8. Transnational Exilic Space

In Chapter Two, we saw how anticommunist elites responded to reforms in Vietnam by seeking to discourage returnees, who were initially seen as violating the principle of exile. Nevertheless, individuals not identifying with this purist politics challenged the return taboo, effecting a pluralisation and privatisation of the issue of transnational mobility. In this chapter we shall see how, rather than continuing to attempt to impose a relationship of physical exile (and thus excluding themselves from the mainstream of community identity politics), elites have sought to recoup the returnees’ unruly practices, with their complex motivations and multiple allegiances, into an anticommunist interpretation. This strategy marks the coming into being of a flexible exile imaginary, as opposed to the inflexibility of the absolutist, bounded conception of diasporic space we have hitherto encountered. Thus alongside the pluralisation and privatisation of the politics of return we charted in Chapter Two, we might speak of a deterritorialisation of these politics, entailing a significant rewriting of the narratives of diasporic identity, particularly the trajectory and teleology of exile. Here we witness the novel phenomenon of an exile culture that has been deterritorialised by cross-border flows and affiliations seeking to reterritorialise itself in a transnational modality, thus creating what we might term a “transnational exilic space”. We shall begin by looking at the way in which overseas Vietnamese professionals instantiate this space in their understandings of the diaspora’s role in the process of globalisation in Vietnam, and of the effects of the labour they perform there. We shall then move on to a more theoretical
consideration of the concepts of transnationalism and exile, looking at how the professionals’ transnationalisms, and those of overseas Vietnamese in general, problematise the distinction between these concepts.

The Colour of Grey Matter: Contesting the Role of Viet Kieu Professionals in Doi Moi

As we saw in Chapter Seven, SRV discourses of transnational nation building envisage diasporic Vietnamese doing such things as lending the nation their “grey matter”, acting as conduits to international markets, stimulating the economy through FDI and so on - in short, acting as “loyal” agents of globalisation. Discourses of exile also articulate understandings about the role of the diaspora in globalisation in Vietnam. As we might expect, these narratives radically contest those articulated from within Vietnam. Critically appropriating the SRV slogan, one commentator urges that, as an “inseparable part of the Vietnamese race”, the overseas Vietnamese community “has an important role to play in furthering the democratisation and development of Vietnam” [emphasis added] (Nguyen Chan 1998). At present, as Vietnam and the US prepare to implement a Bilateral Trade Agreement cemented between them in 2000, the mainstream of opinion among overseas Vietnamese political associations is not against the projected tenfold increase in trade this would bring. Having seen the writing of the end of Vietnam’s isolation from US markets on the wall, anticommunists - alongside high profile homeland dissident Nguyen Dan Que (Phan Dung 1999) - support the treaty on the grounds that it will make Vietnamese society more open to the forces of liberalisation, thus eroding the Party’s monopoly on power (see, for instance, Vietnamese
Political Action Committee 1999). Those overseas Vietnamese who are not hard-line advocates of non-engagement typically identify with the dominant free market ideology of globalisation, institutionalised by the IMF, which holds that opening up markets will force the governments of developing nations to get the “fundamentals” right, producing wealth and at the same time bringing democratic freedoms. In practice, the current US policy of “peaceful evolution” through constructive engagement nominally advocates democratic freedoms and human rights for Vietnam, but in fact prioritises trade and the imperative to draw the SRV ever more inextricably into the global capitalist order over these ends. Overseas Vietnamese political organisations have sought to put pressure on the US government to use the BTA to force human rights reforms in Vietnam, while others condemn the greedy heads of Vietnamese state companies and their patrons in the Party for prolonging unemployment and underdevelopment by stalling on signing the treaty for reasons of self-interest (“Thoa Uoc Mau Dich...”). A small minority of pro-democracy intellectuals, in the company of the US trade union movement, voices a left wing critique of the anticipated and extant ill effects of economic globalisation on relatively unprotected Vietnamese labour, non-competitive domestic industries and Vietnam’s social welfare budget (e.g. Vnforum).

I wish now to turn the discussion to a consideration of how overseas Vietnamese professionals negotiate the offer of (partial) national belonging extended to them by the SRV. How do they embody (or reject) the idea of a transnational exile imaginary in their conceptualisations of the effects of globalisation on Vietnam, and of their own roles in this process? This material is drawn from overseas Vietnamese media and Internet sites, as well as some twenty interviews I conducted in person with overseas Vietnamese
professionals in Sydney and Ho Chi Minh City, and by email with professionals in the US. I will discuss the material in terms of three main positions that were articulated by the interviewees: “anti-engagement” (advocating a simple refusal of engagement with Hanoi), “pro-engagement” (advocating the use of trade and other links to bring about development and change in Vietnam), and “independent” (not advocating any diasporic political agenda). The first position is relatively straightforward, and will not require a great deal of discussion. The others are more complex, especially the second, and thus shall require closer attention.

Anti-Engagement

While family remittances and homeland tourism are now almost entirely unstigmatised transnational practices, officially investing in Vietnam and working there in a professional capacity are more controversial. Opinion in the diaspora is split between those who consider such forms of engagement to offer support to Hanoi, and those who see them as a means of furthering the political and humanitarian goals of the overseas Vietnamese. Anti-engagement critics of Vietnamese policy state that it has only one aim: “to find a way to exploit overseas Vietnamese [professionals’] brainpower and economic potential, and their influence in their host countries, to create more resources and means for the regime, and at the same time to find a way to nullify the endeavours of struggle of the overseas Vietnamese” (Nguyen Chan 1998). Those who would help Vietnam are warned “communists use people according to the needs of the time, and after they’ve used them they throw them away” (“VC khen Viet kieu...”). Harder line exiles see themselves as being in competition over the identification of diasporic subjects,
particularly the young, with a host nation-defined transnational project that converges with the interests of the SRV (see Chapter Five). Prior to the BTA becoming a *fait accompli*, this stance was popularly advocated by overseas Vietnamese community associations, media and political organisations in the US, who had some success in lobbying politicians to take their issues to Congress. Since then, the anti-engagement position has largely lost its dominance, and is now associated with an archaic Cold War politics. Those who continue to uphold this absolutist position are typically those lacking the social resources to adapt to the change, particularly the elderly.

*Pro-Engagement*

The alternative and now dominant position is to see engagement with Vietnam as the most efficient means of bringing about the diaspora’s political goals. This mindset is supported by the post Cold War US policy objective of “peaceful evolution”. Under this policy, China, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba have been primary targets for dogmatic US efforts at securing democratisation, human rights and free markets. Former US President Bill Clinton claimed that the normalisation of relations between Vietnam and the US “will advance the cause of freedom in Vietnam, just as it did in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union”, and that “engaging the Vietnamese on the broad front of economic reform and the broad front of democratic reform will help honour the sacrifice of those who fought for freedom’s sake in Vietnam” (cited in Ma 1999: 52). Recently, the official Vietnamese Communist Party newspaper *Nhan Dan* (26.5.00) reacted to this rhetoric by criticising a resolution to be brought before the US senate praising Vietnamese Americans for their role in bringing democracy to Vietnam.
My interviews showed that the pro-engagement position tended to be associated most strongly with those who took up positions with international bodies, NGOs, or on development and philanthropic projects. Professionals who identified with an exile politics found these positions least objectionable, since they were least associated with self-interest, and offered something of a protective shield against the state (see Chapter Two). Interviewees in this category included, among others, a Vietnamese American economist and former re-education camp internee who returned to Vietnam under a UNDP program to act as advisor to a government ministry, and a Vietnamese Australian agronomist and former refugee who advised on the setting up of curricula at a Ho Chi Minh City university. Professionals articulating this position also, however, included those engaged in more entrepreneurial pursuits, such as the Vietnamese American head of a private English college in Ho Chi Minh City. We shall return to his case below.

Those who adopted a pro-engagement position typically represented themselves to me as having strategically taken up the transnational “citizenship” extended to them by Hanoi only in order to pursue the diaspora’s goals, and not the state’s. They spoke of their work in Vietnam as a kind of “playing loyal” which refused to be co-opted to the state’s vision of an alternative Vietnamese modernity rooted in a distinct revolutionary legacy and hegemony. Rather, they tended to see themselves as undermining this historical trajectory, upon which the regime founds its legitimacy, by facilitating Vietnam’s full incorporation into the capitalist world-system. Such interpretations typically rested on an ideologically motivated understanding of globalisation, development and the creation of wealth as leading “naturally” to the demand for democratic freedoms and political change. None of the pro-engagement professionals
cognised the alternative hypothesis, that the interests of the new middle classes may be bound up with those of the authoritarian regime, and thus help to bring about its perpetuation rather than its liberalisation or demise.

On the one hand, one must take at face value these professionals’ resistance to the state’s attempts to interpellate them as “loyal” diasporic subjects. On the other, however, one is obliged to make the criticism that the professionals’ tendency to totalise the nature of their activities in Vietnam as entirely “disloyal” or “subversive” is perhaps a retrospective idealisation. For the status of their contributions is ultimately indeterminable. Can one really say whether they were pursuing their own goals more than they were pursuing those of the regime? That they were undermining it by encouraging modernisation and development rather than helping it to rationalise and consolidate itself? The professionals’ representations of their own transnational practices tended to deny the radical possibilities that they contained. This was so not only in that they did not acknowledge that at least some of the effects of their labour must inevitably have been captured by the state, but also in that they represented their transnationalisms as being “purely diasporic” ones, untainted by the power of state apparatuses to localise and discipline them in the Vietnamese national field. However, if overseas Vietnamese professionals’ transnationalisms resist the hegemonic narratives of national belonging and nation building in Vietnam, then equally do they resist the hegemonic narratives of exile. Having refused absolute exile as a Cold War political project, mobile overseas Vietnamese professionals have been in part responsible for reconfiguring exile consciousness in a post Cold War idiom of “constructive engagement”. Further, whilst declaring their loyalty to the exile heritage, the professionals often placed universalist
humanitarian goals over particularist political ones in the homeland. As the UNDP adviser wrote to me, “the ‘no contact, no return’ model of relations proposed by the older generations has slowly changed to ‘alleviate poverty through direct help to the people, especially those forgotten in the rural sector and the weak’” (Email Interview, 2000). I found that pro-engagement professionals typically envisioned themselves as getting “straight to the people” in a way that cut the regime (and the hard-line exiles) out of the picture. Here the issue of primary importance to them was that of development, and not whether this occurred under a communist regime or a post-communist one. Toppling the regime was certainly a desired by-product of development, but this goal was deferred for more immediate priorities. What emerged from the interviews was a kind of people-to-people transnational imaginary that sidelined the imperatives of hegemonic nationalist projects on both sides of the Pacific. However, this utopian, counter-hegemonic moment was inevitably recaptured in the professionals’ self-representations. Development was recouped into an anti-regime potentiality, along the lines of “people can only think and be empowered when their stomachs are full” (Interview, 2000), and represented as subverting or denying a pro-regime potentiality, whereby it would consolidate an alternative modernity under the stewardship of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

The idea of an extra political, transnational Vietnamese “people” is, without doubt, itself an idealised construction. Nevertheless, its radical potential is to (momentarily) represent a transnational social field that is outside the purview of the nation-state and diaspora-as-nation. The desire of each to recapture it to their respective (trans)national imaginaries - a process in which transnational subjects are complicit -
reveals an anxiety that this field will exceed their capacity to hegemonise it by giving it a “national” referent (SRV or RVN).

Independent

Apart from what it may or may not tell us about what the effect of professional labour performed in Vietnam is, the articulation of the above position signifies a sense of belonging to and engagement in the diasporic social field. One only bothers to justify oneself to “anticommunists” back home in the diaspora if one wants to go on existing as a social being and accumulating cultural capital within this field. Thus one interviewee reported to me that on his return to the US he was obliged to stress his anticomunist credentials (as a former re-education camp intern) before being able to speak and write about his experience in Vietnam in the overseas Vietnamese public sphere. There are of course those who feel no compulsion whatsoever to explain their actions in terms of exile politics. Those we have discussed above are people such as academics and health professionals, who are engaged in philanthropic and development projects. People working in these positions, it must be noted, are predisposed to speaking of their work in terms such as bringing “freedom” (from hunger, disease, poverty) to a downtrodden group or people. Thus we might say that overseas Vietnamese philanthropists are in a sense bound to conceptualise their task in terms such as liberation, empowerment and enlightenment. My point is, however, that in addition to this they conceive their work in a more narrowly ideological way. The pro-engagement overseas Vietnamese professionals to whom I spoke conceived the targets of their efforts not simply as the victims of structural inequality in the world economy, but also as the victims of an uncaring and
repressive regime. By contrast, professionals working in private, profit-motivated enterprises are less disposed to and less capable of representing their work in such a way.

In overseas Vietnamese entrepreneurial and corporate circles in Ho Chi Minh City, working in Vietnam is typically discussed in terms of career opportunities, high wages and a good standard of living rather than in terms of the political goals of the diaspora. This group, with a larger proportion of the “1.5 generation”, is best understood as a class of transnational professionals maximising its Western cultural capital and its culturally specific knowledge for personal career and financial goals. Its loyalties are with corporate and host nation identities rather than exile or “homeland” ones. From such a point of view, there is no ideological boundary between Vietnam and the diaspora. In taking this position, one dissociates oneself from the exiles and the lowly social position they signify in the host nations. One interviewee, a Vietnamese American investment advisor in his forties with connections in high places in the Vietnamese government, denied that anyone in the diasporic Vietnamese Professionals Society was in fact a “real” professional at all. Such a stance emphasises one’s non-Vietnamese, first world identity, differentiating one from both diasporic and homeland Vietnamese. Other overseas Vietnamese in this category that I became acquainted with in Ho Chi Minh City included a Vietnamese Frenchman working for a multinational petroleum corporation, a Vietnamese American woman managing a restaurant, and a Vietnamese Canadian working for a Japanese infrastructure company, all of whom were in their twenties. Their relationship to Vietnam was not entirely dissimilar to that taken up by non-Vietnamese foreigners living and working in Ho Chi Minh City. This is to say that they related to Vietnam as an exotic site in which their first world cultural capital could be converted and maximised in certain
ways - for instance, they all enjoyed high wages and senior positions in Vietnam which they would not have been able to attain at their ages back in their countries of settlement. Significantly, these interviewees did not construct themselves as governmental subjects (Hage 1998: 46), i.e. those who feel empowered and legitimated in taking up a position as national “managers” in Vietnam. This is in contrast to the pro-engagement subjects - who, on the basis of having been governmental subjects in the RVN, and/or being community leaders and notables in their countries of settlement, aspire to a managerial relation to Vietnam. As we saw above, they manifest this aspiration by representing themselves as saviours of “the people” of Vietnam from the ravages of communism, and by implication, as the future leaders of the nation.

The “independent” position represents itself as being free from of the power of both exile and homeland national fields. As we saw in Chapter Seven, however, overseas Vietnamese working in Vietnam cannot avoid being hailed as Viet Kieu, positioned in an ambivalent legal status as both subjects and non-subjects of the nation, and figured in the popular national imaginary as strangers, inauthentic subjects of culture and so on. The power of the exile (trans)national field over them is, however, extremely attenuated. Their refusal to articulate their transnational identities along an exile model suggests that they do not have any significant investment in the diasporic social field as a locus for subjectivity. The possibility of taking up this position demonstrates the effects of host nation foreign policy and intergenerational difference in limiting the influence of the exile social field.
Imagining the Subversive Effects of “Things Sent Home”

Contemporary attempts to capture transnational practices to an anticommunist paradigm are presaged in a Cold War discourse whereby money and gifts sent back to Vietnam were seen as “bullets” to be used against the regime. Viet Dzung’s “A Few Gifts Sent Home” [Mot Chut Qua cho Que Huong], broadcast back to Vietnam via the BBC and Voice of America, and composed with the stated intention of encouraging people to flee the country, gives the gifts a very martial complexion indeed. Money sent home in the song is used by the recipients to buy a passage out of Vietnam, and thus the possibility of starting a new life. During the “closed door” period, remittances and gifts sent to Vietnam were perceived to be subversive in that they opened up the possibility of life trajectories other than those made available by the state. This conception continues to an extent to inform these practices, in which the overseas Vietnamese givers imagine themselves to be engaged in a sort of potlatch with the regime. Mandy Thomas recounts how her overseas Vietnamese interviewees sent a refrigerator to relatives in a village without electricity, in the hope that it would stir up their anger at the Party for not offering them a better standard of living (Thomas 1998). In another example, “Truc”, owner of a chain of Vietnamese restaurants in Sydney, returned with her husband to buy an orchard for the Vietnamese ministers and devotees of an American evangelical church of which they are members. The pair saw this investment as a way of ensuring the livelihood and independence of the ministers, who are prevented by the state from practising their faith and raising money through the church. The orchard potentially gives the marginalised faithful some “insulation” from the power of the state by providing them with an independent source of income (Interview, 2000).
By this exilic logic, even essentially self-interested transnational practices can be recoded as forms of resistance to Hanoi. Thus, as we saw in Chapter Seven, “contraband” investment and extra-legal remittances may be seen as transgressive in that they bypass the state and its projects and go straight to the needy friends and relatives. We might understand this in terms of what Bourdieu calls a strategy of legitimation, whereby one satisfies one’s self-interest while at the same time being seen to obey a rule or moral imperative. In order to further illustrate this point, let us return to the case of the Vietnamese American head of an English college in Ho Chi Minh City, mentioned above, who identified with the ideology of democratisation through development.

“Mr Nguyen” was engaged in a game of cat and mouse with the taxation authorities. This involved hiding the actual number of students attending the school (several hundred), the number of classes being taught there and the number of foreign teachers employed, so as to minimise the on-paper revenue of the school, and thus avoid paying tax on the entirety of the school’s income. He spoke of this avoidance as a legitimate way of resisting what he saw as the unreasonable greed of the communist authorities for the Viet Kieu dollar. In order to forestall difficulties with the tax office, Mr Nguyen was planning a gala event at the Saigon Opera House. This was to be a televised variety show, put on in honour of the Ho Chi Minh City Council, at which the school’s Vietnamese-speaking Western teachers (of whom I was then one) would perform their linguistic feats. I was at the time embroiled in my own difficulties with the police of a certain Ho Chi Minh City district because I had rented a house from a landlord who was not authorised to lease to foreigners, and was facing paying a hefty fine for my “administrative infraction”. Mr Nguyen suggested that by performing in the show, I
would be able to avoid paying the fine. My role was to be to introduce the school’s Vietnamese staff (in Vietnamese), and then to beg the audience’s permission to be able to break into a “foreign language”, i.e. English, to introduce the Western teachers. After the leadership of the Ho Chi Minh City Council saw this, he claimed, his and my troubles would be over. The head of the district police would just laugh and forget all about my administrative infraction when he recognised me as the Vietnamese-speaking foreigner on TV who had begged permission to speak English. In the event, I paid the fine in the official way and left Vietnam before this gala night took place, so did not have the chance to test Mr Nguyen’s theory.

In the tele-event, as conceived by Mr Nguyen, the English school represents itself as a subaltern institution, existing by the grace of the state. English is presented as a marginal foreign language that one has to ask permission to speak. The school’s disinvestment of its own cultural power is, I would argue, calculated to assuage the anxiety which the Vietnamese state in fact feels about the proliferation of English in Vietnam, and its sensitivity about the existence of English schools run by overseas Vietnamese, particularly Vietnamese Americans. Asking permission to speak English suggests that the state has the power to prevent one from speaking it, that one may only speak it by virtue of the state’s tolerance. In actuality, of course, the state cannot control the multitudinous points of information transfer, epitomised by the Internet, which are enabled by English being spoken in Vietnam. Mr Nguyen’s strategy of assuring the state that his English school is not a threat to its control and stability is, ironically, oriented to the goal of enabling him to further subvert the taxation system. This goal, in turn, was articulated by Mr Nguyen in terms of enabling the school to keep performing its task of
people-to-people development in Vietnam. Significantly, both representations act to mystify Mr Nguyen’s self-interest in avoiding turning over profits to the administration. According to his plan, we both “trick” the authorities by flattering them and representing ourselves as non-threatening, avoid being done out of our hard-earned cash, and refuse to participate in the communist regime’s self-enrichment and self-perpetuation.

The advent of popular temporary migration between diaspora and homeland has caused the exile imaginary to evolve to a point where subversive effects are claimed not just for things sent back, but for the effects of the work of subjects who go back as well. Despite their apparent self-interest or the contrary intentions of their authors, professionals’ transnational practices may be recouped into a transnational exile imaginary in which they do not compromise the ultimate loyalty of the returnees to the diaspora, or betray the promise of final return. These returns can now be thought as transgressive rather than collaborative.

Return Without Compromise

A contributor to a Vietnamese Australian newspaper, distinguishing “family returnees” from those who go back to Vietnam to “collaborate” with the communist authorities, notes of the former that:

They return on the money that they have made in Australia from their sweat and tears. They return to visit their family tombs, their parents and grandparents, their relatives and hamlets. They return to see their old fathers one more time, to meet their mothers after a serious illness, to give their uncles and aunts a little money,
someone else a few presents, to eat a few happy meals, have a drink with friends and relatives. After that they come back to Australia to continue to work hard for a living and to help their loved ones still back at home (Huu Nguyen 1998).

Although purists have in the past criticised the practice of sending remittances to relatives on the principle that this money may indirectly help the regime, the maintenance of transnational family solidarities is one form of cross-border contact that has never been regarded as controversial. As a senior community leader remarked to me, “family emotion is above politics” (Interview, 1997). Far from being read as instances of betrayal, family returns are represented in the above passage as being harmless, or even as culturally regenerative, a return to traditional values. Unlike the “premature” returnees in “Mother Vietnam in the Year 2000” (see Chapter Four), these imaginary returnees do not go back to a socialist dystopia in which their diasporic political identities are extinguished. Rather, they return to an idealised “family Vietnam”, a traditional place unsullied by the institutions of socialist society, and one in which their exile subjectivity is not threatened by the hegemony of a “usurper” state.

Note, however, the way in which a firm distinction between diaspora and homeland is maintained in the excerpt. The money on which the returnees go back is earned, with “sweat and tears”, in Australia. By implication, it is not earned, with dishonest ease, through investments in Vietnam. After their sojourns, the returnees come back “home” to the diaspora for more hard work, earning money which is again sent to their relatives, who are needy and dependent by corollary of living in (a backward, socialist) Vietnam. Since these transnational solidarities cross the border in a purely
familial mode, untainted by economic self-interest, they leave the principle of exile intact. Of course, this idealised construction of family returnees does not cognise facts such as that many overseas Vietnamese use family members as fronts for illegal investments in Vietnam, as a means of bypassing the Law on Foreign Investment (see Chapter Seven). Such misrecognitions may be read, as might those that claim subversive effects for things sent back to Vietnam and professional labour performed there, as strategies of reinterpreting ambivalent transnational practices in a “loyal” idiom. The authors of transnational practices are, by this logic, recruited as constituents of an anticommmunist transnation.

The Freedoms of Transnational Exilic Space

Overseas Vietnamese have taken up the possibilities of return to Vietnam in a way that is doubly critical. This is so in that their returns have challenged and rewritten the overbearing narratives of “absolute exile”, while at the same time they have resisted incorporation into the transnational nation-building project of the SRV, and transnational capitalist projects of the host nations. I wish now to look more closely at how the more flexible notion of exile embodied in the idea of a transnational exilic space has enabled overseas Vietnamese both to resist and accommodate the claims of capital, the state and diasporic belonging.

In Chapter Two, we explored the tension between exile as a dominant communal identity and public politics of return, and the heterodox spatial stories inscribed in refugees’ and migrants’ departures from and returns to Vietnam. In this context, I argued that the transnational mobility enabled by Doi Moi had led to a challenge to the authority
of elites to hegemonise the politics of return, and to a reassertion of the difference that had been suppressed beneath a communal exile/refugee identity. In this case, overseas Vietnamese had used their new “rights” within the Vietnamese national field (the right to a visa, the right to have one’s status as a foreign national respected, etc) to challenge the imperatives of exile politics. The returnees’ “freedom” from exile politics is of course also enabled by their host nation citizenship. However, early Vietnamese American returnees found themselves at odds not only with the exiles but also with the US government. Prior to the lifting of the embargo, American citizens were officially discouraged from travelling to Vietnam, and having a Vietnamese visa in one’s passport could cause difficulties at the immigration desk on returning to the US. Thus in this instance, transnational mobility effectively became a means of freeing oneself from the symbolic violence entailed in the imposition (by the host nation and diasporic elites) of a collective exile/refugee identity which incorporated a moral imperative not to go back. This did not, however, mean a total rejection of exile.

Those who returned by and large did not wish to give up a sense of diasporic belonging, even though hard-line organisations initially tried to deny them this belonging. There is evidence that early returnees were subject to varying levels of ostracism and even persecution. However, the temporary return migration movement eventually prevailed, effecting a renegotiation of the terms of diasporic belonging. Elites were forced to give up their insistence on an “ethics of immobility” and permit a privatisation and pluralisation of the politics of return as a means of retaining their authority. This relaxing of the spatial bounds of diaspora permitted overseas Vietnamese to effect a compromise between the claims of loyalty to the diaspora and loyalty to family,
homesickness, and even entrepreneurial opportunities in Vietnam. In “co-operative”
transnationalisms, self-interested goals may be legitimated in terms of loyalty to the
homeland. In the Vietnamese case, as we have seen, such practices are typically
legitimated in terms of disloyalty to the state - a move which in turn legitimates them as
loyal to the diaspora. Thus an overseas Vietnamese making an unofficial investment in
property or a business in Vietnam may do so illegally through a relative who is a
Vietnamese national. This may in turn be represented as an anti-state gesture, since one is
refusing to invest officially, and thus denying the state a share of the profits, which it may
use to sustain itself. At the same time as one is “helping” one’s relative to be independent
from the state, one is also managing to get around the discriminatory status to which non-
Vietnamese nationals investing in Vietnam are subject. Through this convoluted strategy,
enabled by the metaphor of transnational exilic space, one may accumulate economic
capital in Vietnam and at the same time accumulate national belonging in the diaspora.

While overseas Vietnamese have negotiated a freedom of mobility, the retention
of a sense of exile identity (albeit a more flexible one) has also permitted them to resist
being disciplined by the host nation vis-à-vis their homeland politics and other issues of
community and identity. The ability to imagine oneself as the constituent of another
national field, in this case the imaginary one of the Exile Nation, potentially allows one to
adopt a subject position that does not obey the logic of the majority/minority relationship
with the host society. It was such an imaginary which enabled the Truong protestors to
conceive of themselves as having a special, proprietorial relationship to the urban space
of Little Saigon (Chapter Five), such that they believed themselves to be justified in and
capable of removing a conspicuous national other from this space. Obeying the law to
remain loyal to the Exile Nation placed them, however briefly, “above the law” of a host
nation in which it is not a crime to hang the SRV flag. In the Australian context, we also
saw how exile functioned as a counter imaginary to that of “enmeshment” with Asia by
situating overseas Vietnamese in a resistant position towards Vietnam rather than in the
productive one desired by the host nation. Interestingly, this was not a case of a
transnational field enabling freedom from a nation-state that sought to monopolise the
loyalties of its subjects - the usual scenario of counter-hegemonic transnationalism.
Rather, it was a case of resisting the imperative to “be mobile, become transnational”
which the state was imposing on subjects whose desire was to be immobile and stay in
exile. In this instance, exile operated as a formation that asserted the difference of
overseas Vietnamese communities in Australia and refused the erasure of their specific
histories.

As we have also seen, however, this resistance is not actually an attempt to
prevent transnational links altogether, but rather to ensure that these links obey a certain
political logic. If Little Saigon is a transnational space, it is an exilic transnational space -
and not the apolitical “ethnic” one envisaged in the multicultural imaginary, or the pro-
homeland transnation envisaged by the Vietnamese state. Likewise, the refusal of
“enmeshment” is a refusal of a certain kind of economic engagement with Vietnam - one
that obeys to the imperatives of capital alone. What is affirmed is an economic
rationalism heavily marked by diasporic loyalties and the logic of exile. As we saw in
Chapter Seven, the investment potential of overseas Vietnamese is “objectively” limited.
One can safely assume, however, that this logic acts to discourage overseas Vietnamese
from inserting in the form of FDI what capital they do command, thus keeping flows of capital into Vietnam small and family-oriented.

This dynamic may be illustrated through the case of “Minh”, a Vietnamese American IT millionaire (and former refugee) I met in Ho Chi Minh City. When I met Minh, he was handing out extravagantly generous tips in a hostess bar [bia on]. He had just been through a messy divorce back in the US, and was in Saigon to be with his new “girlfriend”, “Nga”, one of the hostesses in the bar. Minh later invited me to meet him at a New House Party [Le Tan Nha] Nga’s family was holding. When I arrived there and got into conversation with the other guests, I found out that Minh had bought the house for the family. Later, I asked him why he didn’t invest in Vietnam’s burgeoning IT industry, and Minh told me that he wouldn’t do such a thing because he hated the communist regime. Bearing in mind that transnational practices obey a logic of “flexible” capital accumulation - we might say that this capital is flexible in that it is accumulated in different places and in that it is capital of different varieties - helps us to make sense of Minh’s position. His anticommmunist ethics do not forbid him from accumulating prestige and real estate with his US dollars, or from appropriating the effects of Nga’s dominated positionality in Vietnam’s post-reform patriarchal order. His refusal to actually invest in a business in Vietnam is a disavowal, however, of the desire to “profit” in a communist Vietnam. In drawing this line, Minh accumulates another kind of capital, that which confers diasporic belonging. Arguably, his anticommmunist identification also has the function of mystifying the economic rationale for not investing in Vietnam - an investment environment that is uncertain and structurally discriminates against foreign investors.
Where, then, does freedom lie? The complexities and contradictions we discover in this series of national/transnational interfaces should caution us against any easy privileging of mobility over immobility, or of the transnational over the national, as the site of counter-hegemonic possibilities. We have seen how resistance to the power of the nation-state can lie in the very refusal to become transnational (or to change one’s transnational paradigm from an immobile, resistant one to a mobile, co-operative one). We have also seen how transnational mobility has effected the pluralisation and privatisation of a once onerous collective politics of return, thus loosening and relativising an absolutist national imaginary. It seems wisest to say that these “freedoms” are relative and contextual to the historically specific disposition of national and transnational fields in which they are forged, and not enabled simply by the existence of cross-border formations that are invariably and inherently counter-hegemonic.

**Exile and Transnationalism: A Critical Comparison**

Few attempts have been made to think involuntary migrants - refugees and exiles - within the transnationalism literature. Indeed, involuntary migrants have tended to be understood as the subalterns of the transnational world order, doomed to immobility in alien lands, deterritorialised by upheavals at home and reterritorialised with a vengeance by the national will of the host society. The phenomenon of an exile diaspora in the process of being deterritorialised by transnational flows of migration and media obliges us, however, to rethink our traditional understandings of exile. In this section, I wish to consider how we might reconcile the concepts of transnationalism and exile in coming to a new understanding of contemporary Vietnamese diasporic identity.
Transnational consciousness has been described as a form of bifocality or “double consciousness” (Gilroy 1993). Exile consciousness has in turn been seen as a form of transnational bifocality. For Said, the experience of exile is “contrapuntal”, meaning that exiles possess a simultaneous awareness of the new and old environments (Said 1984: 171-2). Hamid Nacify’s (1993) influential theory of exilic liminality takes this trope further. Nacify, appropriating Turner, suggests that exiles experience a liminal state in which they are distanced from the norms of both host and home cultures. While these theorists are primarily interested in the aesthetic possibilities of exile, they nevertheless make it clear that the bifocality of exile can function as a powerful anti-assimilatory formation that acts to maintain a strong investment in the homeland.27 Transnational subjects enact a plurality of identifications, configuring their identities in relation to more than one national field. Exiles, too, configure their identities across national boundaries, but in a different temporal structure. The transmigrant experiences a coevalness between the national fields with which he or she identifies. For the exile, however, nationalist identification with the homeland is temporally blocked or skewed. As we have seen, the “now” of the Vietnamese diaspora-as-nation connects with the pre-communist homeland or alternatively with the future, post-communist nation, but refuses the contemporary

27 For example, in 1998 Viet Luan, a Vietnamese community newspaper based in Sydney, signified its commitment to homeland over local issues by featuring a story on a Hanoi intellectual who had publicly criticised the Vietnamese Communist Party above a story on the charging of Vietnamese Australian politician Phuong Ngo, after a three and a half year investigation and a dramatic coronial inquiry, with conspiracy to commit Australia’s first ever political assassination - an event bringing with it potentially disastrous consequences for the community’s image (Viet Luan, 17.3.1998, p.1).
nation-state. Thus exile bifocality is less a “here and there” kind of consciousness than a “here and then” one. A further distinction between transmigrancy and “classical” exile is that the homeland with which the exile identifies is an imaginary, stateless nation while that with which the transmigrant identifies is a “real” nation-state. Having said this, one must qualify it with the observation that it is not untypical for transnational (and indeed national) populations to experience dissonance in their identification with the “state” half of the nation-state equation (Glick Schiller and Fouron 1998: 132). For the Vietnamese exiles, however, identification with the very nation-idea that is modern Vietnam is problematic, since the contemporary nation was brought into being as a result of reunification under the communist regime. As we have seen, for some the very act of setting foot on Vietnamese soil is stigmatised, since by doing this one tacitly recognises the sovereignty and legitimacy of the communist regime. For such purists, the final “return” from exile is predicated not simply on a change of regime, but on a thoroughgoing national restoration [phuc quoc]. Exile and transmigrancy also differ of course with regard to the issue of mobility. The transmigrant moves easily between national fields, while the exile’s return is “blocked” by the presence of a hostile regime. A final difference is that in the imaginary geography of transmigrancy, there is a symbolic continuity between national and diasporic space, giving rise to metaphors like the Haitian “Tenth Department”. By contrast in the classical exile imaginary the space of diaspora is perceived to be discontinuous from that of the contemporary homeland.
The Deterritorialisation of Exile

In the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, the advent of a pluralised, post Cold War politics of return has meant that exile has undergone a significant deterritorialisation. The enabling of back and forth temporary migration in this context means that, as a territorialised spatial imaginary and “ethics of immobility”, exile has begun to shift from the political to the mythological, and from the public to the private. This empirical process confounds many of the binarisms through which exile has been theorised, and collapses many of the distinctions between it and transmigrancy. Return to Vietnam once implied a betrayal of exile and incurred a level of marginalisation and even persecution within overseas Vietnamese communities in the West. Certainly, the “pro-engagement” imaginary, which now underpins the mainstream of homeland politics, continues to maintain an ultimate separation between homeland and diaspora. Nevertheless, it also makes it possible to return to Vietnam without being considered to have betrayed or irrevocably left the imagined “national community” of the diaspora. So comes into being the patriotic figure of the “transnational exile”, who maintains his or her anticommunist identity while going back to Vietnam. Rather than being conceived as having been corrupted by entering the alien national space of the SRV, the returnees are imagined instead to extend diasporic identity into this space, and by so doing to further the project of undermining the communist state. The advent of this figure marks a shift in paradigm from a “simple” refugee/exile identity, based on an ethics of immobility between diaspora and homeland, to a more complex identity that retains an anticommunist politics and exile identity but incorporates mobility. This paradigm of loyal transnationalism is popularly understood to the extent that overseas Vietnamese recognise a chalk and cheese
difference between returning to Vietnam to visit family or to engage in a bit of entrepreneurship, and transferring one’s loyalties lock, stock and barrel to the communist regime.

If orthodox exile precludes identification with the contemporary homeland, the pluralisation of the politics of return may be seen as having produced a complexified structure of exile identification. Reyes speaks of a three-way tension “between the idea of Vietnam as homeland, the physical presence of the United States, and the cultural forms that must be constantly shaped and reshaped to lend coherence to the label Vietnamese American” (Reyes 1999: 168). I would argue that, in addition to this tripartite identification with a lost homeland, a host nation and a “hybrid” diasporic identity, the contemporary homeland now inserts itself as a fourth site of identification for overseas Vietnamese - albeit a problematic and fragmented one. For those who return while maintaining an exile consciousness, we might speak of an oscillation between the lost nation and a plurality of “dissident” sites of identification in the contemporary nation: family, birthplace [que], “Saigon”, “the South”, “the people” etc. The projection of a transnational exilic space onto the homeland permits one to go back to a “family Vietnam” that is continuous and coeval with the diaspora-as-nation, or to a “Vietnam of the people” that is not riven by the divisions of history and ideology.

Despite their differences, exile and transmigrancy have both been represented as transgressive subjectivities, capable of providing one with a degree of freedom from the imperatives of the nation-state. The transmigrant achieves this freedom through mobility, while for the exile it is attained through the experience of cultural in-betweenness. For Nacify (1993), the liminality of exile is (or can be) a liberatory and utopian experience,
producing anti-essentialist and cosmopolitan identities. He is not alone in interpreting it this way. Indeed, exile has been thoroughly idealised as a metaphor for a rootless postmodern subjectivity. It has also been constructed in terms of the aesthetic possibilities of displacement rather than as a sociological condition (Malkki 1995: 512-515). For my part, I have tried to stay closer to the reality of exile discourse as it is articulated in a diasporic public sphere, i.e. as an (essentialist, hegemonic) narrative of public identity which is capable of legitimating censorious acts of symbolic and actual violence such as those perpetrated against Tran Van Truong. This is not to say, however, that exile has any purity or essence as a cultural form. The diaspora forms a coherent “national” space only in the exile imagination. In practice, exile identities are overlaid and contradicted by “ethnic”, transnational and other subjectivities. Rather than seeing exile as an inherently transgressive positionality, then, I would argue that theorising it as a deterritorialised national imaginary is a better way of reconciling the claims of essentialist national identities with the reality of cross-border cultural formations.

Conclusion

If exile as an imaginary has been transnationalised, then equally might we say that in the Vietnamese case the idea of the transnational field has been subjected to the logic of exile. The idiom of exile provides the very means through which this field can be conceptualised, and marks it indelibly with a logic of deferred return and national restoration. Thus I would argue that what I have described above is not simply a case of the “end” of exile due to the advent of a transnational field of Vietnamese identities/identifications. Rather, it is an illustration of the way in which transnational
fields are highly contingent formations, enabled only by virtue of specific histories of exchange between existing national fields. In choosing to do an analysis of so contested a transnational field as the Vietnamese one, I suppose that I was bound to arrive at a conclusion which stressed the continued salience of the national. I hope that I have also, however, demonstrated the power of globalisation to de- and reterritorialise two “national” fields founded on such quintessentially territorial metaphors as anti-foreign nationalism and exile.