities. Ultimately, we might regard Vietnamese discourses of deterritorialisation as a type of damage control. That is, as an attempt to manage one of the unintended consequences of the “open door” policy of Doi Moi, the proliferation of uncontrollable transnational flows between Vietnam and the diaspora. Rather than attempting to “plug the leaks” and prevent contact with the diaspora, the state has chosen to gradually legalise contacts with it, and thus to put itself in a position to better regulate and supervise the points of transfer. Its success in pursuing this novel form of governmentality is, however, tentative indeed. The fact that overseas Vietnamese engage in transnationalisms that are significantly more family-oriented and self-interested (e.g. illegal remittances, “contraband” investment) than “patriotic” (e.g. FDI, knowledge and technology transfer)
strongly suggests that they do not share the state’s vision of an SRV-loyal transnational Vietnam. In the next chapter, we shall pursue in depth the alternative transnational imaginaries that inform these “dissident” transnationalisms.