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Socialist Mobilities: Crossing New Terrains in Vietnamese Migration Histories

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This paper examines the waves of migration between Vietnam and fraternal socialist countries in the Eastern bloc from the 1950s until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Arguing for a collectivist migration framework, it compares and contrasts the various generations of architecture student migrants, their multidirectional movements, and, for most, their repatriation to Vietnam. There is no single uniform narrative of socialist mobility. Each wave was driven by different war and postwar exigencies, and the groups of migrants who left Vietnam confronted a range of unique challenges related to such factors as location, gender and assignment overseas (i.e. student or worker). This paper has two objectives: first, to decentre the West from hegemonic discussions of Vietnamese diasporas in order to advance a broader understanding of the historical development of overseas Vietnamese communities in what are now post-socialist countries; and second, to complicate the story of Vietnamese migrants in Central and Eastern Europe by arguing that past socialist mobilities are constitutive of much capitalist-driven migration today. An examination of different socialist migration trajectories and experiences of living overseas across generations provides important insights into how socioeconomic and political changes that came about in Vietnam with the fall of the Berlin Wall shaped the personal lives and professional futures of returnees and their kin. It also serves to bring the study of socialist migration histories more deeply into the epistemological and methodological fold of contemporary Vietnamese studies.

Keywords: Vietnam; socialist migration; architectural training; educational exchanges; international solidarity; Vietnamese studies

Vietnam in the world, the world in Vietnam

In February 2013, the scholar Anh Thang Dao commenced her talk at the University of California, Riverside entitled, *'Vietnamese People Don't Die': Discourses about Undocumented Vietnamese Immigrants in Poland* with an off-the-cuff remark: *Yes, there are Vietnamese people in Poland,* she joked with a smile. Although the audience chuckled, Dr Dao, who spent several years in Poland in her youth and went on to receive her PhD from an American university, was right to assume that most of the US academics and scholars of Southeast Asia present in the room might not be privy to the Cold War history of 'socialist mobilities,' as

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I term them, that preceded the formation of vibrant Vietnamese communities beyond the Iron Curtain. Of course, for Central and Eastern Europeans, this observation is hardly new or extraordinary. It is also not wholly unknown to Western Europeans, despite their greater familiarity with Vietnamese diasporic groups whose radically different migration trajectories are more akin to those of the United States (refugees, mainly from the south). Especially for Europeans living close to the once heavily militarised border with the Eastern bloc, the visible presence of this *other* group of migrants, mainly from northern Vietnam, is hard to miss today. Crossing the former frontier between Bavaria (Germany) and Plzeň (Czech Republic) at Furth im Wald, for instance, one encounters an active border market catering for German shoppers run by Vietnamese traders. Their linguistic flexibility – shifting between Vietnamese, Czech and German with an occasional smattering of Russian or English – speaks to a dynamic, transnational history of migration and trade beyond and across former Cold War divisions. And certainly for visitors to Hanoi, it is impossible to ignore the influence that socialist-era circulations of people, goods and technologies have had on the Vietnamese landscape – from languages spoken to 'friendship hospitals' built to commodities produced, consumed and traded, many of them imported before the collapse of the Soviet Union, while others are produced with imported technologies for today's emerging middle-class consumers.

As an anthropologist of Vietnam based in the United States researching the material, social and infrastructural legacies of transnational exchanges between East Germany (GDR) and Vietnam during and after the Vietnam War, I cannot help but ponder: where do socialist mobilities fit into epistemological frameworks and methodological practices for studying Vietnam and its diasporas? Why have such histories been overlooked in the rapidly expanding field of Vietnamese studies, especially as it continues to engage more critically with issues of transnationalism and with more complex and multifaceted notions of diaspora?[1] In the United States, literature on the Vietnamese diaspora focuses almost exclusively on Vietnamese Americans and their historical experiences of war, migration and resettlement. Perhaps this is to be expected, given the large numbers of Vietnamese who fled the south and settled in the United States (today totalling approximately 1.5 million). In other Western countries where Vietnamese refugees and migrants resettled, including France, Australia, Canada and West Germany, similar trends can be found among the respective populations.[2] And yet, this tendency to study Vietnamese settlements in one's own society – even in 'transnational' form (i.e. including relations with the homeland) – risks reproducing the problem of methodological nationalism insofar as it naturalises the nation-state (or two of them, for that matter) as a standard and bounded unit of analysis (Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2003).[3]

In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) where widely networked communities of overseas Vietnamese formed as a result of Cold War socialist (and post-socialist) mobilities, this methodological trend in the literature is also apparent.[4] A critical factor in the fairly limited circulation of such research, including, as Dr Dao suggested, among US-based scholars, is language: most studies of the diaspora in the former Eastern bloc and Soviet Union are not published in English for an English-speaking readership (in and beyond the United States), and translations are not always forthcoming.[5] On the other hand, those studies that *are* published in English appear more often than not in European studies or migration-focused journals (cf. Alamgir 2013, 2014; Hüwelmeier 2013a, 2013b; Zatlin 2007; Williams and Baláz 2005). Very few studies of overseas Vietnamese in CEE have been published in venues associated with Asian studies,[6] and none to date has been published in the flagship *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*. A further important reason why scholars might not position their work in relation to the study of Vietnam is that their research on Vietnamese migrants is subsumed under broader comparative examination of 'foreigners' in a particular post-socialist country (cf. Dennis and LaPorte 2011; Iglicka 2008; Behrends, Lindenberger and Poutrus 2003). Nonetheless, it is disquieting that such work continues to exist outside the canon of Vietnamese studies despite a commitment to rethinking and broadening the field. Knowledge of the diaspora thus remains strikingly bifurcated along

a Cold War-inflected, East–West axis: while 'transnational Vietnam' addresses networked flows between Vietnam and the West (and, increasingly broader Asia), the former socialist East remains largely off the grid.[7]

The extraordinary events of 1989 radically altered the lives of tens of millions of people around the world. And yet a quarter-century after the collapse of the ideological and geographical border once known as the Iron Curtain, other kinds of epistemological barriers remain. This paper seeks to advocate a more truly global approach to studying and analysing the 'Vietnamese diaspora,' to include alternative pathways of migration and repatriation linked to socialist mobilities that were constituted through *multiple temporalities (i.e. over several phases or for various periods of time) and* transnational *geographies beyond the hegemonic West*. There is no uniform story to tell here; thus, I choose to use mobilities in the plural.[8] I maintain that if we are to acquire a more complex understanding of Vietnam today – its socioeconomic and political transformations and its renewed relations, particularly with the West (including with refugees and migrants who fled after 1975), it is imperative that these voices – reflecting a range of social backgrounds – be heard. To do so would contribute to the unravelling of persistent binaries in knowledge of Vietnam's global diaspora, while recognising the unique characteristics and historical conditions that led to the formation of vastly different communities across time and space (as well as political-ideological divisions). It would also reveal important points of intersection in networks of trade and sociality, frequently tied to kinship, that span much of the globe today and have contributed historically to the marketisation of Vietnam in the postwar years through Soviet goods and Western gifts sent back to the homeland to supplement shortages and improve low standards of living (Beresford, Đặng 2000: 76). Socialist mobilities are thus revealed to be the bedrock of many capitalist forms of contemporary mobility, especially across generations, as parents transfer their technical skills, social competencies, and cosmopolitan sensibilities, as well as their political connections, to their next of kin.

Waves of emigration from Vietnam over the 70 years that have passed since its declaration of independence from France on 2 September 1945 reflect specific geopolitical histories and geographies of power bound up with colonial, imperial and national projects of modern nation building. As international relations between countries fluctuate, so too do the flows and directions of migrants. During the Cold War, for instance, several hundred thousand Vietnamese went abroad to socialist countries in organised groups under solidarity agreements as workers, students, apprentices and trainees. The collectivist nature of these mobilities encourages us to think beyond migration as the individual (family-based), self-interested initiative that the literature tends to describe.[9] The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, prompted the end of such programmes and the compulsory return of temporary migrants (though many chose to remain, if illegally). Likewise, the normalisation of diplomatic ties between the United States and Vietnam in 1995 has led to a gradual strengthening of social and economic relations between Vietnamese Americans and the homeland. The fear of return (and retaliation) that was once widespread is less tangible today as large numbers of overseas Vietnamese who fled the communist regime now travel back and forth with relative ease.

This paper focuses on socialist mobilities linked to higher education opportunities across three generations of students sent abroad to train and study between the 1950s and 1980s: postcolonial, wartime and postwar.[10] Notions of *đi Tây* (going West) to study changed radically over the course of the war and postwar years as unofficial networks of transnational trade and informal markets in Vietnam offered new economic opportunities to students. Destination countries and educational programmes – which hinged closely on diplomatic relations – also changed over time.[11] Student migrants did not intend to stay overseas; on the contrary, they were sent abroad with the objective of returning and applying their expertise to rebuilding the war-torn homeland into a modern socialist nation-state. On the other hand, for advanced socialist countries, fellowship programmes under the banner of international solidarity were a means of displaying their intellectual

and technical superiority through the transfer of ideas, skills and technologies to newly independent socialist (and socialist-friendly) states in the Third World. On completion of their studies, graduates returned with professional experience, international knowledge and a global worldview, in addition to material goods (especially for the later generation) that transformed Vietnam's social, political and economic landscape. Many of these specialists from the earlier waves of socialist migrations are still in government positions today, though as I outline at the conclusion of this paper, their hold on power has waned with the rise of a younger generation trained abroad in a new knowledge economy that, in Vietnam, is likewise shaped by the mobilities of their predecessors.

Postcolonial mobilities: studying architecture in the Soviet Union

The establishment of official diplomatic relations between the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam (DRV) and the Soviet Union in January 1950 (and, weeks later in February, with the rest of the Eastern bloc) generated the first wave of socialist mobilities across Central and Eastern Europe. As the anti-colonial war against France came to a close, with victory achieved in May 1954, officials in Hanoi sent a first group of Vietnamese students overseas to train in technical fields identified as critical to the development of a modern and independent nation-state, including engineering, chemistry, physics, architecture, mathematics and aeronautics. Other groups of students soon followed. In 1955, a cohort of approximately 30 students left for the Soviet Union. This cohort included the first class of five students who were assigned to study at the Moscow Academy of Architecture, one of whom was 19-year-old Nguyễn Trực Luyện.[12]

Nguyễn Trực Luyện did not choose his field of study, nor did he select the academic institution that granted him the fellowship. Such decisions were made by the state according to rational calculations of the anticipated need for national reconstruction, which involved estimates of how many scientists and technicians were necessary and in which highly specialised fields. It was no accident that Mr Luyện was sent abroad to study architecture, however. His professional training would continue the legacy of his father, Nguyễn Cao Luyện (1907–1987), one of Vietnam's first and most prominent architects, known for his modernist, colonial-era villas across Hanoi, including what is today the Cuban Embassy at 65 Lý Thường Kiệt Street. Nguyễn Cao Luyện's training was the product of an entirely different knowledge economy from that of his son. Educated at the Indochina Art School under the French (L'École des Beaux-arts du Việt Nam), in 1933 he travelled to France to study with Le Corbusier and Auguste Perret. A year later he returned to Hanoi to co-found a private Vietnamese architectural firm at 42 Tràng Thi Street – the first of its kind in Hanoi (Đoàn 2008). That officials chose Trực Luyện to train in the same field as his father, a product of French education, demonstrates how the postcolonial state chose to build on the technological expertise of the colonial era to advance the cause of socialist nation building, rather than dismiss such knowledge legacies on ideological grounds.

When I asked Nguyễn Trực Luyện to reflect on the differences in the overseas training in architecture that he and his father received – Cao Luyện trained in 1930s Parisian internationalism and Trực Luyện in post-Stalin Soviet modernism – he suggested there were continuities and overlap in form, but differences in theory and application. *My father was trained in an era when architecture was used to serve individual interests, while in the USSR we were trained to apply architecture to the service of the people*, he explained. Nguyễn Cao Luyện, his father, went on to apply his valuable skills to serve the revolution, however. Through his architectural contributions to the anti-French resistance (designing the Việt Minh base at Việt Bắc, for instance) and to postcolonial nation building, he came to occupy a high position in both the Party and the government, as a member of the National Assembly and Deputy of the Ministry of Architecture. Nguyễn Trực Luyện was a beneficiary of his father's legacy, as was his own son who studied architecture in Moscow be-

fore the collapse of the Soviet Union, showing how socialist mobilities could continue across generations depending on one's professional and social standing. Though a family's political connections brought them many privileges, they were not enough to secure a fellowship to study abroad, I was often told by former students: both *ân nghĩa* (the state's gratitude for contribution to the revolution) and a strong academic performance were necessary. As Mr Luyện explained, *I was chosen not because of my lineage*, – which he admits was an advantage – *but because of my high grades in school*, showing how cultural *and* political capital worked in tandem to give certain students an advantage.

The early years of the postcolonial state saw an urgent need to expand the number of technical experts in the fields of architecture and city planning to assist in the project of socialist urbanisation. According to the architect and architectural historian, Đặng Thái Hoàng, there were fewer than a dozen skilled architects in Hanoi after independence, all of whom had been trained by the French.[13] As such, students and trainees were sent overseas to architectural programmes across the Eastern bloc – including to Poland, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria – as well as to China. Nguyễn Trực Luyện spent eight years in the Soviet Union, from 1955 to 1963. He remembers the time as one of exciting changes taking place in the arts and architecture following the death of Stalin two years earlier. After Mr Luyện's arrival in Moscow (by train from Hanoi through China and across Siberia), he spent a year in an intensive language programme before relocating to Leningrad for a year to study electrical engineering. He then returned to the Academy of Architecture in Moscow, where six years later he received his degree from the Department of Civil Architecture (*kiến trúc dân dụng*). Mr Luyện's programme of study focused on housing and public works (*nhà ở và công trình công cộng*). In the first two years, he took courses on the basics of architecture, including introductions to accounting, architectural theory and world architecture (with content on the United States and other capitalist countries). Over the next three years, he delved more deeply into the topic of public housing (*nhà ở công cộng*). With his cohort and professors, he visited cities around the USSR as examples of 'old' architecture and 'new' cities built after the war. Mr Luyện completed his coursework by the end of the fifth year. His last year was spent gaining practical experience as an intern at a state design agency while writing his graduation thesis.

Life in the USSR was challenging (only a decade after the end of the Second World War), but the former students I spoke with considered living conditions better than they were in Vietnam at the time. They also reported homesickness and crowded housing. Mr Luyện, for example, lived in a dormitory room at his academy with four other Soviet students. There were few international students at the time, so he learned the language quickly. His scholarship provided him with 50 rubles a month – enough to live on and, if frugal, to save between 5 and 7 rubles. He worked on a farm during the summer to earn extra money and his internship also provided him with a small grant. There were no informal networks of trade in Soviet and Vietnamese goods at the time; these developed much later. As Beresford and Đặng (2000: 74–75) have observed, students of this generation had limited resources (saving only a few rubles a month) and could only afford small-scale purchase of goods, largely for their own consumption back home. Mr Luyện's recollections confirmed this. Before returning home, he used his savings to purchase a bicycle, radio and sewing machine – three commodities students commonly shipped home for family use. When I asked Mr Luyện about the presence of a Vietnamese market in the Soviet Union while he was overseas, he laughed and shook his head: *Not yet. At that time there was no* buôn bán *(trading of goods); we were there only to study and learn*.

Like many of his generation who studied abroad, Nguyễn Trực Luyện aspired to return to Vietnam and apply his expertise to nation building – in his case, to designing new models of social housing. Yet, the knowledge and experience he brought with him proved difficult to apply. The subtropical climate in Hanoi differed greatly from that in Russia (affecting construction techniques and durability of materials), and economic conditions did not allow most of the principles of urban planning he had learnt to be implemented. There was simply not enough money to build high-quality public housing in integrated neighbourhoods (*mi-*

crorayon) based on the Soviet ideal of one family per unit (though this was an unrealised ideal for many in the USSR). Space was another critical issue. The criterion in the USSR was 9 square metres per person. This proved too high for Vietnam, where the goal was an average of 4 square metres, according to Luyện. In reality, living space per capita was frequently much lower, given that postcolonial dwellings in Hanoi were based on collective forms of housing, such as the Nguyễn Công Trứ blocks (considered modern for the time) or the colonial villas confiscated by the state and allocated to separate households, usually with one family per room.

Despite these challenges, this cohort of students returned to Vietnam to occupy coveted government positions in the 1960s as war with the United States loomed. When Mr Luyện arrived home in 1963, he was assigned to the Division of Civil Construction Design at the Ministry of Construction, a mid-level cadre position commensurate with his training. In 1967, he was promoted to Deputy Director of Design, remaining in this post until 1987. From 1983 he served concurrently as president of the Vietnamese Association of Architecture until his retirement in 2005. His successor, who is still in post, came from the next generation of architects who were trained overseas; in this case, in Cuba during the American War years.

Wartime mobilities: studying architecture in the GDR

Though the first cohorts of architects trained abroad returned to government jobs in a period of postwar renewal (*khôi phục*) that could use their expertise, they also returned to a divided country and an escalating war, this time with the United States. As bombing commenced in 1964, another generation of architecture students was preparing to travel overseas, also by train. Their numbers, however, far exceeded previous groups, as collaborative architectural programmes expanded to academic institutions in Cuba, Romania, Hungary, Albania, and, most influentially, the GDR. Because of mounting Sino-Soviet tensions, academic exchanges with China largely ceased at this time. Only the best and the brightest in the DRV, those students thought to emulate the progressive ideals of scientific socialism, were selected for overseas study; this was a great privilege (and a relief to their families), given the protracted war that raged on. The high death toll in Hanoi due to aerial attacks made overseas study highly desirable. Moreover, from the perspective of the state, it became imperative to train – as well as protect – a new generation of young professionals and future leaders who could return to the DRV to rebuild a unified country after the end of the war.

Mr *Trần Văn* Lăng was one of the more fortunate young people of his generation.[14] Born in a border province in 1946, he did not come from a prominent family background as had Nguyễn Trực Luyện, but he proved to be a good student who worked hard and earned high grades at school. Due to his academic achievements, he was one of the few from his region selected for an overseas study programme. Mr Lăng reflected on the process that led to this golden opportunity: *While in theory, any good student could be chosen to go abroad, regardless of connections* (quân hệ), *the reality was that connections often played a role. But not always, and not in my case*. In an attempt to distribute opportunities for overseas studies more widely, the Ministry of Education awarded scholarships to promising students across the provinces of the DRV according to the number of students agreed with each Eastern bloc (or other) country. Similar to Mr Luyện's experience in the 1950s, students in the 1960s could not choose their field of study or which country they preferred. *The government decided one's destination*, Mr Lăng explained, switching from Vietnamese to German. As luck would have it, he was assigned to study in East Germany (a much coveted destination due to its perceived wealth).[15] In 1966, he set off for the College of Architecture and Civil Engineering in Weimar (now Bauhaus University), where he remained until he received his diploma in 1972.

Like their predecessors, studies were the priority for this generation of student migrants. As the war back home intensified and casualties increased, students like Mr Lăng felt emotionally compelled to focus exclu-

sively on their university work. It was their duty, he explained, not only to the country, but also to friends who had stayed behind to risk their lives on the battlefield:

> *We understood that each of us had* a *different role to play in the war. We were all working for the revolution and for victory; we could never lose sight of this while abroad. We were being trained to be the future leaders, scientists and technicians of the country. Each person had something to contribute to the war effort. Those whose paths took them to the army knew that they had a different purpose to serve. This was the same for students who studied abroad.*

Commitment to their studies was not only driven by a strong sense of solidarity with compatriots back home; it was also the directive of the state. Mr Bình, who was sent to the Soviet Union to study aeronautics, also emphasised studying as a duty during the war. Unlike Mr Lăng, Mr Bình came from a prominent line of Nghệ An revolutionaries and members of the Communist Party. The decision to send him overseas, he explained, had largely to do with the state's policy of *ân nghĩa*. Though he failed a college entrance exam in Hanoi, he was considered *ưu tiên đi nước ngoài* (priority to go overseas) because of his *lý lịch* (family background). Mr Bình took this opportunity seriously:

> *We were advised to study diligently and warned against going out to have fun* (đi chơi) *in public. The Vietnamese government did not want an image of its students enjoying themselves abroad while their schoolmates were dying on the battlefield. We were told that we would be sent home immediately if it seemed we were not serious enough about our studies*.[16]

This was not an empty threat. Mr Bình related a story that circulated widely at the time about the daughter of Lê Duẩn, General Secretary of the Party, who was caught having an affair while studying in Moscow. She was promptly sent back to Vietnam, a signal to other students that unacceptable social, including sexual, behaviour – particularly for women – would be disciplined by the state. This urban tale carried much weight with Mr Bình, who feared being sent home and the shame it would bring to his family: *These orders [not to* đi chơi*] were applied even to the highest levels*. Thus, in the GDR, Mr Lăng – fearful of the watchful eyes of his fellow students who might report back to the embassy – was careful not to be seen too often in the presence of local students.

Since there was virtually no informal Vietnamese trade network at the time (this developed more extensively in the late 1970s and 1980s),[17] there were few economic opportunities to distract students from their studies. Moreover, profiting from socialist mobilities during the war was likely to spark hostility back home. On their return, students had to be careful about displaying the material wealth and economic benefits of their studies abroad, few as they were. Like the previous generation, students received a monthly stipend from the government: Mr Lăng received 270 GDR marks per month. He recalled spending approximately 100 marks on food and 30 marks on housing (in a dormitory). He also put aside money regularly for clothing, supplies and other essential goods. The rest he saved, yet he dipped into his reserves to travel around the country on holidays (though he was not allowed to enter West Germany). Like Mr Luyện's generation, he earned extra money in the summer harvesting potatoes or strawberries. Yet he was able to save – and buy – much more than the previous generation. These were years of relative abundance in East Germany, and Mr Lăng recalled the ease with which he could buy an array of goods at the market, including salad, bananas and other foods imported from fraternal countries. At the end of his stay in 1972, he used his savings to purchase commodities to take back to Vietnam, including a radio, two bicycles and yards of fabric, all of which travelled with him on the train. Most items were kept for use in his family, with the exception of one bicycle and

some pieces of fabric, which he sold discreetly from his home to neighbours and relatives who heard he had returned and inquired about overseas goods for sale.

Like members of earlier cohorts, Mr Lăng returned to Vietnam to take up a position in the government. From 1972 to 1974, he worked at the Institute of Democratic Design under the Ministry of Construction in Hanoi. As Mr Luyện found, applying specialised knowledge acquired overseas proved challenging, but for other, more critical reasons. *Nobody listened to us*, an architect trained in the GDR in the same cohort at Mr Lăng opined. *This was a huge mistake on the part of the state. We talked and advised [how to rebuild the country], but in the end we were ordinary people with little worth, so nobody paid attention*.[18] Frustrated, this architect eventually quit his government job and went on to become an independent consultant on international projects, a move that was initially seen as imprudent by his colleagues, but proved lucrative in the long run. Mr Lăng (who like this colleague was not a Party member) had a radically different career trajectory. In 1974, he was sent to Vinh City, Nghệ An, an industrial centre demolished in the war, to work with the provincial Department of Construction as the chief translator and contributing architect on the seven-year *Wiederaufbau* (reconstruction) project by East Germany (Schwenkel 2013a). Unlike his colleagues, Mr Lăng was thus able to put his technical and linguistic skills into practice, working closely with GDR advisers to redesign and rebuild the city. His academic training in the GDR proved indispensible, as it enabled him to culturally navigate and translate very different ideas of urban planning (Schwenkel 2015). As he reflected, this time contributed in unforeseen ways to the development of his career:

> *I didn't want to go. Nghệ An? I thought, oh god. But I was young and single and had just returned from my studies in architecture and civil engineering in the GDR. So I was sent to work on the reconstruction project. When I first arrived I was astonished by the extent of the destruction from the war – the city was* hoàn toàn phẳng *(completely flattened). At first, I lived in collective housing* (*khu tập thể*) *until I was allocated an apartment in Quang Trung [microrayon built by the GDR]. My income at the time was only 93* đồng. *I never thought that I would spend the rest of my life here!*

Lăng eventually married, and he continued to work for the Department of Construction until the Ministry of Labour selected him in 1987 to return to the GDR as a *Gruppenleiter* (group leader) for a Vietnamese labour unit in a textile factory in Pausa.[19] He held this position until 1990, when the reunification of Germany brought his contract to an end. The opportunity to take up a three-year job overseas distinguished the second generation of students from the first. As the Vietnamese government negotiated a number of bilateral labour agreements with Soviet bloc countries in the 1980s (chiefly the USSR, the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Poland), trained professionals who spoke the language fluently and knew the culture intimately travelled back to their countries of study, this time by plane. A position as group leader proved to be fairly lucrative: Mr Lăng earned 850 GDR marks monthly, and needed only half that amount to live. By this time, an increase in the scale of socialist mobilities had facilitated the development of an extensive, informal trade economy between Asia and CEE as the number of Vietnamese workers and students travelling back and forth increased dramatically. Moreover, new policies allowed migrants to send goods home on a regular basis, and not just in their suitcases. Against this backdrop of new economic opportunities, Mr Lăng used his savings to send packages regularly to his family, with the intention of reselling the goods on the market – no longer only from his home. Socialist commodities soon flooded markets throughout Vietnam, mitigating shortages and helping to pull families with relatives overseas out of postwar poverty, while contributing to new forms of socioeconomic inequality between neighbours (Schwenkel 2014: 251–252).

The atmosphere in the GDR had changed significantly for Mr Lăng since the time of his studies, however. Everyday life had become more strained. Markets had a more limited selection of foodstuffs, compared to

the diversity he had enjoyed previously. The spirit of international solidarity, so strong during the war years, that had made him popular with local students and student organisations, had also diminished. Racism, as he experienced it, seemed to be on the rise as solidarity waned and competition for goods increased: for example, Mr Lăng recalled hearing the derogatory term '*Fidschis*' more often.[20] In general, growing resentment against foreigners was more tangible, particularly against the Vietnamese, whose transnational traffic in overseas goods was thought by GDR citizens to be contributing to their own mounting shortages (Zatlin 2007; Schwenkel 2014: 245–246).

Despite these growing difficulties, Mr Lăng focused on his job, which he and other group leaders described as stressful due to the constant negotiations between Vietnamese workers and GDR managers regarding illness, absenteeism, pregnancy, and complaints about taxes and the salary system. He continued to put money aside, diligently recording his monthly savings in a *Sparbuch* (savings account book). After the Berlin Wall fell and his contract was annulled, the Bundresrepublik provided him with 3 000 Deutschmarks (DM) and a return ticket home. Many of the workers in his unit chose to remain illegally. Mr Lăng used the collapse of the GDR to his economic advantage; for instance, he was able to profit when the East–West Mark exchange rate, in anticipation of reunification, dropped to 1:1 (from 5–10:1). Mr Lăng cashed in his savings at once: *When the rate changed, I converted all of my East Marks, and had a lot of money to bring back to Vietnam – almost 10 000 USD!* After returning, he invested this capital in land and construction materials, which were still difficult to acquire in Vinh at that time. He built a house and moved out of his apartment in the housing blocks soon after. For many of Mr Lăng's generation, the opportunity to first study overseas during the war and then work abroad (and engage in small-scale trade) provided access to a standard of living that had not been attainable by the first generation of Vietnamese students. The next generation, however, engaged in a range of tasks simultaneously – work, trade and study – that made overseas education even more lucrative.

Postwar mobilities: combining study with trade

By the time that Lê Quốc Huy[21] travelled to Weimar in 1983 to study architecture at the College of Architecture and Civil Engineering, patterns of socialist mobility to and from the Eastern bloc had changed considerably. 'Mutual aid' labour agreements authorised a workforce of nearly 300 000 Vietnamese to go abroad in the 1980s (Tran et al. 2010: 21), as well as hundreds of translators and *Gruppenleiter* like Mr Lăng. A complex network of cross-border trade emerged, dominated by the Vietnamese. For students, the burgeoning black market offered a range of economic possibilities to supplement their low monthly stipends and to support needy families back home. Central planning and a subsidy system had inflicted severe hardship on the Vietnamese population in the postwar years. Shortages and hunger affected much of the nation. Involvement in overseas trade could potentially propel families out of poverty to a condition of relative prosperity, with imported goods resold on the black market in Vietnam, as the example of Mr Lăng's 'care packages' above showed. As informal marketisation moved into full swing in the socialist world, the era of total commitment to one's studies became a relic of the past.

The shift in priorities from education to trade has been noted in the literature. Beresford and Đặng (2000: 95), for instance, have observed that earlier generations of students *saw study as their main purpose, while getting rich was only incidental… [F]rom the mid-1980s, studying became the minor activity and a rather large number scarcely studied at all, but plunged straight into trading*. While certainly not true of all students, this pattern represents the *Geist* of the time, especially as employment prospects after return seemed less promising than before. Mr Lăng summed up the changed attitude of migrants that he witnessed over two generations of socialist mobilities: in the later years, going abroad meant '*mehr Sachen und mehr Geld*'

(more stuff and more money). Economic, rather than political connections (or, ideally, both) became a way for 'ordinary people of little worth,' as the disgruntled architect referred to himself, to secure upward mobility.

In the 1980s, there was less pressure from the state to publicly demonstrate student excellence than there had been during the French and American war years (that is, for both of the earlier generations). Rather, pressure now came from families to provide them with support, as contract workers with much higher earnings were doing. Yet monthly grants were not enough for students to save money and send regular packages of re-saleable goods home. Consequently, they found creative ways of supplementing their stipends by tapping into the trade networks that were developing around them. Nguyễn Thị Hoa,[22] for example, studied veterinary medicine in the Soviet Union from 1981 to 1987. In her free time, she and her Vietnamese friends earned money by making clothes to sell to Russians on the black market. Gradually, they expanded their social networks to include other groups of Vietnamese migrants (workers) and began to participate in the transnational trade in blue jeans – a highly desirable commodity purchased in Thailand and shipped to Russia *via* Vietnam. With her additional earnings, Ms Hoa purchased a range of goods to send home to her family who, in turn, sold them for cash on the market. While her studies remained important, she was deeply committed to securing a decent living for her struggling family back home.

Unlike previous generations, student migrants in the 1980s returned to a radically different playing field after the introduction of economic reforms, referred to as *Đổi mới*, in 1986. As a result, many highly trained scientists and technicians came to occupy an intermediate position in society, betwixt and between two knowledge economies. The specialised training that Vietnamese students had received in a centrally planned system of socialist education was suddenly obsolete and deemed incompatible with a global market economy. Ms Hoa, for example, faced unemployment at home: the state had no use for her expertise in collective husbandry as cooperatives were dismantled and livestock returned to private family ownership. Her skills for building a modern socialist society had no place in a market-driven economy that failed to recognise her cultural capital and university degree (Schwenkel 2013b: 60). Lê Quốc Huy, on the other hand, who received his degree in architecture from Weimar, was more fortunate. He returned to a position at the University of Civil Engineering, where he continues to teach today. And yet, like Ms Hoa, who went on to work with international non-governmental organisations, Mr Huy expanded his profile to work with multilateral institutions, such as UNESCO, on urban conservation projects. While his training proved sufficiently flexible for him to update and apply his skills to new market trends (such as his current collaboration with German architects on green urbanisation), for Ms Hoa, her training proved largely useless. Indeed, unlike earlier cohorts of students trained abroad, few specialists of her generation, now middle aged, work in the fields in which they received their overseas qualifications.

Socialist and post-socialist mobilities: expanding Vietnamese diaspora studies

The three waves of student migrations outlined above – postcolonial, wartime and postwar – reveal subtle shifts in the historical conditions of socialist nation building and state formation following Vietnam's independence from France through to the end of the Cold War. There were significant differences in the advantages of an overseas education for each generation of Vietnamese students. The first generation enjoyed sociopolitical stability (i.e. state employment) but generally lacked economic mobility. They did, however, attain some limited material gains over others because of the commodities they brought back for household use. Many in the second generation were able to achieve both sociopolitical stability and economic mobility, particularly for repeat migrants who travelled overseas again in higher management positions in the 1980s. The last generation experienced greater economic gains than they did sociopolitical mobility. As Vietnam's

political economy transformed radically with *Đổi mới* and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the value of knowledge followed suit. The last generation of Vietnamese students in socialist countries felt these changes most acutely after they returned home to find their degrees devalued, with little relevance to a market-oriented society.

Over the past 25 years, Vietnam has seen broad changes in its patterns of student migration, with the internationalisation of its higher education system. The collectivist framework for such mobilities – from bilateral solidarity agreements to group travel and joint study – has largely disappeared, replaced by individual models of 'choice.' Scholarship opportunities in a market-driven economy have likewise shifted remarkably (now spanning Europe and Asia), as have the disciplines studied. Economics and international relations remain two of the most popular fields of study at home and abroad. Business administration degrees (including MBAs) have also risen to the top of the list. While the emphasis on 'educational and cultural exchange' remains the same (even the Fulbright programme uses this phrase), the ideological objectives underpinning international support have changed radically. Today, fellowships represent a way of training a new generation of Vietnamese professionals and upcoming leaders in the merits and workings of global capitalism, *not* socialist internationalism. In this era of *post*-socialist mobilities, families aspire to send their children to English-speaking countries like Australia, Singapore, the United States and the United Kingdom – often at their own expense. These returnees are slowly changing the political landscape of Vietnam as they move into state (and non-state) positions once occupied by cadres trained in the Soviet Union or elsewhere. English, not Russian, is now the international *lingua franca*.

There are certain continuities between socialist and post-socialist mobilities, however. While a post-reform knowledge economy has reconfigured education-based migration, it has done so by building on the legacies of mobilities in the socialist era. Shifts in international education are not about a rejection or abandonment of the past, which was also true for the postcolonial state building on its colonial knowledge foundation. On the contrary, for many young people, international education would not be possible without the skills, knowledge and credentials of their parents, which derive from their diverse experiences of studying (or working) in the Eastern bloc. Mr Dũng, for example, studied chemical engineering in East Germany from 1969 to 1975. He then returned to work as a *Gruppenleiter* in a tannery from 1987 to 1990. His daughter now studies architecture in Dresden, not far from his *alma mater* in Leipzig. Ms Vân, a former contract worker who married her East German supervisor, sent her two children to the United States. So did Mr Sơn, who received his degree in nuclear physics from Czechoslovakia. Likewise, Mr Minh, who studied economics in Kiev, sent his son to London to study finance. Most of these students received scholarships; their families would be considered middle class, but not wealthy. Yet their parents do have the advantage of a broader worldview and a cosmopolitan sensibility – social capital that allows their children to move across national and cultural borders with more ease. The integration of socialist mobilities into the broader canon of Vietnamese studies thus becomes essential to expanding the horizons of the discipline for it reveals a critical point of intersection in the histories of Vietnamese migration across the globe: the ways in which migrants and their families (including returnees) mobilise their economic and social resources to obtain better educational and professional opportunities for future generations.

Notes

[1] See, for example, 2013 (vol. 7, no. 3) special issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*: 'Alternative Voices and Histories of the Vietnamese Diaspora.'

[2] Examples include Bui (2003) and Kien (2012) on Germany, Bousquet (1991) on France, Thomas (1999) and Carruthers (2008) on Australia, Dorais and Richard (2007) and Dorais (2009) on Canada.

[3] As a result, movements between and among diasporic groups, where people, goods, ideas and technologies cross *multiply constituted borders* (national, cultural, political and economic), typically remain beyond the scope of most research identified as 'transnational.' For an exception, see Nyíri (2002).

[4] Though this literature provides less of a postcolonial perspective than is found in Nguyen (2012) on the US and Kien (2012) on Germany.

[5] For example, Teresa Halik's (2006) major ten-year study of Vietnamese migrants in Poland.

[6] For exceptions, see Hardy (2002) and Schwenkel (2014), neither of whom is based in CEE.

[7] As do Vietnamese transnational engagements with socialist Africa and Latin America (namely, Cuba).

[8] Socialist mobilities were also multidirectional, especially in the postwar years as technical experts from 'fraternal' socialist countries travelled to Vietnam to assist with postwar reconstruction (Schwenkel 2013a).

[9] I thank the reviewer for encouraging me to develop this point.

[10] Research for this paper was conducted in Hanoi and Vinh City in 2006 and from 2010 to 2012.

[11] For example, China played an important role in training young Vietnamese architects in the 1950s and 1960s until tensions with the Soviet Union (resulting in the Sino-Soviet split) mounted.

[12] This section is based on interviews with Nguyễn Trực Luyện in Hanoi in July and December 2011.

[13] Interview with Đặng Thái Hoàng, June 2010, Hanoi; also cited in Logan (2000: 193).

[14] A pseudonym. This section is based on interviews with Mr Lăng in Vinh City in 2006, 2010 and 2011.

[15] On the GDR as a 'paradise' for Vietnamese students and migrant labourers, see Schwenkel (2014: 248).

[16] Interview with Mr Bình, July 2011, Vinh City.

[17] As Beresford and Đặng (2000: 75) observed, *Thus the Vietnamese market before 1975 was characterised by circulation, on an extremely limited scale, of goods brought home from the socialist countries in the baggage of individuals*.

[18] Interview with architect, June 2012, Hanoi.

[19] Group leaders were responsible for a working unit of Vietnamese labourers in an East German enterprise or factory. They served as a mediator between workers and management to translate, explain and implement labour policy and disciplinary measures, as well as assisting workers in times of need (such as illness). Lăng's work unit began with 25 workers and increased to 60, one-third of whom were women. On Vietnamese contract workers in the GDR and their return to Vietnam, see Schwenkel (2014).

[20] Though it actually means 'Fijians,' the term was used as a racist epithet for Asians in the GDR.

[21] A pseudonym.

[22] A pseudonym.

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