

CURRENCIES OF IMAGINATION: CHANNELING MONEY AND CHASING
MOBILITY IN VIETNAMESE REMITTANCE ECONOMIES

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IN VIETNAMESE REMITTANCE ECONOMIES

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In Vietnam, international remittances are significant, estimated at around seven billion dollars annually or 11.5% of GDP. Yet beyond capital transfer, diasporic remittance economies are key nodes to witnessing an unfolding transformation of Vietnamese society through the extension of imaginations, identities, and ontological possibilities that accompany them. In this dissertation I examine the role of remittance gifting in mediating transnational kinship networks dispersed by exile and migration.

Drawing on twenty months of fieldwork in Vietnam, France, and the United States, I argue that long distance international gift exchanges in the neoliberal political economy juxtapose the mobility of remittance financial flows against the confines of state bound bodies. In this contradiction is revealed a creative space for emergent social imaginaries that disrupt local structures and contingencies of desire and expectation. Furthermore, the particular characteristics of remittance gift monetary mediums and channels in a global economy, including transnational mobility and exchangeable value, affect the relationships, aspirations, and identities of the exchange participants. I trace a genealogy of how this phenomenon has shifted through changing remittance forms and transfer channels, from material and black market forms to formal bank and money service transfers. Significant transformations in the social and institutional relations among givers, receivers, and remittance facilitators accompany each of

these shifts, illustrating that the socio-cultural work of remittances extends far beyond the economic realm they are usually consigned to.

Remittance economies link participants to alternative social terrains through the intimacies of exchange. They impact recipients through the transfer of capital, but also via the interactions of familiar bodies and unfamiliar subjectivities. The imaginaries emerging from remittance exchange offer insight into not only the already widely examined processes of collective diaspora identity formation, but also the identities of those who never left, yet whose spatial and social identities and aspirations are inevitably expanded, challenged, and emplaced by their contingency on and imagined identification with the diasporic Other. The classic question of the gift's social role in anthropology is thus revisited in a globalized world in which the gift's long distance mobility transforms its representations and significance among the networks that exchange and encounter it.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ivan Victor Small was born on October 27, 1972 in Carbondale, Illinois. At the age of one he took his first trip to Vietnam, where he lived for half a year in Saigon. It would be many years before he would return for a family visit in 1993, living in New Jersey, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Virginia, Massachusetts, and the United Kingdom during the time in between. After further personal, educational, and professional meanders in Europe, Asia, and North America, Ivan arrived at Cornell University in 2004 to pursue doctoral studies that would take him back to Vietnam once again for fieldwork between 2007 and 2009.

Ivan holds a Bachelors degree in History from Boston College, and a Masters degree in International Affairs from Columbia University. Ivan will be a postdoctoral research scholar at the University of California, Irvine starting in September 2012.

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Chapter One

Introduction: Exchange and Spectres of the Other

The thematic departure point of this dissertation is remittances: most commonly understood as financial and social capital sent by diasporic subjects back to families and home communities of origin. Remittance economies have become a topic of widespread interest among public policy circles over the last decade. Starting at the turn of the 21st century as governments and international organizations became paradoxically both interested and concerned in transnational flows of capital among ethnic communities as a potential source of not only grassroots development aid, but also terrorist financing (Ratha 2005, ADB 2005, Hernandez-Coutin 2006, Cirasino 2008, et al). Since 2001 studies on the topic have abounded. Increased policy attention to and tracking of remittances generally exaggerated annual quantitative increases over the last decade, creating a silver bullet bubble of sorts with inflated hopes for global development and poverty reduction. Remittances and their direct infusion of capital into local communities were widely hailed as a promising alternative to failed overseas development aid distribution schemes. More recently, reportage on remittances have pointed to the negative effects of the global economic downturn on communities that have become dependent on migrant incomes. Meanwhile, a small but steady chorus of cautionary critics has warned about the social costs of migration and the dangers of promoting remittance led development schemes (D’Emilio 2007 et al.). Overall, remittances as an economic consideration are a topic of significant policy interest and intervention, particularly among development economists.¹

¹ A joint conference in Manila in September 2005 sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme and the Asian Development Bank, among others, outlined prevalent policy perspectives on remittances in a statement on

As an anthropologist, I find the issue of remittances compelling, and deserving of focused analytical attention, but from perhaps a slightly different social angle that opens up a host of research tangents. Remittance economies offer an entrée into a mélange of socio-cultural questions and phenomena. At the heart of these issues is the concept of exchange. For remittances, despite the etymology of the word, are never a mere one-way remission of money, but an exchange between parties in which encounters between selves and others become central to emergent mobile subjectivities, fluid identities, shifting expectations, and futural aspirations. The discipline of economic anthropology has always been cognizant of and interested in analyzing the multiple facets of social interactions that occur within a broader framework of “substantive economies” (Polanyi 1968). In particular there has been a rich genealogy of gifting analysis, often traced back to anthropologist Marcel Mauss, from which this dissertation will draw upon and contribute to.

Yet remittances also highlight a spatial and fetishistic material dimension in which the characteristics of the exchange medium [money and other gifts], including their origins and destinations, come to partially define the relationship between givers and receivers. The international and neoliberal contexts of many remittance economies juxtapose the mobility of financial flows against the confines that “citizen” bodies experienced in contemporary global market economies and bounded nation states. A resultant mobile gaze extends the margins of what is normative and imaginable for many remittance recipients, linking them to alternative social terrains through the intimacies of exchange. In the process, new hopes, possibilities, and

the rationale for the conference: “The *economic* power of migrant remittances, as a source of capital and support, is affecting millions of households around the world. In Asia, which accounts for more than half of the world's migrants...remittances have helped address the most basic needs of migrants' families and their communities. The challenge now rests in further transforming the potential of remittances into a sustainable input to poverty alleviation and development efforts.”

ontological horizons are apprehended, but as we will see, rarely fully achieved or satisfied.

Remittances, therefore, can be a disgruntling and unpredictable force of anticipatory unrest.

For this study, I conducted research in Vietnam. With remittances at 6.8 billion dollars a year and accounting for 11.2% of GDP (IFAD 2008), Vietnam is one of the largest aggregate remittance receiving countries in Southeast Asia, just after the Philippines.² Unlike the Philippines and many other remittance receiving countries, however, most Vietnamese migrants have the exceptional status of being displaced abroad as refugees. Following the end of the Vietnamese civil war in 1975, a mass exodus of refugees ensued. This exodus continued by foot, boat, and plane until the 1990s, with a continued trickle to the present day. For years, Vietnamese exiles set up communities in countries willing to accept them such as the United States, France, Canada, and Australia. Most remembered the families and friends they had left behind, and a reverse trickle of material remittances mailed in boxes that could be used by recipients for subsistence or traded on the market in Vietnam ensued. Material items from the West also contributed to a growing nostalgia economy (Dang 2000), at times manipulated for political ends (Thomas 1999), as will be discussed at further length in this dissertation. In the 1990s, as the socialist government of Vietnam began to re-engage politically and economically with many of its former Cold War adversaries, some of these refugees began to return to the homes from which they had been displaced. Remittances began to take more financial forms, as banking and financial institutions emerged to facilitate both transfers and savings. For the most part, however, remittance transfers remain below the official radar. A strong reliance on informal and black market transfer services, as well as personal social networks for delivery, means that at least half of remittances do not flow through formal financial channels that can be quantitatively tracked.

² As a percentage of GDP, Laos is the largest remittance recipient in Southeast Asia.

How, or why, remittances can or should be tracked and “productively” invested in communities of origin is the subject of much policy analysis and debate. This dissertation, however, focuses on the social dimensions of remittance economies. While there is increasing awareness of “social remittances” by analysts, categorically defined by one as “the transfer of ideas, skills, and knowledge” from diasporic subjects back to home communities, the epistemic framework remains the same—emphasizing North/South developed/underdeveloped dichotomies and teleologies in the interest of “development” and therefore primarily concerned with measuring and harnessing the use value of the migrant gift. If the anthropological gifting literature is of any use to us, however, it is that gifts aspire to reciprocity—gifts are always, already a return or returned. Whether reciprocal symmetry is achieved is another question, and one that this study will closely examine. Reciprocity assumes understanding and recognition, and therefore some mutual relationality between givers and receivers.

The Vietnamese remittance exchange participant is interesting therefore for this precise reason. Vietnamese migrants, fleeing as refugees from a devastated war torn society experimenting with a command socialist economy in the 1970s and 80s, are only relatively recently returning to a country that has dramatically transformed during their absence, but with which they had always retained links and influence from exile through various forms of gifts and remittances. Since *Đổi Mới* [Renovation] economic reforms after 1986, Vietnam has steadily integrated with a global capitalist economy, all but abandoning its socialist economic experiment from which so many refugees fled. The symbols of communism nonetheless remain strong, as a one-party state clings to the legacy of the revolution to maintain legitimacy and support from its populace. At the same time the spectre of an alternative, South Vietnamese modernity preceding and perhaps succeeding socialism and retained in scattered diasporic fragments haunts the

hypotheticals of a national historical narrative increasingly challenged as the state re-engages with an often politically averse diaspora (P Taylor 2001). The remittance relationship, in its negotiation of this medley of memories and symbols, continually confronts the gaps in understanding and difference—differences that were always present but have been revealed more apparent as a result of the long historical, political, social, and mnemonic divide encountered by the exchange participants. It is in this space of conscious and revealed difference that new forms of imagination and agency are born and bred, along with their resultant socio-cultural forms and influences.

In the following chapters, I will examine the narratives, experiences, observations, and interpretations of various remittance economy participants in an attempt to understand the effect and affect of exchange on social and familial relationships as well as personal and collective notions of past, present, and future identities and aspirations. I examine the broader economy of imaginations entangled with remittances, in order to reconsider the viability of the remittance gift as we generally understand it. To do so, I draw on twenty months of field research conducted while based in Ho Chi Minh City / Saigon, Vietnam's largest city located in the south—from which a significant proportion of the Vietnamese diaspora left, and through which one third of remittances to Vietnam flow (Pfau & Long 2008). I also draw on fieldwork conducted in secondary Vietnamese sites, including Vietnam's south central coast, the Mekong Delta, and also compare these southern cases with a short-term migrant labor remittance community in northern Vietnam. Fieldwork was also conducted among remittance sending communities in California in the United States. Supplementary historical archive and public policy research was conducted in Aix-en-Provence, France and Hanoi, Vietnam—relevant observations and findings from which

will also be presented and discussed. I begin then with a brief overview of migration and remittances in Vietnam.

Migration and the Vietnamese Diaspora

The Vietnamese diaspora is different than that of many other overseas communities, primarily because of the refugee nature of the majority of the population that left following the aftermath of the Vietnam War. There is a long history, however, of Vietnamese migrations abroad, and a tendency in contemporary Vietnamese historiography to include them in a continuous narrative highlighting their contributions to the homeland. *Kiều Bào và Quê Hương*, a publication of the Vietnamese government's Committee on Overseas Vietnamese [*Ủy ban về Người Việt Nam ở Nước Ngoài*], is a 966 page accounting of various overseas Vietnamese heroes and their contributions to the homeland from colonial times [1887-1945] to present.³ The opportunity to travel, work, or study overseas gave many Vietnamese a new perspective on their homeland as well as economic and political relations of inequity vis-à-vis Europe and other core economic countries. Among many nationalists and anti-colonial activists during the colonial period, there was a belief that the attainment of knowledge and skills abroad were the best hope for eventually overcoming French rule. Ta Thu Thau, a Vietnamese Trotskyite leader in the 1920s, is quoted in an address to a group of students leaving Vietnam for Marseille in 1927 as saying:

“We students must pick up and conquer the education that we are refused in our country...Do you know my dear friends that at each ship departure, some young Annamites who have neither relatives nor friends aboard abandon their work in order to be present at the pier? They inform themselves of the number of those leaving and their joy rises with the number of emigrants...Those compatriots who thus accompanied us at the departure represents Annam for us, and their hopes are those of the fatherland.”⁴

³ *Kieu Bao va Que Huong*, Uy Ban Nguoi Viet o Nuoc Ngoai: Ho Chi Minh City (2006).

⁴ In McConnell, Scott (1989). *Leftward Journey: The Education of Vietnamese Students in France, 1919-1939*.

The young Annamites “at the pier” illustrate that migration affects not only those who go abroad, but significantly influence the imaginings and social worlds of those who stay behind.⁵ Other historical migrants, including 100,000 Vietnamese soldiers sent to the Western Front to support the French Empire in World War I against Germany, have had significant cultural and social impacts upon returning and reintegrating into Vietnam, as suggested by Kim Loan Hill and Tran Khe Nu.⁶ This fact has never been lost on those holding the reins of state power, who have frequently been concerned about the effects of migratory imaginings on social stability at “home”. During the First World War the French government closely monitored the activities and thinking of overseas Vietnamese serving in Europe, as evidenced by intercepted letters sent home found in the overseas archives. Some of the dangerous ideas and materials monitored and commented upon by French Surete monitors include pornographic images and accounts of French prostitutes by Vietnamese soldiers. In a 1917 report, one French official expressed his concerns about the effect of the circulation of such images on the prestige of France in the colonies:

“If the spirit of our protégés is generally good, as for their private conduct, insofar as we would desire to hold intact the prestige of the European, there is left much to be desired. Our morality, admittedly, lends itself to their natural lewdness. Prostitution in the big cities offers carnal pleasures that are all the more tantalizing and often more affordable than in the colonies and offer incomparable comforts. The arrivals do not tarry with their praise, as illustrated with great indecency by postcards on which one continues to find nudes in many of the Indochinese battalions, with the sacramental phrase ‘there isn’t anything of beauty, of interest here, except that.’”⁷

⁵ the localized social impacts of broader “cultures of migration” have been explored by various scholars including Cohen & Sirkeci (2011).

⁶ see Hill, Kim Loan (2011). *Coolies into Rebels: Impact of World War I on French Indochina*. Paris: Les Indes Savantes, and Tran Khe Nu, Bulletin du Centre d’histoire de la France Contemporaine (Universite de Nanterre), examining the impact of returning Indochinese soldiers serving in Europe during World War I.

⁷ R. Lacombe, l’interprete stagiaire, charge du controle; Marseilles 6 Octobre 1917 (CAOM Fonds Ministeriels Indo/NF/263 Archives d’Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence France).

French original: “Si l’esprit de nos protégés est generalement bon; leur conduire privee, telle que nous la souhaiterions ici pour garder intact au Indochine le prestige de l’Europeene, laisse de plus en plus a desirer. Nos moeurs il faut bien le reconnaitre, ce pretent admirablement a leur lubricite naturelle. La prostitution dans les grands villes leur offer des plaisirs charnels qui sont d’autant plus goutes que les prix en sont souvent inferieure a ceux de la

For a colonial subject to travel to the “motherland”, and relate back home, via the exposed publicity of a postcard⁸, that there was nothing of interest to be found there but their naked prostitutes—“*there isn't anything of beauty, of interest here, except that*”—was a dangerous form of sacrilege that threatened to demystify the allure of the center of colonial power. The maintenance and control of such mystique, as observed in other places in colonial Southeast Asia such as Indonesia, where officials maintained strict control over who could wear western clothes and speak the Dutch language (Siegel 1997), was deemed important for effective French rule over Indochina. Maintaining respect for French customs and traditions in the Indochina colonies was an integral part of the colonial strategy for effective governance. Clearly, official anxieties over dangerous forms of “social remittances” are not limited to the present.

There is much historical precedent, therefore, for the transnational contributions and influences of overseas Vietnamese on their homeland—Ho Chi Minh, the communist leader who spent thirty years in Europe, Africa, North America, and Asia before returning home to lead the revolution, has sometimes been referred to by the Vietnamese state as a celebrated example of an overseas Vietnamese individual returning to aid the homeland through contacts, skills, and perspectives gained abroad. Yet the majority [~3/4] of the current 3.2 million strong Vietnamese diaspora, spread through 94 countries and territories,⁹ left under quite different political and historical circumstances in the weeks leading up to and many years following the end of the

colonie et que le confort toujours pour eux incomparable. Les arrivants ne tarrissent pas d'eleges aux ce qu'illustrent avec une grande indecene les cartes postales et l'on continue a trouver sur les nudites qui viennent nombreuses des bataillons indochinois, la phrase sacramentelle 'il n'y rien de beau, de joli, d'interessant ici si ce n'est ca.'”

⁸ Jacques Derrida (1987) discusses the potentially threatening and destabilizing nature of communication via the open nature of the postcard, which can “fall into all hands...an open letter in which the secret appears, but indecipherably.”

⁹ Vietnam News 9/21/07. “Vietnamese Abroad Focus of New Scheme”

Vietnam War and reunification of Vietnam on April 30, 1975 under the Communist leadership in Hanoi. For most of them, Ho Chi Minh does not typify the diaspora experience.

Categories of “Migrants”

Sociologist Ruben Rumbaut (1996) presents a descriptive taxonomy of this post-1975 exodus. Rumbaut describes three major waves of Vietnamese post-war refugees. On April 30th, 1975, Saigon fell to North Vietnamese Communist forces, ending the American/Vietnam War and re-uniting a country divided along Cold War political lines in 1954. A mass refugee exodus ensued, actually beginning in the weeks before the final fall. This first wave of refugees was mostly "high risk" government and military officials, comprising many of the elite of South Vietnamese society.

Compared to the first wave of refugees, who were highly educated¹⁰ and often airlifted directly to the United States in 1975, the second wave [1977-1985] represented a somewhat different make-up. Facing persecution, often forced re-education, repercussions from Vietnam's 1979 border war with China, as well as dire economic conditions and resettlement to “new economic zones”, hundreds of thousands left Vietnam in rickety wooden boats seeking refuge in places like Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, later moving on to resettle in countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada. Thousands perished due to starvation, dehydration, and drowning, while even those who made it faced attack, robbery, and rape by pirates who preyed on the helpless refugee boats. About half of the second wave held white-collar jobs, and represented a broad range of backgrounds, including urban and rural residents, and Chinese-Vietnamese.

A third wave, from 1985, represented many more rural and less educated people, Chinese-Vietnamese, and Amerasians, as well as former South Vietnamese officials released

¹⁰ averaging 9.4 years of education, the majority holding white-collar jobs in Vietnam.

from re-education camps and their family members. In the United States the establishment of the Orderly Departure Program [ODP] in 1979 and Humanitarian Operation [HO] in 1989,¹¹ as well as the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987, allowed for the direct departure of qualifying Vietnamese refugees to camps in third countries, such as the Philippines and Malaysia, where they would stay for a period of time before moving on to permanent resettlement.

In 1995, western countries sought a comprehensive solution with the goal of a permanent end to the Indochinese refugee crisis that had gone on since 1975. Refugees in existing camps were either screened in or out—those who were screened out were repatriated, mostly voluntarily, but a large minority involuntarily. There has also been a smaller, but continuous, flow of immigrants from Vietnam mostly to join families who had already left.

As refugees were resettled, there was a widespread phenomenon in the United States of secondary migration in which Vietnamese moved away from areas of first settlement. Many had been initially placed in rather remote regions under the auspices of an intentional “dispersal” policy to distribute new Indochinese refugees throughout the United States, rather than allowing the formation of ethnic nodes. Finding themselves culturally, socially, economically, and geographically isolated, many Vietnamese chose to eventually move to new population centers where they could [re-]form ethnic communities and support networks. Topping the list of Vietnamese resettlement nodes in the U.S. are Orange County [California], followed by San Jose [California], Houston [Texas], and Falls Church [Virginia]. Already by 1980, 45% of the 1975 arrivals to the U.S. lived in a state other than the one where they had originally been sent. California is a particular state of preference, accounting for roughly 40% of the Vietnamese American population, although Texas with 12% is becoming an increasingly attractive alternative as many Vietnamese seek new familiar warm weather community nodes

¹¹ Segal (2002). *A Framework for Immigration: Asians in the United States*.

with lower costs of living and real estate. These population nodes have been further reinforced in the last generation by continuing primary and secondary migration. Sociology research consistent with policy concerns about cultural adaptation has suggested that the re-establishment of kinship networks through such secondary migration processes has increased the economic success rate of such former refugees (Haines 2002, Zhou & Bankston 1998). In France, Canada, and Australia, Vietnamese have established communities near metropolitan areas such as Paris, Toronto, and Sydney.

As a diaspora population, Vietnamese refugees co-exist under a broader categorical umbrella of overseas Vietnamese populations, as will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Seven. The term “*Người Việt Nam ở Nước Ngoài*” is broadly applied by the Vietnamese government to all Vietnamese living overseas. A more popular term is “*Việt Kiều*”, the most common reference to Vietnamese resettled overseas although ironically the origins of the word suggest a state of temporary sojourning rather than permanent immigration. Historian Douglas Pike attests that the word “*Việt Kiều*” has been in use since the nineteenth century, and was used in both former republican [South] Vietnam and socialist Vietnam to refer to Vietnamese living in foreign countries (Pike 1998). The term is itself of Sino-Vietnamese origin, referencing a “Việt” ethnic group “overseas” [*Kiêu / Qiao*] whose gaze nonetheless remains fixed on a homeland to which one imagines and hopes for a return.

Besides the pre-1975 migrants and post-1975 refugees already discussed, a third broad sub-category of *Việt Kiều* might be applied to socialist era migrations to the eastern bloc, a fourth to contemporary overseas students, a fifth to contemporary migrant workers, and a sixth to migrant spouses.¹²

¹² Hernandez-Coss (2005). “The Canada-Vietnam Remittance Corridor” World Bank Working Paper 48.

During the Cold War, Vietnam was closely aligned with the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries, resulting in a significant flow of laborers to those countries. Although such socialist bloc labor contracts are now over, migratory networks as well as memories and imaginations of migrant labor journeys to Russia and Eastern Europe linger. Acclaimed fiction author Duong Thu Huong evokes the imagined experiences of a Vietnamese worker of this era, Hang, in *Paradise of the Blind*, contemplating her positionality and fate in an icy Russian landscape.

“You had to think to survive, to feed your loved ones, to hustle for a day’s wages sharecropping or sweeping on a train. You had to think too of the life that stretched out ahead, the pain that still waited for you, of a future as obscure and unfathomable as sea fog...to be twenty years old and see wrinkles forming on your forehead, dark circles of misery welling under your eyes. Desperate, soulful eyes. To have the eyes of a wild animal, darting about razor sharp, ready to quarrel over goods at a shop counter or scuffle in a line for food. And there was the shame, the self-loathing, in the mirror of another’s gaze. Life as one endless humiliation.” (229)

Although socialist bloc labor migration programs have ended, informal and often illegal labor networks built on geographic and social connections from that time period continue, as will be discussed in Chapter Seven. Besides laborers, many students also went to Russia and other communist countries for higher education—indeed the upper echelon of the Vietnamese academy today remains very much defined by this era of students.

In more recent years, interest in overseas study to gain a more business / capitalist skill set has grown rapidly. Bootleg copies of popular western self-help and business success books such as Robert Kiyosaki’s *Rich Dad Poor Dad* (2001) translated into Vietnamese are ubiquitous on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, where many young students aspire to study business abroad.¹³ Places like the United States, Australia, and Singapore are popular destinations for studying subjects such as business management—with a corresponding mushrooming of

¹³ A number of overseas business schools are also setting up MBA programs in Ho Chi Minh City to take advantage of this burgeoning demand, including the University of Hawaii and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

preparatory schools to prepare for language and testing skills, such as the popular *Hội Việt Mỹ* chain. One of the American foreign policy foci in Vietnam is increasing Vietnamese study abroad opportunities at U.S. institutions, with the Academy for Educational Development providing an unprecedented number of scholarships. The recent American ambassador to Vietnam,¹⁴ Michael Michalek, stated during his tenure that he intends for Vietnamese to be in the top ten foreign nationalities represented among study abroad students at U.S. universities. Ironically, this educational “aid” was lobbied for as a return on a controversial Vietnamese debt repayment scheme, in which one of the conditions of normalizing U.S. ties with Vietnam was the current regime’s repayment of 146 million dollars of debt incurred by the former U.S. supported republican regime in the south (Wells-Dang 2000).

The migrant worker population is growing with government support and incentives to push international labor migration into new opportunity regions for purposes of socioeconomic development. The Vietnamese government’s Department for Overseas Labour Management Director Nguyen Ngoc Quynh states, “on average, more than 70,000 Vietnamese workers are sent abroad annually. At the moment there are about 460,000 Vietnamese working in 40 countries and territories worldwide. These labourers send back more than U.S. \$1.6 billion every year.”¹⁵ The majority of these workers are unskilled, and employment varies by destination, from construction in the Middle East to factory work in South Korea and Malaysia. There is interest on the part of the Vietnamese government to increase the number of departing migrant laborers to reach 100,000 per year by 2015, as well as to improve their skill level. Measures to implement this include a vocational training initiative begun in 2005 under the Ministry of

¹⁴ 2007-2011.

¹⁵ Hong Thuy, “Labour Export Crucial to Viet Nam” in Vietnam News Outlook, Sept 2007, pg. 6.

Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs [MOLISA].¹⁶ The government has expressed a desire to promote a stronger export labor market in the information technology and engineering sectors, where higher returns are expected. Recent increases in overall remittances to Vietnam are probably more attributable to this growing migrant labor population than from long term resettled overseas migrants.

There is a significant bride market to places like South Korea and Taiwan, with brokers charging high transaction fees [~\$12,000] to men looking to marry Vietnamese wives. The families of the potential brides, often from the Mekong Delta, also pay fees to get their daughters into the potential selection pool. The expectation of remittances after marriage, along with a lack of cultural and linguistic familiarity in the new country, result in some situations where the new brides are unable to seek help and support in cases of abuse and sometimes trafficking. International organizations like the International Organization for Migration [IOM] have sought to address this issue through pre-departure trainings and information for Vietnamese brides, with seed support from the Korean government, while NGOs such as Action Aid, ADAPT, Oxfam, Asia Foundation and others have also emerged in the destination countries to provide protection and advocacy for the Vietnamese women's rights.¹⁷

Any overarching description of the “Vietnamese Diaspora” is clearly difficult to summarize or categorize. In total numbers, the top four countries with significant Vietnamese diaspora populations are the United States with 1.5 million¹⁸, France with 250,000, Australia with 200,000, and Canada with 150,000.¹⁹ The majority of the current \$7 billion in estimated annual international remittances to Vietnam come from these countries—64% from North

¹⁶ Vietnam News Outlook “Training the Key to Labour Export” pg. 8.

¹⁷ IOM presentation by Andrew Billo, Program Officer, Ho Chi Minh City, 5/07.

¹⁸ American Community Survey (2005).

¹⁹ Data from the Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs, 2007.

America alone (Pfau & Long 2008), in which the diaspora is largely characterized by post-1975 refugees whose patterns of international resettlement are usually permanent and long term.

Definitions of Remittances

Dang Nguyen Anh, a sociologist at the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences in Hanoi who has conducted research on the development impact of internal and international remittances, makes the case that the term “remittances” covers a range of categories: 1. money/gifts sent by migrants to relatives in countries of origin, 2. personal investment transfers, 3. collective transfers, and 4. charitable activities. Sociologist Luin Goldring (2004) similarly disaggregates remittances into family, collective, and investment remittances. Of course, such remittance giving patterns generally overlap and are often inter-dependent.

Remittances [*kiều hối*] in Vietnam are notoriously hard to track because of the widespread preference for informal remittance channels that emerged during the 1970s and 80s when Vietnam’s economy remained closed to much of the capitalist world. Informal remittance services, as well as asking friends or relatives who were returning to Vietnam to carry cash by hand, filled the gap left by the lack of formal financial transfer options. The long-term familiarity and established community trust in such methods continue today despite the lifting of taxes on formal remittances²⁰ and the increased availability of official banking and money transfer services such as Western Union and MoneyGram. These formal money transfer companies still cannot match the low fees and discrete delivery options offered by the informal sector, with 24-hour turn-around times, home deliveries, and fees of 1-2%. Western Union, for example, despite a widespread and quite visible distribution network of over 6000 agents in

²⁰ 5% remittance tax was lifted in 1997.

Vietnam, captured less than 5% of the remittance market in 2007.²¹ Since only 5-7% of the population have bank accounts, bank transfers are also not particularly convenient.²²

Informal remittance channels have the added benefit of keeping money below the tax radar both abroad and in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese overseas work in the informal sector, such as the nail industry, and are unlikely to fully disclose their earnings to the government: in the case of the United States, the Internal Revenue Service. In Vietnam, there has been a growth of local government *Kiêu Bào* [Overseas Compatriot] associations that target families who receive remittances for “voluntary contributions” to public works projects, resulting in reluctance among many Vietnamese to report their remittance incomes publicly. “There are two ways for money to travel to Vietnam—the legal road and the illegal road. The first is taxed, the second is not,” explained one remittance recipient. One *Kiêu Bào* organization volunteer in Saigon I interviewed told me “Many *Việt Kiều* homes²³ don’t want to let the police know about their overseas relatives or remittances. Sometimes their relatives stay in hotels so they don’t have to register with the local police. It is very difficult for us to know exactly how many houses have *Việt Kiều*.” Another described the remittance couriers: “women, often on bicycle, who deliver private [illegal] remittances to the home. They ask me not to tell anyone they delivered the money and will not tell me where they live.” Asked where remittance savings were usually kept, many respondents usually said “at home”, pointing out that the house was almost never left unattended and therefore safe.

Given the dominance of informal transfer services, current estimates of overseas remittances to Vietnam range wildly—from \$2.7 billion year, as tracked through the purely

²¹ Western Union informal market research, retrieved April 2008.

²² Trinh, Deutsche Bank Research July 2007.

²³ *Nha Viet Kieu*—general term for a household that has overseas relatives and receives remittances.

formal sector²⁴ to more recent figures of \$6.8-8 billion annually when informal channel estimates are included.²⁵ In the wake of the 2008 global recession, Vietnam's international remittance flows have flattened, although not declined.²⁶ As one man in the town of Quy Nhon who receives regular remittances from his son said in April 2009, "he is sending less than before, but he still remembers his parents. The economic situation in America is not good now, there is a lot of unemployment. He has to be careful with his money, we understand this." Yet studies have generally shown that even in periods of overseas economic decline, return remittances remain a relatively steady source of diasporic support to home communities (Yang 2005).

Remittances as business investment from the diaspora has also been growing, and although relatively small compared to other foreign investment, like personal remittances tend to be more stable and less likely to withdraw in times of fluctuating financial crises and market uncertainties. Investment remittances to Vietnam from the United States have risen steadily over the course of the past three decades, especially after the U.S lifted the economic embargo against Vietnam in 1994. According to the Vietnamese government's Committee for Overseas Vietnamese, there are currently 1,465 overseas Vietnamese companies registered in Vietnam, half from Vietnamese Americans, with total capital topping 300 million dollars.²⁷ Many of these overseas Vietnamese businesses also bring international business practices and market fashions to Vietnam, such as the popular Starbucks-like Highlands Coffee chain started by Seattle-raised Vietnamese American entrepreneur David Thai. Many overseas Vietnamese owned businesses also engage in corporate philanthropy as profits increase. The U.S.-based Vietnamese American

²⁴ Maimbo & Ratha (2003). *Remittances*. World Bank: Washington D.C.

²⁵ UN International Fund for Agricultural Development "Sending Money Home: Worldwide Remittances to Developing Countries" October 2007, Deutschebank Vietnam Economic Update January 2009.

²⁶ Deutsche Bank Vietnam Economic Update Jan 2009.

²⁷ Retrieved from Vietnam State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs, October 2007.

Entrepreneurs Association,²⁸ for example, has as one of its aims the goal of encouraging such practices. Additionally, many overseas Vietnamese serve as a source of loans or grants for business investment by relatives. These personal investment transfers increasingly take place on frequent return family visits by overseas Vietnamese. The number of overseas Vietnamese returnees is rising annually—in 1987 there were about 8,000 returnees, in 1992 the number was 87,000, in 2001 it was 360,000, in 2002, 380,000²⁹, and in 2007 over 450,000.³⁰

The last remittance categories are those of collective and charitable remittances. Generally, collective giving through official institutions, such as the Home Town Association [HTA] models in countries like Mexico where local governments encourage and often match development assistance donations from migrants, remains limited due to the mistrust of the current Vietnamese regime by many former refugees. Despite the growth of local government supported “*Kiêu Bào*” associations that seek to emulate HTAs, most report underwhelming results. The Vietnamese government actively solicits support from overseas Vietnamese communities through a variety of official and unofficial programs and policies, most noticeably the passage and distribution of Politburo Resolution 36 in March 2004 officially establishing that the overseas community is an “integral part of the Vietnamese nation.” However the reception from *Việt Kiều* community has been mixed and limited. Dr. Luong Bach Van, Chair of the Overseas Vietnamese Liaison Office in Ho Chi Minh City that oversees twenty-four district level committees and has linkages to overseas Vietnamese interest groups overseas, explained that the Vietnamese government is trying to facilitate a closer relationship with overseas Vietnamese, which compared to many other countries with diaspora populations, is admittedly not close. Efforts have taken the form of culture and information “bridging” campaigns, and are actively

²⁸ Nha Magazine, San Jose CA: October 2007.

²⁹ Data from Committee on Overseas Vietnamese, available at www.quehuong.org.vn.

³⁰ Doan Nhan Saigon 1/18/08.

emulating best practice cases from other countries such as China and Singapore for engaging with overseas diasporas. Their mission however is still relatively “new and under-funded compared to similar government supported diaspora outreach initiatives in other countries.”³¹

In a parallel vein, however, overseas Vietnamese philanthropy has been on the rise and has become increasingly visible as transnational humanitarian and development aid beyond immediate family support becomes more acceptable to both overseas Vietnamese communities and the Vietnamese government(s) at the national and local levels. An example of this trend is seen in the 2005 formation of the Vietnamese American NGO network, a coalition of over twenty member organizations primarily run by overseas Vietnamese volunteers addressing issues from education to human trafficking to public health. Vietnamese American NGOs and other collective remittance channels will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Five. Significant remittances are also directed to religious and community organizations such as temples and churches that provide charitable [*từ thiện*] outreach and disaster relief services. Collective remittance giving also takes different forms as they transition from first to second generation organizers. In such shifts, one gains insights into new identity mappings and relationalities that expand and challenge the notion of remittances as gifts.

Finally, there is an additional category of remittances that is often unmentioned and overlooked but, as discussed previously, is of significant interest to this study. This is what is often called “social remittances” (Levitt 2001, Levitt & Lamba-Nieves 2011, Sorenson 2004), including “ideas, practices, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending country communities.”³² Social remittances are often invoked in policy discussions on “grey

³¹ Interview w. Luong Bach Van, Assoc. for Relations with Overseas Vietnamese HCMC 10/2/07.

³² This definition of “social remittances” should not be confused with the terminology sometimes used by NGOs to earmark portions of remittance flows for local development projects, as in the charitable/collective remittance category defined above.

matter” and knowledge transfers: the idea that diasporic subjects learn valuable skills that can be reinvested in their home country for the purposes of development. As with other remittance categories, the emphasis here is on the sending side, often unintentionally constructing a passive recipient subject deemed to be without adequate skills or knowledge for self-advancement, and not necessarily addressing the political and economic roots of social inequality and injustice. Of course, despite analytic attempts to separately categorize social and monetary remittances, such forms and flows are intimately intertwined, as this study will emphasize.

Nonetheless the notion of “social remittances” acknowledges that migration and remittance flows are socially and culturally complicated and entangled matters. In the course of this dissertation, various ethnographic accounts will be invoked illustrating the richly textured social dimensions of all remittance and gift forms, how remittance receivers and senders relate to each other through this medium, and the space for imagination that emerges in the recessed expectations of remittance exchange. The resultant imaginaries, as we will see, are displaced into a variety of social and cultural forms, illustrating that the work of remittances extends far beyond the economic realm they are usually consigned to.

Chapter Two

Sài Gòn, Overlaid by Hồ Chí Minh [City]: Nostalgia, Desire, and Hypotheticals

Ho Chi Minh City, still commonly referred to as Saigon by local inhabitants, is the largest city in Vietnam and its economic center. Although the official population count is around six million, the actual population is closer to ten million, as internal economic migrants from around the country have descended on the city to work in the informal sector and send remittances to families in more rural areas with fewer economic opportunities.³³ Founded as a Vietnamese city in 1698 in a formerly Khmer controlled area, Saigon continued to grow as the center of the prosperous southern Vietnamese frontier region, later becoming the capital of France's only directly administered colony in Indochina.³⁴ Subjected to three centuries of economic and cultural flows from all parts of the country, region, and world, Saigon has been no stranger to new ideas and faces. Historian Keith Taylor has discussed the dynamic fluidity of Vietnamese geography and identity in the south—a region of “openness, vulnerability, possibility... [with] little sense of fixity, boundedness, orientation,”³⁵ towards which a more culturally static and homogenous north, centered around the old capital of Hanoi, often gazed with migratory and transformative desires. It was a place that for many southward migrants offered “a new version of being Vietnamese distinguished by relative freedom from the Vietnamese past and the authority justified by appeals to that past,” where one might “taste the

³³ Internal migration is severely underestimated in Vietnam, where difficulties in registration [*ho khau*] and state efforts at controlling urban growth have resulted in many migrants having to live and work illegally in the informal sector. It is estimated that over 86% of households in Vietnam receive some form of domestic remittances from family members who are internal migrants (Pfau & Long 2008).

³⁴ Saigon was the capital of the French colony of Cochinchina. The other regions of central and northern Vietnam [Annam, Tonkin], along with Cambodia and Laos, were administered as protectorates rather than direct colonies.

³⁵ Taylor “Surface Orientations” 966, 1995.

sensory and imaginary powers of unexplored terrain.”³⁶ As we will see, for many contemporary overseas Vietnamese, themselves originally from this southern region, diasporic communities abroad offer a similar de-familiarizing break with the past and reimagining of collective and individual identities vis-à-vis the Vietnamese “homeland.”

From 1954 to 1975, Saigon was the capital of the Republic of Vietnam, the southern part of what is now the unified nation-state of Vietnam, which had been divided in 1954 by the Geneva Accords at the seventeenth parallel. A hard fought war for Vietnamese independence from France had ended in 1954 with the creation of the two competing postcolonial states of the Democratic Republic of [North] Vietnam and the Republic of [South] Vietnam, with Hanoi and Saigon as their respective capitals, replacing the old royal Annamese capital of Hue in central Vietnam. A front in the Cold War, South Vietnam was allied with the United States and other western countries against its communist counterpart in North Vietnam, supported by the Soviet Union, China, and others in the socialist bloc. As the Vietnam War wore on through the 1960s and 1970s, public support in the United States for their Vietnamese ally began to wane. In 1973, the U.S. pulled out the last of its troops, leaving South Vietnam to fight the war against the communist north alone. In 1975 northern troops victoriously entered the south, as city after city began to fall, finally capturing the symbolic southern capital of Saigon on April 30, 1975, and renaming it Ho Chi Minh City.

After the war, large segments of the population were relocated to New Economic Zones, following a general policy to de-urbanize the new unified socialist nation, as well as to develop and “Vietnamize” the population of strategic frontier areas. Saigon’s population fell to a low of 3.2 million by 1984.³⁷ Through the 1970s many Saigoneses and other southerners, facing

³⁶ Taylor “Nguyen Hoang and the Beginning of Vietnam’s Southward Expansion” 64-65, in Reid (1993).

³⁷ Gainsborough (2003), Appendix A1.2.

persecution and exclusion by the new government that saw their former loyalties as traitorous, left the country illegally [*đi chui*] to seek their luck abroad. The result is a city population connected to vast extended overseas kinship networks. These networks have been partially maintained for the past thirty plus years through overseas remittances. A third of international remittances to Vietnam today are estimated to flow through the greater Ho Chi Minh City area (Pfau & Long 2008), although often en-route to extended kin further afield.

In this bustling, dynamic, noisy, ever changing and expanding city,³⁸ where congested and dusty streets full of motorcycles and increasingly cars chug out smoke and smog visibly competing with an ever transforming skyline of new high rise commercial and residential buildings, it is not difficult at all to encounter someone who has family members abroad or who receives overseas remittances. Between local government facilitated introductions, introductions through friends and colleagues, and direct inquiries, I was able to identify and interview over fifty households in Ho Chi Minh City about the remittances they receive from abroad and the relationships maintained with the relatives and friends who send them.

Nostalgia and Memory

The forms remittances have taken have varied over time, as have the relationships with the senders. Tuan, a 57 year old man living in Saigon's fourth district for over forty years, remarks "in the past subsidy era [*thời bao cấp*] it was very hard to live, hard to keep contact with family, and hard to receive money. Everything had to be secret. We'd go to the airport and wait overnight for a box. Our relatives in America would send soap, shoes, clothes—things like that, to use or sell. But there were often surprises inside, we'd have to find them. Like a \$20 bill rolled up inside the tube of toothpaste. But the authorities knew about such tricks as well—they would insert a spoke into the toothpaste for example to find the money, so such treasures always

³⁸ Ho Chi Minh City's 12% GDP growth rate is twice the national average (HCMC govt 2008).

had to be sneakier, and the bribes higher, to get past them.” Another woman told me how her relatives would sometimes seal money beneath a layer of glue on a postcard sent from overseas, while another related how money would be sewed into the recesses of gifts of clothes and shoes. “Life was so hard then, the money helped us to survive those difficult times.” At a time when receiving money from the United States was illegal, remittances from North America were often sent first through relatives in France, who would then send them on to Vietnam.

Despite the illegality of American dollars, a strong black market for them constantly resupplied through remittances continued through the 1970s and 80s. Nonetheless, the difficulty of direct cash remittances resulted in many families abroad sending market items that could be sold or exchanged for more direct subsistence needs. The exotic overseas items, intended as convertible material remittances, also took on unexpected symbolic and nostalgic meanings, becoming mnemonic signifiers to past social worlds as experienced under the capitalist “old regime” [*ché độ cũ*] now diachronically distant and synchronically inaccessible. Đàng Phong, a Vietnamese economic sociologist, described these symbolic overseas markets and their role in reinscribing imaginations and memories for Saigonese adjusting to new life worlds under the communist regime.³⁹ “*Việt Kiều* could help their relatives more easily by sending goods back rather than foreign currency, as there was a market constantly hungry for them, both financially and psychologically. In every street and market place in Saigon as well as other urban centers of the South, the places with the ‘brightest prices’ were always the shops selling goods sent back from France and the USA.”

The role of these markets in circulating imaginaries was remarkable: Đàng explains “a system of relations came into being between those who left and those who stayed... these

³⁹ Viet Kieu va Su Nhap Cuoc Voi Kinh Te Viet Nam (1999) ; “The Returning Vietnamese Diaspora: Returning and Integrating into Vietnam” (2000).

relations gave rise to a notion of the West which increasingly grew all out of proportion. The West took on the meaning of a promised land.” People selling remittance commodities in the market were described as having a “proud look on their face,” acting as “ambassadors for a civilization even higher than the civilization of reality” (Đang 2000, 188). Đang also discusses a complex medicine market that took shape during the 1970s and 80s whereby overseas remittances of western medicines—a rare commodity at the time, became traded and bartered on the market for other subsistence items (Đang 1999). Remittances of medicines and vitamins, symbolizing the health and security that the gifters wished for their recipients, circulated in a failing socialist economy under which much of the Vietnamese population lived close to poverty and sometimes starvation. Indeed, medical remittances flowing in both directions are a common feature of many migrant labor and remittance economies, illustrating the substantive human dimension of care inherent in them (Pribilisky 2008). One woman, telling me about the traditional herb medicines that she sent to her brother in the U.S., said “*Việt Kiều* give me dollars, I give them leaves!” On multiple occasions I have been asked to carry *đậu xanh*, a greenish medical oil that revives the senses through inhalation and rubbing on the temples, to friends and relatives of informants both in Vietnam and the United States, despite the widespread availability of the item in both locations. The significance of this unusual two-way symmetrical gift flow will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Following a lift of an official remittance tax in 1997, the extension of formal financial distribution channels in 2002, and Vietnam’s increasing integration with the global economy, marked by World Trade Organization accession in January 2007, long distance remittances have increasingly moved away from the material forms of the past towards more direct financial transfers. Informal distribution networks still remain popular, with many *Việt Kiều* regularly

carrying the maximum allowable amount of \$7000 U.S. dollars and thirty kilograms of baggage if not more on their bodies each time they return for distribution to direct friends and relatives. Like the “hidden” remittance forms of the past, such monies are often concealed and or sewed strategically in their clothes, to avoid prying eyes by customs officials who are feared as seeking bribes. Returnees often also carry remittances for other Vietnamese friends abroad who cannot make the trip.

Besides money, material gifts are still prized and distributed, although it is increasingly difficult to find unique gifts that would be unavailable in the Vietnamese market. Nonetheless a tax differential that inflates the prices of imported luxury goods in Vietnam, as well as a prevalence of cheap imitation copies of many commodities, means that Vietnamese appreciate many of the authentic and otherwise costly gifts that their overseas kin are able to bring back with them. Cosmetic products in particular are desired gifts from overseas. Meanwhile, other once highly valued items, such as clothes, are sometimes welcomed but at other times disdained due to temporal dis-junctures and fashion differentials. One remittance recipient in Saigon remarked to me “we like when our relatives bring gifts when they return, it shows that they remember us and who we are. But sometimes they are inappropriate, like my cousin who still thinks I am a child and gave me a teddy bear.” Another pointed out that “sometimes the gifts they bring [clothes] are not very fashionable, but we don’t tell them so or else they would be upset.” Yet at other times certain types of clothing may be valued for reasons of nostalgia and authenticity. One woman in California told me “my relatives love American military style clothes – but it is very important to them that the clothes be made in the U.S.A. This is difficult, because most clothes are made in China!” Ironically, although fashion tastes can be a point of gifting disjuncture, it is clothes that often bodily mark *Việt Kiều* and may even confuse them

with urban Saigonese in other parts of the country. Vietnamese migrants to Saigon who return to visit their rural villages are sometimes told that their change in fashion sensibilities makes them “look *Việt Kiều*.”

In another interesting case of remittances indexing nostalgia and memory, an old woman living in Saigon’s third district, whom I called Grandmother Seven [Bà Bảy], as she was the seventh child in her family, mysteriously received a one hundred dollar bill hand delivered by a man from California. It turned out the man was a friend of an ex-romance, who now lived married with children and grandchildren in California. When Bà Bảy and the ex-romance were young they had been in love and promised to be together, but her family disapproved. When war came, he went off to battle and never returned. Many years later, he was able to track down her address and send the money without a note, seemingly to indicate his remembrance of her after all these years. As for Bà Bảy, she took the money, but did not reply to the man. As she explained, “he remembers me, and that is enough.”

Remittances and Capitalism

Many remittance-receiving families in Saigon participate in a small-scale capitalist economy through capital provided by overseas relatives. They form an emerging entrepreneur middle class that has been able to enter Vietnam’s emergent capitalist economy through remittance investment infusions, but lack the political and social capital and connections to expand from small to large-scale enterprises. Very few of the informants I encountered worked for large companies or the government, rather they would often run small family businesses such as coffee shops, pool halls, or restaurants. Typically, Vietnamese I interviewed would mention ten or twenty thousand dollars being a typical business start up loan request from a relative, with no return interest and no fixed repayment date. “We pay back when we can,” explained one.

While most of these small businesses appeared to operate with marginal profit, they often provided a semi-performative appearance of work and entrepreneurship intended to satisfy overseas relatives who were sometimes grudging in their support. Sitting in one remittance recipient's household when an overseas relative from California called on speakerphone, I listened to him patiently explain the hours and nature of their coffee shop business, accounting how they used the remittance money received. The relative in California repeatedly asked how many hours a day the coffee shop was open. Although the Vietnamese family members told them it was open all the time, in actuality I only saw their shop open, like many other coffee shops, early in the morning when more people typically stop for coffee before going to work.

Yet most families I met were reluctant and sometimes defensive to acknowledge any suggestion of dependence on remittance support. They were insistent that the money received was merely small gifts and rarely admitted complete financial dependence on overseas relatives. "Their lives are hard over there, so we don't ask for money, but sometimes they send gifts to help us with larger medical, wedding, or death anniversary expenses," explained Loan, an older woman with relatives in Massachusetts. Another said proudly, "I don't need or take money from them, I can live by myself. I am old, I don't need so many things as when I was young, and now I also diet. Before I ate a lot but now I eat a little food and fruit...I don't need their help. They [overseas Vietnamese] often think that Vietnamese always ask for their money, I don't like that way of thinking." Gifts for *Tết*, or lunar New Year, however, are almost always expected, with most respondents sharing that they range from \$200-300 each year. This "small" money for *Tết* was commonly explained as spent for the purposes of "*chơi*", fun, and was not expected to be spent or invested in any serious manner. Most households I spoke with however did recognize and acknowledge the added comfort and security provided by remittances. As one elderly man

who receives monthly stipends from his son in Australia commented, “if it wasn’t for the money my son sends, I would probably have to sell lottery tickets or something in the marketplace.”

In many cases, remittances have become the normal and expected mode and medium of social relations across international kinship networks. Anh, who has been receiving a few hundred dollars occasionally from overseas relatives she has not seen for many years, said that “in the past this money was important, because times were hard. Now a few hundred dollars is not very much, and I don’t need it. But they send the money to show they remember me, and because they don’t know how else to express this anymore.” She said that sending money was an act of sending “gratitude and feelings” [*gửi trả ơn, gửi tâm long*]. For this woman it had been many years since her relatives had returned, and money had become a stand in for the social relations she remembered once having with them before they left abroad.

“Small” money [*tiền ít, tiền lẻ*] however has also in some cases become a deferred stand-in for much larger remittance gifts expected when an overseas Vietnamese returns home. Many remittance senders and recipients explained to me the enhanced financial obligations for a diasporic returnee. “I need \$10,000, at least, to visit my relatives in Vietnam”, said one San Jose man who returns to Vietnam infrequently. “It is very hard to save enough money to go, so I can only return once in a while.” One remittance recipient recalled the fun family road trips in a rented Mercedes van they would go on to Dalat [a mountain resort area] and Nha Trang [a beach town] each time his uncle returned from America, all paid for by the uncle. Yet just as much as these expansive gifts serve to reunite family kinship networks, they can also isolate them. In another case, a woman speaking of her relatives who left in 1975 from whom she’s hardly heard since, said “they’re afraid of us, they think we will beg [*xin*] for money. But we don’t need or want their money. We are just sad that they don’t have sentiment [*tình cảm*] with us anymore.”

Another Vietnamese American in San Jose explained to me that he rarely returns to Vietnam because “everyone thinks we are rich and can afford anything... they ask for everything and I have to give it to them, even the shirt off my back!” In Saigon there is a growing population of young *Việt Kiều* who have returned to Vietnam for professional work in international companies. Many of these young *Việt Kiều* however said they rarely visit their relatives in the country, often because they resent the pressure of gifting expectations. The expatriate *Việt Kiều* scene will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Six.

The obligation to express generosity upon return through personal presentations of remittance gifts reflects longer standing social expectations in Vietnam. One is reminded of Marcel Mauss’s descriptions in *The Gift* of total prestations and potlatch gifting in which the prestige of performing generosity outweighs what might be called individual rational choice decisions.⁴⁰ As Thuy, a thirty-five year old Saigonite said to me, “it is better to take all your friends to dinner and drinks and show complete generosity, and then go home and eat rice for a week, than to appear stingy in front of others.” In Vietnamese custom the inviter is always expected to pay for the invitees, with an unspoken expectation that every invitee will eventually become an inviter or else risk exclusion from the group. This can also be seen for example in the rotating credit tradition of “*hụi*.” In this system, members of a group contribute money to a central fund, with each person taking turns to borrow the total for a personal investment and then taking responsibility to pay back the pool. This is a practical community initiative in a country where access to small loans and credit is extremely difficult.⁴¹ The system largely works not because of any collateral the borrower provides, but because of the social relationships between

⁴⁰ Although, tracing some of his potlatch accounts back to Boas, one might reconsider. Boas emphasizes that a central motivation for the potlatch is the contraction of future debts and the establishment of an advanced credit system. “Thus the potlatch comes to be considered by the Indians as a means of insuring the well-being of their children if they should be left orphans while still young. It is, we might say, their life insurance” (1898, 55).

⁴¹ For more on the difficulty of accessing small credit in rural Vietnam see Barslund & Tarp (2008).

the group members that would be destroyed should someone abscond their repayment responsibilities.

What happens, however, when these close-knit social networks become dispersed through migration? In many cases of international remittances, money has been similarly “borrowed” by a relative, with the only guarantee being the familial trust relations between loaner and receiver. In general the kin relationship seems to secure some promise and intention of repayment. But in many cases, such “loans” are interpreted by both sides to be “gifts” to be repaid through other forms of favors, hospitality, or during an unforeseen future reversal of fortune. A number of remittance senders related how when they received unrealistic requests for large loans from relatives they never responded by merely saying no, but rather gave smaller sized financial gifts that did not have to re-paid. Others senders lamented about money borrowed by Vietnamese relatives, the return of which was in constant deferral and re-negotiation—straining but never breaking the social relations whose maintenance guaranteed some hope of eventual repayment.

Furthermore, the nature and origin of the gift is unclear. In many cases, remittances are not seen as merely gifts from the diasporic sender, but obligatory expressions of gratitude for favors or care previously or currently given. One man, expressing anger at a nephew who no longer remitted money to him, said the “half-breed” boy was “*xáu*”: bad, ungrateful, ugly... because he had forgotten the many things the uncle did to take care of him when growing up and abandoned by his mother in Saigon. Once the boy had escaped to the United States under the Amerasian Homecoming program, he no longer maintained contact with the family that had raised him in Vietnam. Another explained she was arrested and sent to jail for eleven months because of a relative in her family who had fled by boat, now she could not work because she

had to take care of sick elderly relatives. The money the *Việt Kiều* relative sent back from abroad, therefore, was in her eyes a justified form of payment for the suffering she underwent being left behind and support she gave allowing another to leave. Others reflected on the burden of taking care of older relatives or family situations while other siblings were able to experience freedom and new lives overseas. “Vietnamese families are difficult, there are so many people to worry about,” said one woman who had a number of Vietnamese relatives abroad. “In America, you just have to care for your parents and children, that’s it.”

The cycle of giving and asking is emboldened by a trust and assumed understanding of and empathy with the misfortunes of the Other. Yet in the long distance gifting process and with Vietnam’s rapid economic development, the situation of the Other is no longer so well understood or constant. A majority of remittance recipients explained to me that regular subsistence remittances largely ended the first time an overseas relative returned to Vietnam. On seeing that the situation for their relatives in Vietnam was not as bad as they had imagined or been told, and reflecting on their own hard work to raise money to support family left behind, remittances for many overseas Vietnamese transitioned away from regular subsistence payments. They became rather a special gift bestowed during one’s return home, maintained during in-between periods by sporadic holiday remittance gifts, or small money. At the same time technology has seemingly flattened the distance, allowing relatives to maintain regular contact through mediums such as Microsoft messenger, yahoo chat, and cheap internet telephone calling. Internet service and webcams are common features in many remittance-receiving households. One informant scrolled through the many emails from his brother in Texas, showing me the updates on his life abroad including taking the ESL exam and applying for work. Other emails from the brother checked in to see if money sent had been received. Another woman who uses

yahoo chat to talk with her son in Canada told me how exciting it was to see her grandson grow bigger every week through the webcam.

Yet while technology can give one the illusion of immediacy and direct communication, the virtual realm also offers many opportunities for misrepresentation. An internet café in Saigon is full of many women who cultivate online relationships with *Việt Kiều* and foreign men abroad. One pays by the hour for access to a computer booth, replete with webcam, earphones, and microphone. Many of the female customers at this café noticeably have multiple chat windows with different men at the same time, with the cameras strategically angled to capture attractive physical features. One woman, who let me observe her multiple chat screens, was carrying on a conversation with a *Việt Kiều* in California who wanted to marry her. She explained to him that to be with her he had to have money. The many accoutrements required for the wedding, such as a “flower wedding car” [*xe hoa*] were expensive; her nagging question being was he up to the task? Meanwhile, a similar flirtatious chat window was open with another overseas man with whom she seemed to be just beginning an acquaintance.

One Citibank official I interviewed noted that many of the people who come to the remittance window at the bank are women who receive remittances from overseas boyfriends. The illusions of identity constructed on the internet are fallible however, and beneath them there is much room for play. This is true in both directions. A common comment about *Việt Kiều* in Vietnam was “They come here pretending to be someone that they’re not. We actually know that many of them are poor over there.” Yet despite the fallibility, *Việt Kiều* are often allowed to maintain and take responsibility for their image of wealth despite changing economic circumstances in Vietnam. One Vietnamese American man visiting Saigon, who remits money to his parents and siblings in the Vietnamese countryside, remarked that a brother in Saigon who

was quite rich did not contribute anything to the family. When I asked why, he said, “because I have always been the one supporting everyone. Even though times are different now they still act as though I’m the rich one—because I live in America where money is ‘easy’.”

The rapid accumulation of wealth in Saigon during the last decade of Vietnam’s fast economic growth means that remittances, although significantly channeled to the city, represent only one flow of many. Some families have taken advantage of the capital infusion to participate in the capitalist economy as entrepreneurs. Others have used the money to send children overseas for education, building an overseas opportunity foothold. The explosion of *Hội Việt Mỹ* English training schools throughout the city is testament to this widespread desire for overseas education. Many students who study in these schools hope to prepare themselves for future educational and business opportunities overseas. Others, it has been creatively suggested, study English to try and connect to other ontologies beyond the Vietnamese life worlds they feel trapped within. 1.5 generation Vietnamese American author Linh Đinh, in the short story “!” (2004), ruminates that “as the universal language—for-now English represents...the rest of the world. English is the world.” Đinh suggests therefore the widespread fetishization of English study and usage in Vietnam “is to insist on another reality” (17). While remittance flows offer some the possibility of participating in the broader capitalist economy that is quickly enveloping them, others cling on to remittances as a subsistence or retirement income flow, conserving older and familiar lifestyles as the city dizzily transforms around them. Nonetheless, remittances are symbolic markers and in many cases predecessors to overseas infusions of capital that are rapidly metamorphosing Saigon’s social landscape in Vietnam’s late socialist era.

Anywhere one goes in Saigon, discussions of money and its transformative powers abound. It is an openly discussed topic—Saigonese regularly discuss salaries, bonuses, prices of

new motorcycles, cars, houses, land, etc. during social interactions. With increasing confidence in market era rules and regulations and concerted policy efforts to “bank”⁴² Vietnam’s citizens, peoples’ relationship to money is transitioning from one of hoarding to investing. Banks in Vietnam now offer both Vietnam Dong and U.S. dollar savings accounts, with the U.S. dollar interest rates often higher than those offered by U.S. savings accounts in the United States.⁴³ Yet in general new forms of investing are intended to spread assets widely and relatively secretly. Such secret diversifications of assets are not dissimilar to the sneaky forms remittances took in the past, like the aforementioned money hidden in toothpaste, postcards, and boots. Such strategies are intended to obscure assets from not only a rent seeking state, but also rent seeking friends and relatives. “I just earned a bonus but I’m not telling my relatives otherwise they’ll ask me for money,” remarked one Saigonese woman named Thuy. “Instead, I’m going to invest the money in a new piece of land and house.” Land prices in Vietnam have skyrocketed in the last decade, in part due to investments of remittances in land. As one agent from CB Ellis Real Estate explained, “the *Việt Kiều* are buying up land everywhere: especially in new development areas such as Saigon South or the Danang coastline, although they usually do this through a Vietnamese relative.” One woman, explaining the expansive possibilities of money, said “gifts are inconvenient and useless, money is better because you can do anything with it.” As people’s relationship to and understanding of money becomes increasingly accumulative, there is a growing parallel sense that money can limitlessly beget itself.

In the popular play “Gratitude” [*Tri ân*] that performed in Ho Chi Minh City theatres in 2007, an overseas Vietnamese man sends a gift of silk home to his parents in the *quê* [home village]. The silk, however, arrives at the local People’s Committee [*Ủy Ban Nhân Dân*], with a

⁴² on policy initiatives and research to incentivize increased formal banking participation, see “Banking the Poor,” World Bank (2009), et al.

⁴³ “Tien o My, Gui Tai Viet Nam”, *Tuoi Tre* 4/9/08.

note requesting that it be delivered to his parents. As the story proceeds, various officials and village members come to the office and take small pieces of the silk for themselves, always justifying that there is more than the parents could ever need. By the time the parents come to the office to pick up the cloth, there is only a small piece left, but they are nonetheless overjoyed to receive the gift from their son. The catch, however, is that the gift box contains a letter from the son directing them how to use the gift. The son expresses his desire that his parents finally wear some nice clothes for once in their life, and requests the father to make pants and the mother to make a nice top with the silk that he sent. The parents do their best to oblige. At the end of the play, the son returns home. He asks his parents to show him the clothes they made with his gift of silk. The parents are embarrassed and try to avoid showing him, but he insists. When the two finally change into the clothes made with the son's silk and re-emerge on stage, they are wearing long overcoats. Finally urged by the son to remove the coats and show off their new clothes, the father is revealed to be wearing a silk thong, and the mother a skimpy silk bra, as it was all they could have tailored with the limited remnants of cloth left over after everyone else in the village had taken a share. The scene was, of course, responded to by widespread laughter in the audience, and was certainly a metaphor for an all-too-familiar theme that for many struck close to home.

Flows of remittances to Saigon serve as personal samplers of a broader accumulative capitalist economy that has been rapidly pervading and transforming the city for the past generation, with economic growth rates in Ho Chi Minh City at twice the national average. Following *Đổi Mới* economic reforms in line with Perestroika trends elsewhere in the socialist bloc led by Soviet Union, Vietnam began adopting market economy reforms to attract foreign investment and much needed capital into a country whose experiment with an orthodox socialist

command economy had largely been a failure. With the demise of the Soviet Union and its corresponding aid flows, Vietnam embarked on a path of further integration with the global economy, re-establishing trade and diplomatic relations with the United States in the 1990s and eventually joining the World Trade Organization in 2007. Ho Chi Minh City, with its prior history of and experience with capitalist integration, became an attractive investment hub. There was over \$10 billion of foreign direct investment annually in the mid 2000s, although falling by half in 2009 due to the global recession.⁴⁴ Districts of the city such as *Đông Khởi* [Uprising] Street, formerly *Tự Do* [Freedom] Street under the Saigon government and Rue Catinat under the French colonial regime, began to regain the sparkling capitalist luster they had under previous eras of “globalization.” Street vendors disappeared as new hotels and office high rises quickly went up, while expensive fashion boutique shops and cafes such as Luis Vuitton opened their doors to cater to a new class of wealthy Vietnamese and upmarket foreign tourists strolling the leafy streets. In striking contrast, until 2010 pockets of state cadre occupied apartments continued to hold out against gentrification—their peeling green walls, bare fluorescent lights, and laundry lines embarrassingly visible from the grand showcase boulevard below. Yet remittances to Saigon did not flow to these prime real estate state apartments, mostly occupied by communist cadres who benefited from the state’s confiscation of land and businesses following the revolution in 1975. Rather, they largely flowed to families without connections to the current political establishment, whose family members had fled fearing persecution and economic disenfranchisement. This phenomenon has resulted in the commonly heard observation that the south lost the military and political war but won the economic peace. This regional discrepancy continues to be a source of friction in the current political atmosphere. Foreign development aid is often channeled by the government to the north rather than the south,

⁴⁴ Los Angeles Times “Multinationals Take a Longer View of Vietnam” 4/11/09.

structurally facilitated for example by the legal requirement that all international NGO representative offices be physically located in the capital of Hanoi.⁴⁵

The project of modernization has therefore taken a hard right turn, by and large rejecting although supposedly integrating prior socialist modernization schemes. In doing so, Vietnamese abroad become a spectre for the nation, a theme that has been observed in other countries with large diasporas such as the Philippines (Rafael 2000). As capitalist subjects and salary earners, diasporic subjects represent, for many, what Vietnamese can and should become, and in many hypothetical imaginations, could have become had the American allied side won the Vietnamese civil war. Capitalism is both foreign and familiar for southern Vietnamese. Remarked one man at a coffee shop frequented by unemployed men, “back in the 1960s Vietnam was rich, richer than China or Korea, now we lose [*thua*] to them.” Capitalism as reintroduced in the 1990s however is still seen as crony capitalism. “Sure there’s some economic development, but the wealth goes to the rich and doesn’t spread to the poor people, who can’t even afford to pay for their children to go to school, or to other areas of the country outside of Saigon and Hanoi where life is still as hard as it was before. You have to have connections to make money and most people don’t have them. Only the big people [*bua*] get rich here, the life of the common people [*dân*] doesn’t change.” Another noted the differences in capitalist environments for Vietnamese in Vietnam and abroad— “*Việt Kiều* in America make easy money because the government there is good, providing the people with economic opportunities, providing free education and taking care of people when they are old. It’s easy to earn and save money over there and send it back here where there are no opportunities to make money.” Yet while money is considered “easy” to earn in the United States, it was also said to be easy to spend in Vietnam. One woman who receives remittances from her daughter in Michigan explained, “Vietnamese in Vietnam spend

⁴⁵ Vietnam Prime Ministerial Regulation 340: Regulations on the Operation of Foreign NGOS in Vietnam.

money easily [*thoải mái*] and live more in the present. *Việt Kiều* spend money with a purpose, for a future, to build security.” Yet this woman was also concerned that her daughter might not marry a Vietnamese in the United States. She explained, “those who do not marry Vietnamese will not send money back. They become used to more expensive lifestyles and do not save money, and their husbands [partners] will not agree to support relatives. They forget their Vietnamese obligations.” Marrying a *Việt Kiều* therefore meant building security and a future that continued to have ties with Vietnam.

Remittances from overseas friends and relatives index the idealized possibilities and myths of unfettered capitalism, an environment where money is easy to come by and accumulates itself. A common question of social comparison directed to me by Vietnamese was how much money one makes at a minimum wage labor job in the United States. At \$7 for just one hour, more than a laborer makes in a whole day in Vietnam, it becomes easy to imagine the spending and investing power one has abroad, and the ease of putting a little aside to send back to Vietnam every now and again. In America, even a common factory worker can make this kind of hourly wage; in other low level occupations such as nails [manicure], one can make up to \$200 a day I was told by Vietnamese, and later confirmed upon my return to the U.S. In fact, Western Union marketing strategists have targeted nail workers in the U.S. for use of their remittance transfer services. Similarly, activist NGOs such as the Oakland California based Transnational Institute for Grassroots Research and Action [TIGRA] that organize for migrants rights have identified nail salon workers as an important group to focus organizing and awareness efforts around issues of remittances.⁴⁶ Indeed remittances are often sent by Vietnamese who, like those on the receiving end of them, are not powerful magnates with extensive political, economic, and social connections.

⁴⁶ interviews with researchers and staff from Western Union 3/08 and TIGRA 7/08.

Sociologist Hung Thai has drawn on work by policy analyst Michele Wucker suggesting that lower classes of Vietnamese Americans are more likely to send a significant proportion of their salaries home than richer Vietnamese Americans.⁴⁷ Of course such differentials are also connected to the fact that new immigrants are more likely to have direct family members still living in Vietnam who need support, while older immigrants have often already sponsored the chain immigration of close relatives. Vietnamese remittance recipients generally share awareness that Vietnamese overseas are marginalized. Many commented that Vietnamese abroad don't even sufficiently speak the languages of the countries they live in, sometimes testing *Việt Kiều* relatives who return on key English words to check their level of fluency and linguistic capital. Indeed knowledge of English has become a status marker in Vietnam, with dialogues between Vietnamese speakers often peppered with performative English words. Yet the perception remains that despite all the low level positions, linguistic disadvantages, and even discrimination experienced by *Việt Kiều*, they still live in an environment that allows them to earn and invest money, buy houses and cars, receive medical care, educate their children, and send money home.

Living in an environment with such opportunities [*điều kiện*], it was widely said, transforms personal character. One woman named Trang in Saigon's District Four who has family in Canada explained, "In Vietnam people only eat, sleep, hang out—they are dependent. But overseas the environment forces you to work, so you won't be lazy anymore." Overseas capitalist worlds of transformation and opportunity offer a magical myth that allows many in Vietnam to imagine an alternative habitus—what they themselves could also be if only they too could participate in a truly unfettered capitalist environment in which the opportunity to make,

⁴⁷ Thai, "Tien Gui Cua Dang Ong Viet Kieu Co Thu Nhap Thap Trong Boi Canh Kinh Te Toan Cau Moi" in Tap Chi Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi p.12 (2007).

invest, and accumulate money was accessible to all. Hoping to gain a taste of such environments, many remittance recipients I met apply for six-month family visitation visas in countries where they have relatives, during which time they hope to find under the table jobs in the Vietnamese communities there to earn money [*tiền thù lao*] to send home.

In Saigon, foreign investment flows remain inaccessible to much of the population, who wrap scarves and masks around their faces and mouths to protect them from the rampant street pollution on their motorbike drives to work, passing by the shiny tinted window air-conditioned Mercedes Benzes of business executives. Some who sit in those Mercedes are themselves *Việt Kiều*, often hired by companies to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps as they forge new business relationships, with varying degrees of success (Carruthers 2002). Remittances appear as a small sampler of how those living in fully capitalist economies benefit from developed modern market economies. “The Vietnamese government is still corrupt, and therefore our country remains poor,” explained a middle-aged man who receives remittances from his daughter in the United States. “It is a good thing she [the daughter] lives over there, here she would have no job prospects.” The perceived ease of remitting money from abroad back to Vietnam suggests to many Saigoneses that the development trajectory they are currently riding is far from finished or promising. They frustratedly await economic reforms that will one day allow them or their children to make money like their overseas relatives, who despite possessing little social capital, appear to be successful abroad. In the meantime they hedge their bets by strategizing how to send more adaptable younger household members overseas to make their own way in the land of “easy money.” The contrast between what Vietnamese in Vietnam are able to achieve compared to what their counterparts overseas succeed at is measured and compared in absolute monetary amounts, confirming that the current economic policy reforms, while certainly bringing changes

to Vietnam, remain far from complete. Yet with an economic growth rate of 8.5% during the mid 2000s, falling to a still relatively high rate of 5.5% during the 2009 economic downturn⁴⁸, the momentum of change remains strong albeit unpredictable, with most Saigonese riding the wave wherever it may take them, be it in Vietnam or abroad.

Money as Medium

The transformative powers of money have been widely recognized and theorized upon in the social sciences and humanities. Three themes often explored are money's mystique, exchangeable value, and mobility. I shall comment on each of these briefly, highlighting analyses by Karl Marx and Georg Simmel. I will then discuss how these themes relate to the phenomenon of remittances and their connection to broader capitalist flows in Vietnam, acting as a medium between ontological realms experienced and imagined by exchange participants.

In *Capital*, Marx discusses a curious situation in capitalism in which the “social relation between men themselves...assumes...the fantastic form of a relation between things” (165). The commodity takes on a mystical life form, to which men are irresistibly drawn—wood transformed into a table, for example, “changes into a thing that transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (164). That which drives the exchange of commodities for Marx is the desire to recapture the alienated human labor such commodities represent. The material relations between persons as symbolized by the commodity fetish represent an alienated capitalist world that has replaced the face-to-face interactions of feudal societies. Ultimate alienation is achieved in the “finished form of the world of commodities—the money form—which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the

⁴⁸ Don Lee, “Multinationals Take a Longer View of Vietnam”, LA Times 4/11/09.

individual workers, by making those relations appear as relation between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly,” leading to a mysterious and fleeting world of “magic and necromancy” (169). In this world the magic of exchange exists in the relationship to the medium, the “fetish” by which men forget themselves and their independent identities. Yet the fetish is elusive not only in its mystique but also its mobility. Marx notes, “money constantly removes commodities from the sphere of circulation, and in this way continually moves away from its own starting-point [...] as the medium of circulation, [it] haunts the sphere of circulation and constantly moves around within it” (213). Money’s fetish is elusive, yet still compels men to chase it, disrupting the settled worlds they thought they inhabited. The global mobility and circulation of money teases the imagination, confusion, and desires of those who participate with it.

George Simmel, in *Philosophy of Money*, furthers the idea that individual ontological desires are kaleidoscopically transformed through and rooted in the exchange medium.

“The philosophical significance of money is that it represents within the practical world the most certain image and the clearest embodiment of the formula of all being, according to which things receive their meaning through each other, and have their being determined by their mutual relations...the project of mere relations into particular objects is one of the great accomplishments of the mind; when the mind is embodied in objects, these become a vehicle for the mind and endow it with a livelier and more comprehensive activity. The ability to construct such symbolic objects attains its greatest triumphs in money. For money represents pure interaction in its purest form; it makes comprehensive the most abstract concept; it is an individual thing whose essential significance is to reach beyond individualities” (129).

In reaching “beyond individualities” we see money’s role as an unsettling medium “livening the mind,” *in and through which* the participants of its exchange apprehend a life world beyond their immediate existence and its associated structures of familiar and assigned identities. The fetish for Marx, or desire for Simmel, that unsettles social relations and assumptions via the symbolic exchange medium offers an elusive but intriguing glimpse into an alternative world one

can only begin to imagine and apprehend. It is within monetary fetishes and desires that the imagination becomes affectively embodied.

In the case of remittance economies, material gifts and social gifts, but most often money, act as the tangible medium of exchange between vastly different worlds. The conception of “*ở bên [kia]*”, or “over there”, as overseas locations where Vietnamese live are usually referred to, is a world both imaginatively intriguing and experientially unfathomable to Vietnamese who have never left the country but who nonetheless interact with a broader global world through media and commodity flows, remittances, and interactions with foreigners and *Việt Kiều* returnees. While the anthropological and social science literature on money is vast,⁴⁹ the references to Marx and Simmel are helpful for gesturing to the importance of mediumship in exchange. The mode of exchange between parties not only brings them together but also affects how they relate to and identify with each other and themselves. For remittance recipients, money—often green US dollars—indexes a broader, powerful, capitalist horizon from which the diasporic gifter emerges, of which Saigon had once been part but in the last generation became largely isolated from. In the imagined “there” of ideal capitalist landscapes, money is invested rather than hoarded, accumulative rather than scarce, and a means to upward social mobility and transformation. Vietnam’s experiences with development and war show that money, especially from foreign places, has the power to both create and destroy: and that to have and generate it gives one such power. Monetary remittance economies unleash a mediatory form that symbolizes possibilities of agency and social transformation through accumulation and assimilation of the very form itself. Yet they also raise awareness of the fact that contemporary possibilities of accumulation are not equally distributed across political and economic terrains.

⁴⁹ see Bill Maurer’s “Anthropology of Money” (2006) for an overview of the social science literature analyzing money.

Remittances flow from foreign, unfamiliar capitalist economies, yet across seemingly familiar networks of sentiment. This peculiar combination of the unfamiliar and familiar has an uncanny effect of confusing social relations with capital. The imagination of accumulating “easy money” in an ideal capitalist world beyond the reach of Vietnamese in Vietnam increases expectations that remittance gifts should flow proportionate with the limitless sentiment that motivates them. The hardship of the overseas migrant, while recognized, is understood to be social, not economic. *Việt Kiều* living in “lonely” communities overseas lack the sentiment and neighborly exchange experienced in Vietnam. Their remembrance of and return to Vietnam illustrate to Vietnamese the validity of this assumption. However, the money that one so easily earns abroad, through even basic unskilled labor jobs, flows and accumulates “there” in a way not possible across much of Vietnam. This is attributed to the ideal capitalist geography in which such overseas migrants live. Money infused in entrepreneur activities in Saigon are limited in scale, because those who invest them are not “*bua*”, big people, connected politically and socially in order to turn small investments into grand returns. The environment for ideal capitalist accumulation is still perceived to be limited within as well as across the Vietnamese state. Money may flow to Saigon and Hanoi creating some small-scale entrepreneurs, but fails to accommodate transformative expectations in much of rural Vietnam where 80% of the country’s population still resides.

The diasporic remittance gift therefore not only offers a glimpse into a life world vastly different from that of the receiver, but is itself a medium of social transformation. Yet money operates differently in different places. The transformative magic money offers, while possible to be sampled in Vietnam, reaches its fullest metamorphosing power in the capitalist abroad from where it comes and where it is always, already accumulating and transforming its givers. The

“individualities” of the here and there are confused in the remittance exchange, as receivers minds are “livened”, tasting and imagining not only the world of the giver, but themselves as they might be in such a world. The unleashing of new desires and imaginations through gifting exchange is very much tied up in the monetary form of the gift. The gift of money, as the long distance medium of exchange and interaction between imagined life worlds, is itself a central feature and marker of the differences between them. Money’s mystical accumulative and transformative powers that can beget and develop capitalist subjectivity in some environments, mildly sustain, tease, and alter social worlds in other environments, and altogether bypass socially transformative aspirations in others, demonstrates its unpredictable and fetishistic role as a stand in for social relations and desires between Vietnamese dispersed across different life worlds. The heightened monetization of social relations through increasing financial remittance flows raises spectral awareness of differentiated political economy landscapes across the exchange spectrum. The resultant comparison-induced hypotheticals, memories, and desires manifest in diverse socio-cultural forms. The city of Saigon, a.k.a. Ho Chi Minh City, offers an exceptional vantage point to observe such processes.

Chapter Three

Coastal Flows and Horizons

Anthropological discussions of “imagined worlds”,⁵⁰ described by Arjun Appadurai (1996) as a “negotiation between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility”, are common but often vague and unsatisfactory attempts to reference the psychological byproducts of heightened trans-cultural flows during an era of “globalization.” In Vietnam imagined worlds abound, finding their catalyst in numerous sources ranging from the global media to foreign investment to diasporic returnees. This chapter examines a particular economy reflecting the intersection of remittances and imagination as encountered in the south central coastal area, with a focus on the coastal city of Quy Nhon. Extending Chapter’s Two’s discussion of remittances and their connections to broader imaginations and geographies of capitalist accumulation, this chapter further develops the argument that an important element of the imaginary catalyst, beyond transcultural flows, lies in a fundamental contradiction in the neoliberal ethic: the lack of equivalence between flows of finance and commodities and that of bodies. It then explores the relation of such experiential contradictions to horizons of personal and collective dreaming and displacements characterized by mobility, aspiration, hope, and chance.

In Vietnam, after Ho Chi Minh City, the most significant flow of remittances is to coastal areas (Pfau & Long, Appendix Table 5, 2008). During the late 1970s and 80s thousands of refugees fled the country using small fishing boats—those with access to such boats were more easily able to leave. The rickety wooden boats, meant for offshore fishing, were commandeered for long multiple day journeys to neighboring countries such as the Philippines or Malaysia, yet often arrested by the Vietnamese coast guard, running short of fuel and supplies, capsizing, or

⁵⁰ including Anderson (1991), Appadurai (1996), Mankekar (1999), et al.

attacked by sea pirates before reaching their destination. Although the casualty rate was extremely high, thousands of Vietnamese followed friends and family to take the risky journey on the high seas—those who made it usually ended up in refugee camps such as Palawan in the Philippines where they would wait months or even years to be processed for resettlement in a third country or in some cases sent back to Vietnam. The present day result of this fishing boat exodus is a multitude of Vietnamese coastal communities with strong ties to diasporic networks and remittance support, particularly along the central coast. Although my research in this region focused on Quy Nhon, I also followed remittance connections to other south central coastal areas including Binh Thuan and Phu Yen provinces, Vung Tau, Phan Rang, Nha Trang, and Danang. Throughout this region, one finds intriguing spatial and mnemonic relationships to a once porous and transcendent border and horizon—the sea.

Quy Nhon, the capital of Binh Dinh province, is located in a desert like coastal region marked by dry rocky land, fishing villages, and sand dunes, as well as scattered Cham ruins serving as reminders of the historical southward migration of the Viet people at the expense of the prior inhabitants. The city's current population count is about 300,000. Quy Nhon was historically not only a fishing community but also a strategic military post during the Vietnam War. A number of residents I met would recall the days when American and South Korean soldiers strolled the streets. Today, the town's peninsular location by the Eastern Sea⁵¹ is marked by a large number of remittance recipient neighborhoods along the streets close to the water on either side of the town, as well as the surrounding fishing villages. Similar to some other smaller towns and cities I visited, the material effect of remittances on recipient households

⁵¹ *Bien Dong* a.k.a. South China Sea, the Vietnamese name translates as Eastern Sea.

in Quy Nhon is more apparent than in Ho Chi Minh City⁵²—their homes often noticeably newer and fresher looking as overseas money has been invested in their upgrade and expansion. Yet *Nhà Việt Kiều* [remittance households, literally, house of *Việt Kiều*] are rarely ostentatious—whenever I saw a particularly large and decorative new house and inquired about it I was told that the occupants were government officials or managers of state owned companies, rather than families with overseas relatives. Upgrading or buying a house for relatives is a common use of remittance funds. Upgrading usually involves the destruction of the previous structure and rebuilding on top of it, typically ranging \$15,000-20,000, whereas buying a new house with the land ranges \$60-\$80,000 I was told. As many informants noted, these remittance purchased homes benefited remitters as much as the recipients, serving as vacation homes away from home whenever the *Việt Kiều* family returned to Vietnam.

When I was invited to research in Quy Nhon the local provincial authorities chose an initial sample of households for me to interview. In most cases, initial formal interviews served as entrées into repeated social interactions that expanded to other topics and contacts. Following up to socialize with my informants usually took me to places outside of the house [where the first meetings were usually held] and away from the government officials that initially accompanied me. The two areas of town that my informants would often choose to meet were cafes by the ocean and cafes near “the airport” [*sân bay*]. The airport was not actually an airport but the town’s only “mall”: a hangar like assortment of supermarkets, bars and coffeeshops, clothing and book stores, and even a nightclub, bordered on both sides by broad boulevards popular with motorbike cruisers. Before 1975 it had been the main airport, which had since moved further north to occupy a former military airstrip. Nonetheless the space still retained the reference to

⁵² In HCMC a prevalence of other economic activities often results in remittances being only one minor flow of income among others for working age households.

flight in local parlance. I found it an interesting coincidence that these areas of socializing were also spaces of historical mobility infused with storied memories of departure by boat and by plane.⁵³

In these interactions, two particular themes emerged that I will explore in this chapter: mobility and chance, both of which are connected to notions of exchange and social transformation.

Mobility

One day some fishermen from Nhon Ly, a fishing village in the jurisdiction of Quy Nhon but about ten kilometers outside the town center, invited me out on their boat to explore the surrounding area. We loaded up with fishing gear, water, beer, and dried squid to snack on. Thanh, a twenty-nine year old fisherman with a wife and child whose older brother went to the U.S. in the 1970s, started up the engine and guided the boat away from the other colorful blue and red wooden fishing boats docked off the coast. As we headed out towards the sea beyond the rocky coastline, he extended his hand to the horizon and said, “keep going that way and America is there.” I asked him if many people had gone there, he said yes, more than 60% of the families in Nhon Ly village had a relative abroad who had fled by boat [*vuợt biển*].⁵⁴ Motioning back to the village behind us, he pointed to one of the districts by the sea on the north side of town. “That area over there, almost everyone has someone who went by sea—you can see the big houses they build now with the money sent back.” When I asked why so many people in that particular area had left he said, “before they were poor, so they would go. Now they are rich. Many of them no longer need to fish.” I asked if those people who left often came back. Thanh

⁵³ Boat refugee flows largely ended by the 90’s, after which those wishing to leave the country were processed through the Orderly Departure and Humanitarian Operation Programs [ODP, HO] and able to fly directly to countries of resettlement. Many continue to wait years after submitting their paperwork requesting emigration.

⁵⁴ Binh Dinh Province Peoples committee officials guesstimate at least 40% of Quy Nhon’s population have extended relatives overseas, although there has been no official count (discussions 5/08).

said, “yes, many of them do, but some never return. But it’s easy for them to go back and forth now. For us, we’ve not yet been anywhere. Going to Vietnam from America is easy, but going to America from Vietnam is very hard.”

Thanh went on to explain how those with boats were able to flee the country from 1976 until the mid 1980s, at that time other countries “accepted Vietnamese when they arrived.” Groups of people would pick up and leave with some family or a group of friends, one of whom had access to a fishing boat even if a tiny one. I was told young people were particularly inclined to attempt the journey. It was a kind of adventure—risky, but with great unforeseen rewards at the end. They would go to the Philippines or Hong Kong or Malaysia and then wait for a country such as America, Australia, or France to sponsor them where an unimaginable new life awaited. “But then the door closed” [*đóng cửa*], Thanh said, and the sea route was no longer an option. One was stuck: the chances and dreams of mobility although still alive were no longer as tangible, even for those willing to take a risk.

Reflections on mobility and chance pervade substantive remittance economies. There is a strong correlation between reception of remittances and reflections on mobility. Many other families I met in Quy Nhon and elsewhere who had relatives abroad were interested in finding a way to either personally, or have a child in the family, go overseas.⁵⁵ In their hopes for migration people spoke of not only economic opportunity but also escape from stifling norms and expectations and finding an environment in which they could realize new personal potentials. Ha, a middle aged woman with an adolescent daughter, said, “it is difficult being a woman in Vietnam because everyone judges how you behave. You have to get married early otherwise you’re unmarriageable [*e*]. I want my daughter to be educated in a different

⁵⁵ This hope of emigration seemed less immediate among others I spoke with who did not have overseas kinship networks.

environment [*môi trường*] so that she can develop and have opportunities.” Such opportunities included in Ha’s opinion the option to be different. In Vietnam, she said, if one doesn’t conform one is teased [*chế*], inhibiting the development of distinct articulations of identity. Ha had sent one of her two daughters to live with a sister in Florida, where she attended high school and was preparing to apply for college. The purpose of overseas education for the daughter was not necessarily to return with new skills, but to perhaps escape from Vietnam permanently through subsequent job opportunities, marriage prospects, or a variety of other chance life circumstances that one cannot possibly predict. In the meantime Ha’s family was also planning a move to Saigon, where there would be more employment options and education opportunities for their other daughter.

Many other informants said they would be willing to give up stable and respected professions in Vietnam in order to traverse to an unknown world of opportunity and risk. “If they let me go [the American government] then I’ll go!” declared a man named Hai who had applied for emigration a number of years ago and was still waiting for an official response. Most times when I asked informants what they hoped to do if they moved abroad, they said they didn’t know, but their contacts would surely help them find something. “I have relatives and friends there, they’ll help me figure everything out once I arrive,” said Cuong, a middle aged man who had applied for family sponsorship to go to the U.S. There was always the folk wisdom security that any Vietnamese can “do nails [manicure work] and make easy money” in America.

Chance

The spectral unknown overseas horizon that ontologically haunts remittance communities contributes to a general attitude that migration and by extension much of life, is a matter of certain chance. As one man described it, “some people took a risk to change their life. Some

people accepted their life.” Many of the remittance recipients I met had themselves attempted to leave on previous occasions but were unsuccessful. The boat refugee journey was risky—many were lost at sea or attacked by pirates en route. Many more were caught by the local police, often resulting in a prison or hard labour term for the offender and/or their family.

Minh, an older man who taught English at the local university, said that he had been on many boats that had tried to escape. On each journey he had been invited to go for free, whereas others would have to pay for their passage in gold bars [three often referenced as the standard fee], because he was deemed able to translate should a foreign freighter pick them up at sea. There was even a secret acknowledgement of this arrangement with the local police, who each time the boats were caught let him go with a fine/bribe. The last time he tried to escape, however, was with his wife and daughter, after which he was sentenced to a year in prison. Hai, a middle aged man with whom I sat having coffee and watching music one night, spotted one his friends from the labor camp they had both been assigned to after trying to flee by boat. He said at the time they were young teenagers, and any chance they got they tried to go: they had tried three times. It was a “youth movement [*phong trào*]”, he explained, or “something to keep up with [*đua đòi*]. There was a tendency [*khuyh hướng*] of sorts, to try and escape abroad [...] but it was also because times were very hard [*khó*], there wasn’t enough to eat for the whole family so the young and able would leave.” In such recountings there appeared to be a theme of not only economic push and pull factors motivating migration, but also a collective youthful sense of adventure and explorative curiosity that motivated the mobile determinations of young boat refugees. While some successfully made the journeys, others were turned back. One now middle-aged man, Lam, wearing a Tommy Hilfiger shirt and gold watch sent by his brother in California, with whom I sat one night at a seaside restaurant partaking in a hot pot and Heineken

beer, said he had tried to escape thirteen times over the previous thirty years. Finishing off a case of beers with his friends, he looked out to the dark sea, specked by the fluorescent lights of far off fishing boats. “Other people made it and have new lives,” he said, “but I got caught every time. Nothing has changed.” For him, there was not so much a sense of “them over there” and “us over here”, but rather a hypothetical awareness that “I could have been them over there ... but I’m still here.”

Hypotheticals of Self and Transformative Social Horizons

Migration, therefore, is for many imagined as a journey for the fulfillment of not only economic opportunity, but also an identity that remains unrealized in Vietnam. There is an awareness of differentiated social, cultural, political, and economic structures and how one’s chance to negotiate them affects the future self. Vietnamese life overseas offers a comparatively unknown future, but one invested with great promise of social transformation. Many Vietnamese spoke about how a foreign environment could bring out latent traits in the Vietnamese character. The transformation is most fully displayed and realized when a migrant returns home to visit, contributing to an emerging transnational social ideal. The generosity of gifting overtures by overseas Vietnamese was one mode of gauging such latent character evolutions. As one woman named Lan reflected, “the Vietnamese character is generous, but Vietnam is a poor country so it is difficult to always show generosity. Overseas Vietnamese are fortunate, they can afford to give without worrying. Even in the market they don’t have to bargain as much.” There nonetheless remains some ambivalence about such transformations, as reflected in comments about the social and physical markers of overseas Vietnamese. Another man, in discussing his relatives who return to Vietnam, noted, “they’re the same mostly, but a bit different—their skin is lighter, they’re more polite, they get sick easier.”

The achievement of cultural and financial capital and difference through overseas living has an acknowledged price. Most informants I spoke with believed that life abroad, while endowed with opportunity, is isolated and difficult—explaining why so many *Việt Kiều* [overseas Vietnamese] return on a regular basis. “Over here life is happy [*suống*—exclaimed a 60 year old retired fisherman with a son in Brooklyn who escaped by boat 20 years ago and now sends back \$200 monthly to support his parents. Riding on the back of my motorbike as we went out to eat and drink [*nhau*] with his family one night, he pointed to the rows of seafood restaurants lined along the water with groups of mostly men eating, drinking, and toasting with loud outbursts of “*Dô*” [Cheers]. “The *Việt Kiều* don’t drink like this, but the *Việt Cộng* [Communists] do. Vietnam may be poor but life is good.” He went on to say that with a little money from his son he no longer had to fish, and could now afford to live in the city, pay for medical expenses, and treat his friends. He said, “I prefer life here because it is familiar—I have friends nearby and people to talk to. Over there, what would I do? But I do wish I could visit my son to see what his life is like.”

The migratory horizon of social transformation and subsequent return is represented by the networks of remittance money across which such imaginaries flow. Remittances represent characteristics of mobility and exchangeable value increasingly able to overcome the structural limitations of both “here” and “there”. In doing so they heighten personal observations of and in many cases anticipation of actual transnational body mobility as displayed by *Việt Kiều* and sought after by many Vietnamese for whom remittances tease their own desire to travel to and see their source.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Recent structural facilitation of remittance and return flows in Vietnam include an elimination of a 5% remittance tax in 1997, expansion of remittance institutions in 2002, and VN Politburo Resolution 36 of 2004 affirming overseas Vietnamese as integral to the nation.

“Money is best,” said Na, answering a question about whether he preferred money or material gifts from his overseas relatives, “because with it you can do anything.” This sense of money as enabling social transformation reflects new capitalist perceptions of class mobility that remain ambiguous in a Vietnamese late socialist societal structure, as discussed in Chapter Two. There is a large and growing disparity between rich and poor in Vietnam in which a strong middle class—typically embodying economic and social mobility—has yet to find a securely defined place (Van Arkadie & Mallon 2003, Gainsborough 2003, Marshall, Drummond, & Bélanger 2012). On the one hand there is the multitude of small family owned businesses participating in a burgeoning market economy. On the other there are large enterprises, formerly or still state owned, partnering with foreign investors on deals in which inside connections and privilege are paramount to successful accumulation practices. Establishing medium enterprises and a solid middle-income sector remains a challenge. Remittance recipients often fall into a still small and emerging Vietnamese middle class—rising from poverty through the help of overseas relatives but without the social capital and connections to take further advantage of Vietnam’s “market economy with a socialist orientation.”⁵⁷

Although the power of capitalist transformation is quite visible in places like Saigon, in Quy Nhon there are timid “build it and they will come” hopes for future neoliberal utopian living through large scale capital investment in new industry and tourism projects. Across the newly built Thi Nai bridge from the city lies the Nhon Hoi industrial zone, a fishing village area now zoned for not only factories, but also beach resorts, residential districts, and shopping centers. An official from the Binh Dinh tourism authority explained, “Right now the manufacturing industry and tourism sector are still small: hotel occupancies are only 40% for example and the

⁵⁷ Many remittance recipient families I encountered owned small businesses such as cafes and billiard halls, or household farms/gardens [lam vuon] that turned only marginal profit and were largely subsistence based.

road system is not very developed. But that is all changing, come back in fifty years and Quy Nhon will be totally transformed.” Anh, an older man with daughters in Australia and other relatives in America and Europe, eagerly took me out on his motorbike one windy day to look at the newly constructed road to Nhon Hoi, lined with billboards painted with images of suburban office complexes, homes, and cars, while another map parceled the zoning of the area into industrial and residential districts. Yet in 2009 it largely remained a performance of hypotheticals. A lonely, mostly empty supermarket and billiard hall, on a wide dusty road still under construction, are all that exist of this future capitalist pleasure and production utopia. As foreign investment wanes in the post-2008 global economic downturn, local Quy Nhon residents lack the capital to ensure the project realizes completion. Large scale capitalist transformation still remains outside the ability or control of waiting middle class Quy Nhon residents, for whom paltry remittance flows from core neoliberal utopias overseas are only a tease of what could be but can never be grasped within the limitations of Vietnam’s still undeveloped system of capitalism under late socialism. The realization of Quy Nhon’s developmental dreams depends on corporate remittance infusions from as yet unknown foreign investors. In the meantime desires for continued social and class momentum are displaced onto an idealized overseas capitalist landscape where dynamic upward class mobility is imagined to be indiscriminately accessible.

Agency and Money

Remittance recipients reflect their aspirations for mobile and transformative middle class subjectivity in their stated desires to not only spend money, but also earn and send it to others. One constantly hears comparative references to how much one earns in a day in America versus how much things cost in Vietnam. The power of money earned there but spent here teases the

imagination of many remittance recipients who would if given the chance prefer to be on the generating side of the money relationship. “I want to go to America so I can send money back” said Quynh, an unemployed remittance recipient in Saigon who related her dreams of running a cleaning service in the United States. As another man named Sang decried, “talent in America is rewarded, and you can have success and make money. In Vietnam it doesn’t matter whether one is talented, there is no opportunity to use it.” This desired performance of transformation through work and remittance giving may be understood as a desire to emulate the creative mobility and agency of money as a mediator of exchange relations. Successful migrants are perceived as possessing heightened agency as represented in the money they direct and sometimes follow across the route of original departure. They display their power to control and direct the gift and its representation. The preference for remittance sending is personal courier networks: it has become a general expectation that a returnee to Vietnam will carry gifts and money for other friends and family, thus personalizing the financial gift exchange. If personal networks are unavailable, remitters still prefer private services providing home delivery to the anomie of banks or money transfer companies such as Western Union. Remittances are usually accompanied by a small note from the sender indicating their remembrance of the recipient, and followed by a phone call or email from them to confirm the arrival of the gift. This ability of money to travel, to return, to represent the agency of the sender, and to mediate relations with the receiver, demonstrates the highly transformative and mobile dynamics of imaginative remittance economies.

A proverb about money related by an informant says, “Money wanders everywhere, one cannot control it.” [*tiền là phù du*] In a post renovation [*Đổi Mới*] Vietnam where remittances

take easy monetary form⁵⁸ and arrive from all parts of the globe overnight at one's doorstep, the expanded flows and efficiency of in-bound remittance services contrast with the inefficiency and seemingly far-fetched gamble of un-transparent and bureaucratic emigration processes. On a return trip to Saigon from Quy Nhon one month, I ran into Minh, one of my informants from Quy Nhon, waiting to take the same flight to the city. He said he was accompanying his nephew to Saigon for his visa "interview" at the U.S. consulate there, wincing as he remarked how "hard" and unpredictable these performances were. Daily, large crowds gather across the street from the U.S. consulate in Saigon – mostly family members awaiting the outcome of "the interview" of someone inside: that mysterious event that defies understanding or advance preparation. Sidewalk vendors sell food and drinks to those waiting – there is a general sense of anticipatory spectatorship. The visa interview is the final step in the emigration process in which applications are processed or denied. Many informants showed me the various forms and papers they have filled out for emigration, at times exhausting every possible visa channel from spousal to student to family reunification, as well as documentary evidence of their transnational relationships including letters, family photos, and remittance receipts. Again, the theme of chance emerges centrally in this process: one cannot anticipate the event or its outcome, it therefore becomes a liminal spectacle to all who patiently wait on the plastic stools across from the consulate.

Magic, Mystery, Gambling

The tension between desire for the agency of mobility and the mysterious obstacles to migration that prevent it are increasingly displaced into a magical culture of chance supported

⁵⁸ As opposed to the material manifestations of the past: before the 1990s remittances were often sent in the forms of commodities, medicines, etc. that could then be exchanged in the marketplace (Đang Phong 2000).

and represented by remittances. In Quy Nhon, freshly painted and restored Whale God⁵⁹ temples can be found in various districts. The whale god is a traditional deity worshipped by fishermen who provides a good catch and good weather to keep the fishermen safe at sea. The whale is said to support a sinking boat in a storm by perching it on its back, risking its own life in doing so. *Ông Nam Hải* temples are common throughout the south central coastal area—in the Van Thuy Tu whale god temple in Phan Thiet, enormous bones from beached whales going back hundreds of years are stored in honor of the selfless sacrifice they made for fishermen. Many in the fishing community, including fish sellers, participate in paying tribute to this deity. In more recent years, many former refugees who left on fishing boats from Vietnam and successfully made the sea voyage also send money back to support the temple of the whale god in gratitude for his assistance. On Xuan Dieu street in Quy Nhon, a newly restored Whale God temple carries a plaque honoring the temple’s main benefactor—“a Vietnamese immigrant in America” who gave \$26,000 to help rebuild the temple, catalyzing a host of smaller donations from both *Việt Kiều* and locals.

Each spring, various coastal communities open the temple [*lang*] of *Ông Nam Hải* to the public to celebrate the deity [*Lễ Hội Ông Nam Hải, Nghinh Ông*]. The festival scene is carnival like, with food stalls, merry-go-rounds, and children playing everywhere. *Hát bội*, a traditional Vietnamese opera, marks the event in which members of the community squat in the courtyard to watch while the male elders of the fishing communities, sitting on the platform of the temple behind the stage, take turns going to the front to beat the drums, attaching money to the sticks and tossing them to the performers to express their appreciation. Some of the most active drum players and hence benefactors receive their money from *Việt Kiều* relatives, and it is common for

⁵⁹ *Ong Nam Hai*, elsewhere in East Asia known as *Ong Heo* but in Vietnam also known as *Ca Ong* or sometimes *Ong Ca*.

the festival organizers to collect money, usually about \$50-\$70 per person, from overseas former fishermen to support the temple. “The *Việt Kiều* have more money so they can help support maintaining the temple and funding the festival, which gets no government assistance. The local people donate their time to perform and organize,” explained one of the festival committee organizers. Here money is equated with time, both seen as personalized gifts to the community collective. The festival culminates in the drum playing elders wearing traditional outfits [*áo dài*] joining the *Hát Bội* performers, dressed as traditional deities including *Ông Địa* [Mr. Earth] and King Tran Hung Dao to pay obeisance [*cúng*] to the gods at the altar.

Yet the whale god does not serve everyone. While successful *Việt Kiều* pay homage to their safe sea journey through remittances, in other homes, pictures of those lost at sea stare blankly out on ancestral altars or not at all. Sometimes families try to identify appropriate death anniversary [*đám giỗ*] dates for them based on approximate dates of departure and probable decease, but for the most part such lost migrants are forgotten in terms of traditional cultural rites: the circumstances of their death outside normative structures of remembering. “My father left us behind in 1981 to take his chances on a boat, he was never heard from again. There is no death ceremony. He is forgotten in our family because we don’t know what happened to him,” related one woman.

The whale god, in the end, signifies chance—a life gamble that some win and others lose. “*Nhà Việt Kiều*” [remittance receiving households] are often criticized by neighbors for their card playing, gambling, and drinking. Walking with a resident of Quy Nhon named Huong in a neighborhood near the water where many of the homes were *Nhà Việt Kiều*, she pointed out to me the various families lounging in their pajamas in the open living rooms, drinking and playing cards, saying “see, look at these people, they don’t want to work or do anything, they are just

parasites [*bám*] living off their overseas money.” She went on to critique their haughty [*kiêu ngạo*] overseas relatives who helped them to arrange fake marriages [*kết hôn giả*] with *Việt Kiều* for even more remittance dependence, saying dismissively that should any of them ever stop receiving money, they would have no idea how to make a living.

A similar neighborhood in Danang, also located near the water over which many refugees escaped, has even taken on the designation “*Xóm Đô*” or dollar village, because of the large numbers of residents who live off overseas dollars. In the village of Xuan Hai in Phu Yen province, whose village skyline is dotted by a number of taller houses newly re-built with remittance money, makeshift tents scattered along the beach providing shade from the hot afternoon sun are filled with groups of boys, girls, men, and women playing cards, a popular pastime after a night of fishing. Drinking beer with one such group, they said I should buy the next round of ten beers to continue the party. When I asked why, they related a local proverb: “*Việt Kiều* who return to Vietnam have to treat, if they don’t, they’re not *Việt Kiều*.”⁶⁰ In this case, money as an index of generous intention, not merely blood and ethnic kinship ties, is what allows overseas Vietnamese to be re-included in the social life of the community.

Indeed such modes of play and gamble that stereotype *Nhà Việt Kiều*, or as they are sometimes called *Xóm Đô* [Dollar Village], neighborhoods are fairly representative of the liminal floating social world of waiting, chance, and escapism in which many remittance receivers with their deferred migratory and transformative aspirations exist and cope. One resident of Danang’s *Xóm Đô* said he had been waiting for seven years for his application to emigrate to the United States. In the meantime he carries on a small tailor job that keeps him occupied and provides some steady income. Although his income is supplemented by remittances, the tailor job keeps up work appearances for his overseas relatives, as well as local government officials and

⁶⁰ “Việt Kiều về Việt Nam phải nò. Việt kiều về Việt Nam không nò thì không phải Việt Kiều.”

neighbors. As was explained to me in the fishing village of Nhon Ly, “those with *Việt Kiều* remittances often stop fishing, because it is a hard life—you have to work all night and the work is heavy and dangerous. Instead they do small jobs around town—it is an easier life and they can afford to do so because their income is supplemented by their overseas relatives.” In many cases such jobs that provide daily routine and that allow one to stay close to home include selling general merchandise from one’s house, or vending food or drinks at the local market. One married couple that I met in their late 20s, living with the wife’s mother, have between them three regular remittance-sending relatives in the United States and Europe. They lived in a large pink house with a host of modern appliances such as washing machines, and received on average \$2000/month. Nonetheless, they both continue to hold routine jobs – the husband as a motorcycle repairman, and the wife as a hair cutter at a beauty salon.

Hierarchies of Mobility

In anthropologist Marcel Mauss’s description of *The Gift*, the “hau” or spirit of the gift’s giver is carried and represented by the thing given, always seeking return to the source. This “hau” might be described as similar to the agency of the giver and is reflected by the characteristics of the money they direct to the recipient. However is there reciprocity? In some cases no, there are those who say “we are poor we have nothing we can give them.” Indeed, remittance gifts are often seen as an expected expression of sentiment or gratitude in the absence of personal interaction, allowing the *Việt Kiều* to continue to participate in the community they lost through migration. But in reconsidering the gifting question, most remittance receivers did eventually acknowledge the in-kind gifts and hospitality they offered, the pre-migration support they provided, or the treats they often tried to send when a returning relative or friend of a relative returned abroad.

Yet the international remittance gift is difficult to reciprocate because the form of the return gift does not have the mobility of money. The desire of remittance recipients to counter-gift often fails because of the return gift's inability to travel on the same terms as the money received. Commonly in the form of locally produced items such as rice paper, green tea, dried shrimp, etc., endowed with sensory memories of home (Seremetakis 1996), return gifts rely on personal networks willing to carry such items back to the remittance senders. Such requests are in fact often refused, as food items are not easy to carry on international flights. "Sometimes my relatives don't want the dried squid [*mực khô*] I give them, because they say they can't take them on the airplane," noted Lan, a resident of Quy Nhon with relatives in California. Unlike the senders, who can seemingly conjure immediate agency of giving through the variety of personal networks, private and black market remittance services, and formal financial services at their disposal, remittance recipients remain dependent on the acquiescence of mobile social networks in which they are only partial participants to carry return gifts back to the original gifter. The immediate twenty-four hour delivery time of the Vietnam bound remittance contrasts with the waiting and dependency on social favor required by the counter-gifter, whose obligation to return, if felt, is hampered and de-familiarized by the structural and practical obstacles to mobility represented in the types of gifts one can afford to return. Only money, and in particular, money from the outside: foreign currencies such as green American dollars, can flow freely. Money becomes master in this unequal dialectic of representative exchange, its characteristics affectively taking the place of the absent sender.

Maussian inspired gifting theory usually emphasizes the Durkheimian solidarity and symmetry of the gift, particularly as observed in Mauss's Polynesian accounts: gifts must be given, received, and returned. Yet in the Vietnamese case we see shadows of power, agency,

and failure more akin to Mauss's Northwestern American potlatch descriptions than the more commonplace gifting references to South Pacific kula circles. In the potlatch, one gifts to outperform a rival, leading to exuberant performances of destruction and waste as the gifters compete to achieve dominance through exchange. Mauss's interpretive emphasis in describing the gifting practices of potlatch still aspire to symmetry, however, in that one supposedly feels shamed when out-gifted. The gift is a medium and extension of one's embarrassment, exiled from the body with the expectation that the return will be honor. But in the potlatch one not only seeks to out-gift, but one also destroys the gift itself. This destructive motivation to overcome such shame, and the ever anxious and tenuous holds on power by potlatch victors offers suggestive ethnographic insight into a theory of the gift that exceeds Mauss's domestication of the phenomenon.

Georges Bataille (1991) focuses on potlatch rivalry to suggest an alternative motivation for gifting: the necessary expenditure of exuberant energy. The rivalry of potlatch is not predicated on symmetry, but rather on destructive consumption, in which energy is not conserved for reciprocity but lavishly dissipated. Here, we catch a glimpse of an outward oriented energy in which circulation does not desire return home, but seeks permanent escape, much like the migrant who successfully leaves Vietnam. The gift they return is an embodied remnant of a circulatory energy in which escape, rather than return, is the primary momentum. It is the very agential momentum that remittance recipients desire and elusively seek. One wishes to migrate so that one can give rather than receive, as in the previously mentioned case of Quynh—the woman who dreamed of running a cleaning service in America. The control and even destruction of the gift—including the hierarchical relations it maintains, rather than its reciprocity, is the ultimate goal.

The gifting process itself therefore highlights the circulatory mobility of money and juxtaposes it against the relative chance and difficulties of bodily mobility. With the emergence of long distance diasporic gifting networks, the space between giver and receiver represented by invisible boundaries that money can pass but bodies cannot becomes a productive site of emergent imaginaries. The increasing prevalence of telephone and internet communication technologies, especially in households with overseas relations where the technological hardware for communication was itself often a gift from abroad, means that overseas migrants can regularly perform for their kinsfolk the personal transformations they have undergone overseas—enabled by money earned and spent on education, fashion, material items, even spouses⁶¹. In contrast, parallel performances of Việt Kiều remittances to relatives are comparatively modest amounts intended for ambiguous Vietnamese middle class subsistence. Such remittances are small, sporadic, and declining in the post-2008 economic downturn, drawing awareness to the global nature of the present financial crisis. Furthermore remittances intended for immediate families are almost always expected to be shared with neighbors and friends. As one man put it “if you get \$100 then you take everyone out to *nhau* [eat and drink] for four days.” The result is the common adage that “money is bottomless, there is never enough” [*tiền là vô tận, biết bao nhiêu cho đủ*] by both remittance senders and receivers.⁶² Remittance money sustains life, but is insufficient to satisfactorily transform it, due to limits of quantity and environment.

Yet money teases the possible eventuality of controlling not only its reception and consumption but also its generation. Remittance exchange disrupts social norms and expectations, drawing awareness to the limitations and margins of one’s environment and the

⁶¹ *Viet Kieu* men returning to marry local women is a common occurrence. See Thai (2008).

⁶² Remittance senders in California have much to say on this issue, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapters Five and Six.

possibilities that lay beyond as represented by transformed yet still familiar overseas kin. The limited local economic development it catalyzes heightens what Arjun Appadurai (2004) has termed “the capacity to aspire,” shifting structures of expectation. The realizations of such aspirations, however, are often imagined to lie overseas. This is spatially highlighted in coastal communities in particular, existing at the visible edge of the constructed nation-state where an oceanic horizon spreads out. Endowed with past memories and histories of migratory yearnings and journeys, “the view” (Siegel 2011) continues to sublimely tease the imaginations of residents, who most evenings routinely stroll its margins to the hypothetical possibilities of what lies beyond.

Across remittance recipient communities in Vietnam, the long distance nature of international gifting exchanges in the global political economy juxtaposes the mobility of financial remittance flows against the confines of state bound bodies. The remittance gift that freely flows, carrying a certain “*hau*” that desires return home but also represents escape from it, highlights structural differences as manifested in the perceived agential capacities of the exchange participants. The frustrated desire of remittance recipients to participate in the gift’s journey—a journey that the remittance giver represented by the gift already traversed—is displaced into diverse and liminal cultural and social imaginaries. In these, it is the characteristics of the gift medium of money itself, as manifested in a capitalist global economy, which become central to notions of self and other. The circulatory mobility of money possesses power to manifest and index exchangeable value and social transformation in and across core and periphery capitalist life worlds connected by global financial flows but separated by state migratory bureaucracies and borders. These very characteristics become embodied in the individual and collective reflections on and desires for bodily mobility and transformation

described in this dissertation.

The mobile cultural imaginary therefore disrupts and complicates both utilitarian economic development and symmetry seeking anthropological gifting interpretive frameworks. In the shadow of every story of “productive” investment by families happily reunited by remittance gifts, there is another of exuberant consumption, risky gambles, frustrated hopes, betrayed loyalties, unbalanced power relations, bitter memories, unrequited desires, and disappointed misrecognitions. The gift itself becomes a mirror and embodiment of what should be, could be, but rarely is. The hopeful imaginary that teases the agency of remittance recipients to gaze upon horizons of social possibility beyond reach retreats to hypothetical reflection. The exchange between selves and diasporic others devolves into a meditation on self, but one that remains always, already haunted by the uncanny spectre of an Other as one might have been and, might still be.

Yet this meditation on the imaginaries of circulation is also a re-imagination and transformation of the self and the space it occupies. The Vietnamese experience of gift exchange with the diaspora does not merely create an abstract imaginary of another life beyond borders that nonetheless remains transfixed upon the static immobility within them, but leads to dynamic transformations in immediate personal and collective social identities and their relation to spatial landscapes.⁶³ Where physical mobility is denied, imaginative mobility is seized upon. Vietnamese remittance receivers imaginatively traverse and inhabit the beyond of the borders they live within— asserting creative agency as they reassess personal potentials, rearrange ritual forms, re-imagine deities, re-engage the spiritual, reconstrue family and community relations, and re-envision life maps for younger kinsfolk in hopes of vicarious social transformation. The

⁶³ The connection between shifting structural identities and spatial relationalities has been explored by Heidegger (1977), among others.

resultant hypotheticals of self index the emergence of “liminal” identities that cannot be re-domesticated,⁶⁴ but nonetheless act as dynamic forces for ontological re-orientations. Such social and cultural processes are in no small part contributed to by the diverse imaginaries that are catalyzed, accompanied, and embodied by transnational gift exchanges.

⁶⁴ In Victor Turner’s (1967) interpretation of liminality, it is a betwixt and between period in which one escapes structure and hierarchy only to then be reincorporated within it. He does proffer the idea of “liminoid” states—liminal identities characterized by more permanent departures from or playful rebellions against existing structural norms, perhaps more appropriate for thinking through this material, but nonetheless suggestive of engaging a structural return albeit with heightened agency. Jacques Derrida’s (1991) discussion of the impossibility of the gift, which must necessarily remain outside the circle it gives meaning to, also gestures in this vein, but perhaps more productively in that the aporia remains un-reconciled.

Chapter Four

The “Dangerous” Gift

“in Annamite morality, to accept a present is dangerous” –Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*

In this chapter I pause to return to a discussion of a more generalized concept of gifting and explore how it relates to contemporary situations of remittance exchange in Vietnam. The previous chapters have given some ethnographic insight into the experiences of remittance gift recipients in southern Vietnam. The genealogy of remittance gifting from post-war migrants/refugees illustrates how relations and imaginaries connected to transnational gifting have shifted with and are contingent on the symbolisms, forms, and presentations of the gifting mediums. The material remittance forms that emerged to assist and reconnect kinship networks dispersed after 1975 slowly shifted to monetary gifts in the 1990s and were increasingly bodily accompanied by the gifters or their extended social networks. The long distance nature of remittance gifting practices is being recompressed with the increased availability of rapid financial transfer channels, and as a significant segment of Vietnam’s exile population are reorienting themselves as transnational subjects, if only occasionally.⁶⁵

The occasional transnational returning to Vietnam may be a somewhat uncanny figure as encountered by the Vietnamese remittance recipient. He or she lives “there” [*ở bên*] where new social practices are learned and then related to kin and community members. Yet these social practices not only include the “foreign” but are themselves “hybrid” Vietnamese, as often practiced within the collective social habitus of diasporic communities abroad. The question

⁶⁵ The range of return travel to Vietnam varies considerably among overseas Vietnamese I interviewed, from regular business trips to never. Many families return one family member for periods of down time, such as during the summer school break for a child, or during low seasons for a husband or wife for private business owners. The majority of informants however reported that their return trips to Vietnam were typically spaced 2-3 years apart and lasted approximately one month.

here is how hybrid diasporic practices of gifting are received and perceived in Vietnam, including assessments of their “authenticity” or “purity”, and whether they contrast with local notions of gifting etiquette. The practice of gifting as a “Vietnamese” cultural concept [custom: *phong tục*] is often invoked by both remittance recipients and senders in explaining the obligations and expectations of remittance exchange.

Remittances are regularly explained by informants as gifts [*quà*] that are both obligatory and altruistic, and that to know and remember this is to be Vietnamese. To fully understand the invocation of this Vietnamese gifting concept, we must therefore investigate a broader range of local gifting customs than merely the remittance practices that emerged after the [Vietnam] war. This chapter will trace discussions about the idea of the “gift” in various Vietnamese contexts.

In Search of the “Gift”

Our first investigation is a curious one that begins in western social and anthropological theory but takes us by surprise to Vietnam. European cultural spectators of non-western societies have long been interested in the moral codes and functions governing intra-community exchanges. Anthropologists in particular have obsessed on identifying, categorizing, and dissecting universal codes and categories of gift giving, with scholars from across the humanities eagerly following in pursuit.⁶⁶ Often and perhaps mistakenly attributed as the original anthropologist gift scholar, Marcel Mauss, already introduced in this dissertation, directs our attention to the long social scientific genealogy of gifting in *The Gift*. He draws on ethnographic accounts of “gifting” practices from a broad spectrum of societies, including Polynesian, Melanesian, and Kwakiutl accounts that provide the core material for his analysis. Later he looks at how traces of gifting in “primitive societies” survive in other civilizational contexts. In

⁶⁶ For an overview of the extensive genealogy of gifting literature see Mark Osteen’s introduction to *Question of the Gift: Essays across Disciplines* (2002).

doing so, he in fact mentions in very brief passing Vietnam—the geographic and national subject of our present study, at the time referred to by its colonial name, “Annam.”⁶⁷ Towards the end of *The Gift*, Mauss highlights the curious fact that “in Annamite morality, to accept a present is dangerous.” (64) Mauss does not elaborate the remark, but attributes the reference in a footnote to the Finnish anthropologist Edward Westermarck, who “perceived some of its importance.”

Westermarck, who like Mauss was also an armchair anthropologist/sociologist, discussed in his 1906 two-volume work *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas* the dangers of Annamese gifting in the context of more universal fears and suspicions of strangers and the unknown. Offering an intriguing take on the origins of hospitality, Westermarck ponders “it seems likely that the custom of not receiving payment from a guest is largely due to that same dread of strangers which underlies many other rules of hospitality. The acceptance of gifts is frequently considered to be connected with some danger.” (vol. 1, 593) Westermarck draws his account of dangerous Annamese gifting—“of the Annamites it is said that for fear of bringing ill-luck into the place the people even decline presents” (vol. 1, 594)—from a German ethnographer, Friedrich Ratzel. Ratzel, known for his theories about the role of natural environments and geography in shaping human cultural outlooks and relations, draws on accounts of French ethnographers and traders such as Jean Dupuis, Jules Harmand, and Morice to describe late 19th century Indochinese society. In another grand three-volume work entitled *The History of Mankind* (1898) offering interpretive insights into various cultures and civilizations around the world, Ratzel offers passing comments on Indochinese customs. The passage on gifts in Ratzel’s work that Westermarck drew upon is as follows:

⁶⁷ Although under French colonial rule Annam was the official name of only the central Vietnamese protectorate, with Tonkin to the North and Cochinchina to the South, Annam, where the Vietnamese Emperor continued to hold nominal power, was commonly used to reference all three Vietnamese regions and the people living within them as a whole. As a province under earlier Chinese rule, Vietnam was also called Annam 安南, sometimes translated as “Pacified South.”

“The Annamite, says Morice, lives either on the water or on the mud. The villages are enclosed by palisades or thorn-hedges. Spikes of bamboo hidden in the grass render every approach unsafe; they are placed even round the houses. In the centre of the little place, surrounded by the huts, a small platform is raised on a tree-stump for the night-watchman. Amulets against mischievous spirits hang on trees and poles, and fine threads of cotton, stretched round the roof to keep off spirits, terminate in little sand heaps. For fear of bringing ill-luck into the place the people even decline presents.” (vol 3, 418)

In another passage on Annam Ratzel discusses the Vietnamese relationship to money. Quoting the French trader Jean Dupuis, he says that Tonkinese (north Vietnamese) in particular ““like making money, but are just as keen about spending as about earning it. The Tonkinese is extravagant, he is a great careless child and fond of jollifications and festivals. No sum is too high for him to pay for showy ceremonies and funerals”” (vol. 3, 413).

Further following these ethnographic vignettes to their respective sources (Harmas 1879, Morice 1880, Dupuis 1910) one is inevitably caught up in fascinating ethnological descriptions, daring adventures, and storied colonial and local politics. The accounts of explorers, administrators, traders, and missionaries, detailed with accounts of local geography, political intrigue, and reflections on cultural difference, serve as what anthropologist Jean Michaud (2004) has called “incidental ethnographies” of Vietnam at an early stage of colonial encounter. Much as Mauss’ reference to Annamese gifting also appears incidental, the point of this chapter is not to dwell excessively on these admittedly interesting early ethnographies. What is important to consider for the purposes of the present project is that the notion of the gift has intrigued anthropologists and social observers for well over a century, and appears time and again as a concept for humanistic reflection. Yet it appears that the idea of the gift holds strong appeal not only because of its seeming universality, but also as a particularized human practice offering hope for humanity’s complex capacities for hospitality and social transgression of difference through exchange. However, what also anxiously appear in these localized accounts

are the inevitable social limitations of the gift. Gifts mark the circles of social exchange and sharing in which humans participate, but also their margins of exclusion. Gifts appear almost double edged in their possibility. One is the familiar gift, which is given and returned and continues among intimate community and kinship circles. The other, the gift from the stranger, or from the unknown, as Westermarck has suggested, is one that is feared. Gifts from unknown people and unknown places are surely received with heightened suspicion, and no doubt the gifts referenced in the ethnographic accounts take place in such a context. French colonial explorers, adventurers, traders, and missionaries, who in many cases preceded or accompanied larger processes of political and military expansion and colonization, were involved in gift exchanges with local authorities and indigenous populations.⁶⁸ Yet such gifts exchanges were often cautiously and even begrudgingly engaged. Gift giving in such scenarios were likely intended to keep the outsider at a cautious distance. To the extent that they were meant to show hospitality, it was a hospitality that was intended, as Westermarck suggests, to keep the stranger a stranger, in the hopes that he will go away and not return.

Tracing Mauss's description of the "dangerous" Vietnamese gift back to its ethnographic source then, we see that Mauss's commentary is actually taken out of context. The situation described does not involve traditional intra-community gift exchange. Rather, the ethnographic accounts presented by Ratzel describe the suspicious Annamite reception of gifts coming from foreign places and people with unknown intentions. The gift and its giver are not familiar, and its origins overseas are suspiciously viewed. Certainly, it appears that the hesitation and suspicion towards the tepid gift exchanges with the French that preceded colonial intervention

⁶⁸ The aforementioned trader Jean Dupuis, for example, describes how in Hanoi, as part of an attempt to secure passage up the Red River to Yunnan, his 1872 arrival was met with both agitation by local mandarins and welcome by the Chinese colony there, yet in both cases involved dignitary receptions and gifts (1910:31).

was not altogether misplaced on the part of those who had much to lose in the future political context of such ongoing relationships.

Such historical situations at first sight, of course, appear to differ with the contemporary Vietnamese remittance gift scenario. The remittance gift, unlike suspicious gift exchanges with radically foreign western traders with ambiguous intentions, comes from an intimately familiar and recognizable kinsperson, from a place if not known at least imaginable, as this dissertation has discussed. Still, fear of the gift's capacity to disrupt settled social worlds is not out of place. Anxieties regarding remittances, even from familiar subjects, have been long standing. Various Vietnamese governments from pre-modern and colonial times to the present have monitored the influx of gifts and ideas from overseas Vietnamese, as suggested in Chapter One with the state monitoring of letters sent back to Vietnam by Indochinese soldiers in Europe during the first world war. After 1975 there were significant state anxieties about the potentially subversive influences of remittance gifts symbolizing a capitalist prosperity seemingly denied to the Vietnamese citizenry under a socialist command economy. Anthropologist Mandy Thomas (1999) argues that "the desire of overseas Vietnamese to help their families under a regime they despise is an inherently political act [...] as gifts allow individuals to insinuate certain symbolic properties into the lives of the gift recipient, so overseas Vietnamese often wish to place the desire for consumer products within their families in the homeland [...] the gifts are viewed as a type of Trojan horse, which could lead to the disruption of the political system in Vietnam." (154).

State attempts to prevent the Vietnamese population from receiving such alleged politically fraught gifts were creatively resisted. Vietnamese found ingenious ways to circulate banned gifts through other channels, including reliance on kinship networks residing in countries

less politically antagonistic to Vietnam than the United States. As one informant explained, “in the past our relatives in America would send everything [gifts, letters, and remittances] to relatives in France who would then send them to us.” The remittance gift has only recently become accepted and openly welcomed in Vietnamese communities and by the Vietnamese state. Until the mid 1990s remittances were mostly sent in bulky material form, to be sold or exchanged in the market, or via black market channels. As recently as 1997 financial remittances were still taxed, and it was only in 2002 that the Vietnamese government allowed for the expansion of foreign currency remittances and transfer mechanisms, causing a decline in flows of material remittances but also transforming their gift symbolism. “Before gifts would be sold [for cash or barter], now they are actually used” explained an elderly woman who related the genealogy of evolving remittance forms experienced since the 1970s.

Yet there continues to be an air of cautionary oversight and management by the state when it comes to gifts from the Vietnamese diaspora. Development assistance and charity from overseas Vietnamese for example, while welcomed, has also been carefully monitored and managed, as will be discussed in Chapter Five. As Nguyen Van Kien, director of the Vietnam People’s Aid Coordinating Committee [PACCOM] discussed regarding state policies managing remittances in the form of charitable aid donations from overseas Vietnamese: gifts must not be attached to politics or religion, cannot be profit motivated, and the government should intervene as necessary in the distribution of relief aid, otherwise influxes may concentrate in certain areas where families with overseas relatives are highly represented, potentially aggravating community tensions and exacerbating regional inequalities.⁶⁹ On a more individual level, informants regularly explained that informal remittance transfer channels were preferred over formal services because in addition to their familiarity, low transaction costs, and home delivery

⁶⁹ Nguyen Kien, PACCOM, interview August 2007.

services, they provided a discreet method of gifting that avoided the attention of potentially rent seeking government officials, neighbors, and extended relatives.

As with the “uncanny” personhood of the occasional transnational, the gift he or she sends may be similarly uncanny in its dual familiarity and foreignness. The gift as a medium of social relations is a known and expected medium of social relationships within the Vietnamese context, as will be discussed. The gift from the outside, as we have seen, is more suspiciously viewed. The question of the transnational Vietnamese gift returning “home” from abroad, with its characteristic mix of the familiar and unfamiliar, is the central subject of this examination. To understand the potential uncanniness of the transnational gift, we must further investigate traditional and contemporary Vietnamese practices of personal gifting. I turn then to some ethnographic examples in which informants explained the gifting processes in which they participated.

Gifting Relationships: Cycles of Belonging and Futurity

One day Thuy, an informant in Saigon, showed me a potted bonsai style tree, a common sight for the *Tết* New Year holiday, and told me how she had given one to her aunt last year. She said she had bought it on behalf of her family to return another gift—also a decorative plant but of a different type, which the aunt had given the year before. She noted that this plant was “nicer and more expensive” than the plant her aunt had given. I asked her if she planned on giving another one next year, and she said yes, of course, and that “it would be even nicer than this one.” Thuy was young, single, and had a well paying marketing job in Saigon. Explaining why she gave gifts to her aunt, she said that because she was “successful and could afford to buy nice things” it was her way of displaying her appreciation and generosity as a member of the family. She remembered the many gifts family relatives had given her growing up when she most

needed them, including the sticky rice cakes from this aunt, the motorcycle from her father when she went to college in the early 1990s, even a \$10 bill given by an overseas relative which “at that time seemed like a lot of money for me.” Now, as an adult with a professional job, it was her turn to give. She explained that each year her *Tết* gifts became more expensive because with the growing economy and professional promotions, she was able to command an ever-higher salary that she could in turn share with her relatives. Many of these relatives were in the countryside, and had in the past been helped out by her parents, who as city-dwellers had more economic opportunities. Now the parents were retired, however, and she had inherited the responsibilities of displaying generosity, particularly during the holiday period, to extended family members as well as her own parents and siblings who were less economically successful than her. She had in fact, given up a chance and personal desire to obtain a scholarship to study for a Masters of Business Administration in the United Kingdom, because doing so would leave these relatives cum dependents without a comfortable source of income. She seemed to do this altogether ungrudgingly, however, explaining it was “the Vietnamese way,” and that it was with her “home and family” that she belonged. Relating a proverb about the importance of family love and gratitude, “*Cha mẹ thương con như biển hồ lai láng*” [parents’ love for a child is like an overflowing lake], she explained that one could not simply abandon family in search of individual adventure. For Thuy such cultural sentiments were important in defining Vietnamese notions of gifting as well as personal and collective identity.

Within immediate community and family networks, gifting overtures and performances are regular modes of social interaction. Displays of generous exchange are expected, gauged by age and capacity. In the situation described above Thuy, as a working-age member of the family, was expected to share a generous proportion of her expendable income through gifting to

immediate as well as extended relatives. These gifts were in a sense a mnemonic return of previous gift overtures and inheritance of familial responsibility, but were measured by capacity and generous intention rather than economic value. Although her two siblings were also of working age, they were both married with children and had working class jobs that brought in little more than subsistence income. Thuy, as a single professional, took on the responsibility of supporting her retired parents as well as supplementing the income of her siblings. During special holidays such as *Tết*, she also took on an ambassadorial role for her branch of the family by purchasing larger gifts intended to symbolize kinship generosity and participatory belonging. Such gifts were extended not only to family members but also community organizations, including a Buddhist temple her family was connected to. “I donated \$20,000 for the building of this temple,” she proudly told me at an annual ceremony she invited me to attend at the site.

Thuy’s belonging within the family and community was predicated on shared histories and sympathies—whether remembering the motorbike and sticky rice cakes her father and aunt gave her growing up, or the difficult financial situations faced by her siblings [who, working one as a farmer and the other a shop manager, brought in only meager incomes that were expected to support entire families], or the monks of the temple who had performed rituals to bring good fortune for the family and community over the years. This belonging was also assumed to continue into the indefinite future. Thuy’s decision not to leave to pursue an MBA in England in some sense foreclosed the possibility of a “*Việt Kiều*” life overseas. Although her marketing job took her to many overseas locations on business, she had decided that it was Saigon and her family network there that was her home and where she belonged. Gifting relationships as generous rituals of family belonging, therefore, were familiar, conservatory, and necessary cultural practices for Thuy as well as those who participated in the same circles of gifting

exchange. For Thuy the horizon of belonging, concomitant with the ritualized exchange of gifts, continued endlessly and prodigally into the indefinite future.

Phuong, another professional in Saigon whose family lived in Binh Thuan province, had, like Thuy, also encountered an opportunity to leave Vietnam and study in the United Kingdom. She had an excellent job in Saigon as a social science researcher and consultant, and was well respected in her field. The opportunity to study in England was not connected to her professional training, rather it was to study English at a small university in the southwestern region of the country. Phuong, unlike Thuy, chose to pursue the chance of a life overseas. In the weeks before she left, she spoke with me many times of her ambivalence about the decision to give up her job in Saigon to pursue an unknown journey abroad. Clearly, however, she hoped that the English study program would lead her to new, as yet unknown, opportunities in Europe that would keep her there.

Two weeks before her departure, she invited me to visit her village in Binh Thuan province. It was shortly before the *Tết* New Year holiday, and the Saigon East bus station was crowded with people returning to their village, laden with large bags of goods and holiday gifts. Fighting our way through the crowds to get tickets and seats on the bus, we finally pulled away from the city. The bus was crowded, stuffy, and hot, and bumped along the dusty highway under construction as it left the city. Turning her gaze away from the window, Phuong stuck up her nose and said “Vietnam is terrible—so dirty and crowded. The government is bad to let the people live like this. Nothing will ever change in this country. The only hope for change in this lifetime is to leave.”

After a six-hour journey squashed between a rice bag, Phuong, and the window, we arrived in her village, a small municipality largely consisting of generic concrete houses spread

along two roads of a T-junction. The difference between Phuong's life in the city, where she made daily efforts to dress nicely with the latest fashions, and her extremely meager home was striking. The original wooden house with a dirt floor was being extended to two additional blue tiled rooms in the rear, but was still unfinished. Under a fluorescent light, we ate a small dinner of rice, fish, vegetables, and eggs. Afterwards I took a bath below the stars outside by the well, while pigs and chickens ran around me. Walking around the town and market with Phuong, it became clear that any initial return excitement she might have held had dissipated. "I hate this place, I never want to return here again," she told me. In the market she was recognized by some former high school classmates, now married with children, who inquired curiously about her life in the city. She was brief and almost dismissive in her answers, clearly not wanting to engage, and not bothering to tell them of her plans to go abroad.

The next day we met Son, a member of the local overseas compatriot [*Kiêu Bào*] committee [Phuong's reason for bringing me to the village in the first place], who offered me snacks and beer as he related the mission of his committee. "Our organization is trusted and prestigious, we help *Việt Kiều* to spend money usefully. We have many overseas Vietnamese contacts ourselves, many of us served in the American army⁷⁰ with them, and have helped villagers here to contact relatives they had not heard from for years. Some families who receive remittances do not know how to use that money successfully. We act as a middle organization between *Việt Kiều* and their relatives: we help them make a plan to manage their money productively, and give them advice and encouragement. We also help *Kiêu Bào* [overseas compatriots] to invest money and do charity work." He went on to give numerous anecdotes of families separated for years but reconnected as a result of his intervention and kin network

⁷⁰ Army of the Republic of [South] Vietnam [ARVN], which was allied with the U.S. It is common for many Vietnamese to reference their ARVN service days as being in the "American Army" [*quan doi My*].

research, as well as the ceremonial efforts that went into soliciting *Việt Kiều* contributions for village projects, including gifts and certificates to officially recognize their “love of country” [*yêu nước*] and “homeland” [*quê hương*]. He went on however to relate the difficulties encountered in opening up and redirecting transnational gifting flows through the *Kiều Bào* organization, muttering, “In fact, there has been little money donated to our projects, despite our efforts. There is still a lot of suspicion.” Son explained that this suspicion partially revolved around the lack of transparent rules and the intentions of other “middlemen” —whether courier services, customs officers, or government assistance programs such as the one he was running. “In the past when gifts were sent we had to give gifts to the customs officers to be able to get them... Later women would show up on bikes and give me money, but would ask me not to tell anyone I got money from them... And the police, what they really cared about when I started this overseas Vietnamese liaison [*Kiều Bào*] organization was who was getting money.”

Son’s stories of the entangled relationships and corruption involved in facilitating gifts from abroad to local inhabitants, and his role in intervening to make sure the wheels were always properly greased so that gifts could be delivered, confirms that remittances have been capitalized upon by rent seekers over the years. Gifts from abroad can unwantedly mark recipient households and indeed be a disruptive force in the undesirable attention they attract in the community. In order to receive gifts, one must gift—in this case not a return gift to the gifter, but rather local rent-seeking social networks from custom officers to police to government officials and neighbors. A tendency has emerged therefore to be careful about receiving and managing the visibility of diasporic gifts. This resonated with what another *Kiều Bào* organization volunteer from Ho Chi Minh City had told me: many families with overseas relatives “are not friendly to us, and keep their relatives in hotels so they do not have to register

with the police.” The public gift can indeed become a feared entity laden with dangerous attention, as well as intention.

When we left Phuong’s village to return to Saigon, she did not bother to tell her mother that she was leaving the country the next week, or that she would not return for the actual *Tết* holiday. She did tell her brother of her departure plans, and left her most valuable belongings, including her motorbike, with him. Two months later, her brother would call me in Saigon to ask if I had heard from her in the United Kingdom, wondering why she had not sent word from abroad. Phuong’s intention was to escape from the Vietnamese community and familial relationships that she felt kept her oppressed, from becoming and being who she wanted to be and experiencing personal transformation “in this lifetime.” When I had asked her brother previously if he expected her to eventually send remittances he had confidently responded, “of course, she is my sister so why wouldn’t she? If you have the opportunity to be in a place where you can earn money, the natural thing to do is to share it with your family back home who are less fortunate. Maybe she’ll even bring me over to England one day.” Now, the fact that he had not yet heard from his sister, through communication or gifts, was a disturbing sign that her sense of family obligations were not as secure as he assumed them to be. Unlike Thuy, Phuong had made a choice to permanently escape the networked cycles of support and belonging that tied her to Vietnam, her community, and family. The question of whether she would choose to eventually gift as an emotionally symbolic overture of her continued participation in Vietnamese family life weighed anxiously on the minds of those she had left behind, indeed her family identity as a dutiful daughter and sister depended on it.

The cases of Thuy and Phuong demonstrate that there is no predictive model for remittance and migration behavior, but do reflect consistently encountered themes in discussions

with Vietnamese informants on local notions of gifting. Beyond generalized expectations of obligation and reciprocity, Vietnamese notions of gift giving are also diachronic. The role of memory and sentiment weighs heavily in defining the meaning of the Vietnamese gift. Gift givers remember past favors given and generosity evoked, as in the case of Thuy's conscientious remembrance of childhood gifts. Contrary to Pierre Bourdieu's argument that gifts must be forgotten to be gifts (1999), the temporality and intentionality of Vietnamese gifts means they always take place as part of longer circulations in which origins and endings are never clear. This is not to say such practices are merely obligatory returns rather than altruistic overtures. The hope for a future gift is not predicated on a past demand, but nonetheless remembers and values the history of sentiment that motivated the genealogy of exchange. Forgetting is not an option. Gifts remember [*nhớ*] those that preceded them, and are also futural in indicating subjective valuations of continued and committed participation in the social relations they are intended to mediate. It is their meditated circulatory participation that defines them as gifts. Thuy's gifting locates her firmly within Vietnam, Phuong's abscondence and failure to gift marks her departure from it. Secondly, gifting is networked. Gifting is a symbolically expected mode and medium of participation within a kinship or community network. Gifts can never be repaid, but only continued forward. The continuation and futural intentionality of gifting indexes one's sociality within a given community.

Just as gifts include, however, they also exclude. Westermarck has suggested as much in his musings on gift hospitality that serves to Other the receiver. Or as Jacques Derrida reminds us, hospitality inevitably veils the darker violence of inhospitality that it must necessarily define itself against, therefore revealing the "the violence of the power of hospitality" (2000, 149). To not give is to signal one's decision to exit the network. Phuong's decision to leave Vietnam was

a permanent one: with her departure she distanced and isolated herself by breaking off communication as well as gifting. Gifts are deemed to hold one's place in the community, to cease gifting is to exit sociality.

Third, gifts are measured by one's capacity to give, rather than the value of the gift itself. The extent to which one gives more than one can afford imbues the gift with the seriousness of its intention. One demonstrates that one remembers, and that one desires to remain an integral part of a social and kinship network, by sacrificing to gift. Thuy's gifts to her family far outweigh the past gifts received in material terms and by her own admission are expensive for her to purchase. But as a young professional with a decent salary, she feels she must demonstrate that her gifts are not merely token gestures, but rather reflect a similar personal sacrifice proportionate to her income capacity as the smaller gifts given to her in a past period when despite difficult economic times her family still made the effort to gift.

Finally, one's ability to give and the types of gifts given mark one's social status and seek recognition within the community. Thuy's measured performance of gifting during the *Tết* New Year holidays reflects a conscious effort to gain recognition for the professional promotions she has achieved in her job. Her temple donations were also proudly announced so that others could admire her generosity. For Thuy this was particularly important as such professional advancement often came at the expense of other traditional symbols of social success such as marriage and children.

The prodigal cycle of Thuy's family gifting reflects a somewhat potlatch-like exchange process. It is mildly reminiscent of Dupuis's descriptions of "extravagant" expenditures of wealth in 19th century Vietnam, mentioned earlier in this chapter. The public displays of such gifts are not without calculated benefit to the giver. Once again tracing Mauss' account of the

potlatch back to his source, we find Franz Boas's 1898 report on the Northwestern Tribes of Canada to the British Association for the Advancement of Science. In the report, Boas describes the potlatch as a system of gift exchange in which participants pay debts to secure their family's future as integral members of the community. In Boas' interpretation, the "first object is to pay his debts. This is done publicly and with much ceremony, as a matter of record." The lavish display of gifting and destruction that this entails is the part of the potlatch that is more often commented upon. Yet Boas also says that "[the Indian's] second object is to invest the fruits of his labour so that the greatest benefit will accrue from them for himself as well as his children...it is, we might say, their life insurance." Gifts then are not only reciprocal, obligatory, and seeking of recognition, but also conservatively futural in their orientation and calculations. Most importantly, they attempt to preserve and secure one's identity through integral social participation in a community. Through gifting, one maintains a continuum of identity in which past relationships play an important role in reminding one of previous social obligations and ontologies. In the case of global migration and remittance economies, when gifters may choose among multiple communities to partake in, where such gifts are directed and the identities they seek to invest themselves in take on heightened significance. Yet the agency to gift, as we will see, is very much in tension with the obligation to gift, entangling gifters and receivers in complicated social networks in which the production and preservation of identity is never an individuated or isolated process.

Gifts in Religion

Thuy's temple donations highlight the religious traditions that also influence Vietnamese gifting customs. Gifting has no doubt been culturally and religiously ritualized and moralized in Vietnam. Vietnamese draw on a number of religious and philosophical traditions, including the

traditional “Three Religions” [*Tam Giáo*]: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as Christianity [largely Catholic], and Cao Daim among others. Each of these traditions preaches the merits of gifting between humans and to gods. The notion of reciprocity as both a moral code of conduct and as a reflection of the natural order can be found throughout various religious texts. In the Analects, for example, Confucius emphasizes that the one concept that “can serve as a principle for the conduct of life” is “reciprocity.”⁷¹ In the Buddhist Lotus Sutras, the perpetual insufficiency but necessity of gifts is expounded upon. Gifts to the Buddha are a hopelessly attempted return for the gift of enlightened understanding and compassion; humans nonetheless continue to give, for example, “gifts and offerings of rare and unusual food and drink, of superior clothing and bedding, using candana to build monasteries adorned with gardens and groves, gifts of this kind and others all of them fine in sundry ways.”⁷² Of course the majority of religious followers in Vietnam are not necessarily textually engaged with the historical scriptures of their religions. Anthropologist Philip Taylor, following religious pilgrimages and festivals in southern Vietnam, has observed the frequent and playful adaptations of religious rituals and meanings by Vietnamese followers (2004). Nonetheless, general concepts of gifting, compassion, and hospitality are widely invoked by Vietnamese in their religious discussions and practices. During a *Tết* lunar New Year temple trip I participated in, five bus loads of urban Saigonese traveled on an all-day trip through Southeastern Vietnam to the coastal town of Vung Tau, stopping at over ten different Buddhist temples. In each place, monks and nuns would be on hand to offer gifts of sticky rice cakes wrapped in banana leaves and tea, while the pilgrims would rush around the various altars in the temple to pray, light incense, and make monetary offerings to the various deities that had provided them with good

⁷¹ Analects XV:23 as reported in DeBary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 25.

⁷² selection from the Lotus Sutra as translated by Leon Hurvitz (2009), pg. 230.

fortune in the past year and, they hoped, would send more fortune and prosperity in the new year to come. The lay pilgrims were from a wide range of age and income brackets, but all that I observed gave some monetary gift at the temples, whether large or small according to their capacity.

Whereas the definition of gifting to individuals is entangled with and complicated by past debts and obligations, and collective giving through state run hometown association models [*Hội Kiều Bào*] is often suspiciously viewed, religious organizations in Vietnam have greatly benefitted from overseas remittances. Throughout Vietnam one finds freshly built and restored temples, such as the Whale God temples discussed in Chapter Three, the fund raising for which regularly involves outreach to overseas communities. Buddhist head monks and nuns will often personally tour religious communities abroad to raise funds for a temple. Elderly Vietnamese I interviewed often reported that donations to local religious groups were a regular use of the remittance gifts they received from abroad. Many Vietnamese Americans send money for religious purposes, trusting local relatives to channel them to appropriate church or temple authorities. As one woman explained, “my children in America give me money to do with what I wish. I am old and do not need a lot of things. I prefer to give money to the temple. It is good fortune to do so, and the temple helps the poor and needy.”

Although there has been a strong religious revival in Vietnam through the support of overseas remittances, state control over religious organizations remains tight. Religious donations can be “dangerous” to the state in their promotion of a separate sector that may be critical of government policies. In Vietnam there is a storied history of political critique by Buddhist, Catholic, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Protestant religious sects. In recent years, a number of religious leaders actively followed by overseas Vietnamese, including the Buddhist monk

Thich Quang Do, have been under house arrest or are closely monitored and often harassed by government authorities.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a monk who was exiled after the Vietnam War and leads an expatriate Vietnamese Buddhist community in France, returned to the country for the first time in 2007. At Vinh Nghiem Pagoda in Saigon, he led a daring chanting requiem to pray for souls of the dead without privileging past political affiliation. Thousands of south Vietnamese attended the event to write the names of dead relatives, many of whom had fought in the republican army against the communists, on commemorative prayer lists. Although Thich Nhat Hanh was received by thousands of followers on his tour around the country, with cautious government approval, his Bat Nha monastery in Hue was later cracked down upon in 2009, allegedly with state support⁷³—its monks and nuns forcibly ousted from the temple grounds.

Both critiqued and followed by many Buddhists in Viet Nam, Thich Nhat Hanh is often said to bring back to Vietnam a different kind of Buddhism: one that his detractors say has become “more for foreigners than Vietnamese,” having lost its religious and cultural roots in Vietnam and hybridized beyond recognition. Yet the departure and return of Nhat Hanh’s Buddhist faith is seen by other followers as a gift back to his own country. As one attendee at the Vinh Nghiem requiem explained, “Vietnamese Buddhism has lost much of its spirituality and meaning. People go to the temple but they don’t know why, they just wish for good luck but no longer understand Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh is bringing religious meaning back through his preaching and writings. We owe the Venerable Master gratitude for what he has given back to us.” The return of Thich Nhat Hanh’s brand of Buddhism is now being accompanied by the master himself on repeated visits since 2007, despite some criticism within his community of followers that his own colleagues in the Vietnamese clergy remain persecuted. Thich Nhat Hanh

⁷³ Human Rights Watch “Vietnam: Sharp Backsliding on Religious Freedom” 10/18/09.

has preached, “The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers.” Exactly what kind of flowers will bloom and whether they can be controlled is a significant concern of the Vietnamese state that anxiously monitors the present of “presence” in Thich Nhat Hanh’s pilgrimage tours. Indeed the uproar over the monetary and social “gifts” that one diasporic monk has brought to Vietnam through support of the Buddhist faith illustrates that overseas gifts may be both complexly desired and deemed potentially dangerous. The controversy also illustrates that gifting not only affects the immediate relationships between givers and receivers, but also indirect relations with and among the spectators of such exchanges.

Gifts in Legend and Literature

Moving beyond ethnographic and religious accounts, descriptions of gifting practices also pervade Vietnamese legends and literature. One of the most famous Vietnamese national folk tales is that of King Le Loi, who expelled the Ming Chinese occupiers from Vietnam in the 15th century. He was allegedly assisted in this mission by a divine gift: a sword inscribed with “the will of heaven.” Beginning in 1418 Le Loi waged a ten-year battle against the Chinese, finally defeating them in 1427. According to the legend, at the end of the war, the Turtle God that had given the sword reappeared and Le Loi returned it to him. The lake in Hanoi where the event took place is now called *Hồ Hoàn Kiếm*, the Lake of the Returned Sword. The gift in this case had to be ultimately returned—designed to serve a temporally contained purpose and symbolic of the divine intervention bestowed upon the task. The gift of the sword confers social status upon the warlord Le Loi, who becomes Emperor upon returning it. The gift also demands remembrance and gratitude: when the Turtle returns to take it back, Le Loi is naturally expected to oblige yet the act is still portrayed as a voluntary gift. It is through the performative agency of

Le Loi's public obliging that he gains power and recognition, founding the Le Dynasty that would continue over three hundred years before its official demise.

The nineteenth century Vietnamese literary classic *Tale of Kieu* highlights the plight of Kieu, a young woman who foregoes her own happiness to pay off a debt owed by her father. When thugs threaten the lives of her father and brother over repayment of a debt, she makes a conscious decision to give her body as a gift to save them. The narrator of the story relates the ethical choice involved for Kieu:

“By what means could she save her flesh and blood? When evil strikes you bow to circumstance. As you must weigh and choose between your love and filial duty, which will turn the scale? She put aside all vows of love and troth—a child first pays the debts of birth and care. Resolved on what to do, she said: ‘Hands off—I’ll sell myself and Father I’ll redeem’.” (Huynh Translation, 33)

Securing a “bridal gift” of “four hundred and some liang” to pay off the debt, a contract is agreed and Kieu is supposed to be married. The father is freed, but it turns out the marriage gift was in actuality payment to buy Kieu for work in a brothel, not marriage. The money from Kieu to free the father from his debts is in this case a gift, because it represents an emotional and filial attachment. The money to purchase Kieu, on the other hand, turns out to not be a gift, despite initially being under the guise of one. Rather it is an economic contract between parties that hold no sentimental regard for each other. Once the transaction is completed, Kieu is consigned to her role as a slave. For the rest of the story Kieu wanders far from home, undergoing a series of tragedies and forever separated from her childhood innocence. Yet the reader is admonished to admire her for the gift of life she has given her family, where filial duty trumps personal happiness. Kieu in a sense embodies the meaning of the traditional Vietnamese gift, the tragedy of her chosen fate demonstrating the depth and selflessness of her filial obligation. Marilyn Strathern's (1988, 178) observation that the separation between people and objects in western

anthropological gifting analyses and knowledge production is artificial is perhaps apt in relation to Kieu, who both offers and embodies the gift—in this case her life and the money that secured it to free another's. The gift is not merely an external object outside of the participants who exchange it, but involves an affective bodily commitment to the relationship. The *Tale of Kieu* remains a popular literary classic, which even inspired a contemporary film rendition in 2007 entitled *Saigon Eclipse* by French *Việt Kiều* director Othello Khanh, featuring a mixed Vietnamese and *Việt Kiều* caste. In Khanh's film version Kieu is sold into international sex slavery, metaphorically entangling the contemporary plight of remittance sending Vietnamese sex workers removed from home with this traditional Vietnamese tale of migratory woe and selfless sacrifice.

In recent literature emerging from the *Đổi Mới* [Renovation] period, gifts index shifting social hierarchies and become metaphorical critiques of the socialist transition to a capitalist economy in which social relations are increasingly monetized. Nguyen Huy Thiep's famous short story, "The General Retires", offers critical insight into traditional and transforming meanings of gifts in the description of a wedding party:

"The wedding in the suburbs was ridiculous and rather vulgar. Three cars. Filtered cigarettes but towards the end of the party replaced with rolled cigarettes. Fifty dinner trays but twelve were left untouched. The groom wore a black suit, red tie. I had to lend him the best tie in my wardrobe. I say borrow, but I knew I wouldn't get it back."
(translation from the original)

Weddings, in which gifts and displays of generosity are a regular affair, are often sites of social status performance. Here the wedding is performed at the suburban edge of the city, spatially indexing a family of lower socio-economic status. Yet the ambitious presentation of gifts to the guests indicates an aspiration for wealth and social standing that is out of reach for the family. There is a surplus of food ordered, with twelve trays left untouched, but the high

quality cigarettes are revealingly replaced by cheap rolling papers and tobacco by the end of the night. The groom does not even have a proper tie, so the narrator lends him his best. But to lend one something in Vietnam, he recognizes, often means to give without expectation of return. A loan is a begrudged gift, but which receives none of the recognition for generosity and altruism usually associated with gifting. While the “vulgar affair” of the wedding performs itself as a lavish gift to the community, the tie, given by the narrator, is a private loan and thus not publicly recognized as a gift. The public/private disconnect between what the narrator and the wedding audience understands as gifts emerges as a source of resentment in this case.

Resentment, Recognition, Danger

Returning to the title of the chapter then, gifts in Vietnam can be dangerous, not least because they encompass such a broad range of meanings, obligations, and expectations. Nonetheless they are necessary and central to Vietnamese rituals of sociality and exchange. Although Mauss’s dangerous gift appears to be one from the “outside” and thus atypical of Vietnamese gifting practices, further investigation into “traditional” community Vietnamese gifting practices reveal a marked frustration in which one’s social identity comes to be marked, affected, and embodied by gifts, often beyond one’s intended meaning. To gift is to participate in a social network that extends beyond one’s immediate family network and thus control. As Mauss says of gifting in China, the broader civilizational culture of which Vietnam has been historically associated, “through the thing [gift] passed on [...] the alliance that has been contracted is no momentary phenomenon, and the contracting parties are deemed to be in a state of perpetual dependence towards one another” (64). While gifts are public and often token, they index longer-term substantive obligations between givers and receivers, which may draw unwanted attention, oblige begrudged displays of generosity, or be called upon unexpectedly. As

Thang, a remittance receiver in the Mekong Delta province of Ben Tre explained to me when I asked how often he receives remittances, “if I don’t have money I call to ask for money.” It is precisely this attitude that countless Vietnamese remittance senders interviewed in California resent. The agency of gifting is reversed: givers become obliged and recipients demand.

While remittance givers and receivers speak openly of the “gifts” they give and receive, loans—those overshadowed begrudging gifts that often follow the token symbolic ones—are a common source of antagonism between Vietnamese family members. While gifters receive public recognition, loaners are obscured or even vilified. In the case of Kieu, the daughter’s performative agency of voluntary gifting is celebrated. Yet her father also grieved at having to give away his daughter to pay off his debt—“pity the father facing his young child. Looking at her, he bled and died within” (35). The father’s incapacity to pay off his extortive loans and protect his daughter resulted in her having to sell herself. Allowing her to do is represented in some sense as a begrudged patriarchal gift, as to do so was anguishing and painful. Yet in the end he not only lost his daughter but also lost face as a man who no longer holds the agency to gift. He is both a begrudging gifter, in giving up his daughter, as well as a begrudging recipient, in receiving the money and extortion relief from her act. He cannot be the hero of the story, for his participation in the gifting process is obliged rather than selfless and voluntary.

Remittances are often expected and even demanded by those family members who stay behind in Vietnam. Routinely taking care of ancestral homes, or of sick and elderly relatives, means that support money is obliged from far away kin who have escaped such family responsibilities. One must give, and to the extent that one displays personal agency and generosity in the performance of this obligation, as King Le Loi did in returning the sword to the lake turtle or Kieu did in offering her life to save her father, gives one credibility among family

members. Obligated remittance support can become a generous and celebrated gift through the performance of its presentation, but only if carefully enacted. As one informal Vietnamese proverb says, “*Của cho không bằng cách cho*”—“the way you give gifts is more important than the gift itself.” Even more formalized Vietnamese language generally differentiates the formal verb used for giving [*tặng*] a gift from the more common word for giving [*cho*], emphasizing the importance and etiquette of presentation. Personally presented gifts in Vietnam are routinely refused but persistently pressed by the giver on the receiver until eventually accepted. But as one remittance sender quietly complained, “it is not a choice, I *must* show generosity [...] then after I’ve given them everything, they still expect more.” Another proverb says, “*có qua có lại mới toại lòng nhau*”, mutual giving satisfies the heart. The emphasis is on the push and pull of emotional relations through giving of oneself. Gifting is a social and cultural performance in which one’s voluntary and generous intentionality must be emotionally invested and visibly displayed. To do so half-heartedly is to betray the spirit of the gift and lose one’s credibility as a gifter.

When one can no longer afford to gift, one loans. Yet loans are often described as veiled requests for gifts. “My relatives ask me to loan them \$5000, so I give them \$500 instead. I know that the loan will never be repaid, so I might as well be generous with a gift instead of appearing stingy with a loan that is really a gift anyway,” related Minh, a remittance sender in California. The context of the exchange naturally diminishes the credibility and agency of the gifter. Of course in many cases loans are paid back, and remittances are in general a critical source of credit in a country where microfinance is limited. But the remittance loan is predicated on familial trust and goodwill rather than enforceable legal contracts. Like the wedding tie in Nguyen Huy Thiep’s story, one gives never being sure of “getting it back.” A remittance

recipient in Saigon who borrowed \$40,000 to rebuild and expand his house explained to me that there was no interest or timeline for the loan—“we will pay it back when we can.” On the other hand, a remittance sender in San Jose explained how her family “lent \$50,000 to relatives in Vietnam so that they could build a mini hotel. The hotel is not well managed or profitable, so there is no chance of them paying the loan back in the near future. But my relatives in Vietnam do not understand that this money is not free. My parents work harder and later hours to earn money so they can pay off their expenses as well as make payments on the bank loan they took out to support our relatives’ business venture. Our Vietnamese relatives don’t understand or appreciate the hardship we endure. It makes me very angry.”

Gifts may be dangerous therefore, not only from the outside, but even within the closest family circles, because the obligations and drama they provoke are endless, and the imagined intentions they embody are never transparent. Remittance gifts come from elsewhere, with sometimes predictably suspicious intentions, as Marcel Mauss as well as more contemporary Vietnam observers such as Mandy Thomas have suggested. However remittance gifts also attempt to mark one’s place within a familiar community. One gifts not only out of compassion, but also strategically to retain a stake in a family or community of origin. Remittance recipient households often see themselves as holding a social and physical place for family members abroad, and utilize money from them accordingly. “We rebuilt this house to western standards with *their* money, so that they can return in the summers to live here comfortably,” explained one man who upgraded his house with “luxury” amenities such as seated toilets using remittance funds. Yet the transnational family network resides in multiple locales in which traditional customs and characteristics of Vietnamese gifting—whereby gifts circulate within familiar networks, are diachronically oriented, and gauge realistic measures of capacity and social

status—are no longer fully understood. Disconnected imaginaries circulate within the same social networks as gifts and people, exacerbating expectations and misunderstandings.

Reception of a gift may connect one to a past one wishes to forget. Re-entering into gift relations may be uncanny in that one may find one's motives suddenly suspect. Surprise gifts or communications by remittance recipients are often read by senders as veiled requests for more money. A wedding or death announcement from Vietnam is usually followed by a compulsory remittance transfer from the overseas recipient of the announcement to the family member in Vietnam who notified them. A *Tết* New Year card received in the United States from a forgotten relative guiltily reminds one of abandoned family obligations. The general sense of remittance exchange participants is that remittance “gifts” are obligatory rather than truly voluntary, and there is widespread awareness of the emotional tensions they provoke. “They [the family abroad] are afraid [*sợ*] of us, because they think we only want money,” decried one Vietnamese who occasionally receives remittances. Reception of the gift can imply judgment and defensiveness. In other cases, remittances are openly demanded as part of traditional cultural obligations and identity. As one Saigon remittance receiver declared, “those who do not give [remittances] are no longer Vietnamese.” To cease gifting therefore is to lose one's cultural identity.

If remittances are obligatory gifts that must be given, in a sense they are like “gifts to the gods,” as Maurice Godelier (1999) might interpret, emphasizing that not all gifts are reciprocal or voluntary. As in the Buddhist Lotus Sutras, for Godelier, gifts to the gods can never be adequately reciprocated, for the original gift of life cannot be approximated in return: “for in response to the gifts made by the great gods [...] there can be no true counter-gift” (193). Gifts must be given, but can only hope for, rather than expect, recognition. For whatever the lack felt

by those who stayed behind in Vietnam, they still claim the authenticity of kin and even national identity by physical virtue of the homes they maintain and the soil they live on. Yet the rootedness of such claims, especially in communities where so many current residents have attempted flight themselves, are always already tenuous. The chance nature of refugee flight means that the *Việt Kiều* may be uncanny, not only because they re-emerge from an unknown overseas horizon, but also by virtue of the fact that their escape is often attributed to the whims of fate [*số phận*] rather than a rewarded calculation of agency. The gifts former refugees can afford to give as a result of their new lives abroad carry symbolic meanings that are not only from inside a known community of symmetrically aspired exchange but also from an unknown outside: over there [*ở bên*]. It is an outside that is not merely geographic and cultural, but potentially divine: the vicissitudes of fate that allowed some to leave, some to be returned, and others to perish, remains ever enigmatic. The resultant transnational community itself is one that is increasingly displaced, disconnected, and unfamiliar. Gifters aspire to display benevolent agency through remittance giving, but confront the contradiction that such capacity to gift was in part bestowed by circumstances of migratory chance. The sentiment nonetheless remains that wherever fate has taken the *Việt Kiều*, homeland and family are still divine bearing points to which they owe their fortune and identity, to where and whom they can now return, and which they are obligated to acknowledge through gifts.

Thus whether remittances are duly recognized as voluntary gifts or received as expected tribute is frequently an antagonistic issue for remittance economy participants. It may be for this reason that many overseas Vietnamese, especially those who have been away from the country for a period of time and have already sponsored close family members for emigration as well as second generation overseas Vietnamese who do not feel an immediate sense of direct family

obligation, often transition over time away from substantive family targeted remittance support to sporadic holiday familial gifts or collective charitable donations. But for those who retain their family ties and continue to make transnational pilgrimages back to home communities, remittances serve as token but symbolically compulsory placeholders for the absent overseas migrant. At the very minimum, *Tết* New Year money is an expected gifting norm for overseas families who maintain social linkages with home communities. It is unimaginable for an overseas Vietnamese to return to one's family or community without being preceded or accompanied by gifts. The tension between the public performance of gifting and the obligations of giving haunt family relationships, maintaining but also straining kinship networks as well as the idea of the gift itself.

Charitable donations, on the other hand, tend to be collectively oriented rather than targeted for individual family members. They are not necessarily motivated by a sense of kinship obligation and do not always seek recognition in their reception. Rather, the motivations for charitable giving [*từ thiện*] by overseas Vietnamese are often expressed as an attempt to recapture the agency and humanity of gifting while cultivating identity through relationality with a shared homeland. In such giving acts there is an intentional desire to restore and refresh the altruism of the gift and overcome its dangerously ambivalent undertones. How and whether this is accomplished is the subject of Chapter Five.

Chapter Five

Charitable Intentions

After I first arrived in Saigon to begin fieldwork in January 2007, I met with Diep, a Vietnamese American woman I had met in the United States a few months before. I had originally called her while in San Jose, California in Fall 2006 to inquire about the Vietnamese American NGO⁷⁴ network, a confederation of Vietnamese American charitable organizations working in Vietnam of which she was the chairperson. When she spoke with me then she was hesitant to meet, saying that she was very busy and wanting to know “what would I do for them?” When I told her of my personal interest and history of volunteerism and outreach to the Vietnamese community, she started to warm up. I was attending an anthropology conference in San Jose, the city that was home to the second largest Vietnamese community in the United States after Orange County, California, and wanted to make some contacts with Vietnamese Americans who had transnational economic and social engagements with Vietnam. Although I intended for the focus of my dissertation to be on individual family remittances, I thought it would be a useful tangent to learn a bit about the work of Vietnamese American groups that were doing charitable and development work in Vietnam. The project scope of these groups range widely, from education and human trafficking to cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. Diep told me that despite her busy schedule she could introduce me to their work, perhaps I could come stay at her house near the conference center, and we could discuss whenever I was not in conference session? An advisor once said when I asked for advice on field methods: “never turn down an invitation.” So I canceled my motel plans and took Diep up on the offer.

⁷⁴ NGO: non-governmental organization. For more on the VA-NGO Network see <http://wp.va-ngo.org>.

My meeting with Diep would extend into a much longer-term friendship and engagement with the work of hers and other organizations seeking to alleviate poverty and social injustice in Vietnam. Although my interest in collective charity giving continued to be relatively tangential to my research, over the course of my time in Vietnam I volunteered with and shadowed a number of organizations, interviewed twenty-six volunteers and staff people working with them, participated in six conferences and workshops to learn about their efforts, and helped with some of the group's reporting, monitoring, and evaluation efforts. The more the people I worked with and interviewed explained the motivations for their humanitarian work to me, the more I came to realize that charitable giving from the diaspora was actually very much entangled with traditional family remittance giving. This chapter explores the work and motivations of some overseas Vietnamese volunteers and donors who have engaged with charitable activities in Vietnam. In their responses, in which they generally differentiate collective from individual family giving, we see a desire to restore the idealized intention of the gift: a gift recognized as selfless, altruistic, and not demanding of return. Yet as with the gift's other incarnations, the entanglement of identity with giving complicates the hope for what Malinowski, even before Mauss's meditations on the concept, once termed a "pure gift"⁷⁵ without strings attached.

A few days after calling Diep in Saigon, I found myself on a bus with her to Long Xuyen, in the Mekong Delta province of An Giang, to volunteer with her organization: the An Giang Dong Thap Alliance for the Prevention of Trafficking [ADAPT], a project of the California Bay area based Pacific Links Foundation. As in San Jose, she chatted eagerly, full of passion and zeal for her project of preventing young Vietnamese women from being sold into prostitution,

⁷⁵ *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). Pure gifts for Malinowski are "an act, in which an individual gives an object or renders a service without expecting or getting any return." He acknowledges however that "since gifts in the Trobriands are conceived as definite acts with a social meaning rather than transmissions of objects, it results that where social duties do not directly impose them, gifts are very rare." (177)

indignant and angry at the failed efforts of the government and larger organizations to adequately address the issue. ADAPT, as a Vietnamese American led organization, had a critical advantage, she said. With its combined Vietnamese and overseas Vietnamese staff, they could combine local knowledge with Vietnamese American connections to resources and awareness campaigns to intervene in cases of potential trafficking. The primary program ADAPT ran was the provision of scholarships to keep young girls from dropping out of school: lack of local employment opportunities frequently led to the allure of work and remittances across the nearby Cambodian border, where a thriving sex industry awaited in Phnom Penh, often disguised by more benign recruiting descriptions of domestic help positions. Shadowing Diep on her visits to government officials, local partners, field staff, and clients, I was amazed at how this middle aged woman, with a husband and child in San Jose, found the energy to fly back and forth between the U.S. and Vietnam on a regular basis, largely on her own funds, to manage the program. Constantly on the phone and on the move, her “giving” to this humanitarian cause in her country of origin, which she had left as a teenager, involved not only financial but considerable personal expenditure. She differentiated this kind of giving—both financial and social—from personal remittance giving, which she said was more obligatory and filial but often did not go to as good a use. Humanitarian giving to broader development causes, she said, could do much more to bring Vietnam out of poverty in the long run than individually targeted remittances, and her hope was to encourage the Vietnamese American community to engage more with this type of collective giving in the future. In particular she wished to garner support for the broader Vietnamese American NGO Network with which her organization worked.

Eventually, Diep would ask me to help document some of the work of Vietnamese American charity groups in Vietnam.⁷⁶ This chapter relates the voices of some volunteers within the Vietnamese American NGO Network she put me in touch with, as well as others not affiliated with them but with similar humanitarian giving intentions. In the course of these examples, I hope a notion of the gift emerges as articulated by the participants in the various charitable activities documented. I will then examine how this intersects and diverges with notions of gifting within familial contexts.

Vietnamese American Philanthropic Engagement

Diaspora participation with humanitarian issues in the homeland has become increasingly acceptable and visible with time among a Vietnamese American community once wary of any kind of engagement with Vietnam. In the past and to some extent the present, aid to Vietnam might be associated with support of the Communist Party. Beyond individual family giving, collective humanitarian giving was actively discouraged by many in the overseas refugee communities, especially in the United States. Yet now, over thirty-five years after the end of the Vietnam War, the idea that isolating Vietnam will lead to the fall of the regime has become a mostly dismissed strategy. Vietnam has largely integrated with the capitalist global economy, and is a darling of the international aid community, ranking in the top five global recipients of international aid.⁷⁷ Yet despite significant transfers of overseas development aid to Vietnam, remittances from overseas Vietnamese are still greater in quantity.

In the shadow of all this, many overseas Vietnamese philanthropy organizations have also emerged to provide direct humanitarian aid. Their rationale is that smaller, efficient organizations run by staff and volunteers with Vietnamese linguistic capacities and cultural

⁷⁶ part of a country report and regional study on diaspora philanthropy for the Asia Pacific Philanthropy Consortium (2008).

⁷⁷ OECD (2009).

capital will be more effective in addressing poverty relief and development needs than larger international NGOs that often rely on inefficient and sometimes corrupt government partners for distribution of aid. Collective humanitarian assistance also allows many overseas Vietnamese to control and direct their money towards issue specific causes, as opposed to family assistance practices where consumption behavior by remittance receivers may diverge in ways unintended by the senders.

Fundraising for overseas Vietnamese charitable causes has become an increasingly popular way to organize community events in areas with large Vietnamese populations such as California. Many Vietnamese American media organizations now provide free public service slots to advertise charitable fund raising events for Vietnam. Dinh Quang Anh-Thai, a broadcaster for Little Saigon Radio in Orange County California points out that fifteen years ago such organizations had to operate below the radar, but now “we [the radio station] are happy to help put the word out for these groups because we know their work is important. We just make sure that we ask the right questions to ensure that the donations are going directly to people in need in Vietnam and not the government.”⁷⁸

The ability for such organizations to operate more openly and draw increasingly on the diaspora community for not only projects in local communities but also development projects back in Vietnam allowed many such groups to discover each other’s work and share best practices on issues they were encountering in similar fields of operation. Mark Sidel, who has written a report on Vietnamese American philanthropy (2007), highlighted the 2004 establishment of the Vietnamese American NGO Network, of which Diep was the chairperson in 2007, as “an organized community of Vietnamese organizations in the United States dedicated to

⁷⁸ Interview w. Dinh Quang Anh Thai 9/28/07

assisting Vietnamese development through diaspora giving.”⁷⁹ The genesis of the Vietnamese American NGO network was when representatives of some Vietnamese American groups requested that their voices be included along with established international NGOs in regular meetings with the Vietnamese government. The majority of these Vietnamese American NGOs deal with relatively apolitical issues of poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, medical care, youth scholarship, disabilities, etc. This also reflects the practicality of NGO work in Vietnam: poverty reduction initiatives are welcomed by the Vietnamese government, but organizations working with human rights issues for example are not able to operate within the country, reflecting entrenched political sensitivities within the Communist Party.

In September 2007 I attended the Vietnamese American NGO Network’s third national conference in San Diego, California. The meeting was designed to bring its [at the time] thirty-two member and other non-member Vietnamese American NGOs together to share experiences and information, collaborate, and build capacity for their work. Upon a closer look at these organizations through participation with their activities and discussions with their founders, volunteers, and staff, what becomes apparent is not only the diversity of projects, size and formality of organizations, and volunteer/donor bases, but also the difficulty of clearly disaggregating diaspora specific philanthropy from other development initiatives operating between the United States and Vietnam. Quite a few of the Vietnamese American NGOs involved Vietnamese Americans raising money and running projects in Vietnam: the kind of direct diaspora-homeland relationship I had anticipated. However, a number of these “diaspora” NGOs are Vietnamese American catalyzed or facilitated, but rely on strong donor and volunteer bases in the broader American community, as will be discussed.

⁷⁹ Sidel, Mark (2007). “Vietnamese American Diaspora Philanthropy to Vietnam”

While most of the NGOs whose representatives I met with were registered 501c3 non-profit organizations in the United States, fewer were registered as official NGOs in Vietnam with the People's Aid Coordinating Committee in Vietnam [PACCOM]. This stemmed from a variety of factors, including bureaucratic hurdles to registration in Vietnam, lack of tax-exemption incentives, and reluctance to alienate Vietnamese American donors, many of whom fear that working with the Vietnamese government will lead to corruption and inefficiency. Many organizations were also informally run without full time paid staff, and already had local connections with communities and officials that facilitated de-facto working relationships to implement aid projects. Although there was a push among the VA NGO Network to formalize and register many such NGOs with the Vietnamese government, a measure that in the long term would allow access to other development aid and foundational resources, there was concern about the increased report and grant writing requirements of formal funders. For many of the organizations, familiar ways of fundraising through individual or business donations in the local community were sufficient to achieve modest organizational goals.

Many NGOs were also beginning to shift their philanthropic goals towards longer-term sustainable development rather than short-term poverty relief. Short term disaster responses, often in the case of frequent flooding in Central Vietnam and the Mekong Delta as well as within the United States for Vietnamese American victims of Hurricane Katrina, capture headlines and created opportunities for mobilizing broad-based Vietnamese American community support and fundraising. A sentiment often evoked by participants in aid and relief efforts was that Vietnamese globally have collectively suffered, whether in Vietnam or as refugees and immigrants abroad. It is important therefore for those who have raised themselves up economically to offer a helping hand to those who remain in need. Yet many organizations

active in raising relief funds have also been building longer-term development projects over the years, even if at first only motivated by short-term relief needs. Some of these organizations have religious or educational alumni affinities. Many are embedded in Vietnamese American community organizing and may have a history of political organizing and advocacy for Vietnamese boat refugees. Others serve as cultural brokers for a broader spectrum of volunteers, activists, and donors. Still others serve as individual donors for targeted causes of personal concern. Over the years, the institutional rationales for many such organizations have shifted consistent with community needs as well as donor interests and demands.

One well-known Vietnamese American NGO and community-organizing group based on the American east coast is Lua Viet. A Catholic affiliated organization based in New Jersey, Lua Viet has, through the leadership of Father Paul Chuong, organized Vietnamese American youth across the American northeast to maintain cultural and linguistic identities through annual summer camps in upstate New York. Community organizing among youth is seen as an important step in building longer-term collective identities that retain a cultural orientation to Vietnamese issues. In the past Lua Viet has worked with Vietnamese boat people and lobbied against human rights abuses in Vietnam. They also organize community publications and festivals for events such as *Tết*, or Lunar New Year. Since the mid 1990s, the organization has turned some of its efforts to issues in Vietnam, and community events in the U.S. have often been combined with fundraising initiatives for relief and aid projects in Vietnam. Over the years, Lua Viet has sent Vietnamese American medical missions to Vietnam to provide support through funding schools and providing supplies and medical equipment, with part time local staff to manage ongoing projects. In terms of its charitable mission, Lua Viet maintains that “ours is a

humanitarian effort that lies completely outside the controversy of politics and religion.”⁸⁰ And yet the evocation of controversy demonstrates that transnational humanitarian aid initiatives in the Vietnamese American community must necessarily navigate complicated diasporic politics. Overall the organization holds a trusted reputation for relaying humanitarian assistance remittances from individual Vietnamese American donors to collective projects in Vietnam, as evidenced by a significant base of support and participation among Vietnamese Americans in the northeastern United States.

Like Lua Viet, many Vietnamese American NGOs emerged out of the work of Vietnamese mutual aid associations formed throughout the United States to provide basic social services support for newly arrived refugees.⁸¹ While the work of many of these associations generally remain of a firm domestic orientation, particularly those that have developed more politicized stances against the regime in Vietnam, others have evolved with time to turn the focus of such community support networks outward to address the needs of those left behind in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese American nonprofits were active in directing and mobilizing support to victims of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina. Following Katrina, significant numbers of Vietnamese Americans from across the United States descended on the Vietnamese community of Versailles in East New Orleans to help in the rebuilding effort and challenge local government efforts to relocate the community.⁸² Some continue to work on long-term redevelopment initiatives, including business development support, a community gardens and urban farm project, and a Vietnamese charter school in Versailles through the Vietnamese Catholic church

⁸⁰ Lua Viet website: www.luaviet.org

⁸¹ for more on Vietnamese American Mutual Aid Associations, see the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies [NAVASA]: Southeast Asia Resource Action Council, www.searac.org

⁸² for a documentary on this situation see *Chiang, S L, and Joel Goodman. A Village Called Versailles. Harriman, N.Y.: New Day Films, 2009.*

(Mary Queen of Vietnam) initiated Community Development Corporation.⁸³ Many Vietnamese American mutual aid association groups later turned their fundraising capacities to addressing other disaster needs in Vietnam, particularly the issue of flooding in the Mekong Delta and central Vietnam. Many Vietnamese American nonprofit members and volunteers noted that the strength of their organizations is their ability to serve as a bridge between communities of Vietnamese in the United States, as well as a bridge between Vietnam and the U.S. One volunteer with whom I spoke, Amy, who had moved around from 2006-2009 to work with Vietnamese American organizations working on social justice, disaster, and poverty reduction initiatives in California and Louisiana as well as Vietnam, said that “as a Vietnamese, I help my sisters and brothers wherever they need me. We Vietnamese are spread throughout the world, but wherever there is suffering, those of us who are more fortunate need to mobilize to help out.” The notion of sharing a common Vietnamese plight regardless of geographical location was a theme I would encounter with many second-generation overseas Vietnamese activists and organizers.

Vietnamese American engagement with Vietnam is not necessarily predicated on political outlook. There is often an impression that Vietnamese Americans, especially those from California where many of the original refugees who supported the Saigon republican government resettled, are averse to engaging with the homeland because of the communist regime in power there. It is true that many Vietnamese American groups have been active in organizing protests against U.S. diplomatic and economic engagement with Vietnam, such as in June 2007 when many turned out to protest Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet’s visit to Orange County California. Yet many people who participate in protests against high-level visitors from Vietnam also contribute actively to humanitarian and development projects in

⁸³ Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation website: www.mqvncdc.org

Vietnam. The political discourse and debates among Vietnamese American communities and through their US Congressional representatives, often with fierce anti-communist overtones, should be considered not only a response to the trauma of the Vietnam War's aftermath for south Vietnamese refugees and boat people, but also a reaction to the discrimination and exclusion faced by many Vietnamese resettled in America. As one veteran Vietnamese American community organizer pointed out, "many of the older generation, because they are not respected in their new communities, no longer holding the positions of power they once held in Vietnam, express their personal dissatisfaction through vocal anti-communist statements." This illustrates that within the overseas community there are a diverse and competing range of opinions and attitudes about the extent and purpose of diasporic engagement with Vietnam. While many of the political old guard retain a hard political line boycotting travel and investment in Vietnam as long as the communist regime remains in power, others, including notably the late former South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, have advocated engagement, fanning ongoing debates and protests among and within Vietnamese communities abroad.

Overseas Vietnamese anti-communism also does not necessarily recede in the second generation. A number of anti-communist protests by the Vietnamese American community in California I observed were cross-generational, with often strong and vocal leadership by younger Vietnamese Americans born in the United States after the war. An assimilationist generational paradigm can confuse the roots of the issue, and create a false expectation that the anti-

communist rhetoric among the Vietnamese American community will simply recede with time.⁸⁴

A community of refugees that has been largely forgotten in historiographies of the Vietnam War

⁸⁴ Ashley Carruthers (2008) notes "ironically, we are witnessing the largest anti-communist protests (among overseas Vietnamese) ever at precisely the moment at which flows of people, symbols, cash and commodities between homeland and diaspora are at their greatest. While overseas Vietnamese have responded to the opportunities for renewed transnational engagement opened up by reform in Vietnam, they have not abandoned their diaspora identity politics" (83).

in both the U.S. and Vietnam demands recognition from not only Vietnamese back home, but also from their former allies – now their fellow American citizens and neighbors. Andrew Lam, a Vietnamese American writer, former San Jose Mercury news reporter, writer, and community activist says, “among [overseas] Vietnamese, a collective understanding assumes that we have all suffered an epic loss, so it is pointless to ask [each other]....Vietnam goes on without us, America goes on without acknowledging us.”⁸⁵ Overseas Vietnamese anti-communism, therefore, may be as much of a reaction to domestic discrimination and exclusion as it is to the political situation in Vietnam. Diasporic politics and the ability to manage and negotiate them affects the community support Vietnamese American NGOs and charitable organizations are able to garner for their aid and development work in Vietnam.

An example of an organization working in Vietnam with a strong and supportive Vietnamese American donor base is Social Assistance Program to Vietnam [SAP-VN]. Co-founded by Dr. Duong Huynh, who came to the United States as an orphan in the baby lift operations of 1973, SAP-VN has since 1992 focused on medical, educational, and welfare services for disadvantaged and handicapped children in Vietnam. These services include the provision of scholarships and surgeries to correct disabilities. SAP-VN is registered as both an NGO in Vietnam and as a nonprofit organization in the United States. Most of their budget comes from fundraising among the Vietnamese American community in Orange County, primarily through contributions and an annual fund raising dinner that brings in 50-60,000 dollars. Focusing on children, Dr. Huynh says, makes their work apolitical and garners wide support in the community.⁸⁶ Vietnamese American radio and television media over the years have offered free public service announcements to spread the word about their programs and

⁸⁵ Tran De, Andrew Lam, and Hai Nguyen. *Once Upon a Dream: The Vietnamese American Experience* (1995).

⁸⁶ interview with Duong Huynh, 10/1/07.

fundraising needs, and about 100 volunteers, mostly young professional Vietnamese Americans, help out with their annual event, which features popular Vietnamese American singer personalities who donate their time and artistic talent to the cause. SAP-VN has a centrally located office in Little Saigon, Orange County, and faces little resistance to their work, either in the Vietnamese American community or in Vietnam. Dr. Huynh admits, however, that it is sometimes a balancing act to stay strongly rooted in the Vietnamese American community without appearing political to the Vietnamese government officials they must work with as an officially registered NGO in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese American Medical Institute [VAMI], founded by Dr. Pham who has a community medical practice in Little Saigon, has been less successful in avoiding community protest. Although Dr. Pham says he was previously an anti-communist activist, over time as his practice became successful he became interested in addressing humanitarian needs in Vietnam, and helped lobby for the lifting of the U.S. embargo. He has a strong interest in issues of HIV/AIDs and Agent Orange, but also has an ambitious nationalistic interest in seeing Vietnam develop economically and politically by embracing democracy and market reforms. “The only country in the world that can help Vietnam catch up is the United States” says Pham, “Vietnamese Americans, therefore, can play a key role in this process.”⁸⁷ Similar to SAP-VN, he draws on community fundraising activities for his projects, but is also starting to seek out other channels of aid, such as USAID funds for his HIV/AIDS initiatives. Similar to many other Vietnamese American philanthropists, Pham feels that recognition of overseas Vietnamese contributions is important. Recognition however must come in the form of concrete policy reforms and political change, not “honorary certificates” from the Vietnamese government that are often given out to reward benevolent overseas Vietnamese philanthropists. During a 2007

⁸⁷ interview w. Dr. Co Pham 9/28/07.

visit by Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet to Orange County, Dr. Pham had to decline an award the Vietnamese government wished to give him for his services to Vietnam, knowing that such recognition might ignite local community protests and damage Vietnamese American support for his work.

Dr. Tran, a doctor working with Friends of the Lepers, was moved to her current work when she was on a Vietnamese American medical mission in Vietnam during her medical residency. Encountering a man suffering leprosy who asked her to amputate his foot, she became aware of the stigma and suffering of lepers in Vietnam, and has since organized bi-annual returns to Vietnam to provide care for leper communities. Leprosy is a preventable disease that unfortunately prevails in impoverished communities with limited access to health care. She relies on networks of local Catholic nuns in Vietnam who have worked with the communities for years to identify areas of need. Although her engagement with Vietnam is sometimes questioned in Vietnamese American circles, in general the cause of addressing leprosy is widely supported through donations and annual concert fundraisers. Causes like lepers, or orphans for that matter, are “beyond political reproach,” says Dr. Tran, and therefore easier to gain support for. Her organization chose not to join the VA-NGO network, largely because they are worried about alienating their mostly Vietnamese American donor base, some of whom have suspicions of the network’s ties to the Vietnamese government. Tran nonetheless hopes that collaborative initiatives with other Vietnamese American organizations working in Vietnam will help to expand support and publicity for her organization’s work. Philanthropic work in Vietnam is a slow process that must be socially “normalized” so that mobilizing community resources can move to the next level. Tran notes however that it is hard for a single-issue organization like hers to know what to do next. Addressing the immediate medical needs

of lepers is one thing, but taking the following step to tackle entrenched poverty, especially in the highlands where many lepers live, is an entirely different project.⁸⁸

A number of “Vietnamese American” NGOs I met with are actually the work of one or a small group of Vietnamese American individuals who have managed to mobilize and catalyze support from broader non-Vietnamese communities. This is particularly the case for groups based in areas of the United States where there is not the presence of a large, established Vietnamese American community. These groups generally face few problems with protest of their work in the community, and are often an outgrowth of more traditional forms of American philanthropy, such as Rotary Clubs and other local volunteer associations. They therefore serve a bridging role in facilitating charitable remittances, connecting people and projects, and multiplying their own donations to issues of particular humanitarian concern in their home country.

The Dove Fund was established in 2000 in Ohio. Its primary founder, Do Nguyen, is the only Vietnamese American in that organization. His interest in helping Vietnam grew out his participation in the local Rotary Club and volunteering in their international projects in other countries, particularly Guatemala. He said he was particularly impressed with Rotary’s motto, “Service Above Self.” Yet because the Rotary Club does not yet have permission to operate in Vietnam, he was unable to find similar opportunities to volunteer there, despite a strong need for humanitarian and development assistance. Another Rotary member and former Vietnam veteran was also interested in starting something in Vietnam; after the two of them met they worked together to found the Dove Fund. The Dove Fund, with its symbol of a dove representing peace, works on development projects in Vietnam including the building of schools and wells. Program

⁸⁸ poverty in Vietnam is concentrated in poorer highland areas, heavily populated by ethnic minorities. The prevalence of leprosy, a curable disease, is highly correlated with poverty and lack of public health services.

support relies on fundraising events such as auctions and golf outings as well as individual and business donations, almost entirely outside the Vietnamese American community, along with project volunteers, many of whom are Vietnam war veterans. “There is a healing process for many of these veterans in returning to build something in Vietnam,” Do notes. Do began by working with communities in his home province of Quang Tri, an area in central Vietnam badly impacted by the war, and has since moved to other areas as the organization became aware of new need areas. Do enjoys the opportunity to help bring American volunteers and assistance to Vietnam to aid local communities in addressing their development needs. As a South Vietnamese scholarship graduate student at Bowling Green University in 1974 who was never able to return home after the Saigon government’s fall to the communists, Do feels that he is finally able to contribute to the building of his homeland through his personal efforts and donations, as well as his ability to serve as a bridge for American volunteers who wish to work in Vietnam but do not have the cultural and linguistic skills necessary to conduct projects there.⁸⁹

Kids Without Borders is a Seattle-based organization that helps children in need in several countries, with about half of their projects in Vietnam. However less than 10% of Kids Without Borders’ volunteers, staff, and supporters are Vietnamese American. Vietnamese American Board member Michael Son Pham has been able to start and manage a number of projects in Vietnam and “open doors to a number of Americans” interested in volunteering or contributing to their projects. The majority of financial support comes from individual, corporate, and some foundation donors, very few of whom are Vietnamese American. Mr. Pham notes that “many Vietnamese Americans are willing to give time, expertise, in-kind gifts, but few—too few—are willing to give financially. Most Vietnamese Americans want to give conditionally, i.e.: earmarked for areas or projects related to them or their families. I hope I can

⁸⁹ interview w. Do Nguyen, 9/30/07.

change that—to promote 'unconditional giving.'” The organization works with several mainstream philanthropic groups, including Rotary International, but has also begun collaborating more with other Vietnamese American NGOs to share best practices and resources for fundraising, grant writing, and project management.⁹⁰

Many other organizations act as conduits for donors and volunteers to give to Vietnam. Project Vietnam, a medical mission founded by Dr. Quynh Kieu, brings short-term medical missions to Vietnam that travel around the country providing mobile clinics in rural areas. About half of the volunteers are Vietnamese American, and Project Vietnam actively recruits among Vietnamese American student groups in California. The other half of volunteers is a broad spectrum of American medical professionals who wish to donate their vacation time to helping underserved communities in Vietnam. The organization thereby serves a facilitation role to provide the necessary logistical arrangements, translations, and cultural brokerage for these volunteer projects to happen. Dr. Quynh has also initiated long-term projects to address newborn care and nursing issues, and organizes a youth medical summer camp for Vietnamese, American, and Vietnamese American students interested in public health issues. Dr. Quynh anticipates continuing engagement and collaboration with a younger generation of Vietnamese and Americans who wish to contribute their time, resources, and skills for Project Vietnam’s medical initiatives.

There are many individual donors who wish to donate their money and skills to particular causes in Vietnam. Many of them operate independently, but some may also direct their efforts towards other overseas Vietnamese organizations. The KNL Foundation was started by an individual, Kieu Nhi Le, who, after moving to California as a refugee and putting herself through night school while working a full time job, achieved professional and financial success

⁹⁰ interview w. Michael Son Pham 9/30/07.

and wanted to give back to the country she left as a young adult. She donates to a number of projects, and also served as the project director of ADAPT in 2007, the Vietnamese American NGO anti-trafficking initiative headed by Diep based in Long Xuyen. Through her work in Vietnam and connection to local networks, she is also able to serve as a facilitator for other Vietnamese American donors who wish to give money for specific causes. In one case, for example, she helped two Vietnamese American businessmen from Texas visiting Vietnam channel donations to under-employed cyclo drivers, a cause they wished to support.⁹¹

Dr. Doan Phung is an independent businessman who has turned some of the profits of his own business to giving back to Vietnam. He and his wife run two foundations called the Vietnamese American Scholarship Fund [VASF] and the Fund for the Encouragement of Self Reliance [FESR] dedicated to helping at-risk youth in Vietnam. They also donate to other causes that attract their attention. Recently, through their involvement with the VA NGO Network, the couple was moved by the issue of sex trafficking of young girls in Vietnam. “It is shameful as a Vietnamese to know this exists!” exclaimed Dr. Phung. Phung resents the fact that many of the issues he contributes to really should be in the realm of services and protection provided by the Vietnamese government. He hopes that the government will eventually acknowledge the contributions of overseas Vietnamese like himself and give them a say in policy reforms so that Vietnam will be able to develop more effectively.⁹² At the 3rd Vietnamese American NGO conference in San Diego, Dr. Phung offered a \$100,000 challenge grant to support the anti-trafficking work of Vietnamese American NGOs.

In the late 1980s central Vietnam native Le Ly Hayslip returned to her home country from California, where she had been living since 1971. The wartime conditions of her departure

⁹¹ discussion with Kieu Nhi Le, 6/07.

⁹² interview w. Doan Phung, 9/30/07.

from Vietnam, descriptively and tragically described in her book *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) and later portrayed in Oliver Stone's 1993 film *Heaven and Earth*, caused her to think back upon the needs and suffering of those who had been left behind. In 1986 she returned to Vietnam and began to do humanitarian work in her home region of central Vietnam. Out of that work emerged the East Meets West Foundation (EMW), today one of the largest NGOs operating in Vietnam, with an annual contribution to Vietnam exceeding \$20 million. Focused on education and medical needs, the organization quickly grew from the grassroots initiative of an individual visionary to something much larger. Le Ly's role as a catalyst for larger resources and support is apparent in EMW today, which has been extremely successful in securing large foundation, corporate, and overseas development aid grants. EMW runs projects in the areas of community development, health, disadvantaged families, and public education, and also contributes to school, clean water, and hospital construction projects. While large donor grants to EMW are largely foundational, governmental, and corporate, medium size grants include donations for collaborative projects from some Vietnamese American NGOs, and many smaller individual donations also come from the Vietnamese American community.⁹³

While the majority of EMW's support and international staff comes from outside the overseas Vietnamese community, EMW has also been a professional and transnational nonprofit opportunity for a number of young overseas Vietnamese, such as recent college graduates Vietnamese Canadian Cathy based in the Danang office and Vietnamese American John based in Oakland California. Both say that serving Vietnam, their country of heritage, is an important motivation for their work. Although based in offices in California and Vietnam, their jobs with EMW allow them to travel back and forth and stay connected to issues and personal relationships in both Asia and North America.

⁹³ East Meets West Annual Report (2006).

Le Ly Hayslip, after launching EMW, has since 1996 returned to a more personal and grassroots focus for her humanitarian work. She continues to work with many of the EMW projects, but focuses on small-scale initiatives that can work in conjunction with them. While EMW builds schools and hospitals, her new organization—the Global Village Foundation, focuses on what is inside those schools such as books and medical supplies. Compared to EMW, which has a large permanent staff spread through four offices, Global Village maintains a small office in Danang with two part-time staff members and herself. Le Ly says she has little time for grant writing, finding that word of mouth referrals about her work have helped to bring in enough individual donations to support the projects she works on. Only a few donations, she admits, come from the Vietnamese American community. When she first began engaging with Vietnam in the 1980s, many Vietnamese Americans were hostile to her work, leading her to seek out financial donors beyond her ethnic community, a pattern that has continued. Of the various projects Hayslip showed me, one innovative project she was particularly proud of was the mobile library project. Here, mobile libraries with about 50 books each, foldable and transportable by motorbike, are rotated monthly between different rural schools so that children can read a range of books otherwise unavailable in the relatively meager school libraries.

Walking around the grounds of her simple family home in Danang, Le Ly explained to me that she works for not only personal but also spiritual fulfillment. She believes in giving broadly to the community, not to family individuals. She explained that many of her family in Danang were not pleased that she donated much more of her money to charitable causes than to her own family members. Yet, as she explained it, “only by contributing to the development of all can individual families be lifted up.” Individual remittances, in her opinion, lead to suspicion, division, and jealousy among the community. A personal commitment to the region she grew up

in also motivates her. She actively focuses projects on school children, because she wants them to have the opportunities she never had as a child growing up during the war. Locally, she has invested money in community festivals, and although not rebuilding her family home as many remittance senders do, she did provide money to build a large ancestral altar behind the smaller main house where her mother lives. Ancestral altars are particularly important in central Vietnam as symbols of genealogical lineage and memory, and overseas remittances are widely used to rebuild and expand them. In Le Ly's case, it was the one area of familial household support she chose to invest in, despite directing most of her money to collective charitable causes.⁹⁴

While many of the Vietnamese American NGOs reviewed are run by first generation Vietnamese, who have a certain level of cultural capital and knowledge to conduct business in Vietnam, there is also a significant presence of younger 1.5 [born in Vietnam but left as a child] and second-generation [born abroad] Vietnamese American NGO staff. As Cathy at East Meets West explained her "return" journey to Vietnam, "back in Canada there wasn't much information about what was available in nonprofit work here. I decided to come to Vietnam to find out for myself. I started by teaching English, but eventually through local connections I found an opportunity to work with an NGO." Younger diaspora Vietnamese may not have the same skills as their elders to start and manage an NGO from scratch, but given appropriate apprenticeship opportunities, can learn the necessary skills to do effective work. Because Vietnamese communities abroad have generally placed a high priority on maintaining language skills, many of the younger generation do have a working level of Vietnamese that improves with more time spent in the country, increasing their ability to engage with local projects. Many also stay on for longer-term assignments. There is a sense among many Vietnamese American NGOs seeking to

⁹⁴ site visits to East Meets West and Global Village Foundation projects, 9/07.

recruit younger blood to staff in-country practices that although younger Vietnamese may not have native skill sets, they potentially have the passion and commitment for longer term work in Vietnam if given the right introductory experience.

There are several initiatives underway by Vietnamese American NGOs to engage and train the second generation of overseas Vietnamese for philanthropic work in Vietnam. Project Vietnam, Lua Viet, and another Vietnamese American NGO, the International Children's Network, for example, actively recruit and offer short and long-term volunteer assignments to younger Vietnamese Americans. Our One World, a Vietnamese American NGO working on environmental sustainability issues in central Vietnam, offered scholarships for second generation Vietnamese to attend the 2007 VA NGO conference in San Diego. During a special conference session on the "Role of the Next Generation" second generation Vietnamese Americans brainstormed ideas on specific initiatives and projects they were interested in developing in order to mobilize increased philanthropic participation and support from Vietnamese Americans who have never been to Vietnam. VIA [formerly Volunteers in Asia], a California based nonprofit that sends volunteers to Vietnam and other countries in Asia to teach English, initiated a Vietnamese American volunteer program in An Giang province in partnership with the Pacific Links Foundation, sending five college-aged volunteers to teach English and cultural communication at An Giang University and local schools in Long Xuyen. The California Bay area based Asia Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, with Ford Foundation support, has launched a "Viet Fellows" initiative offering short-term assignments to Vietnamese Americans under 30 to experience and assist with development work in Vietnam. Meanwhile, San Francisco State University, which hosts a Vietnamese American Studies program, has worked with the Vietnamese government's Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs to

sponsor summer trips for second generation Vietnamese American students to visit Vietnam with the goal of developing longer term diaspora-homeland engagements. Students from the program are housed in the *Quê Hương* [Homeland] hotel, a guesthouse administered by the Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs, during their stay in Hanoi.

The cultural capital set of the younger generation is different from the first generation, but there is clearly a strong interest and commitment to engaging with social change, justice, and development issues in Vietnam. Furthermore, many of these younger overseas Vietnamese, with access to education and career opportunities in the United States and elsewhere, are expected to potentially contribute their knowledge and capital to diasporic philanthropy projects in the future. A number of long term Vietnamese American staff of the second generation I met working in Vietnam had begun their careers as short term volunteers through work and study programs such as the ones described.

A dimension of collective remittances often discussed among participants in these diaspora driven NGOs was the importance of what is called in development terminology “grey matter”—the transfer of not only financial donations but also skills and knowledge gained overseas back to the homeland. In general, transfer of knowledge initiatives were decried as relatively undeveloped. An early initiative in the 1990s to address grey matter issues was a program of the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] called the Transfer of Knowledge by Expatriates Abroad [TOKTEN]. TOKTEN was designed to create a roster of overseas Vietnamese experts that could assist Vietnam through technical knowledge. The program was eventually closed however. UNDP’s understanding was that the Vietnamese government’s Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs had created sufficient parallel

initiatives.⁹⁵ However although the Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs has estimated that about 400,000 Vietnamese abroad have advanced levels of education, only about 200 are brought back annually to teach or consult on economic, scientific, or technological affairs. There are some new initiatives underway among overseas Vietnamese organizations as well as the Vietnamese government's Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs for think tanks, advisor consultancies, and speaker exchanges specifically designed to promote overseas Vietnamese knowledge transfers, but they remain largely in the discussion and initial planning stages. Although lip service is actively paid to the promising potential of transfer of knowledge initiatives, the realities of such projects often fall short. A presentation by a visiting Vietnamese American professor at Ho Chi Minh City's University of Social Sciences and Humanities discussing sociological research methods in 2007 was politely attended by many of the younger faculty. Afterwards, however, many of them whispered that the visiting professor was profoundly out of touch with present day Vietnamese realities. Even the Vietnamese vocabulary she used in her lecture was out of date. The assumed benefits of diasporic knowledge transfers can therefore encounter significant limitations when confronted with the realities of sociocultural and temporal distancing.

Finally, charitable work in Vietnam is by no means limited to the diaspora NGO oriented initiatives discussed. The idea of charity [*từ thiện*] is a powerful motivation for many Vietnamese families seeking to contribute to local humanitarian issues. This was introduced and discussed in Chapter Four: remittances are often directed and re-directed by recipients to charitable causes through local organizations, churches, or temples. The managing board members of many such groups are often responsible for soliciting funds to support such projects. Re-directing and channeling remittance gifts from abroad to community charitable initiatives can

⁹⁵ communication with Koen Van Acoleyen, UNDP-Vietnam, 6/06.

be personally and spiritually rewarding for many Vietnamese, and also provide local authority and prestige in the community. Recognition remains an important factor in giving. Encircling many rebuilt temples and churches throughout Vietnam, one can find numerous stone benches bearing inscriptions that honor overseas Vietnamese donors.

The establishment of charitable giving initiatives among the diaspora is a growing phenomenon and a unique disaggregated form of collective gift giving under the broader category of remittances, as introduced in Chapter One. Through interviews, discussions, and participations with the various staff, volunteers, and projects of the charitable aid initiatives introduced in this chapter, a different perspective on motivations for homeland giving by the diaspora emerges. While remittances have long connected members of the diaspora to their places of origin, the integrity of their gift qualities and intentions remain ambivalently perceived. While providing important finances to help address basic needs, remittances as gifts are nonetheless often dismissed as obligatory, expected, and unappreciated. One Vietnamese American man involved in transnational charitable activities told me that he had stopped sending personal family remittances years ago. “I used to send them money, but they waste it all on useless things, become lazy, and only expect more. They did not help me out so much when I was a child over there, so I don’t feel that I should be obliged to send money back. But I do love my homeland, Vietnam. It is the place where I was born and the culture that makes me who I am. I still send money therefore to Vietnam, just not to my family. There are many people who need more help than my family does, so my focus is now to assist them.” When asked how this has affected personal family relationships, he said, “I don’t visit my family often anymore. They do not understand why I give to and help other people but not them. They only think about themselves but not the greater good. There are so many poor people in Vietnam—compared to

them, my family is doing okay. Besides it is good for them to work and not just receive money without effort.”

Money then is an embodiment of work—a work whose intention it is to be altruistic. When monetary remittance gifts are expected and demanded rather than graciously and appreciatively received, furthermore when remittances stop the act of work on the part of recipients, the benevolent intention of the gift and the recognition it seeks no longer reaches its mark. Work, for the diasporic remittance subject, becomes a defining characteristic of the transformed identity they have adapted overseas. What that work is, as we have seen in previous discussions of willing professional underemployment by migrants, is less important than what that work earns. Work is a mode of being that time and again has been attributed as a luxury of living in the West. In this mode of work cum money, work—not as an occupation but as a mode of embodied action—is attributed with powers of self-transformation. Remittance senders send gifts with the intention of helping their families, but when they see the very gifts they give inhibiting those family members from inhabiting the work mode of self-transformation, the intentionality of the aid relationship is frustrated.

Repeating the adage that “it is better to teach a man to fish than to give a fish,” one NGO volunteer explained that the goal of his philanthropic giving was to help Vietnamese to help themselves. The types of programs that are widely supported through overseas Vietnamese charitable giving are ones that emphasize the embodiment of work in the lives of gift recipients. Through scholarships, job training, micro-credit, and other similarly minded projects run by the various diaspora aid organizations described, we see a desire to give a “pure” gift that will not be returned. While recognition is widely sought, it is not appreciation alone that acts as a return gift for the giver, but rather a future hope that the intentions of the gift to transform lives out of

poverty and promote self-empowerment individually as well as collectively, will come to fruition. In the fundraisers, presentations, newsletters, and reports of all of these organizations, there is a notable documentary drive to emphasize individual stories of transformed lives in Vietnam assisted and catalyzed by collective donations from the overseas Vietnamese community. The repetition and futural horizons of such documents, through quarterly newsletters and reports, belies ongoing anxieties for recognition, relevance, and achievement. Constructing a gift that can be directed, controlled, appreciated, and transform is a central intention of humanitarian giving by the Vietnamese diaspora.

While the promotion of self-transformation through aid driven capacity building is an important dimension of charitable giving, another significant aspect is that charitable community organizing expands the relationality of the gift exchange away from the dyadic giver-receiver relationship towards a multivalent relationality with other givers. Whereas the individual family remittance relationship is one generally focused on the kinship relationship between the sender and receiver, in cases of collective remittance giving, as in the potlatch, the focus on the receiver recedes as the gaze of the giving community itself comes into more prominent play. Whether a poor orphan, an unemployed job trainee, or a senior citizen lacking health services, the target of charitable aid becomes an increasingly distant recipient without name or voice who nonetheless is assumed to be the needy and grateful recipient subject of diasporic benevolence. In the meantime, diasporic organizations collaborate as well as compete to provide services to Vietnam, seeking publicity and further support for their work, often through fundraiser events. At such events donors' identities, altruisms, and even politics are performed, gauged, and monitored by others in the community and the circles of givers. The spectacle and performance of giving before others within diasporic communities offers not only personal altruistic fulfillment but can

also serve to secure positions of political and social leadership and prestige. Charitable giving practices can help bring together and organize scattered diaspora communities, offering alternative ethnic group relations and collective identifications within and in contrast to the larger societies such organizers and donors live in.

To better understand the dynamics of diasporic community formations and the role of transnational and homeland gifting practices in their organization, we must examine more closely the Vietnamese American community itself, the subject of Chapter Six.

Chapter Six

The Beautiful Country

As my car travels south through the Bay area to San Jose, the thermometer rises steadily upward and the geography gets increasingly arid. For the last part of my fieldwork, I based myself in California, in the U.S.A., or as the Vietnamese call it, “Cali”, in “*Mỹ*”, or America—the Chinese word root of which means the “beautiful country”.⁹⁶

For many Vietnamese refugees, the United States was the preferred endpoint for final resettlement. In refugee camps through Southeast Asia, residents were known to request migration to America over other countries that were accepting Vietnamese for refugee resettlement. In California, Camp Pendleton in Orange County was one of the first arrival points for high profile political refugees, often associated with the former Saigon republican regime, who left days before the final fall of the country. A small community of Vietnamese began to develop in the area, with the cities of Westminster and Garden Grove eventually taking on a sizeable enough Vietnamese population that the area came to be known as “Little Saigon”, and officially designated as such in 1988. California’s strong economy, cultural diversity, and warm climate made the state a naturally preferred relocation site for many Vietnamese, and as the community grew, offered the benefits of a tightly knit ethnic community in which Vietnamese language and customs were normative. Despite official resettlement policies in the United States that attempted to counteract the “clustering” tendency of refugees by dispersing Indochinese to different and often remote parts of the country (Rumbaut 1996), an eventual process of voluntary secondary migration by Vietnamese settled in other areas led to the emergence of California as the “capital” of Vietnamese abroad.

⁹⁶ 美国, from a transliteration of “America”

While the Vietnamese community in southern California rapidly grew, in northern California a secondary node of Vietnamese resettlement began to emerge in the San Francisco Bay region. In the South Bay, the city of San Jose and surrounding area now ranks as the second largest Vietnamese community in the United States after Orange County, and there have been similar and controversial efforts to designate this newer community with the same name of “Little Saigon”.⁹⁷ While “Little Saigon” in Orange County is generally home to longer term resettlers who are more financially secure, in San Jose a more recent immigrant population, often employed in more blue collar occupations, produces significant remittances and transnational connections. Recent immigrants have been found to remit more of their income back to home countries, in part because of closer emotional and nostalgic ties, but also because recent migrants are more likely to have close immediate family members still abroad, whereas longer term immigrants often have already sponsored close relatives for emigration and family reunification.

While I had long been familiar with the vitalities of the Vietnamese communities of California, having previously lived in southern California and often visiting the Orange County Little Saigon area, in 2008, basing myself in the Bay area, I spent time in both Orange County and San Jose to conduct interviews with Vietnamese American remittance givers. The types of communities they lived in were vastly different from the close-knit neighborhoods I had become used to interacting with in Vietnam. Often in sprawling suburban residential areas, community nodes centered around shopping centers in which Vietnamese goods ranging from food to music were widely available, or temples and churches where the community came to congregate for religious and social / holiday occasions. The places of residence however, were often stereotypical California suburban cul-de-sac homes. Arranging for interviews took me to many

⁹⁷ an alternate designation of “Saigon Business District” in 2008 was actively opposed by many in the Vietnamese community, who felt that the name “Little Saigon” more accurately symbolized their political refugee legacy.

such houses, or sometimes to lively Vietnamese restaurants or coffee shops in the community shopping centers. Armed with maps, mapquest directions, and a cell phone, I conducted interviews with approximately thirty overseas Vietnamese individuals and families during the summer of 2008.

There is a striking sense of remittance fatigue that emerges in many of the interviews. As the previous chapter has suggested, the genealogy of remittance giving tends to follow an arc from dedicated family assistance, sponsorship of close family members, a social shift towards focusing on life in the United States, and over time, an economic shift towards second generation earners who become the primary family supporters. Second generation Vietnamese, who grew up in the United States and are more likely to focus on nuclear family relations, generally provide financial support within families out of a sense of cultural obligation and upbringing. It is often the older generation however that redistributes the earnings from the younger income earners to more extended family networks, many of whom remain in Vietnam, in keeping with traditional patterns of extended kinship support.

Xuan, a young Vietnamese American woman who grew up in San Jose, gives part of her monthly salary from working for the local government to her parents. Her parents, she said, “use the money for everyday needs, but also send some of it back to Vietnam. They go back once every two years, so it is important to keep in touch with family there.” Xuan said that she was sometimes frustrated by the fact that her earnings supported not only her parents, but also distant relatives in Vietnam who did not have to work as a result of the remittances she indirectly sent to them. Yet, she also reflected that her relationship to them was different than her parents. “To me, I see my money being given to a distant uncle or aunt that I barely know. But to my parents, they are sending the money to a brother or sister. I guess if my brothers and sisters needed

money from me, I would not hesitate to give it.” For Xuan however remittances also complicated her marriage to a caucasian American. “My husband grew up here, and there is no tradition of helping parents in his family. He often asks me why I give money to my parents, when we are financially struggling ourselves. Over time, he has come to accept that this is part of my Vietnamese upbringing, even though I am an American like him, but of a different kind. I do worry that if I ever stopped working, it would be difficult to ask him to give money to my family.”

Remittances not only cause cross-cultural misunderstandings, however, but can also increase tensions or promote the proliferation of secrets within Vietnamese American families. In one home I visited, the husband was an unemployed engineer while the wife worked as a nursing home aide. Her income helped support remittance gifts to both her and her husband’s families in Vietnam. However, their daughter later told me that the mother felt that since she brought home the income, it was her right to support her family in Vietnam more than his. So she would often go to the “Gui Tien Le” remittance service office after payday to send a little extra money to her family, never telling her husband. It was better to keep it secret, the daughter explained, because as long as the father did not know it would not matter. But if he knew, they might fight about it. Insecurities about his inability to find work and be the family provider were exacerbated by the remittance sending patterns that had developed in the family. In another family the father sent money to relatives whom the mother felt were inhospitable to her when she was back in Vietnam. She resented this, to the point that she refused to accompany him on his return trips to visit his family. In this case, as has been noted in previous chapters, remittance support from abroad maintains a kinship connection for diasporic family members and a “home” in Vietnam to return to. In cases of extended kin networks, who is worth maintaining relations

with, and whose home one wants to return to, is an important and sometimes contentious determinant within families when making remittance gift decisions.

Generational differences in remittance-giving patterns are notable. Older generations often prioritize remittance giving to family members in Vietnam, and frequently return every few years to visit them. Second generation members seemed less likely to travel on their own to visit family in Vietnam. Many with whom I spoke found the family trips tiring. “The weather [in Vietnam] was hot, it was dirty, my father kept telling me what to do and how to behave, and I didn’t remember anyone even though everyone remembered me,” recalled Duy, a 25 year old from the Bay area who wearily recalled a month-long trip to Vietnam with his family. Like many others, he related stories about the “family road trip” in a rented van full of extended relatives, traveling from the beach resorts of Nha Trang to the highlands of Dalat to see the sights. “I couldn’t wait to get back [to America] be on my own again, and not have to spend every minute with family.” Unlike his parents, Duy felt no obligation to give to Vietnam, and even a physical journey to the “homeland” did not catalyze a sense of emotional connection that might then translate into a gifting relation. On the other hand, Tuyet, a middle aged woman, related how she regrets that her children grew up without the chance to go to Vietnam. “Fifteen years ago it was more difficult to go. We were still afraid of returning. Our children grew up in America never knowing their own culture and language. Now we go back and try to show it to them, but it is too late. They are too Americanized, and not interested.” For many first generation Vietnamese Americans, Vietnam still holds a place in their memory as a homeland [*quê hương*] or place of roots [*gốc*]. Many of them left involuntarily as political or economic refugees, and for years dreamed of one day returning. For the second generation on the other hand, while Vietnam holds a strong place in the imagination as a source of ethnic and cultural

origins, Vietnamese American and even Asian American culture is much more familiar to them than the society they find upon “returning” to Vietnam.

Karin Aguilar-San Juan (2009) has argued that diasporic Vietnamese communities are in many senses no less “Vietnamese” than those in Vietnam. Rather they represent a different mode and generation of place making and cultural production that does not prioritize the authenticity of space. The social vibrancy of California’s Vietnamese communities does indeed demonstrate that ethnic cultural production continues despite the distance from Vietnam. Many of the older generation identified strongly as “Vietnamese” and critiqued the current regime in Vietnam for inhibiting cultural expression and tradition. For them, it was actually in exile where Vietnamese culture was being preserved and maintained, rather than in Vietnam. “The communists have destroyed Vietnamese culture, it is shameful” decried one informant in his 60s. Occasionally there are fierce debates and protests among the community when Vietnamese state sponsored culture shows—from singers to art to puppets—tour the U.S., often resulting in calls for boycotts and protests among segments of the Vietnamese American community.

Even for those overseas Vietnamese who do develop a close personal connection to the Vietnamese geobody, such connections may emphasize spatial but not necessarily familial proximity. This is particularly prevalent among younger 1.5 and second generations of overseas Vietnamese. A large expatriate *Việt Kiều* population in Ho Chi Minh City, characterized by urban overseas Vietnamese expatriate living in a somewhat familiar cultural and linguistic context, but distanced from and avoidant of family social expectations and obligations, attests to this. As one 29-year-old Vietnamese American from the Bay area who works for a bank in Saigon explained, “living in Saigon is ideal because there are so many other Vietnamese Americans like me, who live on a bridge between cultures. We never felt that we fit in growing

up in America, but then coming back to Vietnam we realize we don't really fit there either. Our relatives judge us, and ask too many probing questions. Yet living amongst each other [in Saigon], we have a support community that understands each other." Anthropologist Ashley Carruthers (2002) has written on some of the experiences of overseas Vietnamese professionals working in Saigon who, while often brought to Vietnam by companies to bridge a perceived business and cultural gap with locals, are unable to do so and must find other ways of being at "home" in an assumed homeland.

Although many in the young professional expatriate Vietnamese community in Saigon may not be closely engaged with their extended relatives, many *Việt Kiều* in Saigon are noticeably active in fundraising for charitable causes in Vietnam. One organization, called *Việt Mới* [New Vietnamese], defines this generation of Vietnamese growing up overseas but returning to Vietnam to live and work as one "in transition between the old and new Vietnam." In 2008 *Việt Mới* regularly organized fundraisers, replete with music and fashion shows, to demonstrate solidarity with a country and heritage the members, coming from countries around the world such as Australia and the United States, seek to re-engage with. Although such participants are not actively supporting their extended family members through direct remittance support, they are still giving to charitable causes in a homeland they feel attached to, on what they feel is more of their own terms. This is reflective of a broader shift over generations from family to collective remittance giving, as previously discussed, demonstrating that financial gifts also increasingly serve as "identity maintaining mechanisms" (Najam 2007), or even arguably identity constructing mechanisms, rather than demonstrations of familial obligation in situations of extended kinship.

Personal and collective identity is an issue that repeatedly emerged in interviews with 2nd and 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans, living both in the United States and Vietnam. The social, political, geographic, and economic differentials between Vietnam and the United States force many Vietnamese Americans to reflect on the circumstances of their identity, and the critical role of chance in shaping it. One Vietnamese American woman in her 30s named Margaret, born in Vietnam but raised in the United States, travels regularly between the two countries for business. Margaret had a personal project in which she took a series of photos on the streets of Vietnam. She would find women who were approximately her age, usually working menial jobs selling goods in the streets. She would approach these women and strike up a conversation, learning their particular life story and how they came to their current situation. In turn, Margaret would share her own family's story of refugee flight from Vietnam. At the end of the conversation, she would ask to take a photo with them. Her collection included over forty such photos. For her, these photos of herself and another Vietnamese woman of similar age represented a hypothetical of identity. "If history had turned out differently," she explained, "I could be any of these women." Engaging and learning about a cultural place of origins that nonetheless held a significant air of mystery was a defining experiential dimension for many younger Vietnamese Americans engaging with Vietnam. For many of them, personal family connections were relatively marginal to their exploratory motivations.

For the first generation of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in America, however, bodily and financial return to Vietnam is often a symbolic completion of the circulatory journey of escape from Vietnam, social transformation abroad, and reconnection to a homeland. Dinh, a taxi driver in San Francisco whose father died in a Vietnamese reeducation camp in 1976, escaped from Vietnam with his wife and children by boat in 1976. They spent three days and

nights at sea before finally arriving at Renai Island in Indonesia. In the refugee camp there Dinh applied for resettlement in the west. He was accepted for emigration to Holland, but he chose to stay in the camp longer to hold out for immigration to America. “My father, when he was alive, loved and respected America. I grew up thinking it was a wonderful place, so I wanted to bring my family there,” he explained. Eventually his family was transferred to Battang in the Philippines, where they spent six months before ultimately moving to southern California via a brief stint in Hawaii. After working in a factory and getting his feet on the ground financially, he moved to San Francisco, leasing a taxi that he drove to support his two daughters, one who was in college and the other who was in high school.

Dinh explained to me that he remits a thousand dollars, and more when he can afford it, every month back to his mother and extended family on the island of Phu Quy, off the southeastern coast of Vietnam. He also sends money for the various family death anniversaries [*dám gio*], usually \$100 to each brother and sister, and \$10 for each of the children. On top of these remittance gifts is added a 3.5% transaction fee—higher than other places in Vietnam because of the geographical isolation of the island. Dinh said that his mother is happier living on Phu Quy island than she would be in the busy city of San Francisco. It is his filial obligation, he insisted, to do everything he can to help her live out her life back in Vietnam in comfort. He is able to stay in regular communication with her due to vastly improved communication technologies than in the past. While previous correspondence relied on slow letter mail, now he is able to call six times a month, using a \$10 calling card that gives him 200 minutes. His sister and cousins, who also remain in Vietnam, take care of his mother daily, and the money he sends helps support them too. Sending money, he says, also helps him to remember the day-to-day life of his village and the island. Dinh described it as a small and peaceful place where everyone

knows each other: “really, I know 99% of the people in Phu Quy!” he remarked. Indeed, because the island was already off the coast of Vietnam and so many of the population had fishing boats, almost everyone from the island, he said, had family members who escaped by boat after 1975. In fact, each year they have a Phu Quy reunion in San Francisco, where a large diaspora specifically from Phu Quy island reside. They eat special seafood dishes from the island and share news on what is happening back home. Because many go back regularly and the Phu Quy population is small, one can also easily keep up with affairs back home at such annual social gatherings. This is a common theme among many diaspora sub-communities, where members of the same village [*làng*] have found each other abroad and have initiated community-organizing activities based on shared geographic origins.

Another woman, Lan, 64, explained how dear to her heart the remittances are that she sends back to support her elderly 92-year-old mother in Hue. The money she sends goes to support her mother’s health care needs, and, more importantly her mother’s appetite.

“My mother is sad, two of her children have died already. When I call her on the telephone she can’t hear, so instead I send her money. Sending her a little money brings her so much happiness. Each time I send some money, just a hundred dollars every few months, I can imagine her carefully putting the money away in her breast pocket. With it she can go to the market to buy some bananas or sweet sticky rice, which she loves so much and used to feed me as a child. For the most part, she does not spend much, but just enjoys having and holding the money. It makes her feel secure remembering her daughter in America who has not forgotten her.”

Lan would also send money to her younger sister to buy other foods for her mother, which she imaginatively detailed for me. “In the morning my sister will take the money and go to the market to buy *bún bò* [beef soup] or *cháo* [rice porridge] for a small healthy lunch. Then in the afternoon, around two or three p.m., she will make *bánh canh*, another of my mother’s favorite dishes.” For Lan remittances to her mother evoked countless sensory memories of the past.

Remittances to her sister also replace the work and care she would provide for her mother if she

were physically present. Our discussion of her support to family back in Vietnam opened up a stream of memories, and Lan and I stayed up late into the night talking about her past days of food, youth, romance, and adventure in Vietnam before coming to the United States. She brought out family photographs and memoirs that detailed the collection of memories she related. These days, she said, the journey back to Vietnam was difficult for her. Nonetheless she tried to return every three years or so, and intended to undertake another journey soon. Her husband was gone and her house empty, having raised her children to adulthood. For her the vibrancy and immediacy of life was not in California, but rather in Vietnam, where her siblings, mother, and memories resided.

For many of the more elderly first generation, returning to Vietnam has become a viable retirement option. The low cost of living in Vietnam, coupled with the availability of family members in both the United States and Vietnam to take care of empty homes and other logistical details, makes a transnational lifestyle accessible and cost effective. In San Jose I became acquainted with Joanna, an investment advisor with AIG, who specializes in helping Vietnamese Americans design retirement plans that allow them to live almost full time in Vietnam. She advises them on how to invest their life savings in stock portfolios. If the return interest they earn, added to social security payments, can come to at least \$1500 per month, it is enough to live very comfortably in Vietnam. Meanwhile they have the satisfaction of helping out their family: their children are able to take over their real estate in the U.S., and they are able to buy or rebuild homes that they can then share with extended family in Vietnam. Joanna was herself Vietnamese, and came from a family which, arriving to the US in the early 1980s as refugees, had since branched transnationally back to Vietnam to take advantage of investing capital earned Stateside in new start-up businesses there. This family included a sister in Saigon who ran a 50s

style American diner restaurant and real estate investment venture. Her sister, whose diner I had also occasionally frequented while living in Saigon, had used the business investments in Vietnam to help out family members, but had been disappointed that many of them seemed to take advantage of her assistance. Business often failed whenever she was not around to directly manage affairs. Joanna explained to me however that for her family, reconnecting with Vietnam was more than just a business venture. Rather it was an almost “spiritual” affair that helped her feel complete in life.

One day Joanna invited me out to a Buddhist temple in the desert south of San Jose, to show me the spiritual strength of the Vietnamese American community and their cultural connectedness to Vietnam. A former ranch house turned into a temple, we arrived to find scores of Hondas, Toyotas, and Lexuses parked around the grounds.⁹⁸ Inside, hundreds sat or squatted on the cool tile floor with fans whirring above, listening to the head monk give a dharma talk on compassion. Afterwards, a light vegetarian meal was served by volunteers in grey robes. Following lunch we strolled the temple grounds. Joanna stopped at many of the stone markers around the gardens, often engraved with short poems, to explain their meaning. In all of them, it appeared that “destiny” or “fate” was a unifying theme that Joanna seemed to strongly connect with. “It was meant to be that my family came to America, became successful in business, and then could return to Vietnam,” she explained. Her father had paved the way for a transnational family lifestyle and business, first returning in the 1990s to open a French restaurant in downtown Saigon. Going back to Vietnam revitalized his spirit, she explained, which had been broken with the end of the war and the hard life of refugee/immigrant life in America. Two sisters had followed: one had since returned to the U.S., the other had chosen to stay in Vietnam.

⁹⁸ It was pointed out to me that a visual material marker of Vietnamese households, often dispersed through ethnically diverse communities, is a preference for Japanese cars parked in the driveway: particularly Hondas and Toyotas.

Joanna's niece, who she also introduced to me, was a staff person at a local college and planned to visit Vietnam for the first time the next year. For their family, the formation of a transnational family network meant that business capital flows traveled two ways, helping out family on both sides of the Pacific. Initial capital was invested from America, but the profits from the business ventures in Saigon were also sent back to the U.S. For Joanna and her family, it wasn't being either here or there that afforded a more strategic vantage point, but rather the ability to go back and forth in between that had brought her family success. The fruits of that success, she further explained, should also be generously shared with the wider community. Such generosity, according to Joanna, follows the teachings of the Buddha, which is why she had become closely involved with the community at this temple.

In both California and Vietnam I met a number of transnational individuals who also agreed that the ability to maintain multiple lives back and forth across the Pacific was an ideal type of lifestyle. Another San Jose Vietnamese man named Hai, who I initially met in Quy Nhon, Vietnam, explained to me his rationale for transnational living: "The U.S. is a good place to make money, but life in Vietnam is happier. I have a green card, I can go back and forth from the U.S. I stay in San Jose six months with my daughter, but my life is in Vietnam. My daughter, her life is in San Jose. There are more opportunities because she is young. But we can live in both places and be a family." Hai is typical of many "transnationals" able to take advantage of improved economic, legal, and travel opportunities to establish multiple lives and identities in and across geographical worlds and generations, in the process building up significant "network capital".⁹⁹ Each year Hai would travel to visit his daughter in California, as well as relatives in Texas and Toronto. Yet in the end he was always content to return to

⁹⁹ Elliott & Urry (2010) define network capital as "the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with...people not necessarily proximate, which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit" (59).

Vietnam and his modest house by the ocean. Hai said that America made Vietnamese into better Vietnamese—the “environment,” in his view, provided opportunities and resources that facilitated character development. He was quick to add however that one must retain links to the homeland [*quê hương*]¹⁰⁰—to “stay Vietnamese.”

The Vietnamese American transnational subject has been structurally facilitated by significant policy changes in both the United States and Vietnam in the last decade and a half. The specifics of policies stimulating and facilitating transnational movement will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Seven. Overall however, in the past decade return visits from overseas Vietnamese have expanded significantly: half a million individuals such as Hai and Joanna now return annually to visit their homeland.¹⁰⁰ The re-establishment of kinship and social networks has likewise facilitated family reunifications and transnational marriages, whereby relations living abroad sponsor family members in Vietnam, or help arrange marriages to facilitate immigration, as was the case with Hai’s daughter.

For some, transnational life offers an ideal identity. On the one hand it offers freedom from the structural social and economic barriers often blamed on a corrupt, failed socialist government in Vietnam. On the other it offers respite from the discrimination and isolation widely acknowledged as endemic to the experiences of Vietnamese in the United States who have neither the time nor resources to return to the “homeland.” The opportunities for Hai’s family to move back and forth—to take elements of different worlds and combine them into a single transnational life—not only gives Hai personal satisfaction but offers a chance for his children to “become better Vietnamese” beyond Vietnam while retaining connections within it.

Hai’s transnational social aspirations are not singular; rather, they reside within a networked identity in which his daughter’s future life is vicariously and imaginatively

¹⁰⁰ Lam, Andrew. “‘Boat People’ Return to Vietnam After Finding Success in America” *America.gov* 5/3/10.

apprehended. Hai crossed the migratory bridge to America through friends and family who left previously and subsequently sponsored his emigration. Hai extended that bridge to his daughter, by helping arrange her marriage to a Vietnamese American. Like Aihwa Ong's "flexible citizens" (1999), characterized by global mobility, capital, agency, and heterogeneous belonging, Hai is forging a transnational and trans-generational identity in which collective and comparative familial transformation across generations and communities is a gauge of success. The social evolution of such transnational characters beyond and between the horizons is followed with keen interest by Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans alike.

The question then is what effect such networked transnationalism has on remittance flows. In many interviews, regular long distance remittance sending intended to subsidize family household incomes tended to subside as the bodily returns of diasporic family members became more common. In a sense, the remittance gifts that preceded their return and represented their absence during long periods of exile [when travel between Vietnam and the U.S. was more difficult], are replaced by the physical re-embodiment of traditional family roles. Since the 1990s the political environment has dramatically shifted to make overseas family returns, and by extension, transnational identities, easier to manage. This does not mean however that gifts, financial or otherwise, altogether end. Rather, in most cases financial gifts become increasingly sporadic and symbolic. *Tết* gifting for the New Year, for example, rarely ceases, and token amounts of at least a few hundred dollars were regularly acknowledged in most interviews with Vietnamese American families. At the same time, gifting becomes highly concentrated during physical returns back to Vietnam. Journeys by overseas Vietnamese to visit family members in Vietnam are regularly accompanied by significant financial and material gifts. Most families I interviewed said they would typically bring anywhere from three to ten thousand dollars in cash

when returning to Vietnam. According to one informant in his early 40s named Phong, “Returning to Vietnam for us is much more expensive than the plane ticket. We have to bring money for every relative and friend, close or distant. Everywhere you go, and every family member you see, means money out of the pocket. It is like a waterfall of money from us every day that we are there, until eventually the vacation ends and we go home broke: back to work to earn the money all over again.” The types of desired material items from America as described by informants ranged from clothes to beauty products. Emphasis was particularly placed on their authenticity, quality, and manufacture in America, supply chain characteristics that are admittedly harder to ensure when shopping for goods today.

Maintaining family relations therefore means maintaining the gift that mediates them. For many, the gifting pattern established over the years of exile has become normalized. It has become a habit to distribute money to Vietnamese relatives even when family members in Vietnam no longer economically need them. “Money is our way of showing love,” explained Thuan, a Vietnamese American from San Mateo. But with increased family returns, there is also increased awareness of the everyday details of life in Vietnam, and how different they are from the past. Vietnam, while still a poor country, is significantly better off economically than it was in the 1970s and 80s. Many Vietnamese families who return regularly to Vietnam feel that the needs of family members “left behind” are no longer as dire as they once were, and that indeed, many of them have sufficient economic opportunities in the new economy. Furthermore, many Vietnamese Americans with whom I spoke, some of whom work long hours at blue collar jobs in the U.S., have begun to feel that the remittances they pay from their hard earned salaries are no longer helping family members, but rather contributing to laziness and lack of incentives to find work or develop business opportunities. Regular remittance subsidies for household spending

tend to taper off after one or two return visits by overseas Vietnamese family members to Vietnam, replaced instead by significant gifts or monies on the occasion of an overseas Vietnamese return family visit, now increasingly common, or sporadically and symbolically sent in honor of special occasions such as the New Year, a wedding, or death ceremony.

While some members of the Vietnamese diaspora, such as Joanna and Hai, have thrived on the new transnational identities they have forged as travel back to Vietnam has become easier, others such as Phong find the concentrated family gifting requiring thousands of dollars for each return visit prohibitive. One man explained that “although things are relatively cheap in Vietnam, going there is so expensive because we have to give money to all the family members. You must be generous, even if you don’t have money. I went once eight years ago and gave away ten thousand dollars, which took me a long time to save. Now I cannot afford to go again for a while, because it requires too much money and I have many other expenses [in America] to worry about now.” As discussed in the last chapter, many overseas Vietnamese express exhaustion at the endless demands of remittance expectations, which even when fulfilled seem to go largely unappreciated. The turn towards charitable giving is one hopeful response to redeem the desired meaning of the gift from endless cycles of frustrated obligation. In general, there appears to be a widespread desire to restore the sociality of the gift in a transnational exchange environment where the reciprocity and recognition that the gift is intended to achieve seems to repeatedly fail.

Yen Le Espiritu (2006) has critiqued dominant media and academic narratives surrounding Vietnamese Americans that portray refugees as victims, representationally rendered helpless without agency over their own affairs. In much of the sociological scholarship on Vietnamese refugees produced during the 1980s and 90s the dominant epistemological paradigm

was how to assimilate and empower Vietnamese who had recently arrived in the United States as refugees, viewed as helpless to reconstruct their lives anew in an unfamiliar land. This contributes to an epistemological framing and discussion of migrant financial ability geographically oriented towards kinship support obligations in the United States. The material of this dissertation however has highlighted a veiled theme of aspiration and performance of agency through remittance giving. Gifting back to Vietnam concretely demonstrates that one has successfully arrived financially and socially in countries of resettlement. Money represents the social transformation of the giver, as it is accompanied by stories and images of the very physical and material transformations undergone overseas. The ability to take back one's life abroad after leaving everything behind in Vietnam begins with the assertion of one's commodity purchasing power. To then send money home so that friends and relatives still there can purchase needed items in their own lives represents an agential gift that itself seeks to bestow agency upon the receivers. A prevalent anti-communist tone among many overseas Vietnamese appears to not only be the lament of a lost political cause, but also for many, critique of a failed state socialist project and broader structural environment in which individual agency and work appears to go unrewarded. "We Vietnamese are hard working people, but the communists have made everyone lazy," explained one middle aged Vietnamese man in San Jose who decried the passive attitudes of entitlement and dependency that according to him, many of his Vietnamese relatives hold.

Financial gifts are certainly illustrative of this performance of agency through giving, but the material gifts that often accompany them, significantly in the past but also continuing into the present, highlight this. Among the many material gift forms described by remittance senders, one item that stands out is the gift of medicine, particularly vitamins and aspirin. As Joanna, the

Vietnamese American retirement advisor with transnational family business ties, described to me, “each time I return to Vietnam I carry all sorts of things to give away: individual gifts for family members, letters from family members in the U.S. for family members in Vietnam, a few thousand dollars in cash, as well as vitamins and eucalyptus oil [*đâu xanh*].” Later she mentioned that some of the return gifts she brought back with her were also medicines, in the return case antibiotics or other medicines that were either expensive in the United States or required prescription. The two-way flow of medicines struck me as quite interesting and even paradoxical, and when I inquired about it further Joanna explained,

“in Vietnam conditions are bad, a lot of people are poor and sick. In the past we sent medicines to family because it was so hard to get them in Vietnam, and even if they didn’t need them they could easily sell the medicines in the market for cash. Now, there are many medicines available in Vietnam, and they are quite cheap, which is why we also take them home with us. But their quality is not guaranteed and they are not authentic, especially western medicines. If I bring multivitamins or Tylenol from America, my friends and family trust that these medicines will improve their health. Bringing health back to Vietnam is one small thing I can do with these vitamins. I often give a small bottle or two to people who have been kind to me, and they are always happy to receive them.”

Đâu xanh [eucalyptus oil] is a symbolically compassionate gift that recognizes the suffering of the receivers and evokes their social and physical transformation. While *đâu xanh* is of Asian origin, and a standard gift from Vietnamese back to overseas relatives, the fact that it is often a gift also sent from America to Vietnam underscores the importance and concerns of bodily and familial health by both gifters and receivers. The gifting of medicine represents a certain performance of agency through healing and transformation on the part of the givers. The debilitating refugee journey and recovery in an unfamiliar foreign land has been overcome with time. Medicines restore energy to the body. Restoring health to themselves after difficult refugee journeys, labor conditions, and cultural adaptations, overseas Vietnamese can then turn such healing energies outwards to help others. The returning of medicines to families in

Vietnam reflects a widespread desire to help families left behind and debilitated by poverty to begin recovery and take back control of transforming their lives. By the same token, return gifts of medicines by Vietnamese to returning overseas Vietnamese is an acknowledgement that they recognize the suffering their relatives experience overseas, and that not everything in America is golden and easy. Even if money is perceived by Vietnamese as “easier” to come by overseas, they also know money does not go as far due to differentials in costs of living. Providing cheaper, affordable Vietnamese antibiotics as a gift to relatives en route home is similarly an empathetic expression of the agency of the body’s struggle to overcome physical and financial hardship and achieve personal transformation.

Such exchanges also reflect the normalization of kinship relations across time and space and the re-establishment of mundane traditional relationships. The “time-space” compression (Harvey 1989) said to characterize the contemporary globalized world also affects extended family networks in Vietnam, particularly as changing political conditions have allowed for more cross border travel and gift exchange. Whereas the medicinal gifts of the 1980s were often sent by the Vietnamese diaspora with heightened imaginaries and fears of what life was like for family left behind, nowadays the types of gifts that are exchanged, while still carrying the contextual residue of such motivations, are largely determined according to perceived needs and financial capacity. Medicines, which are a general household need, are purchased and exchanged among family members based on differential market access. Whereas some family members in Vietnam have access to medicines that are cheaper cost, other family members abroad can purchase medicines of higher assured quality.

Đậu xanh, widely available in communities in both Vietnam and abroad, is significantly featured in two-ways flows for the simple reason that it is enjoyed and desired by recipients,

wherever they are physically located, and can just as easily and affordably be acquired by gifters on both sides of the remittance relationship. Leveling the gifting field, the *đậu xanh* gift allows for a momentary restoration of symmetry in the otherwise highly unequal dynamics of transnational gifting exchanges. The widespread two-way exchange of such a gift also reflects the fact that in many ways, the full re-establishment of extended kinship relationships after years of separation—facilitated by state-to-state diplomatic and economic policy changes, low-cost travel, new communication technologies, and eased visa requirements—is nearly complete despite the spatial dispersion of family networks. As Peggy Levitt (2001) describes it, the “village” may have become transnational, but the relationships that define it continue across distance. In short, Vietnam is re-engaged with the globalized world, and its diaspora, once isolated in exile, is able to participate again on a regular basis in transnational family affairs, as is the case in many other countries with large diaspora populations.

What then, is significant about the situation of Vietnamese Americans now returning on a regular basis to Vietnam? Vietnam, once a polarized Cold War enemy to the countries where many Vietnamese refugees resettled, has re-integrated and normalized diplomatic and trade relations with them, and in the process has re-established social and cultural relationships with its global diaspora at the state level. On the diaspora side, the fierce anti-communist sentiments of many overseas Vietnamese seem to be receding with time. Return travel to Vietnam is no longer a contentious issue, and even the establishment of transnational business relationships with Vietnam has become widely accepted, along with philanthropic engagement as the last chapter discussed. “Bánh Mì Ba Lê”, a popular chain of Vietnamese sandwich shops found in American Vietnamese communities, was highlighted by many informants I spoke with in California as an example of a Vietnamese American company that had significant business dealings in Vietnam.

In the 1980s and even early 1990s such transnational business dealings would have been extremely controversial, perhaps sparking community boycotts and even threats of violence. Dr. Pham for example, introduced in Chapter Five, who as former President of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Little Saigon was an early advocate of business relations with Vietnam, said that his office was picketed regularly in the 1990s because of his views. Other Vietnamese Americans, such as travel and business entrepreneur Vuong Tran, struggled with other forms of community violence in the 1980s, including an office firebombing.¹⁰¹ Even private remittance companies were at times suspiciously viewed and accused of having Vietnamese government links and support in order to operate a transnational business.

By the 2000s the idea of Vietnamese Americans conducting business in Vietnam has become largely accepted, albeit quietly. Anti-communist rhetoric to some extent remains an important symbolic community identity mechanism,¹⁰² but rarely leads to deliberated political action anymore. The idea that the communist regime will soon fall, is, as many informants soberly reflected, a bygone and unrealistic dream. The full re-establishment of US-Vietnam diplomatic and economic relations legitimized the current regime as, for better or worse, the representative of Vietnam in the world community. The former republican [South Vietnamese] yellow flag with its three red stripes still proudly and ubiquitously flies over Vietnamese American shopping centers across the United States and in many Vietnamese communities in other countries abroad. The republican flag, sometimes called the “Vietnamese heritage and freedom flag,” continues to be fiercely defended as representing the Vietnamese nation, leading to political campaigns in many Vietnamese communities, from Virginia to New Orleans, to pass legislation to this effect. Yet it is also viewed as an emotional symbol of the history and story of

¹⁰¹ Seth Mydans, “To Vietnamese in America, the Homeland Beckons” New York Times 2/12/94

¹⁰² see Vo Dang, Thuy (2005). “The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community.”

the Vietnamese diaspora, rather than a direct contestation of the current Vietnamese regime's existence. Resolution 3750 of the City of Westminster California [one of the two municipalities that Little Saigon straddles], for example, concedes that "the flag of the one party regime currently holding power in occupied Vietnam may be the flag of a government," but argues that "it is not the flag of a Nation." The Vietnamese American community continues to be active in rallying around issues of human rights abuses in Vietnam, often around legitimate humanitarian concerns, but these serve as more of a check on the current government, rather than an attempt to overthrow it.

Nonetheless anti-communist political activism continues to flare up in unexpected places. In the summer of 2008, many Vietnamese Americans in San Jose were vocally upset about the proposed designation of the Vietnamese business area—a series of strip malls on Story Road—as the Saigon Business District. Madison Nguyen, the elected Vietnamese American city council representative, had championed the designation as a way of showcasing the extensive Vietnamese business community in the area. Originally, the proposed name for the area was "Little Saigon", following the well-known name of the Vietnamese neighborhood in Orange County. The anti-communist activism that Little Saigon has come to represent over the years, however, led others who wished to move away from the politicized symbolism of the name to lobby for a different designation, thus the "Saigon Business District." Yet somehow the decision by Madison Nguyen and the city council to push forward with the alternative name, without properly consulting the community [in the eyes of many], enraged a significant segment of it. In 2008 a movement to recall Madison Nguyen from public office [ultimately defeated in 2009] was being organized, and many stores in the Vietnamese shopping centers around San Jose had signs in the window expressing their opposition to "Saigon Business District." As one woman

explained her anger to me, “Madison has connections to the communists in Vietnam, and now she listens to them more than she does to us. When we were asked what we wanted the name to be we told her ‘Little Saigon.’ So why then did she go and change it?” The larger issue in the controversy seemed to be an aggrieved sense of Vietnamese marginalization in American society, further reinforced when a Vietnamese public official voted into office by the Vietnamese community continued to ignore what was seen as the community’s voice. Indeed a great deal of Vietnamese American political activism appears to be in reaction to such perceived exclusions, articulating a plea for the Vietnamese American community to be more visible, heard, and respected.¹⁰³

Years of diasporic exile in the United States has also produced a generation of Vietnamese Americans who have come of age in a multicultural society that encourages them to identify with ethnic roots.¹⁰⁴ For some, this search for identity turns their gaze towards what Ronald Takaki (1989) termed the strange “distant shore” of Asia. As many teenagers and 20-somethings start to connect with a Vietnamese homeland they never knew, remittance giving has also become an important mechanism for facilitating an identity as a Vietnamese overseas. While many first and 1.5 generation members of the Vietnamese American NGO network, discussed in the last chapter, have significant experiential memories, as well as cultural and linguistic capabilities, from Vietnam, the younger generation that is emerging is seeking new ways to connect with their Vietnamese American heritage. A number of different groups have emerged in the last decade that bring together younger Vietnamese Americans to support issues

¹⁰³ Furuya and Collet (2010) note that anti-communist activism in the Vietnamese American community, or what they call “Saigon nationalism” has a “strategic role..(in)..the incorporation of a group that arrived merely a generation ago at the bottom of America’s socioeconomic ladder” (73).

¹⁰⁴ Omi and Winant (1994) point to the exceptionalism of ethnic consciousness in the United States, where “from the very inception of the Republic to the present moment, race has been a profound determinant of one’s political rights, one’s location in the labor market, and indeed one’s sense of ‘identity’” (1).

within the community. These include organizations like the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network,¹⁰⁵ which provides a forum of support for Vietnamese artistic expression in the U.S. and Vietnam, and Viet Unity, which has been active in bringing together community organizers promoting civil rights, environmental, housing, and social justice issues for Vietnamese Americans.¹⁰⁶ The Vietnamese Heritage Foundation¹⁰⁷ is an organization that has launched an initiative to collect oral histories about Vietnam from first generation Vietnamese from across the country, who in many cases have been reluctant to share the hardships of their experiences emigrating to America with second-generation offspring.¹⁰⁷ Another recently formed organization that has demonstrated significant organizing energy is the One Vietnam Network.¹⁰⁸ One Vietnam attempts to use the web as a forum and social network to bring attention to Vietnam and organize interested members from across the Vietnamese diaspora and in Vietnam. Through it, they hope among other goals to promote charitable giving to Vietnam from Vietnamese American professional donors who want to re-engage with their country of ethnic origin, but no longer have the connections, skills, or time to do so directly.

One of the organizational starting points for many such groups is involvement with Vietnamese student associations during college. Many campus associations organize younger Vietnamese Americans around identity and heritage issues, with efforts also directed at sending students to Vietnam or rallying fundraising or awareness campaigns around issues that affect Vietnamese both in the U.S. and Vietnam. One outcome of a 2005 Union of North American Vietnamese Student Associations¹⁰⁹ conference called “Vietnamese Interacting as One” was a Collective Philanthropy Project, in which Vietnamese Student Associations could nominate non-

¹⁰⁵ Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network website: www.dvanonline.com

¹⁰⁶ Viet Unity website: www.vietunity.org

¹⁰⁷ Vietnamese Heritage Foundation website: www.vietnameseamerican.org

¹⁰⁸ One Vietnam “culture network” website: <http://onevietnam.org>

¹⁰⁹ Union of North American Vietnamese Student Associations website: www.unavsa.org

profit organizations working on issues relevant to the Vietnamese community and fundraise for their projects. Some college graduates have been able to take advantage of summer volunteer opportunities offered by a range of Vietnamese American NGOs, as well as newer initiatives such as the Ford Foundation-supported and Asian Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy-managed Viet Fellows program that sends Vietnamese Americans under the age of thirty to Vietnam for short-term volunteer assignments. Viet Fellow Jodie Pham explains that the program offers “the chance to connect to our roots and understand the intense resources needed in Vietnam. There is something that can be done and a young Vietnamese American, like myself, can be a part of that.”¹¹⁰

A common fund-raising strategy among diaspora philanthropy organizations is the development of “giving circles” bringing together young professionals with donor potential around issues of sociality and identity. Asian American / Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy [AAPIP], a Bay area based nonprofit organization that has been active in promoting the model, and which also hosts the Viet Fellows program, describes giving circles as

“a group of volunteers raising, pooling and granting money together. Giving circles allow for a wide range of giving style, philosophy and values. Some giving circle members just donate money while others volunteer their time, skills and expertise in the organizations their giving circle funds. Giving circles also provide social networks, leadership development, peer support and learning among its members.”¹¹¹

Happy hours, dinners, and other social events are common forums for attracting and building such giving networks, at the same time institutionalizing social pressure for collective giving. At one such giving event I attended in the South Bay, strategic potential donors were invited for a catered Vietnamese dinner at a private home, during which a selected Vietnamese American NGO gave a presentation of their work and then fielded questions and suggestions about their

¹¹⁰ Viet Fellows website: www.vietfellows.org

¹¹¹ AAPIP website: www.aapip.org/givingcircles

project operations. Although money was not collected at the dinner itself, the guests went home with literature on the organization that included instructions on how to make a paypal donation to the project.

In these new giving patterns there is also an anticipated donor movement towards larger mainstream NGOs and development organizations and away from the types of smaller community-based and individual personality-driven organizations characterized by the Vietnamese American NGO Network. Mainstream humanitarian and development organizations working in Vietnam such as East Meets West Foundation, for example, currently have a less than 10% Vietnamese American donor base. However there is a deliberate strategy to expand such bases in coming years with the help of mediatory community organizations such as One Vietnam. The Ford Foundation, which actively supported the institutionalization of the Vietnamese American NGO Network, recognized One Vietnam and Viet Fellows as important platforms for promoting one of their grant making aims: to address the effects of Agent Orange in Vietnam and develop awareness of and activism around the issue among youth and Vietnamese Americans. Ford has given seed grants to One Vietnam and Asia Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy to help reach a target audience of young and upcoming Vietnamese American professionals with new earning capacities, generous humanitarian impulses, and distanced from the politics of exile that dominate many discussions of charitable giving among older collective remittance actors.

There is increasing consensus among organizers of collective / charitable remittance initiatives that building a sustained giving base among younger diasporic Vietnamese means connecting the humanitarian issues at stake to notions of identity in fund raising. As two twenty-something year old co-founders of the One Vietnam “Culture” Network explained to me over

beer and pizza in San Francisco, “The first step [to developing a donor base] is making Vietnam cool and trendy among a younger generation that has turned away from it. In the way K-Pop has caught the attention of Korean Americans, we need to make Vietnamese social and cultural issues a part of Vietnamese American identity that people are excited about and want to be a part of.”

What is apparent in the shift towards collective and second generation giving as described in both Chapters Six and Seven is that the orientation and vantage point of the gift is changing, as suggested in Chapter Five. Whereas the crux of the traditional family-to-family remittance gift is the exchange between the overseas giver and Vietnamese receiver, in many of the situations described in the last two chapters, the Vietnamese receiver becomes increasingly distant. As immediate family members are sponsored over time for family reunification emigration, the remittance relationship with extended kin becomes more sporadic, and symbolic of securing a placeholder status in a community of origin and return. In collective remittance scenarios where money is raised for charitable causes, the recipient of such gifts may become generic, stereotyped, and nameless. The direct social relation between the giver and receiver begins to recede, and the sociality of giving shifts to relationships among the givers themselves. The social dimensions of interaction among circles of givers who come together to raise money for a cause has much more to do with localized identities than long distance kinship obligations.

In collective remittance scenarios, there is also a noticeable process of re-imagining and re-inventing the nation as a place of nostalgic origins. Homeland bound remittances flows not only “maintain” identity, as Najam argues, but also serve to supplement the illusion of producing a coherent diasporic and transnational cultural identity that masks divisions, marginalities, contingencies, and unstable ontological gaps. For a refugee community, where support for the

communist regime in Vietnam is generally scarce and quiet, this has traditionally meant focusing community celebrations on cultural and geographic aspects of the nation, rather than the state. Yet if the blame for structural poverty is generally placed on the Vietnamese communist party by the overseas diaspora, collective giving to address poverty issues must in some sense also address the politics of the state rather than trying to abstract out the nation. As discussed in Chapter Five, this is not easy to do, and many organizations have faced resistance to their work, especially if not done in a politically sensitive manner. And yet, the rise of collective giving illustrates that there is increased interest among the diaspora in re-connecting with a physical place of origins, including constructing such connections and emotional linkages for a second generation.

All of these patterns point to an overall normalization of transnational relations between the Vietnamese “homeland” and its diaspora. Whereas in the past the imaginaries of different lives in and beyond borders were heightened, even floating in the far realm of fantasy, today Vietnamese family networks have a more grounded and sobered view of what life is like for family members both in Vietnam and abroad. For the second generation, many are seeking to ground their diasporic Vietnamese identities with experiences, either vicarious or direct, through new engagements with a Vietnamese homeland they never knew. The re-establishment of gifting relationships as regularized two-way flows between specific family members regardless of geographic location, as well as between overseas Vietnamese and the nation more generally, illustrates the widespread normalization, and in some cases invention, of homeland-diaspora relations. In such gifting relations, the demonstration of agency, identity, and sociality is an important performative factor, and is increasingly enacted by not only Vietnamese overseas, but

also Vietnamese in Vietnam who want to symbolically return the gifts and assistance their overseas counterparts have given for many years.

Yet, while Vietnamese overseas have been invited back to participate in homeland affairs with the blessing of the state, the actual policies under which they are able to return reflects the fact that broader structural political factors still have an important role in constructing and governing citizen subjects beyond the family and heritage connections that motivate their returns. The returning “*Việt Kiều*” has become the subject of extended policy discussions, and a familiar caricature in popular culture. How the Vietnamese state designates and differentiates returning Vietnamese from Vietnamese “at home”, as well as from each other, and how such categories are received and inhabited, is the issue to which we turn in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Seven

Crossing the Bridge ... Home?

Thanh, a migrant laborer [*người lao động*] from near the city of Vinh in north Vietnam, spent \$12,000 for a “secret” labor contract to work in Europe, in hopes of sending remittances back home. Smuggled from Hanoi to Moscow to Ukraine, Slovakia, Czech Republic, and finally Germany, Thanh spent six months in 2005 living in an apartment with twelve other Vietnamese men, selling black market cigarettes from Eastern Europe in Berlin. He estimated it would take a year to pay off the debts from the migration fees, after which he could send all of his money back home to his wife and family so that they could, among other things, upgrade their ramshackle wooden house to a tall concrete one, like many of their neighbors in the village who had also gone abroad. But before that materialized Thanh was arrested by the German authorities as an illegal migrant, and despite applying for asylum, eventually sent back to Vietnam.

Thanh’s unpaid debts were assumed by his brother, who added them to even more debts incurred as he prepared a similar journey to earn money in Europe. The fees to secure a labor contract in Europe were more expensive, Thanh explained, but the process was faster and the money was better once you got there. It was preferable over going, for example, to the Middle East, as his neighbor Loan had done. Paying \$2000 to go to Jordan, she had lived in isolated worker dormitories earning a paltry salary, and was not even close to paying down her debt when labor abuses in her factory resulted in a shut down, with all of the foreign workers sent home without compensation. A U.S.-based NGO had intervened when abuse cases were reported, bringing hope among the workers that labor conditions would improve, but instead led to a mass forced return before the end of their contracts. Back home in Vietnam, she fretted daily about

how to repay the large sum her family had borrowed to send her abroad, which was increasing each day at high interest rates: 1.6% per month, with a one year repayment deadline. Although Loan's migratory labor route was legal, unlike Thanh's, the Vietnamese government's Ministry of Labor, despite actively promoting labor migration as a means to national development, had done nothing to help her case except to negotiate a meager settlement with the company of three million dong, less than \$200 and less than 10% of what she had originally paid. She explained that when she had discussed the idea of going to the capital Hanoi to protest her situation directly, she was deemed a troublemaker by local government officials.

The dilemma of how to repay the debts of their failed labor migrant journeys weighed heavily on the minds of both Loan and Thanh. Local agricultural employment options, mainly rice farming, offered low marginal returns, and the high rate of interest meant that even domestic migration to Hanoi for work would be insufficient to pay off the loans within a realistic timeframe. The only real hope of repaying their already incurred and rapidly increasing debts was to go into more debt—embarking on yet another risky employment gamble abroad that might or might not pan out into a steady stream of remittances and economic stability.

On the other [southern] side of the country, Kim, a *Việt Kiều* [overseas Vietnamese] from Washington USA, whose family had fled the communist regime by boat after 1975, traveled back and forth regularly between the United States and Ho Chi Minh City, where she worked for a prominent international medical NGO. Although her salary was modest by American standards, it afforded her a prime condominium overlooking the Ho Chi Minh City skyline and one of the few major parks left in this rapidly urbanizing city. Her American passport had a “five-year visa exemption” specially granted by the Vietnamese government to overseas Vietnamese returnees, allowing them to move freely in and out of the country. The visa

exemption program had been implemented in 2007 to promote “homeland return” and encourage investment from overseas Vietnamese settled in western countries. Many of the three million strong Vietnamese diaspora had eagerly taken up the offer. In Vietnam, returnees often found themselves on a professional fast track, as their linguistic and cultural negotiation skills were in high demand by foreign companies interested in investing in emerging markets but without local knowledge and connections.

In such an environment, middle men entrepreneurial opportunities abounded. Catherine, another *Việt Kiều* in her 30s from California, had given up her salaried cubicle job in suburban Orange County in 2005 to begin a textile production and import business that benefitted from cheaper labor costs in Vietnam and newly reduced tariffs on Vietnamese textile imports as a result of Vietnam’s 2006 accession to the World Trade Organization. Using her connections and capital, she was able to liaise across transnational networks of producers, suppliers, and distributors to make clothing in Vietnam and bring it to the U.S. market. Like Kim, Catherine’s work demanded a mobile lifestyle that took her back and forth between the U.S. and Vietnam on a monthly basis. Both women enjoyed the benefits of the state-encouraged mobility that made their jobs possible, and are examples of the types of overseas Vietnamese celebrated in the state media as returning to their cultural roots and economically contributing to the homeland.

The stories of Thanh, Loan, Kim, and Catherine show that despite the increasing international circulation of bodies and financial flows as a result of Vietnam’s integration with the global economy in the last decade, there remains a drastically uneven hierarchy of mobility that privileges and prefers certain flows over others. In the last decade the Vietnamese state has paid active lip service to the idea of homeland return, instituting a range of institutions, policies, and structural incentives to promote it. Yet despite a 2004 Vietnamese Politburo resolution that

welcomed returnees to the “homeland” [*quê hương*] and promised protection of all Vietnamese overseas, regardless of location or occupation, the experiences of Thanh and Loan as compared to Kim and Catherine illustrate that in practice, state sponsored regimes and institutions that facilitate and regulate mobility betray differential modes of governance in which mobility is institutionally valued and manipulated. As sociologist Beverly Skeggs (2004) notes, “mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power” (49). The emotionally laden notion of homeland “return” is strategically deployed and economically calculated by the state, resulting in varying embodiments of the overseas Vietnamese identity. This chapter examines the Vietnamese state regime of return mobility, considering its strategies, limitations, and contradictions, through an examination of two lenses of migrant experience: permanently resettled overseas Vietnamese returning to Vietnam [*Việt Kiều*], and migrant laborers who go abroad for short term labor contracts [*Lao Động*].

Thanh, Loan, Kim, and Catherine all fall into the state-defined category of “Vietnamese in foreign countries” [*Người Việt Nam ở Nước Ngoài*], the oversight of which has been institutionalized in a national Committee for Overseas Vietnamese Affairs [*Ủy Ban Về Người Việt Nam ở Nước Ngoài*], following similar initiatives in other countries with large overseas populations. The more informal and vernacular term for overseas Vietnamese, *Việt Kiều*, however, is popularly designated and personally embodied by only Kim and Catherine, who enjoy the unrestricted privilege of inter-state mobility. Although the term *Kiêu*, from the Chinese word root *Qiao* meaning sojourning overseas, is often rejected among resettled Vietnamese immigrants abroad, it is generally embraced by those returnees or transnationals who have chosen to return to Vietnam from the West for long-term employment or resettlement. The word is also a homonym for bridge [*Kiêu*], identically spelled in Romanized *quốc ngữ* although

the words are not necessarily directly etymologically related.¹¹² But for *Việt Kiều*, transnational mobility does reflect a bridge-like identity, in that the return “bridge” is two-way: they retain foreign passports meaning that the possibility of crossing back to the other side is never foreclosed. *Việt Kiều* are themselves frequently referred to by journalists, politicians, and businesses as “bridges” between the west and Vietnam.¹¹³ Vietnamese Vice President Truong My Hoa, for example, has stated that overseas Vietnamese are “an inseparable part of the Vietnamese nation, a constituent of Vietnam's strength, and a *bridge* linking Vietnam with their countries of residence.”¹¹⁴

For *Việt Kiều* the state order of mobility is one that encourages constant return by tactfully reminding them of where the bridge and homeland intersect, constructing the latter as a place of nostalgic “return.” Welcoming returning overseas Vietnamese to Saigon’s Ton Son Nhat airport during *Tết* 2008 for example, was a large banner over the immigration counter with the words: “*Quê Hương Chào Mừng Kiều Bào Về Đón Tết*” [the homeland welcomes our overseas compatriots returning to celebrate the New Year]. Here, the choice of the designation *Kiều Bào*, another official term roughly translated as overseas compatriots, underscores the state’s efforts to strategically promote homeland return in the interest of national development and global integration. The Chinese word root of *Bào* means womb. The official usage of the term *Kiều Bào* suggests therefore an agenda of constructing diasporic subjectivities intimately linked with the nation, or “homeland.” Overseas Vietnamese subject-hood is metaphorically

¹¹²The Chinese Han radical for Qiao 僑 – overseas sojourn – is person, while the radical for Qiao 橋 – bridge 橋 – is wood. In Sino-Vietnamese the word is *Kiều*, or in vernacular, *Cầu*. Despite the differing characters, the semantic links nonetheless suggest a shared word family: on old Chinese word families see Laurent Sagart (1999) See also Li, Victor Hao. "From Qiao to Qiao" in *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, ed. Tu Wei-ming. Stanford University Press (1994), 213-220.

¹¹³ such as in statements by Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Phu Binh in Ministry of Foreign Affairs News: “Overseas Vietnamese: a Bridge Connecting Vietnam and the U.S.” 7/6/05; journalist David Lamb in LA Times: “Viet Kieu: a Bridge Between Two Worlds” 11/4/97; etc.

¹¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs News: “Vice President Welcomes Overseas Vietnamese” 2/7/05.

constructed as a bridge always linking them to primordial origins, even in a globalized era of widespread mobility and out-migration.

Despite these linguistic constructions, return is still recognized as an agential choice by those *Việt Kiều* living overseas, outside the purview of the Vietnamese state. Many of those who return, often holding residual anti-communist sentiments common among the overseas refugee community, do so despite the state rather than because of it. Through propaganda efforts to encourage and welcome overseas Vietnamese returning home, however, the state anxiously seeks recognition and relevance among this significant group of diasporic returnees, whose homeward returns and transnational subjectivities are more often economically, rather than nationalistically, motivated.

For Thanh and Loan, on the other hand, their agency of international mobility is often at the mercy of the state. There is no need to coax the voluntary realignment of nation and state in their personal projections of identity, as their citizenship firmly affirms the linkage and in many cases facilitates their opportunities for overseas labor. Their linguistic designation as workers [*Người lao động*] emphasizes an identity based on what they do, rather than where they live. The Vietnamese state order of mobility for them is one that highlights opportunity for socioeconomic transformation through labor rather than homeland nostalgia and patriotism. The state offers labor migration programs to the “poor and unskilled” for the purposes of economic development. Mobility for them is often a gift of the state, which offers short-term migrant labor contracts, typically two to three years in overseas countries ranging from Malaysia to Israel. Workers sign contracts to be on good behavior, including refraining from labor strikes; those who dutifully follow through are often rewarded with more state-granted opportunities for overseas labor mobility. As a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official explained the Vietnamese

state's export labor policies to cooperating technical assistance advisors at the International Organization for Migration, "After some years of working abroad, when their labor contracts end, the workers return home, and they will be encouraged to use their capital for investment and production. This plays an important role in creating jobs and reducing unemployment, especially in far distant and remote rural areas. The poverty there is thus gradually reduced. Return workers with good records [they did not violate the law of the original country or the country of destination] and who fully completed their previous labor contracts are given priority to sign a new contract for another departure."¹¹⁵

Yet situations of overwork and abuse are common for migrant workers, causing duress resulting in some workers failing to complete their contracts. Those who fail to fulfill their contractual migrant worker duties are forcibly returned home before the end of their contracts, even if the debts incurred to initially go abroad remain unpaid for. Reflections on this trauma and insecurity of return were widespread among Loan and Thanh's neighbors and friends, living in a community where over 60% of the families in the village population have overseas migrant laborers as members.

For migrant laborers, return to Vietnam is more associated with economic failure and even personal catastrophe, rather than romantic emotional desire. The bureaucratic and financial obstacles to and controls over mobility experienced by short term laborers means that the agential notion of a "bridge" that invites crossing is not embodied as part of their overseas Vietnamese identity. This is not to say that labor migration is not an emotional or agential process. On the contrary, the stakes involved including the dangerous journey, familial separation, and financial indebtedness incurred, mean that departure as well as return make for

¹¹⁵ speech by Pham Van Dinh (MOFA) to International Organization for Migration, 7/7/08: "International Migration and Return Migrants in Viet Nam"

an extremely meditated, emotional, and often traumatic process. The Vietnamese state's construction of homeland nostalgia and two-way mobile channels for the purposes of return migration, however, is directed at long term resettled migrants abroad rather than short term export labor migrants. There is widespread awareness of the uneven hierarchies of mobility and resultant subjectification within the broader category of "Vietnamese overseas" on the part of overseas laborers. For them, return is often forced rather than voluntary. As Thanh explained to me, "The *Việt Kiều*—they can go anywhere, do and say whatever they like. Over there [in Germany] they don't even talk to us. The old never likes the new—the *Việt Kiều* look down on us (*lao động*). We are not like them, we must be careful living overseas [...] if caught and sent back it is a disaster. You are dead [*chết*]. There are no local jobs sufficient to pay back the money borrowed [to go abroad]. Once you get over there [*ở bên*] you must stay and earn as long as you can, so it's hard to know when someone will return. If and when they do, it is often because they got caught, rather than choosing to do so."

As this dissertation has discussed, a fundamental contradiction in the neoliberal ethic is the lack of equivalence between flows of money and goods¹¹⁶ and that of people—mobility of finance is promoted over the mobility of labor. Citizens as well as states are beholden to a broader global political economy in which mobility is both desired and managed: where money flows, bodies and governments attempt to follow, with varying degrees of success. The experiential dimensions of such differential hierarchies of mobility are displaced into an ontological framework in which mobility itself is central. Differentials in "mobility capital" (Kauffman 2004), the ability to access global mobility channels and networks, play a significant role in shaping migrant subjectivities. The characters in this chapter offer an opportunity to

¹¹⁶ See John Williams for the "Washington consensus" on global trade and financial liberalization and promoting free capital flows (1990,1993,2003).

closely examine the experiences of those living within changing global, state, and civil society regimes of migration and mobility governance. The contradictory notion of homeland return, as deployed by the state and experienced by different kinds of migrants, offers insight into how broader structures and specters of global migration are not only structurally governed but also ontologically negotiated and embodied.

In the last decade the Vietnamese government has implemented numerous structural policies to encourage various forms of economic and bodily return. In contrast to 1991, when the Ministry of Finance imposed a detailed tax regimen on goods brought into the country by returning *Việt Kiều*, in 1997 taxes [5%] on overseas remittances were lifted. In 2002 the government expanded the range of financial institutions permitted to deliver foreign currencies remitted by overseas Vietnamese. In 2006 Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization, attracting new investment and increasing exports. Alongside economic reforms, Vietnam also began instituting a wave of new policies designed to encourage Vietnamese in western countries to return to Vietnam for tourism and investment. This included groundwork legislation for overseas Vietnamese property ownership in 2001, 2006, and 2010; Politburo Resolution 36 of 2004 affirming overseas Vietnamese as an integral part of the nation; the creation of “Overseas Compatriot” organizations [*Hội Kiều Bào*] in 2006 designed to encourage state linkages with overseas Vietnamese communities; 2007 Prime Ministerial Decision 135 allowing five-year visa waivers for overseas Vietnamese; and an amended 2009 Vietnamese nationality law that provides for overseas Vietnamese dual citizenship. In November 2009 a government sponsored conference on the “Global Vietnamese Diaspora” was held in Hanoi, attended by 1500 delegates including 900 overseas Vietnamese representatives, to discuss four main themes: building an overseas Vietnamese community, attracting the return of overseas Vietnamese intellectuals,

preserving Vietnamese cultural identity and tradition overseas, and attracting overseas Vietnamese business return. Returning Vietnamese diasporic bodies, capital, and knowledge to the homeland is a central goal of the state, but as we will see, one that is both conditioned and conditional.

The government also passed measures in 2007 to ambitiously develop and expand its export labor program with a goal of sending abroad 100,000 workers annually. Additional policy efforts have focused on developing training programs to place Vietnamese export laborers in higher skill industries with more lucrative returns, such as engineering, rather than low wage industries such as factory assembly work or construction. An overall increase in GDP and remittances (currently estimated at 7 billion a year, with 1.7 billion coming from the export labor population) suggest such strategies are tepidly beginning to reap the hoped for economic benefits. The Vietnamese government's promotion of migrant labor circulations in the capitalist global economy was a deliberate state effort to replace the socialist era labor contracts from northern Vietnam that largely ended after the fall of the Soviet Union. Regional percentages of remittance receipts in the northern Red River Delta, the source of most migrant laborers, fell from 31% in 1992 to 16% in 1997 to 9.5% in 2002.¹¹⁷ As the government began to ambitiously engage a more deliberate policy of promoting migrant and remittance mobility and return in the 2000s, the situation started to change. By 2004 the percentage of international remittances to the Red River Delta had risen to 19.5%, and the aforementioned labor export policy measures of 2007 reflect the state's hope for even greater future returns.

At the same time, with a flattening of GDP growth and remittances into Vietnam, as well as declining demands for export labor out of Vietnam after the global recession of 2008, the state and its citizens have become even more anxiously aware of the dependency of financial and

¹¹⁷ Pfau & Long (2008), Appendix Table 5.

physical mobility on broader global economic trends and structural frameworks. The promotion and management of international mobility however remains a central goal of the state. Return itself, furthermore, both financial and bodily, becomes valued, with a resultant hierarchy of state managed mobility. The migratory experiences and narratives of those living within the variegated structures of such mobility management regimes offer telling insight into how such regimes are differentially inhabited and negotiated.

Before moving to the narratives themselves, it is helpful to review the overall spectrum and chronology of migrant and remittance mobility. This genealogy, ranging from export laborers to former refugees and extending through the 1970s to the present, illustrates both the power and anxiety of the state in managing diasporic mobility and return. Compare recent policies encouraging diasporic mobility and return—physical, financial, and social—to earlier state attitudes towards the overseas Vietnamese population. Following the end of the Vietnam War and the communist reunification of the country in 1975, there was a pressing demand by the Vietnamese state to encourage return to the homeland for the purposes of national reconstruction. Vietnamese students studying abroad were admonished to return, and those who did were celebrated as patriots. Those who chose to not return and stay abroad, and those in Vietnam who chose to flee overseas, on the other hand, were severely criticized. In an early 1979 decree on *Việt Kiều*, the motivations for international mobility were critiqued as anti-nationalist and anti-patriotic. Those who left the country were described as former “puppets” [*ngụy*] abandoning their homeland and the national reconstruction effort. Remittances from overseas Vietnamese were suspiciously viewed by the state, suspecting hostile agendas. Until the late 1990s, the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City had an entire exhibition depicting overseas Vietnamese

“terrorist” groups who, having abandoned their homeland and living in exile, raised funds abroad for the purpose of “destroying the Vietnamese nation through sabotage.”

Yet as Vietnam’s economy began to buckle under the international isolation imposed by the capitalist West after the war and the failures of a poorly managed socialist command economy, labor migration abroad within the socialist bloc gained favor as a means to national reconstruction in the early 1980s. Labor migrants were called upon to serve the fatherland, departing for contracts in far off unfamiliar climates such as Russia to work off national debts and remit money back to an impoverished nation that was literally starving to death. The International Organization for Migration reports that from 1981 to 1990, 217,183 Vietnamese, 55% male and 45% female, were officially contracted as laborers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe through government managed export labor programs.¹¹⁸ Going abroad became a form of “service to the fatherland,” one whose financial and bodily circulatory return rendered the patriotic journey complete.

Meanwhile, more than twice as many overseas Vietnamese who had left as refugees were kept at bay beyond the Cold War’s iron curtain. There were no diplomatic relations in the 1980s between the United States, where the majority had settled, and Vietnam. Remittances sent from abroad took largely material form [goods that could be sold and exchanged on the Vietnamese black market] due to closed financial channels, and the possibility of return among Vietnamese exiles abroad lay largely in the hope of counter-revolution and regime change in Vietnam. By the early 1990s the Cold War was ending. With Soviet assistance dried up, Vietnam became more amenable to economic and political reintegration with the capitalist world. There was hope on the part of the post renovation [*Đổi Mới*] Vietnamese government that opening up the economy to tourism and investment would bring much needed capital flows to Vietnam. In 1995

¹¹⁸ International Organization for Migration. “Labour Migration in Asia” Vol 1. IOM: Geneva (2003).

the U.S. and Vietnam reestablished diplomatic relations, and in 2000 trade relations were normalized through the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement. Following economic and political normalization with the U.S., where a majority of the Vietnamese diaspora reside, a trickle of returning refugees from western countries expanded to a steady stream. While there were only 8000 overseas Vietnamese returnees in 1987, in 1992 87,000 returned, and by 2002 over 380,000 overseas Vietnamese were returning annually.¹¹⁹ A significant *Việt Kiều* return economy emerged in which the Vietnamese state quickly started to appreciate the economic power of returning *Việt Kiều* through remittances, spending, and investment. Moving from a position of suspicion, the state began to cautiously and then openly welcome *Việt Kiều*, and their money, returning to the homeland.

Socialist bloc labor exports rapidly came to a standstill with the fall of the Soviet Union and the communist Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s. Most Vietnamese overseas workers were forcibly sent home before the end of their contracts, and the Vietnamese government started to negotiate new contracts with countries in the Middle East and Asia to replace the Eastern bloc labor contracts. Countries such as Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan became major destination countries for Vietnamese workers over the course of the next decade. The government promotes such programs as means to poverty reduction, and offers export labor opportunities as a hopeful outlet for the poorest of the poor. In particular, the government has targeted traditionally impoverished northern provinces to fill export labor quotas as a means to counter the disproportionate amount of international remittances directed to the wealthier south (IOM 2003). There are many, however, who for various reasons such as poor health records, are unable to participate in official labor export programs. They must turn to illegal migratory routes and labor contracts. For many of them, the networks of knowledge and contacts with the former

¹¹⁹ Data from the Vietnam State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese, retrieved 2007.

Eastern bloc continue. With the European Union offering lucrative economic opportunities, black market migration has continued following old networks through Russia into Eastern and eventually Western Europe.

In what follows, I further discuss the stories of two overseas Vietnamese who have “returned” to Vietnam from abroad. Canh, a northern Vietnamese laborer who went to Berlin, is a neighbor of Loan and Thanh, falling into the overseas Vietnamese category of “*người lao động*”—laborer. Duc, who was born and raised in Saigon but moved to California after 1975, was a colleague of Catherine and Kim in Ho Chi Minh City. His designation is quite different from “*người lao động*,” and depending on whom he talks to, he has been variously called “*Người Việt Hải Ngoại*”: Vietnamese overseas, “*Người Việt Nam ở nước ngoài*”:¹²⁰ Vietnamese in foreign country, “*Người Mỹ gốc Việt*”: American with Vietnamese roots, or “*Kiều Bào*”: overseas compatriot. Yet the popular designation for Duc, used on a general everyday basis by his friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and himself while living in Saigon, is “*Việt Kiều*.” The differences of the return experiences of Duc and Canh to Vietnam highlight their contrasting subject positions within broader structural regimes of state and inter-state managed and monitored mobility.

Canh grew up in the same town as Loan and Thanh, a community of about 10,000 near the city of Vinh, a traditionally poorer province in northern Vietnam. Canh’s parents had been rice farmers, and many in the community continued to farm rice in the agricultural areas near the town. Yet the returns on farming were nothing like that of the Red River or Mekong Delta, where more fertile land yielded bountiful harvests. Over the years, farming had increasingly become a subsistence occupation. With multiple children in the family, it became necessary that

¹²⁰ this is the official state term for overseas Vietnamese, as reflected in the name of the state ministry that oversees them: *Uy Ban Nha Nuoc Ve Nguoi Viet Nam o Nuoc Ngoai* [State Committee for Vietnamese in Foreign Countries].

some find employment beyond the fields. After leaving school at an early age, Canh and his brother first went to Hanoi, where they worked selling [*buôn bán*] various things, from noodles to small electronics. Yet like farming, Canh's work in Hanoi failed to bring sufficient income to help his family. On one of his return trips home, Canh was drinking with his friend Tinh, who had recently returned from Germany. Tinh and his wife had swapped places: before she stayed home and took care of their two children while he was away: now it was her turn to work. She had found a position in the hospitality industry in Taiwan, and would be away for three years. Between their combined remittance contributions to the household over five years, they had managed to completely demolish and rebuild their house. Rising three levels, it appeared full of half-used rooms. Tinh mostly hung out in the living room, drinking beer and whiskey and watching television. The children played with their cousins and aunt down the street, mostly leaving the father to himself. He would often invite his male friends over to drink, smoke, and talk. It was on such an occasion when Tinh shared his insider information with Canh on how to go about getting an underground job in Germany.

Canh had considered working abroad before, indeed in a town where over half the population had family members migrating abroad for employment, the comparative incentives for going were apparent. Homes of successful returnees who had managed to secure long-term labor appointments usually boasted a range of material accoutrements that demonstrated the family's labor remittance successes, including televisions, motorcycles, and multiple-story housing structures. There were drawbacks of course: many of the occupations engaged in abroad were illegal—from smuggling to drug selling to prostitution—and the years away from family were a burden with significant social costs. Canh was married with a small child, but bringing his family overseas was not an option. However the main obstacle for Canh had been his

inability to pass the necessary medical exams to secure an overseas labor contract. Like many living in poor rural areas, where public health provision was lacking, Canh had contracted tuberculosis and Hepatitis B. Official export guest worker contracts required a clean bill of health, which Canh had failed. So his only option was to pursue the illegal migration route. The stakes were much higher: rather than a 3-4,000 dollar employment broker fee to go to someplace in Asia or the Middle East, Canh paid nearly \$13,000 for an illegal arrangement to go to Europe, with none of the guarantees or securities of an official labor contract. In actuality, Canh explained to me, the financial return was greater if the journey was successful, as the wages were higher in Europe than in Asia. Furthermore, Canh trusted the broker as he had previously facilitated his friend Tinh's journey to Germany, the successful outcome of which was visible in the rebuilt home they now sat in.

Canh related the details of his journey to Europe. Five years ago, after borrowing significant sums of money to pay the labor broker [called *cò*, meaning "stork"] for transportation, paperwork, and a job, Canh traveled to Hanoi to board a Moscow-bound plane. The brokers, drawing on their own connections developed from the socialist labor bloc period when they had worked in communist East Germany, used a network of connections to smuggle Canh and nine others from Moscow to Berlin. Following a similar route to Thanh and Tinh's, Canh's group journeyed through Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and finally Germany—spending two weeks traveling by truck, often forced to hide under blankets and boxes in the back. Sometimes the brokers had border connections they had paid off to pass through, at other times the group had to get out, walking for hours through forests and over rivers, across the border to where the truck would then covertly meet them on the other side. In Berlin, Canh, like Tinh and Thanh, lived with a group of other Vietnamese men and sold goods smuggled from Russia into the European Union.

“Our lives were mostly work, and we sent all of our money back home. We usually sent \$1000 a month, or if it was a good month \$2000. We lost 5% of it to the broker fees. We were on the streets, selling the goods to people, if we sold more then we earned more. Sometimes they were electronics, sometimes cigarettes. It depended. For each carton of cigarettes sold for example we earned \$5. Back in the apartment we would hang out, smoke cigarettes, drink, cook, and play cards. Everyone had a mat on the floor to sleep on. They [the labor brokers] arranged the place for us. Sometimes someone would get caught and sent away, eventually a new person took their place.” One day Canh himself was apprehended for working and migrating illegally. He was allowed to apply for political asylum, giving him six extra months to stay in Germany. During the asylum petition period he received \$300 a month from the government for living expenses and was permitted to go free, only required to check in once a month while his case was reviewed. Knowledge of the political asylum clause in German immigration law seemed to be circulated network knowledge among fellow illegal migrant workers, offering some assurance of having a brief extension to recover migration fees even if caught. During the extra six months, Canh continued his life illegally working and saving money to send home. After Canh’s asylum petition as well as appeal were rejected, the German government deported him, putting him on a flight back to Hanoi. At least, Canh noted wryly, the “return flight was free.”

Returning home early, he still held some debt from the initial labor broker fees. Eventually, he said, he intended to find more money to work abroad again. In the meantime he was helping around the house, taking care of the baby, and doing odd jobs as a driver. His sister, who had also gone abroad to Korea, was helping him to pay back his unpaid migration debts through her own remittances. She had been caught for illegal overseas migration before, but managed to get out a second time using her sister’s passport. When I asked Canh if all the

trouble and debt was worth it, he said that the allure of money on the overseas horizon made it worthwhile, even if you failed sometimes along the way. He repeated an adage I had heard among other Vietnamese entangled in Vietnam's circulatory economies of remittances and migration: "Money wanders everywhere, one cannot control it" [*tiền là phù du*]. For Canh the future remained an unknown entity, but wherever the money wandered, even across difficult to cross state borders, it was his intention to follow it. The obstacles and risks to doing so, however, were significant.

Duc, a middle aged man who had spent his youth in Vietnam and much of his adult life in California, had decided to return to Vietnam in the late 1990s. At the time he was a software engineer employed in Silicon Valley. As return to Vietnam became easier with fewer state restrictions, as well as less controversial among the California Vietnamese community, many of whom had anti-communist reservations about permanent resettlement or business investment in Vietnam, Duc started to think about becoming an entrepreneur back in Vietnam. He had developed industry knowledge over his years working as a software engineer, the start-up capital needed was relatively low, and there was a significant pool of young talent emerging among the younger Vietnamese generation. With contacts back in the States for product distribution, Duc decided to start his own software company in Vietnam, hiring young engineers at a fraction of the labor cost of their American equivalents to design software for the U.S. market. Although initially Duc maintained a transnational lifestyle, eventually the idea of a permanent return to Vietnam became an attractive option. The Vietnamese government had passed a series of policies and measures to incentivize overseas Vietnamese resettlement in Vietnam, and was specifically encouraging overseas Vietnamese to invest in the economy, as they offered the potential for more long-term and stable investments. While Duc still had a home base in

California through the extended family members who remained there, he started to reconnect with his family network in Vietnam. Duc actively identified with the term “*Việt Kiều*”, saying “some Vietnamese in the U.S. think it has negative connotations, but I don’t think so. *Việt Kiều* look to the future, rather than the past, and aren’t afraid to return to Vietnam and make a life here. We have a lot of knowledge and skills that are needed in Vietnam. Here in Saigon, *Việt Kiều* has become a positive word, not a negative one.” Returning to Vietnam was also a social transformation from the life Duc had in America. Previously a middle class suburban bachelor in the U.S., in Vietnam Duc found an attractive Vietnamese woman to marry, and moved into an apartment in one of the upscale neighborhoods of Saigon’s district three. Working with another Vietnamese American partner, Duc oversaw a younger and eager staff of Vietnamese engineers, and occasionally hired younger Vietnamese American and American talent to interface with some of the Stateside investors, marketers, and distributors. “Having an American accent on the telephone makes international business dealings much easier,” Duc explained.

Duc was quite active in Ho Chi Minh City’s expatriate and *Việt Kiều* community, doing some work to support the American presidential campaigns in 2008, coordinating fundraisers and sitting on the boards of various charitable groups and causes in Vietnam, and organizing social events for the community. A number of his high school classmates from Saigon, many of whom had also left Vietnam after 1975, had reconnected or returned over the years to do business in Ho Chi Minh City, and he participated in an alumni group from the school spanning both California and Saigon that frequently organized reunions and networking opportunities.

Although Duc had not taken advantage of the overseas Vietnamese land law that allowed returning *Việt Kiều* to buy land as it remained “too ambiguous” in his view, he had made some real estate investments through extended relatives. In the early and mid 2000s land values in

Vietnam were rising so rapidly that if one had capital to invest, there were quick financial returns to be had. He was one of the first to sign up for the five-year visa waiver for overseas Vietnamese in 2008.

Prosperous in business and generous to those less fortunate than himself, Duc believed that his return to Vietnam was one of the best life decisions he had made for personal, cultural, and financial reasons. Vietnam felt familiar to him, and while before he tried to help his family out in Vietnam through occasional remittances contributions out of his hard earned salary, now he could afford to help them generously, and even give them jobs. There was always more money to be made in the emerging Vietnamese economy, “one only needs to look in the right places, and have the right connections,” Duc explained. It was easy to make money in Vietnam, he said, but at the same time nothing was very transparent. “You never know when the government is going to suddenly step in and try to take your money.” But should that happen, Duc said, “I still have my American passport and can go back to America.” When asked where home was, he said “Vietnam is home, because it is where I was born. But it is easier to feel at home when I have the security to leave it. For Duc, home was geographically rooted and familiar, but also contingent on the security of financial and physical mobility that gave him the agency to name “home” as such. And yet, the very perception of agency over the naming of “home” also provokes anxieties and insecurities of belonging and identity, a theme observed among many other overseas Vietnamese living in Vietnam as discussed in Chapter Two and Six.

The flows and ebbs of globalization have been widely examined and critiqued. As Eric Wolf (1981), David Harvey (1989), and other scholars of the phenomenon might have it, globalized capitalist expansion is predicated on flexible mobility across time and space, and at the heart of that mobility is capital in the form of money. In *Capital*, Marx explains how money

represents commodity forms through exchange value, fueling cycles of circulation and expansion: “money constantly removes commodities from the sphere of circulation, and in this way continually moves away from its own starting point [...] as the medium of circulation, [it] haunts the sphere of circulation and constantly moves around within it.” (213) The mobility upon which capitalism is predicated extends to human labor, which Marx maintains is fetishized in the commodity form itself. Money being the circulating and exchangeable form of commodities then, labor in the capitalist world order is, like money, characterized by circulatory momentum.

The contradiction of neoliberalism is that global economic order and individual nation-state accumulation regimes often reveal themselves at odds. The free flow of global capital and goods is not matched by free flows of services, i.e. labor. Core nation-states, jealously guarding their borders from permanent migrants, but seeking capital flows that roam the globe in search of cheap labor for the production of goods, find themselves fiercely competing in an international economic arena with other core and rising semi-periphery states. The dilemma of how to address the natural osmotic seepage across borders of human labor in search of capital has over time resulted in the development of an inter-state system of labor migration, in which “home” itself has become reconstructed and redefined. Liisa Malkki (1992) notes an analytic tendency in migration studies to naturalize sedentariness and exceptionalize movement, despite empirical observations that suggest the opposite. The “nation-state”, despite its relative recency as a social organizing concept (Anderson 1991), has largely become analytically and emotionally naturalized as a home, which must account for its migrant citizens, and to which its migrant citizens become accountable. The notion of “returning” only becomes possible when its accompanying concept of “home” is secured.

In a slightly different but related vein, scholars such as Aihwa Ong (1999), have examined the convergence of capitalist and state interests in producing an overarching regime of neoliberal governance, and the accompanying subject formation of global citizens embodied by capital flows. Akhil Gupta argues that governmentality has become “unhitched from the nation-state to be instituted anew on a global scale” (1998, 321), that indeed the modern state has no choice but to be complicit in a larger capitalist order of global assemblage and production. States participate in the promotion and expansion of capitalism, and the policy project of returning migrants “home” to their nation-states of origin in order to control and even isolate labor has been strategically deployed around the world to advance such interests.

Yet within the process of migrant subject construction through the naturalization of home and citizenship, the rationale of the state is increasingly deconstructed by its own contradictions. On one hand “return” to the homeland has been romantically constructed for a particular subset of its overseas Vietnamese—the *Việt Kiều*, whom, despite living out of reach, the state hopes to lure back through homeland nostalgia campaigns peppered with economic incentives. While many *Việt Kiều* returns may be initially catalyzed by journeys of personal exploration and discovery, the conformance of *Việt Kiều* with the state’s desire for their permanent return is ultimately predicated on money. As the stories of Catherine, Kim, and Duc show, the primary motivation that catalyzed their reverse migratory momentum to return to and resettle in Vietnam was economic opportunity.

Ironically, their initial departures were often critiqued as being motivated for the same reasons. In the view of many Vietnamese academics with whom I spoke, most of the so-called “refugees” [*người tỵ nạn*] overseas left for economic, not political, reasons. Nonetheless the question of permanent overseas Vietnamese “returns” to Vietnam remains ambivalent and

contingent on conditions for ongoing capital accumulation. Their visibility as *Việt Kiều* in Vietnam is furthermore dependent on financial means—many other overseas Vietnamese who cannot afford the return journey or the required accompaniment of family gifts remain abroad and are largely invisible to the state that imagines their participatory potential in homeland development. Ultimately, the state’s aspiration to secure the return of overseas Vietnamese is conditioned on money. Yet the very monetary medium such security relies on is always already characterized by mobility, risk, and unpredictable circulatory horizons.

With the *lao động* labor migrants—Loan, Thanh, and Canh—on the other hand, return is a direction that is neither romanticized by the state nor desired by migrants. In fact, it is often actively resisted. Economic opportunity for migrant laborers lies abroad, not in Vietnam. As Rhacel Parrenas (2001) has shown in a comparative case of Filipino labor migrants, migratory momentum tends to stray further and further from home, with the possibility of return at best a distant priority in the calculations of migrants. Whether on legal or illegal labor contracts, migrant laborers often attempt to circumvent the state and inter-state authorities of international mobility—staying overseas as long as possible, earning money illegally and remitting it through illegal channels as long as possible, and migrating onwards to new destinations if possible—until return is finally forced upon them.

Thus while Catherine, Kim, and Duc voluntarily return to Vietnam, Loan, Thanh, and Canh are returned. Despite the state’s crude attempt to lump them all together under a singular category of “Vietnamese overseas” [*Người Việt Nam ở Nước Ngoài*], their vastly different experiences and directional momentum within this category illustrate that subject formation is not necessarily predicated on how the state designates them or any nationalist attachment to it, but rather on a broader capitalist logic in which money, more than states, play the paramount role

in the construction and affective embodiment of migrant identity. As Benedict Anderson has noted, “The segregated queues that all of us experience at airport immigration barricades mark economic status far more than any political attachments. In effect, they figure differential tariffs on human labour.” (1998, 70) The dual complicity and infirmity of the state in controlling international migration and capital flows, then, suggests that an analysis of state return migration policies alone does not necessarily help gauge a deeper institutional understanding of global migration flows and governance.

State and inter-state attempts to manage the global mobility of migrants run parallel with attempts to manage the return of remittance money through formal channels.¹²¹ Yet the fluidities of economic flows seem more closely aligned with the dynamic cycles of social transformation and fluctuating desires than static notions of situated homeland cultures and attachments exhaustively utilized to explain migrant behavior and exploited by states to control and influence them. “Return,” for the characters in this chapter, is more compellingly associated with mobile finance than stationary geography or political entities. When geographic and financial returns have opposing interests, migrants tend to actively resist state attempts to align them. How migrants, of different backgrounds and experiences, from *lao động* to *Việt Kiều*, have negotiated within, around, and against regimes of migratory governance suggest that the management of global mobility remains a contested and contradictory process that should be analyzed as a dialectic between broader structural strategies of social, financial, and migratory control, and the creative agencies of migrants negotiating their lives within them.

Returning then to Marcel Mauss’s observation of the “*hau*” or spirit of the giver that embodies the gift, as well as Malinowski’s depiction of the entanglement of commodities and

¹²¹ development policy analysts have emphasized the importance of shifting from informal to formal transfer channels in the remittance sector (Hernandez-Coss 2005 et al).

gifts in the Kula circles of the South Pacific, it appears that modern migrant “return” in the case of financial and migratory repatriation remains an elusive notion that is nonetheless anxiously sought and chased after by states. Mauss reminds us that despite the gift’s desire to return home, it circulates ever outwards, passed on anew and always demanding greater mobility. The energy of the gift and its gifters, despite the elaborate social rules established by societies and categorized by analysts that attempt to domesticate and control them, can never be constrained—their exuberance is inevitably unleashed in creative or even destructive form. Migrants, embodying the elusive capital and remittance gifts they seek and continuously earn and pass on in hopes for more, demonstrate a similar creative outbound momentum, from overseas Vietnamese leaving western homes they have lived in for a generation to rediscover opportunities in Vietnam to northern Vietnamese migrant laborers leaving Vietnam to seek social transformation at home through money abroad. The horizons upon which migrants gaze do not necessarily include a return gaze towards the homeland, especially when such returns threaten future mobility. The emotionally laden notion of “home” can be as much a construct as a reality, and strategically deployed to advance broader agendas beyond the interests of migrants themselves. Given these ethnographic insights into migrant mobility, the naturalization of “return” by the state seems instinctively, un-natural. Questions of mobility, momentum, and its embodiment by migrants, gifters, and gifts in long distance cross border remittance exchange economies, then, are the main subject to which we [re-]turn in Chapter Eight.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion: Mobility and its Discontents *[Not Yet Enough]*

This dissertation began by introducing and contextualizing migration and remittance economies in Vietnam. It has moved ethnographically through different landscapes of mobile persons, monies, commodities, ideas, and imaginations. These landscapes range from urban Ho Chi Minh City to coastal Quy Nhon to suburban California, and have involved the lives of Vietnamese in Vietnam encountering returning overseas Vietnamese and their gifts, transnational individuals and organizations moving between the United States/West and Vietnam, and Vietnamese living in ethnic communities on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. This dissertation has also looked at how mobility has been defined, controlled, and capitalized upon by the state: particularly at a moment of widespread return by former refugees and expanding labor migration outflows, as well as how state migrant subject categories are inhabited, experienced, resisted, and circumnavigated by migrants and remittance economy participants. The argument has been made that the particular character of Vietnamese refugees, i.e. the origins of their departures entangled with historical traumas of war and subsequent escape and exile, makes for a very different relationship to nations, home communities, and kinship networks, than is the case in many situations of contemporary global migration. Most importantly, the ethnographies presented in this dissertation illustrate that in remittances-as-gift economies, the gift's monetary form displays characteristics that are increasingly desired and embodied by remittance exchange participants themselves, namely mobility and exchangeable value enabling social transformation.

What is to be learned from the varied ethnographic accounts presented in this dissertation? First, I hope that these materials demonstrate that any discussion about remittance economies must recognize the complex actions, motivations, and reactions of the exchange participants involved. The standardization of the remittance actor, a portrait caricature often crudely enacted for the needs of development policy research, prediction, and implementation, is not surprisingly more complicated than typically assumed. Remittance flows, while certainly an important tool for poverty alleviation in many communities, are also private gifts that carry complex and latent symbolic meanings. Remittances, which most often serve as family support from those who have more economic earning capacity to those with less, are in many ways merely a transnationalization and in some cases monetization of longstanding and traditional modes of kinship support and relationship building. As Peggy Levitt (2001) describes it, the village has become transnational, but it is still a village. To draw such familial rituals of gifting and kinship belonging into the public realm of scrutiny is to risk misunderstanding, and intrude into personal matters that have complicated and specific histories, contexts, and complexities that cannot be blueprinted and standardized for the purposes of policy planning and analysis. Remittance participants are poor performers of rational choice economic actor stereotypes and do not necessarily respond to the cultural assumptions and incentives of state homeland promotion campaigns. The gambling proclivities of some remittance recipients detailed in the ethnographic materials clearly demonstrate that remittances are not always directed towards “productively” orientated family and community investments, as many development economists presume.

This is not to say remittances are not helpful in reducing poverty and addressing basic needs in low-income communities. Remittances provide an important source of household

credit,¹²² and health and education are critical needs areas that remittances often support.

Nonetheless, remittance economy participants also direct their incomes towards a range of other activities that cannot necessarily be generalized, but differ widely according to circumstance and individual preference. Even a behavioral economic lens is unlikely to serve well in predicting the motivations, actions, and investment strategies of remittance actors, nor is it the goal of this dissertation to offer a predictive model of remittance actor behavioral patterns.

One general theme that does appear to emerge from the case studies observed, however, is a certain subjective comparative spectre that pervades and influences individual and collective structures of expectation, desire, and satisfaction. Remittance economies bring vastly different life worlds into intimate encounter, drawing awareness to the stark limitations of human action in the context of broader structural environments in shaping individual and collective efforts to produce human social transformation. International remittances between and across spatial environments molded and differentiated by global and local political and economic structural factors beyond individual control reinforce an already strong Vietnamese notion of fate [*số phận*] that continues to be an important explanatory factor in coming to terms with the conditions and limits of possibility in Vietnam. But also of increasing awareness is the fact that there exist opportunities for gaining access to different conditions of possibility through migration. The strong qualitative correlation found in this dissertation research between reception of remittances and migratory desire and planning demonstrates a certain heightening of agential aspiration and expectation in remittance economies.

¹²² For more on the limitations of credit access in Vietnam, see Barslund & Tarp “Formal and Rural Credit in 4 Provinces of Vietnam”, *Journal of Development Studies* 44.4 (2008). I was told by informal [high interest] moneylenders that most of their clients are not from remittance receiving households, as overseas relatives usually provide loans to such families.

Relevant to a more general discussion of credit and gifting, Franz Boas as quoted in Mauss (1924), discusses potlatch gifting as an advanced system of credit, in which collective trust supports an otherwise artificial and unsustainable expansion of capital as well as futural oriented subjectivities (111).

In some cases, this agency reflects a desire and belief in the possibility for systemic change, as in the case of many of the Vietnamese American charities and NGOs discussed in Chapter Five, who hope through their labor and monetary contributions to bring social justice and poverty alleviation to those left behind in Vietnam. But for those Vietnamese who have stayed in Vietnam, it is access to physical bodily mobility that seems to be primarily desired. Here the agency enacted is not reflective of a belief in changing the system itself, but of escaping it altogether to begin life anew in a completely new political, economic, and cultural environment with fresh horizons of possibility. Such was the case of Phuong in Chapter Four who sought to escape Vietnam permanently to find a new identity in the UK free of social obligations and structural obstacles to development. Such aspiration is collective in that it tends to factor into family diversification strategies, rather than individualized desires. Local histories of migration have infused a cultural dynamic of collective migratory yearning and even adventurism in many of the communities where remittances and overseas relations are prevalent, such as Quy Nhon and its coastal neighbors. Although migration is not personally desired by all who stay behind in Vietnam, especially among those who are more elderly, it does enter as a hopeful option in the basket of choices available to families planning and making decisions about issues of employment, education, social development, financial security, marriage prospects, and kinship networks.

The production of imagined alternative identifications facilitated by remittance economies can also act as a conservative force that preserves long-standing social ties and identities, connecting participants to older, often pre-1975, life worlds. This is particularly true when aspirations for social transformation through migration or full participation in the capitalist economy are frustrated, leaving remittance trickles as a begrudged source of dependency. While

the cycles of economic change that have enveloped Vietnam, from war-time to subsidy to new market economies, have forced many of its citizens to rapidly adapt to changing social, economic, and political norms, those who are connected to and sheltered by remittance support networks are also less vulnerable to the tumultuous political and economic cycles of Vietnam's ongoing quest for a stable postcolonial identity. In such cases, the imagination can orient one less to a future cusp than to a nostalgic past in which the vestiges of former life worlds and horizons continue to cling. On the one hand, the remittance gift teases the possibility of alternative ontologies beyond one's immediate structural environment. On the other, it may orient those unable or too resigned to ride the migratory wave of social transformation to safe but perhaps dissatisfactory life worlds in which dependence on historical support networks, even if now dispersed overseas, discourages one from forging a new identity in the contemporary economy and consigns one to the continual receiving end of the gifting relationship. This is seen for example in the Chapter Two case of the idle unemployed man in the coffee shop who complains how Vietnam was once richer than Korea and China. For him there is no point of engaging in the local economy to build a life beyond that which remittance support affords him, nor does he have the energy to try and escape Vietnam as in the case of Chapter Four's Phuong who sought a better life and escape from family obligations in the United Kingdom.

On the remittance providing side, remittance gifts may prolong past relationships and inhibit the exploration of personal horizons, as in the cases of many remittance senders in California who feel burdened by but nonetheless continue their giving patterns. This may be true in the case of domestic remittance providers in Vietnam as well, such as Chapter Four's Thuy who chose not to risk going abroad for education in order to continue local work to support her extended family. In such cases, by directing one's gaze either to an unknown overseas future or

comfortable familial past, remittance economies may serve to distance participants from the immediacy of their present economic, political, and social conditions, as well as their individual sense of investment in them.

It is at the intersection of local worlds and migratory imaginations where the notion of the gift as introduced to us in anthropology has been a helpful analytic departure point. In Chapter Four, I paused to consider Vietnamese notions of gifting in various historical and cultural circumstances, and to examine more closely the nuances of Mauss's argument about the gift. Mauss romanticizes the gift as a pre-monetary form in which personal relations are preserved and cultivated, rather than eradicated. Gifts draw our attention to the "total social fact" (Malinowski 1922, Mauss 1924, et al.) of society, in which human relations are entangled within and cannot be abstracted from the broader economy, what Polanyi called a "substantive economy" as discussed in Chapter One. Mauss claims, "it is by considering the whole entity that we could perceive [...] the fleeting moment when society, or men, become sentimentally aware of themselves and of their situation in relation to others." (80) The pre-monetary form of the gift, as represented in the kula shells, potlatches, and other social and ritual forms Mauss presents, elucidates the social significance of the gift medium. And yet, it is clear in the case of Vietnamese remittance economies that money is not a replacement for the gift, but rather stands in for it. Remittance gift economies re-signify the work of money in a capitalist economy. The "gift" of money is unable to pay off obligations or establish impersonal contracts, as money is intended to work. Rather, in a country that is undergoing rapid capitalist transformation, the detached anomie of large-scale capital flows from abroad is re-personalized in its designation as gifts of sentiment between family members. Yet control of the emotional meanings and intentions of the gift confronts its limitation in the case studies presented in this dissertation. The

gift, particularly in its monetary form in a long distance economy, teases and even hypnotizes the imagination of gift participants to contemplate its broader role in the global capitalist economy from which “green dollars” flow.

The gift, as commonly interpreted by social analysts, is endowed with a certain force that derives from the giver, but also independently holds force over the giver as well as the receiver. Mark Osteen explains Mauss’s discussion of this force as follows: “Basing his interpretation upon the words of a Maori sage [...] Mauss held that a spirit—named *hau* by the Maori—within the objects given causes them to be passed on” (3). In Mauss’s own words, the *hau* is “the spirit of things”, and that “what imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him [...] the *hau* follows after anyone possessing the thing” (12). Mauss also discusses the *mana* of the gift—the “honor, prestige” and “authority” one gains and can only hold by passing the gift on (8). While it is the poesies of the “*hau*” that humanities scholars often fixate upon, its entanglement with “*mana*” is important to consider. The gift comprises the spirit of the thing [*hau*] as well as the social authority [*mana*] through *relationality* which that thing bestows upon its possessor. The gift, despite the varied attempts to control its meaning, in the end indexes social recognition of larger forces beyond individual human capacity to control as well as the predication of individual identity on participation, interaction, and comparison with a broader social community. It is the dominance of structural environmental and social factors over the alluring faith of individual agency, but one that masks the relationship in experiential apprehensions that project the opposite illusion.

Perhaps it is Mauss's somewhat crude western lens emphasizing individuality, ironically the very impulse that he seeks to write against,¹²³ that results in an analytic exaggeration of the individuality of *hau*, or, as has been suggested here, agency, in Mauss' gift analysis. Of course the remittance sender, as the gift giver, may seek to control the gift and its flow, often directing its use and seeking recognition of the giver's generous intentions. And yet time and again the use of the gift by its receivers in Vietnam differs from the intent of its givers. Overseas Vietnamese senders invoke their authority as gifters to direct what the gift should be used for, but Vietnamese recipients, as has been shown in the ethnographic materials presented, often employ the monies received for other purposes. Meanwhile, attempts by Vietnamese remittance recipients to reciprocate the gift, with locally produced nostalgia products for example as described in Chapter Three, often remain under-appreciated by overseas Vietnamese. The frustrations and misunderstandings on both sides of the relationship have been expressed through the ethnographies presented throughout this dissertation: over years and decades of remittance and gift exchange.

And yet, despite it all, the gift seems to go on. While it has been shown that remittances often taper off within individual families over time, holiday and special occasion giving continue, and charitable giving to humanitarian causes in Vietnam has risen as discussed in Chapter Five, especially as overseas Vietnamese become less connected to direct family members with the passage of time and the emigration of close relatives. Despite the frustrations of gifting, and the repeated experiences of gift exchanges falling short of their intended outcomes, giving gifts continues to be an ongoing mode of maintaining and producing relationships with relatives, a homeland, and personal and collective identities. There does

¹²³ A central moral concern for Mauss in *The Gift* was the dehumanization of social relations through the individuality and competition inherent in capitalism, see Chapter Four: Conclusion.

indeed seem to be an excessive spirit that drives the need to give, which even when absent, haunts the discourse of identity and memory surrounding the individuals involved.

In Mauss's descriptions of the potlatch, the emphasis of gift giving is not relationality with the Other on the other side of the relationship, but maintenance, transformation, and possession of the self (46). Mauss tells us "the obligation to give is the essence of the potlatch [...] he can only preserve his authority [...] and] maintain his rank [...] if he can prove he is haunted and favoured by the spirits and by good fortune, that he is possessed, and also possesses it [...] he can only prove this good fortune by spending it out, humiliating others by placing them 'in the shadow of his name'" (39). He goes on to say, "in the things exchanged during the potlatch, a power is present that forces gifts to be passed around, to be given, and returned." (43) What is this power that obliges gifts? The emphasis to ascribe such forces with mystical magical power undermines Mauss's more general observation, a truism really, that one's social identity is exactly that: predicated on the social. Humans depend on the recognition of others "outside" of themselves to affirm and develop their own being in the world.

Jacques Lacan (1949) understands the contingency of identity emerging from a very early stage of human cognition, as he discusses in his essay on the "mirror stage" of child development. The mirror stage is when the child first sees his image reflected back at him. The child in a sense views and identifies himself for the first time as an Other, outside of the interiorized identity that he has allegedly known until that point: the beginning of a life long process of alienation from self. In this critical scene however there is also the presence of an exterior onlooker. "For the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority [...] this gestalt is also replete with the correspondences that unite the *I* with the statue onto

which man projects himself, the phantoms that dominate him, and the automaton with which the world of his own making tends to achieve fruition in an ambiguous relation” (5). Here we come to realize that identity is doubly alienated in that we can know ourselves only as a stranger to ourselves, and that furthermore we depend on the recognition of those altogether outside of ourselves, beyond our own human capacity to control or even identify, for ontological affirmation. While the mirror image is alienating, there is still hope in Lacan’s subject of overcoming and mastering it. But the presence of the external onlooker signals realization that there is much in our identity that remains beyond our individual ability to influence; identity is dependent on external variables, relationality, recognition, and circumstances of chance. As Lacan says, “the mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality [...] and lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity” (4).

Sigmund Freud might term this strange duality of self-alienation and recognition a feature of the “uncanny”. He personifies the state of the uncanny, a state in which something is both familiar yet strangely alienating and unfamiliar, in the figure of the automaton. The automaton doll looks recognizably human, but its actions are forced, coerced, and directed by a “force” outside of itself. The automaton furthermore unconsciously directs the actions of any who interact with it. Freud offers an interesting genealogy on how one arrives at the state of the uncanny through the realization that a “home-like” state has quite suddenly, yet without any noticeable shift, become un-homelike [*unheimlich*]. Such experience is embodied in the roots of the word itself: “among its different shades of meaning the word ‘*heimlich*’ exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, ‘*unheimlich*’” (3680). In the case of remittance gifts that return

“home” they are directed by and represent a sender who enacts the agency and free will of gifting. Yet the action of remittance giving and receiving is also strangely automaton-like. One gives out of habit, one gives out of obligation, and even when the disappointments that so often characterize the remittance exchange experience arise, one continues to give. The expressions of remittance fatigue by senders conveyed in this dissertation reflect an obliged process of informal aid that continues on long after original gifting intentions have faded or failed.

Remittances from an overseas migrant return home to a place one has left, an “identity maintaining mechanism” (Najam 2007) anxiously intended to keep one’s home and family alive in the memory and emotions, and in the case of younger members of the diaspora, construct home as an imagined place of origins. At the same time they alter such homes and families, to the point that they often become unrecognizable to the migrant upon return. Remittances also represent monetary income that has socially transformed both the remittance sender and receiver, through the consumption patterns such money enables. Yet money’s ability to radically transform also competes with its supplementary role of symbolically securing familiarity and stability, as remittance economies strive to do. In the re-encounter with home and Other in such remittance exchange relationships, the uncanny of something familiar, yet changed—a “double” as Freud might call it—homelike but strange, is certainly a present feature. As Mauss describes the state of exchange, “one fraternizes, yet one remains a stranger” (38). More importantly for this discussion however is the observation that remittance exchange is seemingly directed by circumstances beyond one’s agency to control. This, despite the gift’s seeming symbolism of an opposite relationality, appears as a defining feature in remittance economies. There exists a compelling and defining force that drives and exceeds the immediate relations and intentions of the remittance participants themselves.

While the inter-subjective dimensions of the uncanny can arise in the exchange of remittance economies, subjecting seemingly familiar parties to the anxiety of re-encounter, the contextual force that directs such exchange circulations also deserves attention here. The mediums of gift exchange, if one can indeed ascribe a “*hau*” that drives it, takes many forms, which themselves have changed over time. The *hau* defined as the spirit of the giver is most apparent in material gift forms and informal remittance transfers, where the giver has taken the time to select a material gift tailored to the real or imagined circumstances of the receiver, or where the monetary gift is accompanied by a personalized note. Here we see its meaning in the Durkheimian sense of the social: the social relations between giver and receiver are represented and displaced in the material gift form itself. As Durkheim says in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, “collective feelings become conscious of themselves only by settling upon external objects [...] in this way, they took on a kind of physical nature; they came to mingle as things” (48).

Yet in some ways the shift towards more formalized and purely financial remittance channels, particularly over the last decade of frenzied economic development, is more reflective of the type of “*hau*” that actually plays out in Mauss’s gifting accounts. For the “*hau*” is not merely the spirit or agency, as I suggested in Chapter Three, of the giver, but is also indicative of an outside force that compels the giving circulations of remittance economies. This is reflected in the gift itself, which Mauss says is animated and has a “personality” of its own that defines those who exchange it. (46) The *hau*’s intersection with the “*mana*” of gifting exchange participants can instigate a disturbing and contentious articulation of force where one feels increasingly obliged to participate in expanding circulations of giving in which individual and collective identity and sociality are the ultimate stake. Remittance pressures here are not only

transnational, but begin within the giving communities themselves. Social circles in which money is the central medium of participation, from Vietnamese “*hũ*” credit rotations to overseas Vietnamese philanthropic “giving circles” in collective remittance scenarios, highlight the fact that the pressures of giving are not necessarily traced only to the expectations of remittance receivers, but are also implicated in a broader social gaze that judges one’s capacity for generosity and trust as a measure of identity within the community.

The contentious cycles of potlatch giving define but also mark the failure of the gift that Mauss attempted to analyze. While Mauss’s hope was that a return to gifting economies would rescue humanity from the increasing anomie and de-personalized exchange that defined capitalist systems of alienated social interactions, the destructive instincts of potlatching reveal a system in which humans also may give not only for exuberant release but also out of begrudged and antagonistic obligation. It is a response to an involuntary force outside of oneself in which one is compelled to give and participate in networks of sociality and exchange even when such participation is neither productive nor desired, and furthermore recognized for its self destructive tendencies. And yet participation in the potlatch is irresistible, for it is also, as Mauss describes, “a phenomenon of social structure” that “brings about a remarkable state of nerviness and excitement” (38).

What is the external force that increasingly pervades and dominates these remittance exchange economies characterized by incessant excitement and dissatisfaction? To paint a broad stroke, one might say it is the vicissitudes of capitalism itself. As Vietnam is increasingly drawn into a global capitalist system, capital circulations are experienced at dizzying heights by its citizens. As are overseas Vietnamese communities who over time, have become increasingly professionally and materially successful in the capitalist friendly geographies where they have

resettled. The unfettered flow of capital, an idealized tenet upon which capitalist development and accumulation is predicated, is symbolic of a mobility that has become exponentially faster and more accessible since the launch of *Đổi Mới* when the Vietnamese state first decided to re-engage with the broader capitalist western world. During the years in which money, particularly dollars, have become the primary mode of remittance exchange, the shift towards progressively formalized money transfer services has meant that the medium of exchange has come to mask the particulars of the social relations and obligations involved. Simmel's analysis of a medium of money that obscures the entangled desires of those who exchange it, as noted in Chapter Two, is apt in the situation of remittance economies in that money has become a supplementary stand-in for the gifting intentions and meanings it is intended to represent. Money, in the capitalist system, is symbolic of Marx's descriptive of ever-expanding and elusive circulations of capital that are increasingly beyond individual control to capture and maintain. Remittances as capital index the sender's ability to participate in a capitalist economy, and in most cases make possible similar if partial modes of participation on the receiving side.

Yet to participate in a capitalist economy is to always already be behind what is deemed sufficient to be social in such a system. The constantly shifting horizon of what level of material well being is deemed "enough" [in Vietnamese: *đủ*]—not for physical survival, but for social comparison—draws one into cycles of dissatisfaction and futural ontologies in which the moment of economic and social arrival is constantly deferred. The gift's lack is always at risk of exposure. Like fashion or other trends that mark capitalist modes of social distinction, one participates in a dynamic economy in which identity is always on the move but never finished. While the future is never arrived at, the past is re-invoked through the older identities and relationships maintained by remittance exchanges, resulting in a confusing mixture of

ontological belonging that is partially mired in the past, partially gazing towards the future, and generally ambivalent of the present. In the meantime, there lurk the silent spectators unable to participate in the remittance gift process, let alone the rapidly expanding capitalist economy. They mark the other side of the gift, which must always necessarily exclude at the same time it includes. Nonetheless, the gift's widespread visibility and centrality in everyday social discourse makes it a prevalent marker of social reflexivity. Furthermore, it continues to be the future orientation of the gift and the aspiration for social transformation it represents that drives the gift's continuance and expansion.

If indeed modern identity is, as Kant suggests, predicated on a blank horizon, in which one never knows what one will be, only that such identity will be radically different than what was in the past, remittance economies represent a particular intersection of the global modern in which unequally modern worlds collide in systems of highly intimate global encounter and exchange. Through participation in the highly developed economies of the capitalist West, Vietnamese migrants are able to earn and save money to send to relatives and communities back home. Reception of remittances in Vietnam are considered a critical source of capital in households, communities, and the national economy, and eagerly sought after by those on the receiving side of the relationship, as suggested in Chapter Seven. The guilt that drives much remittance giving is based on a starkly visible economic differential in which first and third world conditions of possibility are exposed and confronted. As explored in Chapter Six, one gives to Vietnam because one has opportunities overseas that would be unavailable on the same scale in Vietnam. Yet one also gives because of personal connections and empathies in which one knows how dramatically different life would be were such opportunities not available. One receives because one must, but such positions of remittance reception only highlight the fact that

the unequal conditions of possibility are not based on individual capabilities, but rather on a political and economic structural environmental beyond personal control, as observed by Sang in Chapter Three in discussing the limitations of talent. In every exchange there is a spectral reflection on the hypotheticals of identity if one were on the opposite side of the exchange relationship with its corresponding differentials in economic opportunity and access. The hypotheticals of identity are reflected upon on both sides, as seen in the case of Vietnamese American Margaret in Chapter Six who feels compelled to photograph and share stories with Vietnamese women her age as she imagines an alternate life in Vietnam, or in the case of Lam in Chapter Three, who sits by the ocean in Vietnam remembering his multiple failed attempts to cross it to seek social transformation abroad. Thus, the strong correlation between reception of remittances and desire to migrate is reflective of an exchange dynamic where felt “forces” beyond the individual compel one to participate in a substantive social economy in which there is accentuated awareness of the centrality of mobile circulations and environments to formulations of identity. Such awareness also recognizes that access to such mobility is unevenly distributed and further subject to unpredictable factors of chance. Participation in remittance economies is also part and parcel of engaging with a broader global capitalist economy. Just as the “hau follows after anyone possessing the thing” (Mauss, see earlier quote above), new forms of capitalist subjectivity and desire emerge among participants in remittance exchange economies.

In Derrida’s discussion of the gift (1992), its very idea becomes impossible in the naming of it. To give or receive a gift and recognize it as such is to destroy the very idea of what it is intended to be. One must give and forget, which makes the origins of any cycle of gifting impossible to trace. Elsewhere (2000) Derrida shows that hospitality, the motivation for the gift, is predicated on Othering and by extension inhospitality, for only in encounter with a foreigner

viewed as different from ourselves is hospitality then obliged. And yet to bring the Other into reciprocal exchange relations is to commit a violence of forcing the Other to “speak our language”—to respond on our terms to the expectations we have of them and, most likely, to be disappointed and even angered when they fall short. “This is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able to welcome him into our country?” (2000, 15) If the desired gift medium and language of hospitality and generosity is money, then in situations of gift reciprocity the Vietnamese remittance receiver is rendered mute via exchange by their inability to return the equivalent monetary form. Yet despite the rational impossibility of the gift and the deconstruction of the hospitality it invokes, we know it goes on, and on. Derrida’s contention of course is with the epistemology of analysis, rather than the object of analysis itself. Naming the gift gives it the illusion of stability, but it is always already deconstructed the moment we begin to place it within a predictive or interpretive frame.

The gift as remittance also goes on, and as records of total remittance flows indicate, is on the rise. This runs parallel with increasingly deeper societal engagements with a capitalist economy that have already begun to defy state-imposed controls on its particular national and ideological character, such as Vietnamese “socialism with a market orientation.” At the same time, economic interests in capital flows have made remittances themselves a visible policy issue, highlighting financial and gift flows across international family networks that once remained largely below the radar. Remittances have become named, and capitalized upon, by the capitalist order itself. In the course of its establishment as a “language” and medium of capitalist identity and social relations, remittances have also come to reflect and define the characteristics and desires of remittance senders and receivers alike. Money represents and

becomes a socially transformative and affective force that intrinsically embodies those who encounter and participate with it.

Through the course of this dissertation, I have presented various ethnographic examples of how remittance gift exchange brings givers and receivers into intimate encounters. In these encounters money, and through it, imagination, is central. It is helpful to return again to Arjun Appadurai's descriptive of the imagination as "an organized field of social practices [...] and a form of negotiation between sites of agency and global defined fields of possibility" [see Chapter Three]. If we push Appadurai's suggestive ideas further to more clearly locate the particulars of how the imagination acts as a site of negotiation, I argue that remittance economies offer a revealing example of this process. In remittance economies the site of negotiation between local agency and global possibility is money itself, as a medium of the social relations it represents through exchange. As remittance economies have become increasingly monetized over time, money has come to represent the life world of the giver, and the social transformation and enabling environments of agency they are perceived to access overseas. As migrants escape the borders of Vietnam's socialist state, they enter into a capitalist fantasy life world that is the imagined environmental ideal for social transformation. Social transformation in the West is imagined and described by Vietnamese as being structurally enabled by unfettered accumulation and flows of capital. A distinct theme has emerged through the various ethnographies presented in this dissertation of the imagined role of money in enabling Vietnamese who have gone overseas to transform themselves, and in many cases, realize new forms of identity and horizons of possibility. The "environment" [*môi trường*] of western life overseas is seen to be critical in exposing Vietnamese to opportunities for material betterment and character improvement unavailable in Vietnam. Such was the view of numerous informants, such as Ha in Chapter

Three who sought educational opportunities abroad for her daughter. Central to these opportunities is money. Money funds material well-being, it funds education, it funds health care, it memorializes loss, it purchases real estate, and attracts marriage opportunities. As seen with the gamblers and spenders interspersed through this dissertation, money also funds gamble¹²⁴ and play, the character of which is always escapist from and resistant to broader societal limitations and impositions of particular and narrowly constructed forms of identity and personhood. The generation of money makes a plethora of socially transformative opportunities possible, and the general perception holds strong that it can be earned in the simplest of occupations abroad—from restaurant and janitorial work to nail salon services.

The root of this possibility, as imagined by the informants presented in this dissertation, is the perceived difference in value prescribed to labor in a western capitalist economy. Whereas such jobs earn a pittance in Vietnam, labor is deemed to be generously rewarded in places like America. The reason for this, in the view of many Vietnamese I spoke with, is not only that “Americans are lazy and don’t want these jobs,” but also that “the government there is good.” In Vietnam Vietnamese are also derided by remittance senders and receivers alike for being “lazy” but this is because their character has not been sufficiently “developed” through opportunities for work overseas. Such was the view of Trang in Chapter Two who derided a Vietnamese cultural, political, and economic environment that discouraged individual incentive and hard work. The entry rung of labor opportunity is deemed to remain open to those lucky enough to migrate and willing to do basic manual labor, in an environment where the government in a capitalist management rather than rent seeking role, facilitates the structural production of new labor opportunities. Such labor opportunities are rewarded by money, equating labor and money with

¹²⁴ Interestingly, in *The Gift* Mauss mentions the “Asiatic” nature of gambling in a footnote asserting that the practice of gambling is an integral “form of the potlatch and of the gift system” (112).

the development of socially mobile immigrant personhood in the capitalist west. One is socially transformed by money in western countries of resettlement and migration, and one demonstrates this through the subsequent performance of remittance sending made possible through such labor opportunities.

Labor is entangled with money in this process of social transformation. Vietnamese migrants risked investments and lives to undertake dangerous journeys from Vietnam. Arriving in the West with few resources, they took entry-level jobs and through them began the process of earning money, leading to opportunities for betterment and transformation for themselves and their families. When such money is channeled back to Vietnam, however, it is unable, in the eyes of senders or receivers, to bring about the same social transformation, unless invested to send another family member overseas. The money sent back to Vietnam represents the labor performed by the remittance senders, but does not in turn catalyze new labor opportunities and by extension, further monetary accumulation and financial independence, for the remittance recipients themselves. The economies of dependency and migratory yearning that settle into “*Xóm Đô*” [dollar village] communities are blamed by remittance senders and receivers on the systematic lack of labor valuation within Vietnam’s limited capitalist political economy. One can work locally, but it never brings about the economic returns possible in an idealized capitalist environment abroad. In such a situation one becomes less rather than more inclined to seek work. “Vietnam is poor, and so its people are too,” remarked one informant. Poverty is in this case not merely descriptive of a state of material deprivation, but also implicates personal character.

International remittance flows therefore cannot, in the eyes of remittance economy participants, bring about widespread social transformation in Vietnam, for they do not produce

new valued labor opportunities there, and thus by extension, possibilities for social transformation. Work and money are not equated in Vietnam, and therefore do not intersect in the production of identity. International remittances entering Vietnam are only money, the signifier of what labor is in another distant place, but not within the borders of the Vietnamese state. Labor, or the work of the human body, is understood by those who reflect on the remittances they give and receive to be the ontological foundation of any possibility for radical social transformation.¹²⁵ Money earned abroad through labor performed there simply becomes symbolic evidence of this experiential lay wisdom.

In the end the gift continues to triumph over money because it arrives, performs, and transforms differently depending on the environment of the holder, and must continually repeat itself in order to apprehend a social meaning that continually escapes it. The gift of money leads one to further imagine what more it could do or could have done, if only one was elsewhere, teasing long distance imaginaries that cannot always be physically explored. Here again, the histories of migratory chance prevail upon the givers and receivers to reflect on the vicissitudes of fate, which the gift with its characteristics of surprise, alterity, and tangential un-intentionality, continues to index. Frustrated subcultures of in-situ displacement and heightened mobile desire, in which hopes for migration and social transformation are constantly desired and deferred, are represented and displaced into the characteristics of the gift as money, reminding remittance recipients of the limitations of agency in the face of broader structural obstacles.

Such frustrations play out in a variety of consumption patterns in which aspirations for social and physical mobility, as enabled in an ideal capitalist economy, may be symbolically and materially manifested and valued in commodity forms such as the motorcycle. The multiple

¹²⁵ Notions of embodiment have been explored in anthropology by Mauss (1935), Foucault (1975), and Bourdieu (1977) among others. For an interesting ethnography on the affective transformation of the body and identity through labor, see *Immortal Wishes* by Ellen Schattschneider (2003).

occasions when I have been invited by [mostly male] informants to “*đi chơi*” or “*đi vòng vòng / đi giam giam*” [go around in circles for fun] on the back of a new motorcycle purchased with overseas money, cruising Vietnam’s towns and cities with no particular direction or destination in mind, seem reflective of the general circulations of bodies and capital regularly apprehended by remittance economy participants and their spectators in Vietnam. In Vietnam, however, such circulations can become frustratingly contained, familiar, repetitive, and ultimately clogged, rather than expanding and explorative of as yet unknown horizons.

If the gift then fails, it is also because in its money form it has taken on a life of its own beyond the participants that give and receive it. Money alone cannot transform, rather it must be representative of a process of embodied labor and structurally enabled opportunities that have brought about such social transformations. Yet when money symbolically comes to stand outside of the labor and personhood that produced it, when remittances are seen as an end in itself, which must be given and received in order for transnational sociality to exist, then sociality itself fails. It fails because the sign and the signifier—the remittance and the work that produced it—are revealed to no longer be in relation to one another despite the rational and emotional impulses that attempt to keep them unified. The symmetry between the two is furthermore predicated on histories of chance and gamble in which the limits of human agency and reflections on failed personal histories in the face of larger structural barriers and the vicissitudes of fate are woefully exposed. And yet, the recognition of failure is only partial. Thus, the remittance gift becomes animate and fetishized, and indeed emerges as a principal subject of social discourse in remittance economies. Money becomes an incessant topic of everyday discussions—its elusiveness, its shortage, its futural potential and promise of transformation.

In standing in for the sociality of exchange, money and its characteristics in a global economy—mobility and transformation—become an embodied medium of social relations in remittance economies, and ultimately fundamental to changing notions and measures of personal and collective identities vis-à-vis increasing encounters with a once uncanny diasporic Other. While exchange between selves and others has always been central to the production of social identity, in the case of international remittance economies, the Other is traditionally familiar yet removed by distance, although this is changing with increased migratory returns. In the Other’s place the gift takes on heightened symbolic meaning, allowing the imagination extra rein to run wild. The imagination, seeking to re-embodiment the gift with the participants who exchange it, journeys to the landscapes of the gift’s [imagined] origins and across those that it travels. Hypothetical spectres of Self replace the Other, as one imagines what one could, should, or would be on the other side of the exchange relationship. The imagination becomes distracted and entangled in the monetary medium of the gift itself, playing a critically affective role in arbitrating fluctuating social identities in Vietnamese remittance economies and communities. Yet, as we have seen, the resultant ontologies seem to be always excited but not yet arrived, always circulating away and beyond, always dissatisfied and discontented, and always, already, not yet enough [*chưa đủ*].¹²⁶

¹²⁶ The expression of “not yet enough” came up repeatedly in my interviews with remittance economy participants. It referred not only to amounts of gifts and money sent and received, but also was a commentary on general states of social satisfaction, national development, etc.

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