

The Disjunctive Politics of Vietnamese Immigrants in America from the Transnational Perspective

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This paper examines the politics of Vietnamese immigrants in America from the transnational perspective. Vietnamese immigrants' politics are transnational due to two factors: their life experiences with the communists in Vietnam, and the current political situation in the home country. The impact these two factors have upon the politics of Vietnamese immigrants in America is complex. Although most Vietnamese living in America are anticommunist, they do not share the same level of hostility toward the government in Vietnam. This paper provides some insights into the complex politics of Vietnamese immigrants in America which are transnational and 'disjunctive.'

Keywords: Vietnamese Americans, Vietnamese immigrants, refugees, politics, transnationalism

Introduction

It is cold here, but not as cold as in the 'reeducation camps' in Vietnam, my life in America is still too good, said Mr Trung, a refugee from Vietnam, when I asked him whether the winter in Illinois was difficult for him. Ironically, for Mr Trung, life in tropical Vietnam after the war was indeed much harsher than winter in the American Midwest. As a lieutenant in the defeated South Vietnamese army, he was imprisoned in the so-called 're-education camps' for three years by the communists who took over the whole country in April 1975. In the brutal conditions of the camps, he performed forced labour, living in constant fear of punishment by the camp authorities or of death from starvation. After 21 years living under the communist regime, Mr Trung and his family came to America as refugees in 1996. They worked hard, stayed together and quickly settled down in the new country. Today Mr Trung's family owns a house, his children hold professional jobs, and he himself works in a college library. The stable economic status of the family has allowed Mr Trung to pursue his lifelong interest in Buddhism. He is now a monk at a Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Rockford, Illinois, the religious and cultural centre for the small Vietnamese community in the city. As a Buddhist monk, Mr Trung still pays close attention to politics in Vietnam and is highly critical of the Vietnamese government. Like most Vietnamese in America, his politics have been shaped in the crucible of his own experiences of war, imprisonment and immigration, and the current political situation in his home country.

Although the Vietnamese community in America is generally regarded as anti-communist, political diversity exists within it. While most Vietnamese Americans are strongly critical of the Vietnamese government,

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some are more tolerant. This paper seeks to show that behind these complex politics lie two transnational factors: the life experiences of the immigrants under the communist regime in Vietnam prior to their arrival in America; and the current political situation in their home country. The data used in the paper are drawn from ethnographic research in which I interviewed 22 Vietnamese living in northern Illinois.

The scope of the research

In this examination of Vietnamese American politics from the transnational perspective, I am focusing only on the experiences of Vietnamese who came to America after the Vietnam War ended in April 1975. My research does not include Vietnamese who came to America as students prior to 1975 or Vietnamese living elsewhere overseas. However, a brief description of these communities can form the basis for future research.

There were up to 15 000 Vietnamese students in America prior to 1975 whose lives were politically affected by the war in Vietnam. Many of them engaged in the anti-war movement, while others supported the government of South Vietnam in its fight against the communists. Vu Pham (2003: 146), in his article *Ante-dating and Anchoring Vietnamese America: Toward a Vietnamese American Historiography*, sees these Vietnamese students as transnational 'agents of change' who helped transform perceptions and increase awareness within the American public about Vietnam and the war. According to Pham (2003: 148, 149), many chose to stay in America to avoid the draft and the political instability in South Vietnam at the time, eventually becoming part of the Vietnamese American community. The political experiences of Vietnamese students who arrived in America before 1975 are nonetheless different from the experiences of those who came after 1975. For one thing, these students did not suffer the political retribution and economic hardship under the communist regime that were experienced by those coming to America after the war. The homeland that these students came from was also politically different from the homeland to which Vietnamese Americans of today are transnationally connected. For the former, it was a democratic South Vietnam that sent them to America to study, expecting them to return. For the latter, it was an authoritative state that forced its people into exile and today still views them as political adversaries. Such profound differences between these two groups, while interesting subjects for a comparative study, require research on a larger scale than that which I have conducted for this paper.

Apart from those in America, there are approximately one and a half million overseas Vietnamese living in Australia, Canada and Europe. Although sharing a common culture, each of these Vietnamese communities is politically distinctive in its own way. For example, unlike the Vietnamese community in America, which is formed almost exclusively by refugees from the South, the Vietnamese communities in Canada and Australia include a large proportion of immigrants from the North, who are politically more aligned with the Vietnamese government than those from the South.

The Vietnamese communities in Europe are even more complex, including refugees from the South living in Western Europe and Vietnamese from the North sent to Eastern Europe as contract workers by the Vietnamese government during the communist era. While the Vietnamese in Western Europe may be as critical of the Vietnamese government as those in America, the majority of the Vietnamese in Eastern Europe are politically supportive of the Vietnamese government. Szymańska-Matusiewicz (2014: 197), for example, in her study of the Vietnamese in Eastern Europe, observes that it is much easier for Vietnamese returning from Poland to run businesses in Vietnam, due to their political backgrounds, than for Vietnamese returning from America: *Unlike return Vietnamese migrants from the United States, East European Vietnamese do not have to cope with the issues of being on the 'wrong side' of the conflict during the Vietnam War; moreover, they can make use of their favourable connections with government officials.* Such interesting comparisons be-

tween the Vietnamese in America and the Vietnamese in Europe, again, require a more inclusive study that is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Literature review

Like Cuban Americans, Vietnamese in America are highly political refugees from a communist country. Yet few studies have been made of their politics, resulting in a lack of understanding of its complexity. The anti-communist politics of Vietnamese Americans, for instance, are often attributed to the refugees' bitter experience of Vietnamese communists, which is true, but offers a single level of explanation for a complex issue.

According to the ethnic studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu (2006) at University of California, San Diego, there were two major models in the field of Vietnamese American studies up to the late 1980s. The first model, which Espiritu refers to as the 'crisis model,' repeatedly portrays Vietnamese refugees as *abject figures who suffer not only the trauma of forced departure but also the boredom, uncertainty, despair, and helplessness induced by camp life*; and the 'assimilation model,' which focuses on Vietnamese refugees' assimilation to American life and views *assimilation as the solution to the refugee resettlement crisis* (Espiritu 2006: 441). While the first model represents the Vietnamese as 'passive recipients' of America's generosity rather than as active agents in the refugee situation, the second model *impose[s] a generalized narrative of immigration on Vietnamese refugees, thereby reducing the specificities of their flight to a conventional story of ethnic assimilation* (Espiritu 2006: 441). Since the 1990s, Vietnamese American studies has developed into a more complex field, with studies that have moved *beyond demographic and needs assessment* to look into the cultural aspects of Vietnamese Americans, *addressing the gender, sexual, class, political, religious, cultural, and generational diversity of the population and articulating the localistic, familial, national, and transnational linkages of Vietnamese lives* (Espiritu 2006: 441). Two examples of research on politics utilising these new approaches are the works of Thuy Vo Dang (2005) and Caroline Kieu-Linh Valverde (2012).

Dang, a scholar of ethnic studies at University of California, San Diego, suggests that for Vietnamese Americans, anti-communism conveys cultural purposes. It is a way to preserve the story of South Vietnam, the home country that is now lost to the communists. It also serves as a pedagogical tool to educate young Vietnamese about the history and culture of South Vietnam. Viewing anti-communism from the cultural perspective, Dang explains some of the controversial politics in the community, such as why Vietnamese Americans acknowledge only the yellow flag of South Vietnam but not the official flag of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, or why they commemorate the Fall of Saigon every year during what is known as 'Black April.' Community ceremonies in which the yellow flag is displayed and the anthem of South Vietnam is sung, as observed by Dang (2005: 77), create a *cultural space* for Vietnamese Americans to *express their exilic longing for South Vietnam*, to define their identity as war refugees, and to bear *witness to a history that cannot be erased by mainstream America*. Anti-communism for Vietnamese Americans is therefore not only a way of rejecting the communist regime currently ruling their homeland but also of maintaining their cultural heritage as people from a democratic state.

The emergence of transnationalism in Vietnamese American studies, as mentioned by Espiritu (2006) above, is particularly important, because it enables scholars to study immigrant life as a fluctuating mode of being that continues to flow back and forth between the home country and the host country, as opposed to the one-way assimilation of moving from being foreign to Americanised. In other words, it places immigrants in a dynamic global context rather than within the conventional borders of the host country.

Valverde, a scholar of Asian American studies at University of California, Davis, conducted a study on the transnational flow of Vietnamese music between Vietnam and America, through which Vietnamese

American politics was also examined. For example, as part of the transnational music flow, many overseas Vietnamese singers have returned to Vietnam to perform, while singers from Vietnam have come to America to participate in the diaspora music industry. Singers from each of these groups, however, face harsh criticism from the Vietnamese American community. In the eyes of the anti-communist Vietnamese Americans, overseas singers returning to Vietnam are betraying the community that has nurtured them, while singers coming from Vietnam are cultural agents of the communist regime. Music shows featuring singers from Vietnam often meet strong protests from people in the community. On occasions, audiences have had to be escorted by the police for their own safety. Thus, as Valverde (2012: 52) states, *limits on free expression take place in segments of the Vietnamese American community that are critical of Vietnam's communist government.*

By incorporating culture and transnationalism into their work, Dang (2005) and Valverde (2012) provide meaningful insights into the complexity of Vietnamese Americans' anti-communism. Like Dang and Valverde, I approach the subject of Vietnamese American politics from the transnational perspective of an ethnographic study. Yet, unlike these two scholars, I also attempt to explain these anti-communist politics through two channels: by learning about Vietnamese Americans' life experiences under the communist regime prior to their migration to America; and by linking their anti-communist politics to the current political situation in Vietnam. As for the theoretical framework of the paper, I will utilise the global concepts suggested by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2008) in his well-known book, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*.

Appadurai (2008: 32, 33) argues that the new global cultural economy has reached a point where it can no longer be understood in terms of the existing centre-periphery models. Instead, this complex world must be viewed with *certain fundamental 'disjunctures' between economy, culture, and politics*. Appadurai identifies five dimensions of global flows in the world today as ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples.

Ethnoscaples describe 'the shifting world' within which people – including tourists, immigrants, guest workers and other moving groups – constantly move from one place to another. Technoscaples refer to the fact that technology, 'both mechanical and informational,' moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries. Financescaples concern the disposition of global capital at high speeds. Mediascaples indicate the global mobility of electronic goods and information, and the images of the world created by the media. Ideoscaples are also image-centred, but more directly political, and are associated with *the ideologies of states and the counter ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power*. Contemporary ideoscaples still contain ideas of the Enlightenment worldview – freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, democracy – but their meaning *requires careful translation from context to context in their global movements*, depending on different political actors and their audiences (Appadurai 2008: 37).

The interesting component in Appadurai's terms is the suffix 'scapes.' According to the author, it indicates the 'fluid, irregular' and subjective nature of the global flows, which are constructed and affected by various historical, linguistic and political factors. These global flows are also interconnected to one another in 'deeply disjunctive' relationships, for each of them *is subject to its own constraints and incentives*, and at the same time, *each acts as a constraint and a parameter for movements in the others* (Appadurai 2008: 33, 35).

Appadurai's concept of ideoscaples helps explain why Vietnamese American politics are mainly shaped by transnational factors taking place in Vietnam rather than by mainstream American politics. The idea that 'disjunctures' exist within each of the global flows is useful in explaining the political diversity among Vietnamese Americans despite the fact that the whole community is anti-communist. I will employ Appadurai's concept of ideoscaples to illustrate that Vietnamese immigrants' politics are transnational and at the same

time disjunctive. In this sense, I also place my study within the transnational context, moving away from the familiar approach of immigrant studies that focus merely on assimilation.

Methodology

Data used in this paper were gathered from ethnographic research on Vietnamese immigrants residing in the northern part of the state of Illinois, America. Between November 2009 and January 2010, I interviewed 22 people living in the cities of DeKalb, Sycamore, Rochelle, Rockford, and Chicago. Each interview took an average of about three hours and was followed up by email or telephone calls. Over the course of the three-month research period, I also attended many community events and conversed with other Vietnamese, who although not formally interviewed, helped me better understand the community.

I carefully selected the interviewees to represent the diversity of the Vietnamese diaspora, who also, as suggested by Michael Angrosino (2007: 38), appeared to have valuable information to share and were able to *convey that information in a reasonable manner*. The 22 participants in the research sample came from the following 4 sources: 1. people whom I met at the Buddhist temple in the city of Rockford: 11 participants; 2. Vietnamese American students at Northern Illinois University: 3 participants; 3. staff of the Vietnamese Association of Illinois in Chicago: 3 participants; and 4. people whom I personally know: 5 participants.

The gender balance in the studied group corresponds with the gender balance in the Vietnamese American population (US Census Department 2010). As it regards the age structure, the sample includes a relatively big group of older people (13) – between 45 and 74 years old – when compared to the Vietnamese American population (US Census Department 2010). This stems from the fact that most of the people eligible for my study, who had experienced life in Vietnam are now at rather advanced ages since the last major wave of Vietnamese immigrants to America ended about 20 years ago. The large proportion of older individuals in my sample also indicates that for the most part this is a study focusing on first-generation Vietnamese immigrants. Out of the 22 participants, nonetheless, 4 people can be considered second-generation Vietnamese Americans, who were either born in America or migrated to the country as young children. With the exception of one person born in America and one born in Canada, the research participants were born in Vietnam and came to America by one of the four following modes of immigration:

1. as part of the 1975 evacuation at the end of the Vietnam War: 3/20;
2. as ‘boat people’ escaping from Vietnam by boat from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s: 6/20;
3. as part of the two humanitarian programmes between 1989 and 1994. The Humanitarian Operation (HO) brought former military officers of South Vietnam, who were detained in ‘re-education camps’ by the Vietnamese communists for at least three years, to America. The Amerasian Homecoming Act allowed Vietnamese children born to American fathers to come to America with their families: 8/20;
4. through family sponsorships: 3/20.

Mode of immigration is important in understanding Vietnamese Americans’ transnational politics, because their life experiences under the communist regime in Vietnam depended on how and when they migrated to America. People leaving Vietnam during the Fall of Saigon in 1975, for instance, have no experience of life under communism regime and in general are less hostile towards the Vietnamese government than those who left the country later. People who have left Vietnam for America under the family sponsorship system more recently are also less political than the ‘boat people’ who embarked upon extremely difficult escapes during the 1980s. For this reason, it is important to know the historical context of each of these immigration modes illuminating why and how Vietnamese immigrants have left their homeland for America since 1975.

The history of Vietnamese migration to America

According to the US Census Department (2010), there are 1 737 433 Vietnamese in America, forming the fourth largest Asian group in the country, following the Chinese, Asian Indians and the Filipinos. Many Vietnamese came to America as refugees for political reasons. For the purposes of this paper, nonetheless, the more general term ‘immigrants’ is used when referring to Vietnamese Americans, because my study also includes people migrating to America for non-political reasons.

The first immigration wave

Although there were Vietnamese in America before 1975, their number was small and consisted mostly of college students. Vietnamese started to migrate to America in large numbers in April 1975, at the end of the Vietnam War. By December 1975, a total of 129 792 Vietnamese had resettled across the 50 states of America (Do 1999: 39). This is by far the largest number of Vietnamese refugees to have arrived in the United States in a single year. Many refugees from this first group were high-ranking government officials and military leaders in South Vietnam; others had worked closely with Americans in Vietnam as secretaries, interpreters, intelligence experts, and propagandists (Kelly 1977: 2). They were rather atypical in many ways compared to the general population in Vietnam at the time. According to a report by the Interagency Task Force for Indochina Refugees (1975: 13), among the heads of household in this group, 47.8 per cent had some secondary education, 22.9 per cent had some college education, 7.2 per cent were medical professionals and 24 per cent held professional, technical, and managerial jobs, while only 4.9 per cent were farmers or fishermen. Given that more than 60 per cent of the population in Vietnam are peasants, these numbers indicate the highly urban and ‘modern’ characteristics of the first group of Vietnamese immigrants to America.

The second immigration wave

The second wave of Vietnamese immigrants began in 1978, when hundreds of thousands of people escaped from Vietnam by boat, creating the so-called ‘Vietnamese boat people’ phenomenon. On capturing the entire country in 1975, the communist regime had begun a policy of retaliation against those serving in the government and the military of South Vietnam. These people were sent to ‘re-education camps’ located in remote areas where they endured harsh conditions for years. Meanwhile, in the cities, their families faced many forms of discrimination from the local authorities. The new government also relocated 700 000 urban people to New Economic Zones (NEZs) where living conditions were so horrific that eventually over 400 000 of them returned to the cities, despite knowing that their houses had been confiscated by the local authorities (Tran 2007: 47). Although it was designed as an economic programme, in practice the NEZs policy was used politically to ‘purify’ the urban population, since most of the people forced into the NEZs were family members of those affiliated to the military and government of South Vietnam. The planned economy run by the government made life extremely difficult for the whole population, due to severe shortages of food and basic commodities. In addition to economic mismanagement, in 1979 the Vietnamese government engaged in a war with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, drafting many young people into the military to fight on foreign soil. Faced with political oppression and the possibility of starvation, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fled the country by boat or by walking across Cambodia into Thailand. Living in various refugee camps located in Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Thailand and the Philippines for anything from a few months to a few years, the majority of these ‘boat people’ were eventually accepted into America while the rest were relocated to Canada, Australia and Western European countries.

It should be noted that many of the 'boat people' were of Chinese ethnicity. In 1979, at the height of its conflict with China, the Vietnamese government tried to eliminate the ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam first by harassing them, then by encouraging them to leave the country through organised trips if they paid a fee. This programme, often called 'semi-official departure,' lasted several years and sent tens of thousands of Chinese Vietnamese to the open sea to face the same risks that the illegal 'boat people' had encountered during their own escapes. It is estimated that approximately 10 to 15 per cent of all the 'boat people' perished at sea and one-third of all 'boat people' were victims of robbery, rape and murder (Le 2007: 51). Altogether, the 'boat people' wave brought over half a million people from Vietnam to America between 1976 and 1988 (Le 2007: 36).

The second wave of Vietnamese immigrants was more ethnically diverse than the first, relatively less educated, and less proficient in English (Caplan, Whitmore, Choy 1992: 27). However, as I have learned through interviewing the 'boat people,' this group consists not only of fishermen but also of many urbanites. Since the value of boats was so high at the time, fishermen often did not just flee the country with their own families but secretly sold the boat to an organiser, who then sold the trip to many 'passengers' from the cities. Together, they managed to escape after bribing the local police patrolling the coastal section where the boat would depart at night. An escaping boat in fact could include more urban people than fishermen. Education levels of the 'boat people' are thus relatively diverse. Many 'boat people' were psychologically traumatised by their horrific experiences at sea, such as being robbed and raped, in many cases repeatedly, by Thai pirates. They then had to endure a dreadful life in refugee camps that lasted anywhere from a few months to a few years before coming to America.

The third immigration wave

In addition to those leaving Vietnam in April 1975 and those escaping from the country by boat in the 1980s, many Vietnamese came to America in the 1990s through two official refugee programmes: the Humanitarian Operation and the American Homecoming Act. The first programme, often referred to by Vietnamese as the HO programme, allowed former military officers of the South who had been detained in 're-education camps' for at least three years to come to the United States. The HO programme started in 1989 and by 1998 it had brought 123 728 former military officers and their families to America (Tran 2007: 55). The second programme, the American Homecoming Act, passed by Congress in 1988 and implemented in 1989, focused on bringing Amerasians, children born of American fathers during the war, and their families, to America. Between 1989 and 2000, a total of about half a million Vietnamese migrated to the United States (Le 2007: 36).

Refugees from the third wave were diverse in terms of educational background, occupational skills and proficiency in English. In general, the education levels of former military officers were relatively high because they had to complete at least high school to become officers. Despite the hardships of life under the communist regime after 1975, over a long period of time, many children of these former military officers managed to receive a college education in Vietnam. Moreover, while waiting for the immigration papers to be processed, which could take up to several years, the HO programme applicants often tried to acquire some English and occupational skills that they anticipated would be useful in America. The majority of Amerasians, however, were illiterate. Due to poverty and racial discrimination, it was extremely difficult for these Amerasians to attend school in Vietnam.

The third-wave refugees left Vietnam for America by plane and did not suffer the terrible experiences at sea that the 'boat people' had endured. However, they had suffered years of difficult living in Vietnam facing political hostility and racial discrimination under the communist regime.

Through family sponsorship

In addition to the three waves of immigration described above, many Vietnamese came to America through family sponsorship. This mode of immigration includes wives of overseas Vietnamese men returning to the home country to get married. Today, marriage sponsorship is the principal mode of immigration for Vietnamese, mostly women, for three reasons. First, the normalisation of relations between America and Vietnam in 1995 made travel back to Vietnam easier for overseas Vietnamese. Second, new communication technologies, especially the availability of internet dating sites, email and cheap international phone cards, greatly expanded the platform for transnational marriage. Third, due to the mostly dangerous circumstances under which Vietnamese left their country, there are more men than women in the diaspora community.

Furthermore, according to the sociologist Hung Cam Thai (2008), transnational marriages between overseas Vietnamese men and women in Vietnam are also generated by the 'Vietnamese double gender movement.' The phenomenon can be summed up as follows: many women in Vietnam do not want to marry men in Vietnam who, they think, are still held back by outdated gender traditions, while Vietnamese men in America do not want to marry Vietnamese American women who, they think, no longer possess the traditional values needed for a successful marriage (Thai 2008: 29). Transnational marriages thus reflect the respective 'gender ideologies' that Vietnamese hope to fulfill at the global level.

Transnational politics shaped by life experiences in Vietnam

Although in general Vietnamese immigrants to America are anti-communist, the degree of their resentment toward the Vietnamese government depends on the level of suffering they experienced in Vietnam after 1975. While some strongly oppose the communist regime, others seem less critical of the system. I have chosen to describe the politics of four of the interviewees to demonstrate this point.

A young singer and the wife of a military officer stationed in a Central Vietnam province, Mrs Tho's life was happy and relatively comfortable before 1975. Her world was turned upside down after April 1975 when her husband was sent to remote 're-education camps' in the North. As a singer Mrs Tho herself had to attend a brief 're-education' course to learn about the new 'revolutionary culture.' The new regime, however, soon realised that it could use Mrs Tho's talents to 'serve the people.' Mrs Tho was allowed to perform in a state traditional theatre where she could sing one or two contemporary songs for the opening of each night. The job was financially and mentally stressful, as she recalled in the interview:

Every time I wanted to sing a new song, I had to perform it over and over in front of a committee until it was approved. They told me not only what songs to sing but also how to perform them, even how to walk on the stage, how to move my hands, what to wear. All the songs praise the new regime and Uncle Ho anyway. The most difficult part for me was the tiny salary, which was not enough even to feed myself, let alone to feed my two kids. Once I was sick with stones in my bladder but did not have money for medicine. I went home and my aunt could only find me some herbals. But it cured, you know. I did not return to the theatre after that but decided to become a smuggler to earn a living.

The smuggling Mrs Tho mentioned was only for the basic goods that in a free market should not have been considered illegal, such as fish, rice, coffee, sugar and cigarettes. Most of the smugglers at the time eventually ended up having their goods confiscated by the government customs department. This also happened to Mrs Tho. The only option open to her was to leave Vietnam. In 1980, she left for Hong Kong with a friend, travelling in a wooden fishing boat carrying 23 people. She left her two young children behind with her

mother because the trip was so hazardous. The boat was so tiny that *sitting on it one could reach into the sea water*. It took a month to reach Hong Kong and the travellers endured many ordeals at sea. After the engine stopped working, the boat drifted for several days until it met a foreign fishing boat, whose crew agreed to tow the disabled boat to Macau in exchange for all the money and valuables that the Vietnamese had on board. When night fell, however, the foreign vessel abandoned the Vietnamese boat in the middle of the ocean. After another week of drifting at sea without much food and water, Mrs Tho's boat reached a Chinese island, where they were helped with food and engine repair to continue their journey. Out in the open sea once more, they faced several heavy storms before arriving in Hong Kong.

Thirty years on, the memory of the trip is still painful for Mrs Tho. It took her almost an hour to tell me about the trip, with many horrific details. Throughout the conversation, she sounded distressed and her eyes were full of tears.

The most difficult part of life in America for Mrs Tho was the separation from her children. Since there was no direct communication between America and Vietnam in the 1980s, every month she had to travel to Canada for a pre-arranged phone call to her children in Vietnam. After 11 years of painful separation, Mrs Tho was finally able to sponsor her two children to America in 1991.

For Mrs Tho, the ordeals that she and her family went through and the pain they suffered were obviously caused by the communists. Although bitterness toward the communist regime is typical of the 'boat people' I interviewed, I also interviewed another 'boat person' who appeared much less critical of the Vietnamese government.

Born into a small business family in a coastal town located about 250 km from Saigon, Mr Song continued to enjoy a relatively comfortable life in Vietnam after April 1975. Owing to the small scale of their business, Mr Song's family members were not considered 'capitalists' by the new regime and were therefore allowed to keep their property intact. In 1979, when relations between China and Vietnam began to sour, the Vietnamese government encouraged ethnic Chinese people to leave the country on boat trips organised by the government. Although not an ethnic Chinese, Mr Song managed to take the trip after his family paid 10 bars of gold to the authorities, an enormous sum of money at the time. Unlike Mrs Tho's difficult trip, it took only a few days of smooth sailing for Mr Song's boat to meet a foreign ship that took him to a refugee camp in Malaysia. After a year in the refugee camp, Mr Song came to America through the sponsorship of a church in Seattle, and later moved to Chicago to attend college, obtaining a degree in computer science in 1984, followed by a master's in mathematics in 1986. Now living in the affluent town of Naperville, Illinois, Mr Song runs a website featuring news and entertainment information from Vietnam, earning income from the advertisements on the website in addition to working as a computer programmer. The website's server is in America, and the content is collected from various online sources by a small complement of staff in Vietnam. The business in Vietnam, however, is not registered with the Vietnamese government. *The authorities will make a fuss about it if I register the website, just because they want to be bribed*, Mr Song explained. The underground nature of the operation, he admitted, prevents his business from growing in Vietnam. Yet, it is a limitation that Mr Song is prepared to accept. Mr Song told me that although he felt sorry about the political and social problems in Vietnam today, as a businessman he did not want to engage in politics. *Politics are bad for business*, he said. Indeed, for his website, Mr Song is careful to select only content that appears non-political to both the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese diaspora.

Mr Song's politics seem to consist of two layers: deep down he dislikes the communist government but to outside appearances he has reached a pragmatic compromise with it. Compared to Mrs Tho's, Mr Song's life in Vietnam after 1975 was neither dramatically different nor too difficult; his escape from Vietnam as a 'boat person' was relatively easy. These factors could explain why he is less anti-communist than Mrs Tho, who suffered a great deal at the hands of the communists.

My proposition that life experiences in Vietnam define the politics of Vietnamese immigrants in America appeared to be borne out throughout my interviews. Even among former military officers from the South, the group supposedly most antagonistic toward the Vietnamese communists, political attitudes toward the Vietnamese government also varied, depending on how difficult their lives in Vietnam had been after 1975. Mr Trung, the monk depicted at the beginning of this paper, for example, typifies the anti-communist politics of former military officers. However, in my interviews, I encountered one former military officer who was almost sympathetic to the communist regime. I describe his case here to show the ‘disjunctures’ around politics in this community.

Mr Dan, who like Mr Trung was an officer in the Air Force, was sent to ‘re-education camps’ for nine years. He was fortunate enough to earn a good living when he returned home in 1984. Trained as a pilot in America before 1975, Mr Dan possessed good English skills and managed to become a popular English teacher in Saigon in the late 1980s. His students even included children of high-ranking officials of the communist government. *There was a huge demand for English teachers at the time because many people were about to go to America on various departure programmes and the country was also beginning to open up to foreign investors*, Mr Dan explained, *and a person like me who had previously studied in America was considered highly valuable, not only because I could teach students to speak English like Americans, but also because I could tell them about life in America*. The teaching job made Mr Dan’s life so comfortable that at first he did not want to go to the United States through the HO programme for which he was eligible. In 1992, however, he decided to emigrate, realising that in the long term America would be a better place for his family.

It seems that because his experiences in Vietnam after 1975 were not as horrific as Mr Trung’s, Mr Dan has a more positive view of the Vietnamese government. Mr Dan told me he believed the political situation in Vietnam would improve when the current aging communist leaders were replaced by a younger generation. Mr Dan’s politics are not typical of former military officers of the South, most of whom strongly reject the idea that the communist regime is capable of evolving into a more democratic system. When asked how he felt about his nine years in the ‘re-education camps,’ Mr Dan expressed an interesting point of view:

During the war, I flew, I fought, but I also enjoyed a great city life, unlike other soldiers who had to fight in the jungle. In the end we were defeated, so we should have accepted the game. The ‘re-education camps’ were part of that game. Now everything to me is just in the past, and I am the type of person who always looks forward to the future.

Although life experiences in Vietnam under the communist regime significantly affect the politics of Vietnamese people in America, they are not the sole defining factor. Apart from maintaining *a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland*, as pointed out by Clifford Geertz (1973: 304), diasporic subjects are also defined by their *continuing relationship with the homeland*. In this context, the politics of immigrants are shaped not only by memory and life experiences in the past, but also by present linkages to their homeland. For the Vietnamese immigrants, such linkages are particularly strong due to the challenging political situation in their home country, one of the few communist states left in the world. In the next section, I examine how Vietnamese immigrants’ politics are defined by the current politics in Vietnam.

Transnational politics shaped by the current political situation in Vietnam

Throughout my research, I found that the two current political issues in Vietnam to which Vietnamese immigrants pay close attention are human rights and national sovereignty. The 2010 report by Human Rights Watch (2010) summarises the human rights situation of Vietnam in 2009 as follows:

Vietnam intensified its suppression of dissent in 2009 in an effort to bolster the authority of the Communist Party. Authorities arrested dozens of peaceful democracy advocates, independent religious activists, human rights defenders, and online critics, using vaguely-worded national security laws such as spreading 'anti-government propaganda' or 'abusing democratic freedoms.' The courts convicted at least 20 political or religious prisoners in 2009, including five people sentenced in October whom the previous month the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention had determined to be arbitrarily detained. People imprisoned in Vietnam for the exercise of fundamental rights number more than 400.

The government tightened its controls on internet use, blogging and independent research, and banned dissemination and publication of content critical of the government. Religious freedom continued to deteriorate, with the government targeting religious leaders and their followers who advocated for civil rights, religious freedom and equitable resolution of land disputes.

An example of the government's 'suppression of dissent' was the high-profile trial in January 2010 that sentenced 4 democracy activists to between 5 and 16 years in prison for what were called *activities aimed at overthrowing the people's administration*. The convicted activists include 4 well-educated and successful citizens: Le Cong Dinh, a prominent lawyer educated in America on a Fulbright scholarship who had represented many leading multinational firms in Vietnam; Nguyen Tien Trung, a software engineer educated in France; Tran Huynh Duy Thuc and Le Thang Long, two entrepreneurs who founded an information technology company involved in launching Vietnam's stock market. As reported by Pham (2010) on the BBC, although Dinh and the other defendants insisted they just wanted to improve the political system in Vietnam to fight against corruption, they were accused of working with 'reactionary forces overseas' to overthrow the government. Their trial caused concern to governments in the West, including the United States, and was quickly condemned around the world as a mockery of international legal standards. Kenneth Fairfax, the US Consul General in Ho Chi Minh City, called for the dissidents' release while British Foreign Office Minister Ivan Lewis stated that *nobody should [have been] imprisoned for peacefully expressing their opinions* (Pham 2010). The fact that the government punished the activists for their connections with 'reactionary forces overseas' showed how deeply troubled the communist regime was by the transnational political linkages between democracy advocates inside the country and those in the Vietnamese diaspora. In fact, the most serious evidence used to charge Le Cong Dinh was his trip to Thailand to attend a three-day training course on non-violent political changes, sponsored by the overseas Vietnamese political party Viet Tan (Vietnam Reform Party) (Mydans 2010). Other evidence against Le Cong Dinh included a file found on his computer of the book *From Dictatorship to Democracy* by Gene Sharp, translated into Vietnamese by Viet Tan. The prosecutions of the other three activists were also based on 'evidence' of their communications with overseas political organisations. The case demonstrates how ideoscapes, the concept of democracy in this case, flow both ways between diaspora communities and their home countries, as illustrated by Appadurai (2008: 37): *The fluidity of ideoscapes is complicated in particular by the growing diaspora (both voluntary and involuntary) of intellectuals who continuously inject new meaning-stream into the discourse of democracy in different parts of the world*. Apart from crushing democracy activities, the Vietnamese government is also

suppressing the recent rise of anti-Chinese nationalism in Vietnam, a political strategy strongly condemned by most Vietnamese in America.

A traditional enemy of Vietnam for over two thousand years, China has always appeared highly suspicious in the eyes of the Vietnamese, and recently tension has increased due to territorial disputes between the two countries. The disputes centre around the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands, two small chains of islets believed to have large oil and gas deposits located in an area of military and strategic importance in the South China Sea. China seized the Paracel Islands in 1974 from South Vietnam and occupied part of the Spratly Islands after fighting a brief naval battle with communist Vietnam in 1988. Since 2007 China has increased its military presence in the waters around the islands and has started to harass Vietnamese fishermen working near the disputed islands. In many cases the Vietnamese fishermen have been beaten and held to ransom (Pham 2009). Ironically, instead of protesting to the Chinese government over these incidents, the Vietnamese government has attempted to suppress its own citizens' criticisms of China (Zeller 2007). In December 2007, when China ratified a plan to create a symbolic administrative region called Sasha that included the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands, several hundred young Vietnamese organised two public demonstrations in front of the Chinese embassy in Hanoi and the Chinese consulate general in Ho Chi Minh City. It was the first time that political street protests had taken place in the history of communist Vietnam. The protests were quickly suppressed by the police, however, with many demonstrators arrested or intimidated (Zeller 2007). As reported in an article by Crispin (2009) in *Asia Times*, there are different theories that explain why the Vietnamese government aggressively defended China instead of its own national territory. According to its author, one theory states that given the current economic downturn, Vietnam is relying on China for a secret financial bailout. Another theory suggests that the repression of anti-China sentiment reflects the *internal politicking between broadly divided conservative and liberal factions* within the Vietnamese Communist Party (Crispin 2009).

The Vietnamese immigrants whom I interviewed had their own interpretation of this political situation in Vietnam. In their opinion, the Vietnamese government is suppressing nationalism in Vietnam for two reasons: first, it cannot afford to upset China, its only remaining communist ally in the world today; second, and more importantly, it is afraid that nationalist protests might turn into a democracy movement that overthrows the ruling regime. In any case, for Vietnamese Americans, the rise of anti-Chinese nationalism in Vietnam provides justification for their anti-communist politics. Anti-communist politics thus is not only to denounce the authoritative regime in Vietnam but also to protect the homeland from China's territorial violations.

Mr Trung, the former military officer who is now a Buddhist monk, for example, stated that he was critical of the Vietnamese communists not only because they had treated him badly in the past, but mainly because nowadays the communists were dangerously compromising the country in China's favour. When I asked him whether it would be appropriate for a Buddhist monk to be political, Mr Trung responded: *A monk can only be a monk when there is a country for him to practise his religion. The communists are selling out Vietnam to China, so even as a monk I must condemn them.*

Although homeland politics are an important contributory factor to the anti-communist position of many Vietnamese immigrants, it may have little impact on the politics of young Vietnamese Americans. Young Vietnamese Americans do not have much life experience under the communist regime and appear to be more interested in mainstream American politics than in Vietnamese politics, as illustrated by the case of Dinh, one of my interviewees.

A graduate student of literature, Dinh came to America with his 'boat people' parents when he was only one year old. Growing up in America, Dinh was told by his parents about their harsh lives in Vietnam after 1975 and their difficult journey to America. Despite conceptualising Vietnam as an undemocratic country, Dinh is uncomfortable with the anti-communist politics of the Vietnamese diaspora. He stated:

I hold a skeptical disposition about the Vietnamese government because of my parents' experiences, but also skeptical about the Vietnamese American politics, which are conservative and reinforcing the idea of the model minority. I've learned to avoid talking about politics with my parents because of their skepticism about the American left. I listen to them, but don't have much to offer to the conversation.

It is obvious that Dinh used the familiar left–right spectrum of American politics as a measure of the politics of Vietnamese immigrants, rather than viewing them from the transnational viewpoint of a Vietnamese immigrant strongly connected to his homeland.

Homeland politics might also be perceived differently by recent Vietnamese immigrants: although they lived in Vietnam under communism for a longer time, they did not suffer as much as those who left Vietnam before the 1990s. These people tend to express a rather positive view of the Vietnamese government and, moreover, feel discontented with the anti-communist politics of the Vietnamese in America. The case of Mr Lam illustrates this point.

Mr Lam, a 32-year-old nail technician living in the city of Aurora with his wife and a young child, came to America less than two years ago. His family was sponsored to America by his brother in a process that took more than ten years to complete. Growing up in Vietnam in the 1990s when the communist regime was experimenting with economic reforms that significantly improved the living standards of many, Mr Lam did not suffer from economic hardship as the early immigrants had. Mr Lam told me that although there were social and political issues in Vietnam, overall he thought the country was doing well. Instead of criticising the Vietnamese government, Mr Lam expressed his unease about those Vietnamese in America whom he considered politically extreme. In his opinion, the fight against the Vietnamese government was a waste of time; he simply wanted to concentrate on earning a good living. Although he had only been in America for two years, Mr Lam had already gone back to Vietnam for a visit, and really enjoyed the trip. Although he is not anti-communist like other Vietnamese immigrants, interestingly, it seems his political position has also been shaped by his life experiences with the communist regime in Vietnam. In his case, it just happened that the experiences are relatively positive.

The cases of Dinh and Mr Lam reveal the 'disjunctures' within the political sphere of Vietnamese Americans with regard to homeland politics. While human rights and nationalism in Vietnam have fuelled the anti-communist politics of many Vietnamese Americans, they still appear distant to some others. Again, for the most part, this depends on the individuals' life experiences under the communist regime in Vietnam prior to their coming to America. People who have suffered at the hands of the communists in the past pay more attention to the current homeland politics than those who did not suffer. Thus, the two transnational factors shaping the politics of Vietnamese Americans – life experiences under the communist regime and current homeland politics – are interrelated. They are the two main causes of Vietnamese Americans' anti-communist politics, a politics that itself is disjunctive.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that Vietnamese American anti-communist politics are the result of two transnational factors: life experiences in Vietnam and current homeland politics. The loss of South Vietnam to the communist North at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 brought dramatic changes, most of which were devastating, to the lives of millions of people in South Vietnam. The end of the war also heralded the start of mass migration from Vietnam to America. By showing how people suffered at the hands of the communists in Vietnam, I have sought to explain why Vietnamese Americans are anti-communist. For these people, anti-communism is not a theoretical matter but the direct result of painful life experiences. I have described

Vietnamese Americans' life experiences along the trajectory of their migration history to America, which can be divided into three waves. I have presented cases representing each of these refugee waves to show the variety of politics among Vietnamese Americans regarding the communist regime in Vietnam.

Life experience with the communists, however, is only one of the two factors shaping Vietnamese Americans' politics. Another important factor is their linkages to homeland politics. Two homeland political issues are of great concern to many Vietnamese Americans today: human rights and anti-Chinese nationalism. For some Vietnamese Americans, however, homeland politics appear rather distant. These political discrepancies are again determined mainly by the individual's life experience, or the lack of it, under the communist regime in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese community in the United States is a direct product of the Vietnam War, a war that ended 40 years ago but has left behind a very complex legacy for all the parties involved, including the Vietnamese now living in America.

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