9. Conclusion

At the beginning of this work I suggested that, in the historical context of Doi Moi and normalisation, a transformation was under way in the relationship between Vietnam and the post-1975 diaspora in the West. I posited that as a consequence of the enabling of cross-border flows of temporary return migration, capital, goods and information between Vietnam and diasporic sites, a paradigm of “inflexible” exile had begun to give way to a more transnational idiom. This assumption led us to pursue - both physically and symbolically - a number of cross-border practices and imaginings that, I have argued, are characteristic of a post Doi Moi politics of overseas Vietnamese identity.

Multi-Sited Ethnography and the Anthropology of Transnationalism

The insights of an anthropology of transnationalism have enabled us to conceptualise the contested and fragmented space in which post Cold War overseas Vietnamese identities are realised. While the mapping of this terrain has, of necessity, been a fragmented one, the methodology of multi-sited ethnography has paid dividends in a number of ways.

Firstly, it has allowed us to get a sense of the lived experiences and cultural meanings of the global structural changes that have re-connected Vietnamese diasporic and homeland sites. We have been able to gain particular insight into the way in which overseas and homeland Vietnamese draw on contestatory national imaginaries to make sense of, and attempt to exert agency over, the global processes that have transformed a once rigid border into one that is “objectively” flexible (in the sense that the legal and bureaucratic obstacles which once made it impassable have been substantially reduced). The cultural meanings that have been made of this
flexibility are, at first sight, somewhat polar. It has been experienced on both sides as an “invasion” of the national territory, leading to the intensification of binary national identities. It has also, however, occasioned the coming into being of more flexible senses of national belonging in both homeland and diaspora, instantiated in the metaphors of deterritorialised nation-state and its diasporic “counter-formation”, transnational exilic space.

Secondly, it has allowed us to avoid simply reproducing the dominant “local” representations of diasporic and homeland identities as embodied in the discourses of exile elites and the Vietnamese state - for instance, in (mis)representations of the purity and self-sufficiency of Vietnamese national or diasporic exile culture. Spatially unbinding diaspora and homeland has permitted us to contextualise these essentialisations within the larger structure of a transnational field. We have been able to get beyond the mere claim that they are non-essential to show how these identities are constituted through a complex imbrication of the local and global. By pursuing the connectedness between diasporic and homeland sites, we have seen how the intensification of diasporic and homeland national identities is not a spontaneous, local “resurgence”, but rather occurs as a result of the displacement of the geopolitics of exile by an emergent transnationalism.

Thirdly, a methodology of multi-sited ethnography has provided us with a critical perspective on theoretical conceptualisations of diasporic, refugee and exile identities. While the overseas Vietnamese are more properly regarded as a diaspora than as a transnational community, to have approached this study through diaspora theory alone would not have permitted us these insights. As we saw in Chapter Two, orthodox refugee studies and diaspora studies approaches to the overseas Vietnamese have tended to produce a simplex representation of diasporic Vietnameseness as an insular and integral identity. As I have shown, however,
globalisation acts to undermine the possibility of maintaining a hermetic exile (this was never in fact possible, even in the darkest days of the Cold War), and the barrier between the imaginary homeland of diaspora and the “real” homeland of the contemporary nation-state is eroded.

Finally, having done ethnographic fieldwork in both Vietnam and Australia has allowed us to avoid the pitfalls of theoretical “parochialism” which come from fixing one’s research population within a spatially bounded milieu, whether that be a local “refugee community” or a hermetic “exile diaspora”. This theoretical intervention has enabled us to make empirical gains in the form of the identification of a number of transnational phenomena not before identified in the literature on the overseas Vietnamese. These contributions made to this literature include, among others, the identification of: an emergent transnational commercial music culture (Chapters Three and Four); an ongoing pluralisation and privatisation of the politics of return (Chapter Two), and; the emergence of a flexible idiom of diasporic belonging, transnational exilic space (Chapter Eight).

The Structure of National and Transnational Imaginaries

In arguing for the importance of cross-border practices and transnational connections, I have been careful not to abandon the analysis of the local and the situated, or that of the “traditional” nationalist processes of territorial consolidation and defence. Rather, I have attempted to give the border a degree of flexibility without over-exaggerating its traversability (politically or economically), and to give transnational phenomena the right degree of importance in comparison with national and local ones. As a result of this strategy, I have been able to identify two modalities of response to the mutual deterritorialisation of homeland and diasporic “national” space. The first is a defensive response which attempts to re-erect absolute
boundaries in the face of the perceived intrusion of national others. This process entails the intensification of “tricky” local identities, as was evident in the protests around Tran Van Truong or the Mother video in the diaspora, and in Vietnam in the anti foreign culture drives and the discourse of peaceful evolution. The second modality of response is less punitive and more productive. This modality appears to make a more relativistic interpretation of the boundaries of the nation, and to allow for the inclusion of national others, albeit in a “disciplined” way. It is associated with more properly transnational imaginaries.

As a contribution to an emergent anthropology of Asian transnationalisms - one not dominated by the concerns of US-centric migration studies (e.g. Glick Schiller et al. 1992, 1994, M.P. Smith 1994, Rouse 1995) - I believe that my work provides a useful counterpoint to a tendency to constitute Chineseness, rendered in the idiom of hyper-mobile elites and flexible citizenship, as paradigmatic (Ong and Nonini 1997, Ong 1999, Yang 1999). The overseas Vietnamese are subjects for whom the border with Vietnam is far from flexible - economically, politically or even culturally. Yet recognising the limited flexibility and deep divisions that continue to mark the border between homeland and diaspora has not prevented us from usefully thinking through overseas and homeland identities from an anthropology of transnationalism perspective. By analytically linking defensive and productive reactions to transnational flows, I have been able to show how these flows have the capacity to both make and unmake national boundaries, rather than simply claiming that they undermine state sovereignty, or force the state to adopt entirely new types of governmentality. Mayfair Yang is obliged to de-emphasise the disjunctive effects of political difference between Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Southeast Asian and Mainland Chinese communities in order to theoretically constitute a transnational public sphere that cuts across geographical and political divisions (Yang 1999: 7-8). I, by contrast, have been
able to show how such divisions do not preclude but rather enable and structure transnational
space and practices. In doing transnational anthropology, we ought to be attempting to show how
both territorialised and deterritorialised governmentalities co-exist as state and elite strategies of
“staying viable” by reproducing their dominance over the labour of imagining the national
community.

I would like at this point to consider in more detail the question of what the relationship
between these two modalities of nation-building in fact is. In this work, I have represented the
relationship between defensive and inclusive national imaginaries as being both a historical one
of succession as well as being one of contemporaneity and co-existence. Thus in Vietnam, we
saw how a Cold War conception of overseas Vietnamese in the West as enemies shifted to a post
Cold War one in which they were rehabilitated as the (potential) constituents of a Vietnamese
transnation. In the diasporic context, we saw how returnees went from being the targets of
persecution and political violence in the late eighties to being re-imagined as “loyal”
transmigrants in the nineties. The absolutist conception of national boundaries implied in the
labelling of refugees as “American Puppets” and of returnees as “collaborators” has not,
however, been replaced by the more relativist conceptions embodied in the ideas of the
Vietnamese transnation or of transnational exilic space. Rather, as we have seen, they co-exist as
alternative possibilities for conceptualising the national space and for dealing with perceived
intrusions into it from without. Thus in Chapter Three, we saw how discourses of cultural
pollution, which strive to keep “foreign” and “reactionary” culture out of Vietnam, exist
alongside the officially sanctioned commercial appropriation and indigenisation of diasporic
songs, genres and performers. Likewise in Chapter Four, we saw how attempts to exclude
homeland cultural products from diasporic markets co-exist with strategies of making them
marketable by “decommunising” them - for instance by changing the lyrics of songs or erasing the logos of state-owned production companies from homeland CDs and videos.

I would suggest that we ought not to read the difference between imaginaries which seek to keep national otherness out, and those which incorporate it in a productive way, in terms of discontinuity or rupture - for instance as indicating the demise of territorialised nationalisms and the advent of post-national imaginaries. Glick Schiller et al.’s notion of the deterritorialised nation-state (1994) and Ong’s notions of flexible citizenship and sovereignty (1999) may both be read as attempts to theorise a continuity between the “classical” and the post-globalisation nation-state, showing how the nation-state form has adapted itself to transnational processes rather than simply atrophying. Neither of these paradigms has been entirely appropriate to the case of the overseas Vietnamese, however. Overseas Vietnamese returning to Vietnam for a variety of purposes, from family visits to tourism to investment, are very much unlike Ong’s paradigmatic transnational nomad, a multiple passport-holding taipan who is almost entirely unencumbered by the baggage of nationalist affect (Ong 1999: 1-2). For the former, the issue of loyalty to an (imaginary) national identity competes with the imperative to pursue the accumulation of capital. By contrast, the idea of deterritorialised nation-state suggests too powerful a sense of the state’s capacity to govern in an extra-territorial context. This is particularly inappropriate in the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, where the legitimacy of the contemporary nation-state is so contested. Such formations, I would argue, represent more a fantasy of governance than the executive power that is suggested by the idea of a deterritorialised nation-state. Far from being capable of disciplining its constituents, the deterritorialised nation-state must articulate itself to their existing desires and self-interests in order to be able to “succeed”. Rather than using these concepts, then, I shall suggest we read the relationship
between (trans)national governmentalities in terms of the *desire* to manage a finally unmanageable (trans)national space.

If the advent of a transnational exile imaginary makes it possible for anticommunist elites to incorporate the cross-border practices of diasporic subjects into an anti-regime interpretation, it does not make it possible for them to control and determine the behaviour of these subjects. The understanding that the returnees’ practices constitute a transnational exilic space represents nothing but the imaginary nation-building project of a stateless diaspora. I have argued that the adoption of a “loyal” exile identity among returnees such as the overseas Vietnamese professionals we met in Chapter Eight is best interpreted as being a matter of self-discipline predicated on the desire to belong to and accumulate cultural capital within the diasporic social field (as opposed to the host nation social field alone). A counter-example was provided by the analysis of the “independent” professionals, who did not subject themselves to any such discipline. As I have argued, if the idea of transnational exilic space has any power, then this is realised in providing a metaphor with which to think cross-border practices rather than in controlling and disciplining them.

Hage (1998) shows how governmental nationalists conceive of themselves as “spatial managers”, i.e. those who have a say over who comes into the nation, “how many” national others are permitted in and so on. He argues that those who attempt to keep others out and those who seek to incorporate them usefully into the national order have in common the fact that each is seeking to manage and order the national space. While their attitudes towards new arrivals to the nation differ, they nevertheless share a governmental relation towards these others as subjects to be *positioned* within the nation in certain ways. While Hage’s argument relates to pro- and anti-multiculturalist imaginaries, we may usefully apply it to territorialised and deterritorialised
national imaginaries also. This would lead us to conceive of both modalities as representing
different ways of performing the same task of spatial management. For Hage, the fantasy
structure of nation-building (he equates the ideal nation which the nationalist strives to build with
the Lacanian object-cause of desire (Hage 1998: 72)) means that the task of managing the
national space is synonymous with dealing with a loss of control over this space. In a similar
vein, Georges Foucon argues that discourses of deterritorialised nation-building work to mystify
and compensate for the relative loss of national sovereignty which developing nations experience
under conditions of globalisation (personal communication, 2000). Such discourses re-imagine a
transnational space over which the state has control, rather than a national space compromised in
its integrity by international financial institutions, foreign capital, migration, global media flows
and so on. From this perspective, Vietnamese discourses of cultural pollution and peaceful
evolution gain some consistency with those of cosmopolitanisation and transnational nation-
building. This permits us to see Vietnam as using a combination of inclusive and exclusive
means of managing the intrusion of diasporic culture, capital and subjects into the national space.
Thus the discourse of “green and grey matter” may be read as a means of rationalising and
making visible already existing transnational links such as that constituted by the flow of
remittances. It may also be interpreted as an attempt to protect Vietnam from the
deterritorialising effects of foreign capital. As we have seen, while Viet Kieu capital and
expertise brings with it its own risks, it is nevertheless able to be re-imagined as a non-foreign,
“internal” resource - one which is fantasised to be capable of returning a measure of autonomy to
a state caught in the quicksand of globalisation. Conversely, discourses of cultural pollution and
peaceful evolution operate to control the perceived “damage” which comes about as a result of
facilitating overseas Vietnamese transnationalisms, acting to discipline and position the other
within the national space to which it has been granted access. The notion of trans(national) governmentalities as different modalities of spatial management is useful because it allows us to account for the capacity of nation-states to oscillate back and forth between spatially “extended” and “limited” strategies of governmentality in this way.

In the diaspora, we might note that absolutist discourses of exile seek not only to keep the communist other out, but also to keep overseas Vietnamese subjects inside the diasporic “national” space. While the space-time of exile is more flexible within this formation, I would argue that it nevertheless remains a fantasy of spatial control - i.e. a spatially extended control over diasporic returnees. Note that the “national others” who are included in this transnational imaginary aren’t the “communist” Vietnamese, but rather the returnees, who in the past became irrevocably other as a consequence of having left the ethical bounds of exile. Rather than excluding them, this imaginary seeks to politicise the transmigrants and the complex multitude of transnational practices they author by recouping them into a spatially extended version of the Exile Nation, which is perceived to have an effectivity even on Vietnamese soil. Instead of being seen as individuals going back to Vietnam on their own initiatives for self-interested reasons, the returnees are imagined to go back with the “permission” of the exile elite, and their distant transnationalisms to be guided and governed by the imperatives of the political project of exile.

Farewell Saigon: On Displacement and Emplacement

The Paris by Night video 20 Years in Retrospect, a production marking the 20th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, begins with a series of grainy newsreel images of the final days of the defence of the city, culminating in the destruction of the statue of an ARVN soldier and
famous image of the last helicopter to leave from the roof of the US embassy. This poignant
encapsulation of loss resolves into an interior of the studio where this episode of Paris By Night
is being shot before a live audience. The high curved ceiling, rich and soothing purples and pinks
of the studio and high quality of the image contrast with the grainy black and white footage
preceding them, creating the effect of a cocoon or womb-like space. Onto the stage walks Khanh
Ly, the singer perhaps most emblematic of pre-1975 Saigon, and performs the song Sai Gon
Vinh Biet, “Farewell Saigon”.

Nam Loc, composer of “Farewell Saigon”, returned there after a sixteen year absence in
1991 as part of a US delegation. He describes his return thus:

Before, in the song Goodbye Saigon, I promised “Saigon, I will return”. When the plane
landed at Tan Son Nhat, I was still singing that song. But the ironical thing was that in
those few days living there, I really felt that I had truly lost Saigon. At that time, I said
“Goodbye, Saigon”. Why? In the old days, Saigon was only in my imagination. In 1991,
the communists tried to rebuild, tried to recall a Saigon past by letting schoolgirls go to
school in white ao dai, re-establishing the familiar old street names, re-erecting the old
billboards like Givral, QueenBee, Bodard ... But to me it was all pretence, forced and
clumsy. So I felt that I had returned to Saigon and at the same time, I had bade farewell to
Saigon. Saigon is still there, but the image and mood of my Saigon are no more...(in
Nguyen Ninh Hoa 1995).

In the post Doi Moi era, the homeland is a place and time which can be physically returned to
but, as Nam Loc finds, this return is inevitably a disappointment. His Saigon, the imaginary
Saigon of exile, cannot be regained. What he discovers instead is a “forced and clumsy” simulacrum. And yet Nam Loc does return - presumably he revisits his old haunts, stays with relatives, looks up old friends. He is loathe, however, to invest any part of his identity whatsoever in this shabby metropolis. This is a minimal transnationalism indeed, characteristic of the elite’s meticulous maintenance of exile consciousness in the face of the corrupting air of the homeland under the communist regime.

Palumbo-Liu reflects that, once the Israeli state came into existence, an awkward question arose for diasporic Jews. Was the “real” Jew the one who returned “home”, or the one who stayed loyal to the diasporic tradition (Palumbo-Liu 1999: 345)? While physical return to Vietnam is now possible, the instantiation of a “Free” Vietnamese state that would permit the realisation of a diasporic political identity has yet to come about. Vietnamese exiles are thus able to convincingly justify their presence in the host countries by the argument that the proper time for return has not yet arrived. In this context, one does not have to prove one’s authenticity as a Vietnamese subject by returning to Vietnam. Indeed, as we have seen, the refusal to return may be put forward as the supreme proof of one’s commitment to the idea of the homeland and to the maintenance of the project national restoration. Thus, for those few who choose it, exile still credibly functions as a politics of return. Indeed, the returns of those who do not choose a rigorous anticommunism are themselves marked by a logic of exile, albeit a deterritorialised one. Even as they go back to Vietnam, their returns remain unconsummated, and true to the promise of final return.

Malkki argues against the tendency to read displacement as an “abnormal” condition - a loss of identity, community and home, a crisis of the viability of the subject, and so on. Rather, she says, we ought to use it as a means of getting a critical perspective on emplacement, “the
supposedly normal condition of being attached to a territorialised polity and an identifiable people” (Malkki 1995: 516). The narrative of exile represents the displacement of the overseas Vietnamese as a pathological condition for which their return to a territorialised polity is the cure. As Nam Loc discovers, however, return is not necessarily the answer. While the failure of his homecoming is put down to the fact that the homeland cannot be enjoyed (in Zizek’s sense) because of the presence of the usurper state (things look the same, but these are empty simulacra), we might also read it as a quasi-articulated recognition of the fact that “home” is now elsewhere. Or rather, more accurately, that the condition of being at home is not to be found in conforming to a “national order of things” (Malkki 1995: 516) in which subjects belong to a single, bounded national community.

Ironically, theories of transnationalism - most frequently associated with mobility and rootlessness - may in fact help us to understand the ways in which the displaced make themselves at home not only in a particular, “foreign” national territory, but rather in an oblique relationship with the national order of things itself. To suggest this is not to give transnational space a totalising emancipatory character. Rather, it is to suggest that metaphors such as transnational exilic space (a space by no means free of the territorialist imperatives of the state) may be read as formations that facilitate new modalities of home-building or re-emplacement rather than as expressions of the agony of displacement and rootlessness. Indeed, such “displaced” homelands may in time become more homely than the “real” homeland - such that when one goes back to Vietnam one discovers, like Nam Loc, that home is really in the diaspora.

Note, in this context, that the homeliness of Little Saigons is not in fact given by their total separation from Vietnam. The notion that Orange County’s Little Saigon reterritorialises the fallen Saigon of the RVN lends it a homeliness that Ho Chi Minh City under the communist
flag certainly does not offer. However, the fact that one had to buy a Thai imitation of the famous Vietnamese Phu Quoc brand of fish sauce there during the embargo years instead of the real thing made it unheimlich. Thus, we might argue that a certain degree of transnational connectedness - being able to buy fish sauce from the celebrated vats of Phu Quoc in one’s local Little Saigon, or being able to return to Vietnam for Tet every year - becomes part of the definition of being “at home” in such spaces. Conversely, too much connectedness - for instance, having to look at Ho Chi Minh’s portrait while one rents a video - destroys the sensation of homeliness. As we saw with the Mother video, when such incursions occur, they may spark an obsessive attention to all of the minute transgressions of exile. But the discourses of pollution or decay that give a pathological character to all the little pieces of “communist” otherness that find their way into the diaspora misrecognise fact that their presence has become a condition of normality. These transnational connections don’t simply uproot or pollute; rather, they enable a way of being at home that is neither entirely exilic, nor entirely transnational.
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