

The Vietnamese in Thailand: a History of Work, Struggle and Acceptance

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Abstract: Although Vietnamese have been migrating to Thailand for many centuries, the situation which they faced in terms of living and working changed significantly in 1945. This resulted from the attempt by the French to recolonise the Indochina region, which led to many Vietnamese seeking to flee the fighting and oppression by moving to Thailand. The experiences of this generation of people and their activities in the labour market are the main focus of this paper. It is shown that this generation of Yuon Op Pha Yop represents a unique set of people in Thailand. Their experiences are set against the labour market experiences of other sets of Vietnamese migrants in Thailand.

Keywords: migrants; ethnic minorities; community

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1. Introduction

The Vietnamese migrant laborer as a petty trader is quite a common figure in the Thai consciousness, as for example the family in Kampon Boontawee's *A Child of the Northeast* demonstrates. That portrait showed normal although perhaps slightly eccentric family life among people who helped their own. It was said that when Vietnamese decide to move on they leave their shops and all their stock behind for another Vietnamese family to operate whenever they arrived. This is a scene of bucolic peacefulness that was not always reflected in reality, especially in the years following 1945. However, the negative experiences of one generation of people are untypical of the experiences of Vietnamese in Thailand, as this paper hopes to demonstrate.

The history of Vietnamese migration is hundreds of years old. Yet, since the start of the twentieth century, Vietnamese became distinctly mistrusted by Thai authorities, who believed that they may have been involved in the desire to spread Communism to Thailand. Vietnamese migrants thus became subject to persecution at a variety of levels, just as members of other migrant ethnic minorities have also been and in some cases continue to be. Many of the Vietnamese migrants who arrived in Thailand did so as a result of the attempt by the French in 1945 to recolonise the Indochina area. Indochina consisted of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, which had been colonised by France in the third quarter of the

nineteenth century. The colonisation was deeply resented by Vietnamese and many had adopted a faith in Communism as an ideology that would help them to repel the Europeans. The majority of those who fled overseas chose to do so over the Mekong River into Thailand. Not only did they believe that Thailand offered an environment conducive to their lifestyle but there was also the hope that Thais themselves would have political sympathies with them. Thailand had fought a war with France between 1940-1 and had at one stage secured two provinces in Cambodia from the Europeans. Subsequently, many of the refugees found that they did not wish to return to Vietnam for a variety of reasons, one of which was attachment to their new home and its people. The experiences of these people are considered in this paper. Many suffered from continued forms of persecution in Thailand and were forced to find different types of work to support themselves and their families. They form a distinct set of people facing different circumstances than those affecting any other Vietnamese migrants.

This paper continues with an examination of the historical perspective of Vietnamese migration into Thailand and its changing nature and motivation. It continues with analysis of the spatial location of Vietnamese communities, Vietnamese-Thai economic relations, labour laws affecting Vietnamese migrants in Thailand and then the economic activities undertaken by the migrants. An agenda of further research helps to conclude the paper.

I am indebted to Mr. Nguyen Van Canh for research assistance with respect to this project. Many of the respondents contacted for interview were reluctant to participate on account of the illegal status from which many had suffered for so many years and which, in some cases, continued to be a problem. Further, respondents were also hesitant about helping with locating further respondents, although once a trusting relationship had been established then offers of personal introductions then followed. Clearly, all respondents will remain anonymous and personal data maintained as confidential.

It might be noted that many of the difficulties faced by many of the Vietnamese migrants in Thailand might have been ameliorated by bribery and that many institutions of the Thai state have attracted a reputation for corruption. Respondents were obviously unwilling to admit that they had participated in this practice but readers will be aware that this did occur on a fairly regular basis.

2. Historical Perspective

Vietnamese have been living in Siam (the previous name for Thailand) since at least the time of the establishment of the Sukhothai state in the C13th (Thin, 2003). In addition to the small scale trickle of individuals and families seeking better economic opportunities across borders, there have been several instances of larger

numbers of people moving or being moved forcibly en masse. There has been a long-term tradition of peoples being moved from one location to another in mainland Southeast Asia. Historically, population density in the region has been very low and there has been continual pressure to obtain more labour, especially skilled labour, both to create a surplus of goods over consumption and to convert any such surplus into prestige and wealth for the state's ruler. Vietnamese were part of this activity when their lands became embroiled in the endemic warfare of the region throughout the years. Military confrontation between the Vietnamese state (Dai Viet, based in the north of the present country) and the Tai Sukhothai state occurred when the latter sought to seize the ethnic Malay and hilltribe Champa state located in what is now Southern Vietnam. The two were also linked through the network of international trade extending from Persia and India to China and calling in on ports in the territories of each.

Individual Vietnamese were also mentioned in chronicles as being present in Tai states, often in the role of military specialist of one sort or another. For example, a Vietnamese man named Pan Songkhram, who is recorded as having the rank of leader of one thousand men, is described in the Chiang Mai Chronicle as being a specialist in the use of the *pu cao* cannon and helped King Tilokarat to subdue the city of Phrae (Wyatt and Aroonrut, 1998). Vietnamese are recorded to be living on the outskirts of the Ayutthaya of King Narai (1656-88) in a camp similar to those of other foreigners interested in mercantile possibilities (Thin, 2003). These Vietnamese, at least in part, voluntarily offered their labour in public works, perhaps preferring to do so rather than find themselves subject to the corvée labour laws that affected the native-born Siamese. A particular stimulus to migration occurred when the northern Vietnamese Nguyen lords sought to crush their Trinh counterparts in the south and, seizing land, expelled those Southern Vietnamese who had embraced Christianity. As a result, a community of Christian Vietnamese was established at Ayutthaya, which had a tradition of religious tolerance. These Vietnamese built religious buildings in which to practice their faith and their legacy is still noticeable in a number of places throughout the Kingdom. The fortunes of these communities waxed and waned over the years but they continued. The next major wave of migration occurred in the eighteenth century and was the result of defeat for Prince Nguyen Anh and his subsequent settling in Thailand. Many of the prince's soldiers had useful skills and contributed those skills to the development of Bangkok, living in villages in a region known as *Yuan Sam Sen*, which specialised in food processing, liquor distilling and bronze casting (Thin, 2003). Prince Nguyen Anh eventually returned to Vietnam and established himself as Emperor Gia Long. As such, he was able to introduce a friendly relationship between the two states. This was occasionally interrupted by warfare, especially when Siam seized ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia and relocated them to eastern Siamese provinces where they worked on general construction projects. Continued almost anarchic conditions in Cambodia made this a recurring problem.

However, the period of colonisation brought the Southeast Asian people and their rulers together with the desire to resist the Europeans. This was not initially successful and Vietnamese continued to migrate to Thailand for a life offering more personal and economic freedom. Writing in 1892, Lucien Fournereau described the Vietnamese migrants, referring to them as Annamites, in the following slightly idiosyncratic way:

“The Annamites are numerous; skilful and indefatigable fishermen they feed the markets; farmers, gardeners bringing their products to the city, coal merchants selling wood charcoal, they show themselves skilled in all kinds of trades. Almost all of them are former prisoners of war who have founded a line in Bangkok or the surroundings. Some, nevertheless, come from Saigon to seek fortune and to try themselves as cooks or servants, but not being able to fight the Chinese competition they do not hesitate to return home”(Fournereau, 1998, p.40).

While this community was developing in Bangkok, other communities were being built at Sakhon Nakhon and Bandua Mukden, some distance away from the Mekong River but intended to be centres for dissidents. These communities were initially anti-French but pro-Vietnamese imperial system and it was not until later that a more radical ideology began to infuse the Vietnamese overseas population (or *Viet kieu*) (Gunn, 1998, pp.27-42). Siamese officials mostly ignored the actions of the Vietnamese and this led to suspicions among the French of sympathizing with them. The communities varied considerably and also changed location over the course of time. Many Vietnamese were poor peasants from Nghe An Province who simply continued with their normal way of life in the new country. Others were middle class émigrés who had more interest in politics and who were sought out by the active Vietnamese agents and integrated into political networks. Politicised migrants were frequently obliged to work as carpenters or in handicrafts or even subsistence rice farming to make a living. These networks were mirrored by others in Southern China and in Indochina itself, with individuals attempting to link different peoples together by personal message. Most of the politically-motivated migrants returned to Vietnam when they had the chance to do so. However, some respondents in this research reported that they were prevented from returning because of the danger and because of family circumstances.

All of the Vietnamese who arrived in Thailand before 1945 have now been designated as having the generic term of *Yuan Kao* or Ancient Vietnamese by Thai authorities, so as to distinguish them from more recent arrivals.

The Vietnamese revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh travelled to Thailand with a view to fostering revolutionary thought among the Vietnamese community in the north-eastern part of the Kingdom. Various organisations such as the Co-operative Association and the Women’s Association were apparently receptive to his ideas. His visit occurred during 1928-9 when no difficulties were put in his way by

authorities and local people and even monks were prepared to help feed him and his followers (Vy, 2003). However, it is not clear that these activities resulted in any material results. Nevertheless, there is evidence of closeness between Thai and Vietnamese people in this period, even though military forces had established control in Thailand and considered Communism inimical.

3. 1945

At the end of the Second World War, Japanese-conquered territories were initially liberated but were then subject to attempts to recolonise them in some cases. Vietnam, as well as the remainder of French Indochina, therefore suffered the return of French colonists. This led to a decade of warfare between the Vietnamese resistance and the French, which ultimately led to the expulsion of the latter following the battle of Dien Bien Phu. However, during the decade of fighting, many Vietnamese insurgents suffered greatly and many sought to flee westwards. As a result, many occupied the border region between Laos and Thailand, which are divided by the Mekong. Unwelcome on either side of the river, they were forced to cross back and forth illicitly, by boat or swimming. On at least one occasion, French troops chased Vietnamese refugees into the water so that 'the Mekong ran red with blood (Respondent, 2005).' When located by Thai authorities, the Vietnamese were registered and required to remain in the province in which they found themselves. Consequently, the eastern provinces of Thailand remain the home to the bulk of the Vietnamese migrants.

However, some Vietnamese did manage to obtain official registration papers. These were of three groups (Thin, 2003). Firstly, ethnic Vietnamese who were living in the two provinces of Cambodia that were yielded to Thailand as a result of the so-called Franco-Thai War of 1941 were accorded official residency. When the two provinces were returned in 1946, the Vietnamese who wished to were resettled in eastern Thai border provinces. The second group included those who had been involved in maritime trading between Vietnam and Thailand and who had therefore established a network of relationships in coastal towns in Thailand. A proportion of these people also obtained official registration papers. Finally, a small number of the refugees of 1945 (described below) were also able to obtain papers through a variety of ways. These three groups are referred to as a whole as *Yvon Tang Dao* (Vietnamese Foreign Residents).

The situation of the *Yvon Op Pha Yop* (Vietnamese refugees), as the people of this generation were known, was greatly influenced by the role of Prime Minister Pridi Panomyong, who maintained friendly relations with Ho Chi Minh and who is one of the great progressive leaders of Thai politics. When Pridi's government was overthrown in 1947 by Field Marshal Phibul Songkhram, the impact on Vietnamese refugees was immediate and very harsh. Laws prevented them from

attending school or speaking Vietnamese, while their movements were strictly monitored. Thai authorities were concerned at this time to enforce regulations to integrate the Chinese ethnic minority more closely into Thai society, since the Chinese Thais were felt at this time to prevent a threat of rebellion, under the influence of Communist ideals. Ethnic Vietnamese at this time were banned from speaking or learning Vietnamese and, if they wished their children to speak Vietnamese, education had to take place in secret. Since people were not generally permitted to entertain groups of people at home, special occasions had to be invented as a cover when such meetings were desired. These included fictitious weddings, at which Vietnamese could gather to contribute the approximately 7 or 8 US dollars per soldier per month which was then transmitted across the border. This activity was known as 'making flowers blossom (Respondent, 2005).' The stateless status suffered by this generation has continued until the present day, as the majority of applications for Thai nationality have yet to be granted, although the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok is optimistic that all will be granted in due course. At least as recently as the 1980s, some ethnic Vietnamese children were given out for adoption by Thai families so that they would be eligible to receive state education.

For income, Vietnamese looked for portfolio employment in whatever industries provided opportunities for wage labour. These included woodworking, retail and the repair of mechanical equipment. Women were often involved in sewing and repairing clothes. As all forms of employment had necessarily to be unofficial, there was nothing to protect employees from unscrupulous employers. This is a problem that persists to the current day, with Burmese illegal migrant workers, most noticeably, being subject to violent assaults on some occasions in lieu of wages. The border regions of Thailand, where most migrant workers are congregated, are in many cases remote from the control of the central authorities and border authorities are often able to wield a considerable degree of autonomy in their actions.

The internal pressures for migration within Vietnam include the increasing levels of rural unemployment and under-employment, as well as the search for better economic opportunities (Tien and Ngoc, 2001, pp.39-60). In addition, Vietnamese authorities have been planning to export Vietnamese labour as part of their plans for economic development. However, it is not clear that such labour on a large scale would have any comparative advantage over alternatives available to Thai employers.

4. Spatial Location

The majority of ethnic Vietnamese in Thailand are located in Isaan (Northeastern Thailand) and Eastern Thailand. This is because migrant Vietnamese crossed the

border with Laos or Cambodia in those areas and because Thai regulations required them to remain within those provinces. A cap was set between 1946-53 for Vietnamese migrants of 100,000 with between 1-6,000 people in 17 of the 19 Isaan provinces. Between 1960-4, Thai authorities encouraged Vietnamese to return to Vietnam and up to 10,000 did so. Thousands more migrated to other countries, including western countries. It is possible that around 50,000 Vietnamese remain in the Isaan region. The majority of these have become integrated to a greater or lesser extent with the Thai community although, like the various Chinese communities, there are still groups who maintain a Vietnamese identity and speak in the Vietnamese language between themselves.

Previously, Vietnamese were required to remain in the province in which they were registered and leaving that province without permission was illegal. For a first offence, an individual could be returned to the registered province with a warning but second or subsequent offences could result in detention or imprisonment. One respondent reported a brother who was imprisoned for eight years for leaving Mukdahan province without permission. At this time, he had not been long married and had young children. His wife was driven to such a level of despair that she tried to commit suicide. In some cases, breaches of regulations have led to wholesale movement of people from the eastern part of the country to the southern province of Phattalung, where some people still remain, many years after the original movement.

However, other people, especially single men, were able to move to Bangkok for work and even to travel to and from different provinces carrying messages and information. Despite the strict regulations, many Vietnamese were prepared to risk punishment by leaving the registered province for, primarily, Bangkok. Reasons for this centre on the low level of economic opportunities available away from Bangkok and the inability to buy many needed goods. Vietnamese moved clandestinely about the country and, if they wished to take up residence in Bangkok, would live illegally under constant threat of discovery. Presumably some measure of bribery was possible in some cases but respondents were reluctant to discuss this aspect. Since some Vietnamese have still been unable to obtain official registration as much as 60 years after they first entered Thailand, they remain forced to live illegally and have adopted protectively secretive attitudes.

These regulations have subsequently been relaxed, although only for those who are fully registered. Unregistered Vietnamese without Thai nationality must still remain within the registered province and are subject to sanction should they be found to have tried to enter another part of the country.

The temporary home of Ho Chi Minh in Nakhon Phanom has also become a significant centre for the Vietnamese community. The community there includes Thai-Vietnamese monks and a burgeoning business community. Relaxation of

previous rules means that their role in local society is increasing. A prominent entrepreneur, Khun Sittiporn Sirivoradejkul, plans to enter local and possibly national politics once permission is obtained (Achara, 2005).

One additional community of Vietnamese is the estimated 2,000 or so Chams living in the Ban Khrua area of Bangkok. This group originally lived in the Trat province but were moved to Bangkok by King Rama I at the beginning of the nineteenth century because of their skills with navigation and shipbuilding, since the King needed a more modern navy to compete with the various European powers. These Chams follow an Islamic lifestyle and communities also exist in Ayutthaya and also in Trat, where some remained behind. Cham women became involved with silk weaving and when the well-known Jim Thompson silk business was established, it was Cham women who first provided the model for what was marketed as Thai silk (Schliesinger, 2000, pp.136-40). A respondent for this research also operated a silk weaving factory, with workers using traditional technology to produce silk primarily for corporate customers, notably a large airline.

5. Labour Laws and Agreements

Unlike neighbouring countries such as Laos and Myanmar, Thailand has no formal labour agreement with Vietnam. Consequently, applicable regulations concerning labour and migration are those which pertain to all other countries generally without special provision. These regulations concern the industrial sectors and activities in which people may work, their requirements for visa and residence, the procedure for obtaining a work permit and the regulation of access to government services. In general, the requirements for obtaining a work permit are quite rigorous and require a sponsoring organisation in the Kingdom. Since many migrants are comparatively poorly-skilled and compete primarily in terms of low labour costs. This means there is an incentive for potential employers and the migrant workers themselves to try to remain unregistered. This mean the labour is cheaper but unprotected by health and safety standards and without any rights for workplace representation. There are numerous cases of workers suffering from poor and even violent treatment in different parts of Thailand, largely because they are unregistered and unprotected. Indeed, after the recent tsunami disaster at the end of 2004, many hundreds or thousands of Burmese migrant workers went to ground rather than seek aid from authorities it was believed would be unhelpful or worse. Stories of human trafficking are also commonplace (e.g. Prasong, 2005) and the numerous varieties of small-scale and daily persecution of some migrant workers have started to become fully chronicled (Myint Wai, 2004).

According to the Royal Decree of BE 2522 (1979), aliens are unable to obtain work permits for the following activities:

Labouring	Work in agriculture, animal breeding, fishing and farm supervision (excluding some specialised skills)
Masonry, carpentry or other construction work	Wood carving
Driving of motor vehicles or non-motorised carriers (except international pilots)	Shop attendants and window salespeople
Auctioneering	Accountancy supervision, auditing or services in accounting (except occasional internal auditing)
Gem cutting or polishing	Hair cutting, hair dressing or beautician work
Hand weaving	Mat weaving or fabrication of wares from reed, rattan or related materials
Manual fibre paper making	Lacquerware making
Thai musical instrument fabrication	Nielloware fabrication
Goldsmith, silversmith or other precious metalwork	Bronzeware fabrication
Thai doll making	Mattress or padded blanket fabrication
Alms bowl fabrication	Manual silk product fabrication
Buddha image fabrication	Knife making
Paper or cloth umbrella fabrication	Shoemaking
Hatmaking	Brokerage or domestic agency work
Engineering work, including civil engineering and construction supervision	Architectural work or supervision
Dressmaking	Pottery or ceramics
Manual cigarette rolling	Tourist guide or tour organising agency
Hawking	Thai character typesetting
Clerical or secretarial work	Legal or litigation service

Violating these regulations renders the alien subject to a fine of between 2-100,000 baht and imprisonment for up to five years. The regulations have been amended from time to time over the years, both to keep the list of forbidden activities modernised and also to provide some exemptions for certain categories of migrants. Bilateral agreements with both Lao PDR and Myanmar have provided scope for allowing migrants from those countries special permission to become involved in particular professions. However, as mentioned previously, no such agreement exists with Vietnam and there are, as of 2005, no publicly published plans to create one exist. Consequently, economic relations between the two states are regulated by the rules of multilateral organisations to which both belong, such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Relations between Vietnam and Thailand were hostile from 1962 until 1975, owing to the co-operation provided by Thailand to the USA and South Vietnamese in the Vietnamese War for Liberation. However, political relations did improve and diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1976. Although government relations have been mostly harmonious in recent years, there have still been problems. In 2001, for example, Vietnamese and American Vietnamese active in Thailand made attempts to bomb the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok. Fortunately, the attempt failed for technical reasons but there was then a clutch of stories about anti-Vietnamese government groups based in Thailand (Khien, 2003). As Vietnamese relations with the USA have improved and as China has emerged as an economic partner for the ASEAN region, then necessarily Thai-Vietnamese relations have also improved.

6. Economic Activities and Work of Ethnic Vietnamese in Thailand

Many of the generation of Vietnamese who entered Thailand as a result of the French recolonisation of their home country were obliged to adapt themselves to any form of economic opportunity available. Initially, many used the skills that they possessed when they left Vietnam and in some cases shared their knowledge with unskilled compatriots. In other cases, the unskilled workers were obliged to seek whatever manual labour may have been available.

Workers with marketable skills often focused on particular Vietnamese skills which were not available in Thailand. Specific forms of woodcraft were examples of this. It was also reported that niches were available in some activities in which Thais were not competent or else not interested but in which one or more Vietnamese migrants had some ability. These included mechanical engineering and vehicle repair. An unofficial and informal Executive Committee of Vietnamese in Thailand, centred in Bangkok, established a base in which Vietnamese migrants could come to receive instruction in mechanical engineering which they could then take to other provinces. Consequently, it is said that vehicle mechanics around the Kingdom of Thailand are mostly Vietnamese in origin, for example. These skills were taught to male Vietnamese, while females could receive training in sewing and tailoring. Gender distinctions in the world of work remain strong among the migrant communities.

By the time of a younger generation who were born in Thailand and therefore eligible for Thai nationality, most young people are very similar to entirely Thai people. They are mostly less likely to speak Vietnamese or be able to speak Vietnamese and they are supported by their parents to maximise their education. This has meant that they tend to have better options for employment and so are not so constrained in their choice of occupation. Inevitably, those living in rural areas are less likely to be able to take advantage of educational opportunities than those

people living in urban areas. University education is only available to those students whose parents have been able to obtain Thai nationality or who can meet the fee for foreign students, which is around five times that for Thai students.

No Vietnamese agency in Thailand was able to provide assistance for the *Yuon Op Pha Yop* but unofficial organisations were established. Vietnamese would meet in Bangkok at a temple in the Chinatown area and communications could be circulated throughout the Kingdom by those people who were able to travel. One such informal organisation included a mechanical repair workshop and young Vietnamese from throughout Thailand were secretly brought to Bangkok to learn the trade. After their apprenticeship was served, they would return to their registered province to establish a business as a mechanic. This explains why so many mechanics in Thailand are ethnic Vietnamese. While males were offered this training, girls and young women were instructed in sewing and repairing clothes. The gendered division of work was maintained in this case, as it generally has been within the Vietnamese community in Thailand.

Thai law prevents non-Thais from owning land, except in very specific and restricted circumstances. It also prevents non-Thais from holding the controlling interest in any business. Foreigners, Vietnamese included, often circumvent these difficulties by marrying a Thai wife (or husband, although this is much rarer) and placing the assets in her name. Of course, this is not an ideal solution as personal relationships can break down and the assets put at risk. However, it is favoured among many communities and is being used by Chinese businessmen moving into the new economic zones in Chiang Rai province (Subin and Thirawat, 2004). Nevertheless, the business is necessarily run on a semi-official basis and this can be manifested in the protection given to workers and the protection business executives receive from harassment. Some respondents reported being asked to pay fines or fees which they felt were not officially sanctioned.

Intra-ethnic community relations have generally been reported to be harmonious but there has been low level racist taunting and harassment, according to some respondents, from both the Thai majority and also the ethnic Chinese community. It is certainly true that there have been important political differences between the two countries (not least the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979) which may have been influential in raising tensions.

In summary, ethnic Vietnamese migrants became unable to make full use of their skills and competencies as a result of political conflict. They have in recent years been more likely to be able to fulfill their abilities.

7. Future Research

Many of the *Yuon Op Pha Yop* generation have reached an age when they are no longer capable of working and others are approaching that age. They have made efforts to ensure that their children at least have been able to receive official status so that they may pursue the career of their own choosing.

Like nearly all migrant communities, the Vietnamese in Thailand have worked hard to integrate themselves and to provide better economic futures for themselves and their families. Those who arrived in the years after 1945 represent a unique subset of all the Vietnamese migrants and it is hoped that their experiences will not be replicated in the future. However, research has indicated that a majority of Thai society believes in differential levels of wages depending on ethnicity (Martin, 2003) and so genuine equality may still be some way away.

There are currently very few non-migrant Vietnamese businesses in Thailand and Vietnamese exports to the Kingdom are at a comparatively low level, certainly when compared with the flows of capital and goods moving in the opposite direction. The connections, if any, between Vietnamese migrants in Thailand and other Vietnamese in creating new businesses are not clear and research in this area would help to promote successful and efficient business creation. It is possible that better organised networks exist in the eastern provinces of Thailand and that these extend across borders with Laos or Cambodia. However, this has yet to be established. More work on the Vietnamese who returned to Vietnam and any continuing economic connections with the migrant community would also be helpful. It is hoped that the current research will contribute to this larger program.

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