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The Reemergence of Vietnam's Ethnic Chinese Community through Local, National,
and Transnational Structures

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

LiAnne Sandra Yu

Committee in charge:

Professor F. G. Bailey, Chair
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2006

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2006

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Reemergence of Vietnam's Ethnic Chinese Community through Local, National,
and Transnational Structures

by

LiAnne SandraYu

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, San Diego, 2006

Professor F.G. Bailey, Chair

This dissertation is an examination of how the ethnic Chinese community in Vietnam, the Hoa, re-built their economic and social structures after the persecution they faced post-1975. In the decade after the fall of Saigon to Communist forces, the wealthiest and most powerful Hoa were forced out of their positions, and over half a million people from that community left Vietnam as refugees. By the mid-1980's, it seemed that Cholon, once the thriving center of Vietnam's Hoa entrepreneurial activity, had lost its identity as a "Chinatown" and was becoming an undifferentiated district within what was now called Ho Chi Minh City.

My ethnographic research within Cholon has explored the everyday practices and social forms that have contributed to this "reemergence" of Hoa society, after

what seemed to be its demise post-1975. The official, state endorsed version of the story is that the Hoa are a hard working ethnic minority and have leveraged their entrepreneurial talents to help rebuild Vietnam and create the conditions for the country's reintegration into the global arena after a period of isolation. This dissertation has explored how the Hoa have actually experienced the reemergence of their ethnic community. How has their Chinese identity been experienced, shared, and transformed along the way?

This dissertation focuses on three themes:

- The Hoa community's reemergence in the last decade has resulted from various developments on three structural levels: local, national, and transnational.
- Hoa perceptions of a "homeland" have not remained static and tied to China. Rather, the notion of a homeland has transformed into the idea of a future or promise land, now represented by the West.
- Hoa entrepreneurial activity must be considered in terms of the gendered and emotional nature of economic business relationships – which often transcend into the personal realm.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I. Introduction to the Research Question

Anthropologists have studied the Southeast Asian Chinese since the 1950's, and much has been written about ethnic Chinese communities living in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. These ethnic communities have elicited a great deal of interest from both academics as well as the popular media because of their central role in the region's economic development. The Southeast Asian Chinese are known as the region's business class – among the richest and most powerful players – as well as the driving force behind small and medium sized entrepreneurialism. At the same time, each country has seen various movements to assimilate and, in many cases, persecute these communities because of their ethnic difference.

The ethnic Chinese of Vietnam, known locally as the Hoa, are among the least understood of the Southeast Asian Chinese. After the Communist takeover of South Vietnam in 1975, Western researchers were not permitted in the country. Most of what was written about Vietnam in the following decades came from war veterans, the U.S. military and Vietnamese refugees who settled in the West. What was known was the the Hoa had been targeted by the Vietnamese government as a potentially threatening community, due to their alleged ties to China, and their control over the economy. Nearly 60% of the refugees who left Vietnam as boat people were in fact Hoa – attesting to the persecution they endured or believed they faced. By the late 1970's, it seemed that Vietnam's Chinese communities had been destroyed, and the remaining

ethnic Chinese were forced to assimilate. Saigon's Chinatown, known locally as Cholon, or "big market" in Vietnamese, quickly lost its Chinese characteristics as all Chinese signs were taken down, and the abandoned homes and stores were taken over by ethnic Vietnamese.

Twenty years later, the situation looked very different. When I first visited Saigon, now known as Ho Chi Minh City, local media and Vietnamese academics were touting the reemergence of the country's Hoa businesses as a sign of the country's overall economic health. Such views were not limited to the Vietnamese. In November 1998, a five-minute special segment aired on CNN about the Hoa. Numerous scenes of Ho Chi Minh City's Chinatown flashed across the screen as the reporter, Mike Chinoy, briefly swept through history of the Hoa. He emphasized Hoa prosperity before 1975, touched upon the persecution of their community after the fall of Saigon, and then focused on how the Hoa were reemerging both economically and culturally. Scenes of noisy noodle shops, bustling markets and crowded temples filled the screen. Chinoy ended the story by saying that the Hoa had achieved integration as Vietnamese nationals without giving up their cultural distinctiveness.

The narrative of reemergence is powerful and pervasive among journalists and academics focused on Southeast Asia. It is also the story that the Vietnamese state tells of its Chinese minority. Underlying these narratives is the message that Chinese identity is resilient to change, and given the right circumstances can re-energize itself and revive its cultural characteristics and entrepreneurial activities. Furthermore, foreign analysts speculated that the Hoa would come to play a role in Vietnam similar to that of other Southeast Asian Chinese in the development of international

commerce. In short, the Hoa were celebrated as emerging players in transnational Chinese business networks.

Twenty years separate the period of persecution and the perceived end of the Hoa community, and the period of revitalization. Given the unprecedented exodus of a significant portion of the Hoa population, including key entrepreneurial and political leaders, how is it that the community could recover and reestablish itself? What were the social forms that supported this recovery?

This dissertation explores the reemergence of the Hoa community and delves into questions regarding the role of social networks, business relationships, and the state. Rather than beginning with the premise that Chinese culture is timeless and enduring, I explore the types of Chinese identity that have allowed for this perceived “reemergence,” and the social forms that support all of this.

II. Why study the Hoa?

What makes a study of the Hoa interesting from an anthropological perspective? How do their experiences potentially enhance or advance our theoretical understandings of social behavior?

Over the last fifty years, the Southeast Asian Chinese have occupied an important place within anthropological theory for several reasons. First is the problem of why and how so many of these communities throughout Southeast Asia have maintained their ethnic distinctiveness, despite the assimilationist policies of various governmental regimes. Second is the question of why these communities have occupied such central roles in commerce and entrepreneurialism, to the extent that in

each Southeast Asian country, the ethnic Chinese are known as the wealthiest and most powerful business classes. Academic and journalistic studies of the Southeast Asian Chinese have invariably focused on their economic success, vis-à-vis other local populations, as the key research question that defines such communities.

This focus on the economic and entrepreneurial aspects of Southeast Asian Chinese social life increased in salience during the 1990's, as social scientists sought to explain the unprecedented growth in the region. Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines were dubbed the new "Asian tigers"¹ high growth markets with export-oriented economies. The ethnic Chinese citizens of each of these countries were lauded as the engines of such growth.

Throughout the last two decades, financial analysts, politicians, and even pop culturalists have heralded the coming of the "Pacific century." They point to evidence of a shift in the global balance of power from the West towards a China-centered East, including not only a handful of Confucian-influenced countries such as Japan and South Korea, but also a deterritorialized entity called "Greater China." The latter refers to a borderless imagined community of ethnic Chinese outside of the PRC, dispersed throughout Asia in such areas as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia. Variouslly called the Overseas Chinese, Offshore China, the Chinese diaspora, or the transnational Chinese, these communities are portrayed as economically linked through financial and investment networks based on cultural affinities.

The idea that the ethnic Chinese communities of Southeast Asia are part of a greater Chinese diaspora draws attention to the question of why some ethnic

communities maintain their distinctiveness, while others assimilate. This question has been approached from several perspectives within anthropology and cultural studies. On one end of the spectrum is the psychological approach – what are the internal emotional, intellectual, and essential elements of identity that endure? On the other end of the spectrum is what might be considered the structural approach – what are the social, economic, and political forms that support ethnic communities? This dissertation will attempt to strike a balance between the two approaches towards identity, exploring both the internal emotional aspects as well as the external social forms that support ethnic communities.

Despite the fact that the Southeast Asian Chinese are a popular topic among social scientists exploring issues around transnationalism, diaspora, and entrepreneurialism, very little is known about Hoa life in Vietnam today. Before 1975, most accounts of Hoa society focused on their role as middlemen in the colonial economy. Clifford Barton's dissertation entitled *Credit and Commerce* (1977) is the only known ethnographic study of Hoa society conducted by a Western scholar. Since the fall of Saigon in 1975, few Western researchers have been allowed in Vietnam. Only in the mid to late 1990's did that change, and we are starting to see more accounts of not only Hoa, but also ethnic Vietnamese daily life.

This dissertation is one of the first ethnographic explorations of Hoa society since 1975. It thus begins to fill a gap in our knowledge of a particular Southeast Asian Chinese community, which is also increasingly caught up in transnational economic and cultural networks. How the Hoa actually maintain their community

identity in the context of increasing contact with ethnic Chinese from other regions, is the subject of the following chapters.

III. Who are the Hoa?

Before delving into Hoa society today, it is important to explore their history in Vietnam, and the political and economic developments that have helped to shape their current state.

The Hoa are unique among other Southeast Asian Chinese, as well as other diasporan Chinese in general, because Vietnam actually shares a border with China. The shared border has meant that historically, Chinese have moved relatively freely between the two countries. It has also meant that the Hoa have often found themselves in the middle of tensions between the two neighboring states.

Vietnam has, historically, always been wary of its more powerful northern neighbor, and Vietnamese history is rife with depictions of how they fought to keep their unique identity from the Chinese. Chinese influence began in 111 B.C., when the Chinese empire of the Han dynasty annexed and controlled the Vietnamese kingdom located in what is now Northern Vietnam (Amer, 1989, Duiker, 1986). The Vietnamese ruling class was heavily influenced by Chinese culture. The upper class learned how to read and write Chinese characters, even though the spoken Vietnamese language was not the same as any of the various Chinese ones. Furthermore, the great religions and philosophical teachings of the Chinese tradition such as Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, were introduced to Vietnam (Amer, 1989;).

The first significant wave of Chinese immigration to present-day Vietnam began around 100BC. During this time, Vietnam was still under Chinese rule. The second significant wave Chinese occurred in the mid 1880's. These migrants went to Vietnam in search of work opportunities and political asylum due to the unstable political and economic situation in China resulting from the Opium War with the British in 1840, the Taiping Revolution from 1851 to 1864, and the Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1946. These migrants settled both in the Northern and Southern parts of Vietnam (Amer, 1989).

The ethnic Chinese population in the southern part of Vietnam eventually became much larger than in the north. About 85% of the Hoa population lived in the south (Pang 1999). Drawn by the trade opportunities around the Mekong Delta, the Chinese played important roles in fishing, import and export, and rice production and distribution. The Chinese also came to dominate the financial lending sector. By 1954, Chinese migrants in Vietnam controlled nearly 90 percent of the wholesale and retail trades (Chang, 1982).

The ethnic Chinese essentially ran their own city in the south, which came to be known as "Cholon", or "big market" in Vietnamese. Within Cholon, Chinese associations flourished. These associations, or bang, were based on common ancestral province or Chinese dialect. Each association had its own Chinese dialect – Cantonese, Fujianese, and Teochiu being among the largest bang. The Cantonese speaking people constituted 45% of the Chinese population, followed by the Teochiu (30%), Hokkien (8%), Hakka (10%) and Hainan (4%) (Pang 1999). These bang supported their members and their families with financial lending services, hospitals, and schools.

New immigrants from China found immediate assistance and a connection to society through these bang. The bang leaders were also highly invested in maintaining the Chinese community within Vietnam – they sponsored private schools where children could learn to speak Chinese. Young people in the community were usually fluent in more than one Chinese language, but a large percentage did not speak Vietnamese well. Inter-ethnic marriage was not common, especially among the middle class.

The Chinese were considered Chinese citizens and thus were ineligible to work as government officials. Nonetheless, they continued to be active in the commercial and agricultural sectors of the Vietnamese society. The Nguyen rulers used the Chinese merchants to collect taxes, and allowed them to build ships, buy houses, acquire lands, and form their own social and economic organizations. During the French colonial period from 1859 to 1954, Chinese migration continued unabated (Amer 1989). The French encouraged the Chinese to continue their roles in trade and commerce, essentially becoming “middlemen” between the colonial powers and the indigenous masses. As a result of several agreements between China and France, the Chinese people in Vietnam received favorable territorial economic and political privileges.

By 1940, the ethnic Chinese owned nearly 90 percent of all the rice mills in Cholon and large fleets to conduct the trade (Pang, 1999). They acted as the principal tax collectors for the French government. As a result, the privileged economic position of the Chinese was actually strengthened, but the ethnic Chinese communities were further segregated from the native population (Wang, 1981).

The French colonial period ended in 1954. Vietnam was divided into two countries with two political systems - the Republic of South Vietnam, supported by the United States, and the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam, run by the Vietnamese Communist Party. South Vietnam cut off all political ties with Communist China. The ethnic Chinese community in Vietnam also lost all its contact and support from China.

The new president of the south, Ngo Dinh Diem, immediately began to take measures to integrate the ethnic Chinese by mandating that all ethnic Chinese people born in Vietnam be considered Vietnamese nationals adopt Vietnamese names or pay heavy fines. In order to encourage compliance, non-Vietnamese nationals were prohibited from engaging in certain trades, which, not coincidentally, were the areas dominated by ethnic Chinese. According to Chang (1982), the presidential decrees from 1955 to 1957 were the most comprehensive and drastic actions yet taken by any Asian country to absorb an alien minority. These integration measures were explicitly directed against the livelihood of more than one million ethnic Chinese in South Vietnam.

Despite these measures, the ethnic Chinese continued to control about 75% of South Vietnam's commercial activities. In addition, they continued running their own schools and Chinese language newspapers (Chang 1982). The escalation of the Vietnam War in the early 1960's left the South Vietnamese regime with little time to enforce their policies on the ethnic Chinese. Rather, the Hoa were left to continue their economic activities, which also supported a growing Western military presence. Furthermore, as a close ally in the U.S.-led alliance against communism in Asia, the

Kuomintang government of Taiwan was allowed to influence political and cultural activities among the ethnic Chinese in the south (Tran, 1993).

In April 1975, the Vietnam War ended after the North Vietnamese troops took Saigon – what southerners typically refer to as the “fall of Saigon.” On April 30, 1975, when the North Vietnam communist forces entered the Cholon, the streets were lined with thousands of Chinese national flags and portraits of the Chinese communist leader, Mao Zedong. There was a logical assumption within this community that Vietnam and China had a fraternal relationship due to China’s support of the North Vietnamese troops, and the common bond of Communism. Such actions proved to help set in motion policies that would attempt to squash the ethnic Chinese community. Rather than read these actions as pro-Vietnamese Communist Party, the new government interpreted them as dangerously anti-national. While China did support North Vietnam against the south, the two regimes now treated each other with suspicion and escalating hostility. Such feelings were based on Vietnam’s historical distrust of their northern neighbor, and China’s suspicion that a united Vietnam could prove more of a threat. The dispute between Vietnam and China over the policy in Cambodia in 1977, and China’s invasion of Vietnam in 1979 further escalated the VCP’s anti-Hoa policies (Chang, 1982; Duiker, 1986; Tran 1993). These high level conflicts between nations had tangible effects on Hoa society. Vietnamese authorities questioned the loyalty of many ethnic Chinese people to Vietnam.

In March of 1978, the VCP initiated a sweeping campaign against the capitalistic class in the city of Cholon. The police and party cadres ransacked shops and houses and confiscated goods from about 50,000 retailers from mostly ethnic

Chinese backgrounds. Families who were stripped of their properties without prior notice or explanation were ordered to move to the “new economic zones” (Chang, 1982). Most wealthy Hoa were placed on trial for “economic crimes” against the masses (Duiker, 1987). Chinese schools and newspaper agencies were shut down. Hoa were denied jobs, and their children denied admittance to Vietnamese schools or colleges (Chang 1982).

These discriminatory policies created a mass exodus of ethnic Chinese refugees out of Vietnam. The number was estimated to be between 400,000 and 600,000 from 1978 to 1980 (Hess, 1990). Most attempted to cross the South China Sea to seek freedom in many Southeast Asian countries. People who could afford to pay were permitted to leave in a crowded and unsafe fishing boat. Once out of the country, these Hoa typically registered as Vietnamese rather than Chinese, in order to qualify for refugee programs. Thus, there may never be an accurate accounting of how many Hoa fled Vietnam during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s.

Most of us here in the U.S. who remember the events after the fall of Saigon are familiar with the influx of “boat people” from Vietnam. Casual observers typically attribute this refugee phenomenon to the strong anti-Communist sentiment of South Vietnamese, and the persecution of those who supported the U.S. military. What many Americans may not realize, however, is that by some estimates, 60% of these boat people were actually ethnic Chinese. They left, like other Vietnamese, due to their fear of persecution. Unlike the ethnic Vietnamese, however, their fear also had their basis on the new regime’s specific anti-Chinese policies.

Very little is known about the Hoa after 1975. The life histories I collected reveal that the decades following the mass exodus saw the general dismantling of all ethnic Chinese social structures. Chinese language media, schools, banks, businesses, and any other social support systems were deemed anti-national. The Hoa were all nationalized as Vietnamese citizens, but their identity cards were required to state their ethnicity. Most Hoa complained that discrimination was rife, and ethnic Vietnamese were given the abandoned businesses and homes that the Hoa had left behind during the exodus.

When I first visited Vietnam in 1996, there was a glimmer of hope that the ethnic Chinese community would recover. The government's economic liberalization policies, called Doi Moi, were implemented in the early 1990's in order to breathe life into the stagnant economy. Among the first investors were the ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. The VCP understood that in order to attract more of these entrepreneurs, it needed to provide an infrastructure that supported their business practices. Thus, during the mid 1990's, anti-ethnic Chinese policies were gradually dismantled, in the hopes that the Hoa community could provide the cultural and business expertise that would continue to attract foreign investment from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan.

While there were Hoa living throughout the southern region, the most prominent area they congregated in was called Cholon. The Vietnamese name Cholon literally means "big market." The Chinese name of Cholon is Ti'an, which means embankment. Vietnamese speakers nearly always used the name Cholon, whereas Chinese speakers tended to use the name Ti'an.

This dissertation explores that period of “reemergence”. Today, nearly a decade after my first visit to Vietnam, the Hoa community appears to be strong, robust, and growing. Official Vietnamese media accounts describe the Hoa as Vietnam’s hard working entrepreneurial class. The period of persecution and the exodus of nearly 800,000 Hoa are not part of that discourse, despite the fact that most middle aged Hoa today have distinct memories of that period.

IV. The Approach

In order to understand how and why the Hoa community was able to reestablish itself in the late 1990’s after over two decades of persecutory and assimilationist policies, I will explore the social forms have been most salient in affecting both continuity and change within Vietnam’s ethnic Chinese population. As I will show in this dissertation, Hoa society has proven resilient not because of a static or singular sense of ethnic identity. Rather, the Hoa experience and enact ethnic ties on three levels: local, national, and transnational. Locally formed ethnic ties are based on sub-ethnic affiliations (e.g. Cantonese, Haninanes, Hakka, Fujianese, and Chaozhou), rather than a generalized Chinese identity, and have historically supported Hoa education, hospitals, banks, and other social services. Nationally formed ethnic ties are based on the concept of Vietnamese national citizenship being primary, and ethnic minority status being secondary. The Vietnamese state’s attempts to co-opt Chinese identity and control how it is expressed and experienced has permeated the educational system and changed how the younger generation views their “Chineseness.” Transnationally formed ethnic ties are based on networks of diasporan

Chinese who live within different nation-states, but who are linked together through economics, politics, and culture. The Hoa's relationships with Taiwanese and other diasporan Chinese have created a transnational Chinese identity.

The following chapters in this dissertation focus on each of these ethnic structures - local, national, and transnational. Chapter two reviews the relevant literature within anthropology and related fields, in order to provide an understanding of why an exploration of Hoa society matters beyond being its value as another ethnographic case study. Chapter three explores the role of sub-ethnic networks, or bang, based on common ancestral province and dialect. These bang were dismantled after 1975, but have begun to reemerge, albeit more covertly. Chapter four explores the role of the Vietnamese state in both supporting and controlling ethnic Chinese community identity. Chapter five looks at the phenomenon of transnational families, and the impact this has had on the expectations of Hoa youths, who find themselves in a state of educational and social limbo as they wait their turn to emigrate. Chapter six explores how transnational Chinese capital actually affects everyday Hoa lives and their community development. In particular, I explore the relationship between Taiwanese businessmen and Hoa women, and the central role these partnerships have played in the Hoa community's reemergence since the mid-1990's.

For analytical purposes, I have explored each of these structures – local, national, and transnational – in separate chapters. The reality is that people are often motivated and influenced by more than one type of Chinese identity, whether it is based on sub-ethnic allegiance or more generalized transnational networks. In this dissertation, I will argue that the perceived reemergence of Hoa society after a period

of turbulence and persecution over two decades is the outcome of the complex and multi-layered opportunities that these various structures have brought forth.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

I. Introduction

The main problem I address in this dissertation is **with regards to** the reemergence of the ethnic Chinese community in Vietnam after years of persecution and forced dispersion to other countries. What structures have the Hoa created, maintained, or changed in order to reenergize their ethnic community despite the traumas they faced after the fall of Saigon in 1975? How is Chinese identity viewed and expressed, and what adaptations have taken place due to recent historical events? Four general areas of study have informed my exploration:

1. Overseas Chinese Studies focuses on the question of why and how ethnic Chinese communities maintain their ethnic identities.
2. Middleman Minority Studies focuses on the political and economic structures that shape opportunities for ethnic Chinese communities.
3. “Chinese Spirit of Capitalism” Studies focuses on the cultural practices that lead to certain economic/business forms.
4. Diaspora and Transnational Approaches focuses on how global economic flows and a sense of connection to an ancestral homeland shape ethnic communities.

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This chapter continues with a deeper exploration of each of these four areas of study and theory. Note that with the exception of “Overseas Chinese studies,” each of

these areas has been applied to communities throughout the world – not just ethnic Chinese. I have, however, chosen to focus on the literature specifically pertaining to Southeast Asian Chinese. Thus, it is my goal to situate my work in the field of Southeast Asian Studies, and to use the Hoa as a case study that may validate, extend, or even challenge other prevailing frameworks that explain Chinese ethnicity in this geographical region. While it is not within the bounds of this dissertation to explore how the Hoa compare to other, non-Chinese middle minorities or diasporan communities, I do offer some suggestions in the concluding chapter on how the experience of the Hoa may offer fresh perspectives for these fields of study in particular, and anthropology more generally.

II. Overseas Chinese Studies

The first significant body of literature on the Southeast Asian Chinese emerged in the 1950's. Scholars at this time sought to understand Chinese society in the inaccessible PRC through the more accessible ethnic Chinese community of Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asian Chinese were regarded as a "third China" or a "residual China" (cf. Fitzgerald 1965). They were generally portrayed as a homogeneous group, a cohesive race that remained oriented towards China in culture and customs, playing no part in the political life of the countries in which they lived (Fitzgerald 1965:106, cf. Purcell 1951).

Other scholars recognized that return to China after 1949 was unlikely, and thus sought to understand how the ethnic Chinese were becoming integrated into the political, cultural, and social life of the "host" countries (cf Skinner 1957, 1958,

Wickberg 1965). These scholars exemplify the “assimilationist paradigm” which has pervaded the study of the Southeast Asian Chinese for decades. They argue that the ethnic Chinese will not remain perpetually distinct, but will eventually become absorbed into dominant culture.

The experiences of the Southeast Asian Chinese have, in recent years, been held up as examples of the continued pull of a Chinese nationality which defies specific borders and structures. The term “Overseas Chinese” is used both in scholarship as well as the international arena to refer to ethnic Chinese living outside of Mainland China and Taiwan. Nonetheless, it has been contested on the grounds that it connotes a permanent foreign presence by virtue of race. That is, the term portrays ethnic Chinese living outside of China as essentially and always Chinese.

In 1990, there were almost 37 million Overseas Chinese living in 136 countries. About 32.3 million, or 88%, live in 32 Asian countries. Of the total 37 million, 7.3 million, or 20%, live in Indonesia, 6 million, or 16%, live in Thailand, 5.7 million, and 5.5 million, or 15%, live in Malaysia (Poston, Mao and Mei 1994).

Wang Gungwu is among the prominent of scholars who sought to explain and explore Overseas Chinese communities. According to Wang, the first wave of Overseas Chinese fell into the *Huashang* (Chinese trader) pattern, which dominated the growth of Chinese emigration to other Asian countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, before 1850. It included the emigration of merchants and artisans with their respective families, who set up businesses abroad. This pattern was and still remains the most basic form of Chinese emigration. The *Huagong* (Chinese coolie) pattern dominated from the 1850’s to the 1920’s, when Chinese migrated to North American

and Australia to work in gold mining and railway building. The majority of these were men of peasant origin, who planned to return home with a fortune. The eventual formation of the large Chinatowns in San Francisco and New York attests to the fact that most of them never did return. The third type of the *Huaqiao* (Chinese sojourner) pattern. This one, which dominated until the 1950's, is characterized by the movement of well-educated professionals after the fall of Imperial China in 1911. The *Huayi* (Chinese descent) pattern involves persons of Chinese descent who were living outside of China re-emigrating to another country. This type is characteristic of Chinese Southeast Asians who, because of persecution, resettled in North America and Europe. Examples include the Chinese Indonesians who fled in 1965 due to ethnic riots, and the Hoa of Vietnam, who fled in 1975 because of the Communist takeover.

Whatever the roots of their movement, the Overseas Chinese as a whole have been the focus of much popular as well as scholarly attention, primarily because of the economic role they play in the world's most rapidly developing region – Southeast Asia. Books and articles concerning the Overseas Chinese reinforce this emphasis on the power of their networks and capital flows. In his most recent book, *Lords of the Rim*, Sinologist Sterling Seagrave calls the Overseas Chinese “an invisible empire of conglomerates” (1995:2). A Time magazine article characterized them as “a network of capital and enterprise. For the first time since waves of immigrants left China in the 19th and 20th centuries, the overseas Chinese are bonding with the mainland to create something like a nation without borders...linked by blood” (Hicks and Mackie 1994:46). Wang Gungwu, respected scholar of the Overseas Chinese, has written that

the more successful their economic endeavors, the more likely the Overseas Chinese are to retain their ethnic identities and links back to China.

Some scholars disagree with the portrayal of the Overseas Chinese as a coherent community, linked in a worldwide network. J.A.C. Mackie, scholar of Southeast Asian politics, argues that the image of the Overseas Chinese as an economic and social community is ultimately misleading (1993). He maintains that the individual communities of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia have actually become more integrated and even assimilated into their so-called “host societies” than is commonly portrayed.

Anthropologist G. William Skinner, to take one of the most influential anthropologists of the Southeast Asian Chinese, argues that by the fourth generation ethnic Chinese in Thailand become fully Thai. Encouraged by the Thai nobility, Chinese migrants became revenue agents, royal monopolists, and even provincial governors. Access to those with elite status, and few overt barriers to social mobility, help to account for the successful integration of the Chinese into the Thai social order (1957:126-54). Skinner argues that, in fact, many of the Chinese “new elite” are those who have become assimilated into Thai society. The ethnic Chinese community in Bangkok tends to give fuller recognition to the more assimilated in the leadership corps (1958:241). Ironically, however, the most powerful Chinese leaders, by aligning themselves with the Thai elite, become less willing to support the causes of the Chinese community against the power of the state. Skinner concludes that such identifications have important consequences for social change, drawing “the whole

community in the direction of greater accommodation to the larger Thai society.” (1958:316).

There have been several critiques of Skinner’s assimilation paradigm. Chang and Tong (1993) argue that assimilation has not taken place in Thailand, pointing to evidence of the large number of ethnic Chinese who still speak Chinese, an increase in the number of Chinese schools, the continued persistence of Chinese associations, and the public celebrations of Chinese holidays. They also argue that a continued sense of occupational division of labor between the Chinese and the Thai, with the former dominating business and the latter dominating the bureaucracy and non-commercial professions, is evidence that fourth generation ethnic Chinese have not become “fully Thai.”

III. Middleman Minorities

Academic work originating mostly from Political Science or political economy has tended to focus on the role of the states themselves in creating a Chinese “middleman” economy. The important structures here are nations or states, and their governing effects on the local ethnic Chinese, as well as their attempts to create a Chinese minority as part of its national whole. The key question here is how the Chinese integrate into the national whole, and how this integration has created particular opportunities for entrepreneurialism. Among the many contributions of this category of analyses is the placement of the Overseas Chinese within specific colonial or post-colonial structures. The question of Chinese identity is one that cannot be

properly analyzed without looking at the role of states in defining and domesticating their populations

Weber described “pariah capitalism” as characteristic of the marginal situation of trading groups such as the Occidental Jews and the Parsees in India. Such “pariah people” as the Jews and Gypsies lost their native territories, eventually settling as guests in foreign lands. Because of restrictions on land ownership, pariah peoples were limited in the occupations they were allowed to pursue. They could not easily enter into industrial enterprise. Thus, they worked in trade and banking—occupations that did not require land ownership or a fixed amount of capital. Because they came to serve vital roles in the economy, and were functionally indispensable, they came to be tolerated by the majority society. Nonetheless, they remained socially segregated and reduced to a pariah status because of their ethnic or religious background. Although they prospered in the economic sphere, they lacked political power (Gerth and Mills 1946:66).

The economic activity of pariah peoples deviated in several key ways from true, modern capitalism. Occupations in trade and financing did not directly involve production—the cornerstone of Weber’s formulation of capitalism. Thus, no new wealth was created. Pariah groups merely facilitated the movement of groups or capital. Furthermore, pariah groups, such as the Jews, did not attempt to separate family relations from business relations. People commonly worked with kin, or others with ties to their ancestral home. The borrowing and lending of money was also organized along kinship and ethnic ties. The pervasiveness of the pariah group identity in all

spheres of life precluded their economic activity as being fully rational, according to Weber.

In 1967, Hubert Blalock wrote *Toward A Theory of Minority Group Relations*, in which he had one chapter devoted to what he called the “middleman minority” phenomenon. He sought to explain why a number of minority ethnic groups around the world have occupied similar positions in the social structure. He defined the status of “middleman” as that of an intermediary between producers and consumers, employers and employees, owners and renters, and the elite and the masses. As intermediaries, middlemen were involved in trade, commerce, money lending, rent collecting, and labor contracting. Also included in his definition were those who did not serve as “middlemen” but were owners of small businesses – the petite bourgeoisie.

Blalock (1967) approaches the middleman minority phenomenon by detailing the particular types of societies in which such groups flourish. With certain opportunities, immigrant minority groups tend to evolve surprisingly similar traits. He notes that middleman minorities were most common in peasant-feudal types of societies in which there were numerically small elite, a very large group of peasant masses, and a small middle class. The minority group filled an intermediate role, bridging the two major classes and acting as a buffer group. They commonly came to symbolize the elite in the eyes of the peasantry. Thus, they served as ideal scapegoats for social frustration, ultimately preserving the positions of the elite and the general stability of the system. While they took the brunt of frustration for the elite, they had no political power of their own, and were thus dependent upon the elite for economic favoritism. The elite, recognizing the utility of an intermediate group to shoulder the

brunt of a frustrated population, tended to grant them privileges that encouraged middleman occupations. Colonial or imperial systems were particularly conducive to the formation of intermediary groups.

Specific literature on the Southeast Asian Chinese has utilized middleman minority theory. Anthropologist G. W. Skinner contrasted the different social stratification experiences of the Chinese communities in Thailand and Java (1960). He argued that the closed nature of social mobility along ethnic lines in Java provided certain preconditions for the kind of economic formation associated with middleman minorities. In contrast, the Thai elite generally encouraged the Chinese to assimilate, rather than form a distinct social group.

Yoshihara Kunio also incorporated the middleman minority framework in his book, *The Rise of Ersatz Capitalism in South East Asia* (1988). Yoshihara argues that the pariah status of Chinese capitalists in Southeast Asia has ultimately hurt the economic systems, for it is the Chinese who have the skills and the capital to spur national modernization. Their continued marginalization as middleman minorities discourages them from entering large scale production, and therefore has retarded Southeast Asia's development of an indigenous modern capitalism.

Fred Riggs (1966) argues that under Thailand's "bureaucratic polity," ethnic Chinese businessmen are rendered "pariah capitalists" whose economic success depends upon the fostering of patron-client relationships with officials, either military or civil. Because there are no non-bureaucratic institutions to discipline these officials, he argues, local capitalists can be kept as social and political "outsiders" who must

depend on the patronage of bureaucrats, and who in turn are “parasitized” by these office holders.

The limitations of Yoshihara and Riggs’ arguments are revealed in more recent political economic analyses which note that capitalism has in fact developed considerably throughout Southeast Asia—particularly Thailand. One of the reasons is that ethnic Chinese can no longer be described as mere “pariahs” to the same extent as previously: The transition came about as a result of a variety of pressures from external economic forces as well as internal political changes. Not the least important of these, as Ruth McVey (1992) has described, was the shift in attitudes among the former predatory officials whom Riggs had seen as preying upon the vulnerable Chinese businessmen for funds. They had gradually learnt that it was more profitable to collaborate with the businessmen as partners in the further creation of wealth than to behave simply as parasitical bloodsuckers (Mackie 1995:57).

Such changes in the relationship between Southeast Asian Chinese and bureaucrats lead to questions concerning the future of their firms, networks and conglomerates. Will erosions of bureaucratic polities and more favorable economic policies lead to a modernized, corporate business structure, or will the personalistic Chinese family firm endure? Some scholars (cf. McVey 1992, Mackie 1996) argue that the Southeast Asian Chinese have in fact become increasingly “Southeast Asian” in outlook and socio-political identity, further questioning the role of Chineseness in the region’s future development.

IV. The Chinese Spirit of Capitalism

In the late 1950's, several works appeared arguing the case, with ethnographic data, that Overseas Chinese were capable of rational economic endeavors, and that this behavior could be linked to traditional Chinese culture. The most notable and influential have included the works of Maurice Freedman on the Chinese Malaysians (1979) and G.W. Skinner on the Chinese Thais (1957). Freedman observed that without access to banks or large credit associations, Overseas Chinese organized "money loan associations" to provide large sums of money for personal investment at low-interest or interest-free rates. Members of these groups, frequently called "rotating credit associations", pooled together a certain amount of money which was lent to one member at a time, according to fixed rules. Freedman characterized such institutions as economically sophisticated and rational. Freedman noted that this type of practice could not have been due to any special business training in China, since the majority of emigrants were peasants. Rather, the prosperity of the Chinese in Southeast Asia was due to "the equipment which ordinary Chinese took with them when they went overseas in search of a livelihood. Their financial skill rested above all on three characteristics of the society in which they were raised: the respectability of the pursuit of riches, the relative immunity of surplus wealth from confiscation by political superiors, and the legitimacy of careful and interested financial dealings between neighbors and even close kinsmen" (25).

Skinner similarly attributed economic achievement among the Chinese Thais to an ethos that is distinctive of a Chinese heritage. He concluded that differences between Thai and Chinese upbringings were the result of different social organizations.

For the Chinese, one had to work hard in order to elevate one's status, maximize ties in an extended family, and pay proper homage and respect to ancestors. Among the Thais, however, there was no ritual obligation to the ancestors, and no value system supporting excessive concern for material advancement. These differences in beliefs surrounding the family were postulated as the driving factors for why the Chinese were more economically successful than the Thais.

These works, while addressing Chinese "traditional" values, such as familial obligations, did not directly argue that it was Chinese religion which inspired economic industriously. It was not until the 1980's that a significant amount of literature appeared attempting to directly link ethnic Chinese prosperity with Confucianism.

The Chinese who moved have remained in some deep and significant sense still Chinese; the majority of them have not psychologically left China, or at least not left some idea and perhaps romanticized notion of Chinese civilization. This is the feature which unites them, and which provides them with one of their most distinct strengths – a capacity to cooperate. That it has not been displaced by other forms of identity, of the kind experienced when, for instance, a Pole becomes an American, says something about the vitality, validity and fundamental good sense of the traditional beliefs and values which unite Chinese people (Redding 1990:2).

Scholars such as Redding have argued that the very characteristics of Confucianism that Weber found a hindrance to the development of a capitalist mentality have actually brought the ethnic Chinese economic prosperity. Filial piety, ancestor reverence, patriarchal authority, respect for the elderly, and fear of collective dishonor are the prominent "traditional" values that have actually fostered the development of a particular Chinese modern capitalism. Redding argues that Chinese

capitalism has, as its key component, a class of entrepreneurs whose roles overlap extensively with that of the father-figure, and whose power is largely legitimated by the acceptance of paternalism and dependence which typifies vertical relationships in Chinese culture. The success of the family business depends on qualities of paternalism and personalism – qualities Weber regarded as not conducive to the development of rational enterprise. Redding concedes that these values have indeed hindered the emergence of a kind of objectivity and neutrality in which a truly rational and professional bureaucracy can flourish. Nonetheless, the argument goes, industrial capitalism has developed, proving that traditionalism is not necessarily incongruent with modernization.

A similar approach that arose in the 1980's to explain the successful industrialization of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore stresses enduring cultural factors. The "Confucian culture thesis" focuses attention on the ways in which ethnic Chinese have not assimilated, but have retained a core of Chinese values. Supporters of this approach argue that the characteristics of Confucianism which Max Weber thought hindered the development of a capitalist mentality have in fact brought ethnic Chinese economic prosperity. Filial piety, ancestor reverence, patriarchalism, respect for the elderly, and fear of collective dishonor are the prominent "Confucian" values that have fostered the development of a Chinese modern capitalism (cf. Berger and Hsiao 1988, Redding 1990).

Such beliefs have not only been advanced by scholars, but also by political figures and business elites. In the 1960's and 1970's, Lee Kuan Yew, who was then prime minister of Singapore, began a campaign to build a "rugged" and modern

society. He stressed that the “hard” Confucian values of frugality and discipline, as opposed to the “soft” Malay values of indolence and laziness, were essential for industrialization. In 1993, the former leader spoke at a Hong Kong conference limited to entrepreneurs of Chinese ancestry from all around the world. “This meeting was an unrestrained celebration of a transnational Chinese solidarity based on common racial origin, ethnic traditions, and alliances and transcended ideological and cultural differences” (Ong 1997:181).

The uniquely Confucian capitalism that is argued to be the key to Overseas Chinese prosperity has been challenged by the emergence of large-scale, globally oriented, ethnically integrated Chinese enterprises. Heng Pek Koon (1993) argues that the most economically successful Chinese businesses in Malaysia have actually moved away from ethnic and kin based labor resources, as well as reliance on communal institutions. A further problem with the Confucian culture argument is its potentially racist and essentializing nature. The notion that Overseas Chinese communities are prosperous because of Confucian values assumes either that Chinese culture is uniformly passed down from generation to generation in all these communities, or that Chinese culture is inherent in those of a particular genetic stock. Economic inequalities within ethnic Chinese communities, as well as the heterogeneity of Chinese culture, are ignored in such approaches.

V. Diaspora and Transnational Studies

The word “diaspora” has its origins in Greek. It is a combination of “through” and “to sow or scatter.” The term appears in Deuteronomy 28:25: “Thou shalt be a diaspora in all kingdoms of the earth.” This

condition came to be associated with the Hellenistic Jews, who were scattered outside of Palestine after the Babylonian captivity. It also came to describe the body of Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine. “To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ...” (Peter 1:1).

The Jews were exiled from their homeland not once, but several times. It has been widely acknowledged that because of exile and genocide, the maintenance of their identity and unity as “a people” has taken on the utmost importance. While they had no autonomous “homeland” until 1948, and thus no state structure, they nonetheless maintained themselves as a nation in the sense of a people with a common identity – that of Judaism. Even after the formation of Israel, those who claim a Jewish identity remain dispersed throughout the world, maintaining their identity even without official state support.

Black scholars and activists have also adopted the concept of diaspora to describe their own experiences of journey and genocide. Parallels were made between the suffering and removal from the “homeland” of both blacks and Jews. The Africentric movement included the aspiration of building an independent black nation-state—a homeland for the dispersed to return to. In the *Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy argues that the fragmentary relationship between blacks and Jews today can be explored and perhaps mended through an exploration of a common diasporan experience.

Since the appropriation of the concept by blacks, diaspora has gradually come to describe any group that is dispersed outside its traditional or ancestral homeland.

The concept differs critically, however, from the terms immigration and migration, as these ideas are commonly defined. Immigrants are generally seen as people who have come to a new country to stay, having uprooted themselves from their old society. They eventually assimilate because they have come with the expectation of adopting a new country to which they will be loyal. Migrants are thought of as those who come only temporarily, for the sole purpose of finding work. They eventually return home, or move to another place with the same intentions. Diasporan groups, unlike immigrants, preserve their cultural or spiritual essence, despite the lack of a supporting state structure. They remain a cultural minority. Unlike migrants, diasporan groups have in fact “settled” in the new society, commonly taking on citizenship. While migrants are generally single men who send money back to their families, diasporan groups include families who have no immediate opportunities to return to their “homeland.”

The term diaspora, then, has come to encompass much more than just the notion of a people living outside of their ancestral land. Inherent to the term, as it is commonly used, is the idea of a center versus a periphery. The center may be an actual place, such as Israel, or an imagined homeland, such as the independent black nation state. Diaspora also implies a relationship between majority and minority. In most cases, dispersed groups live as visible minorities. This commonly leads to their concentration in particular economic sectors. The continued hope of returning to the homeland, whether it be real or imagined, is related to the belief that the place they currently live can never be their native land. Finally, the concept of diaspora suggests a particular location in relation to the nation-state.

This final point has emerged among scholars such as Arjun Appadurai (1991), Paul Gilroy (1993), and Benedict Anderson (1983), who argue that the traditional concept of the nation-state needs expansion in order to reflect the realities of an ever-increasing number of people who travel, migrate, and immigrate. Their work is characteristic of a recent movement in anthropology to explore “field sites” that are not bounded, discrete, and necessarily in one physical place. According to the scholars, such sojourning groups contest the saliency as well as integrity of the state structure. The term ‘diaspora’ has been increasingly used by anthropologists, literary theorists, and cultural critics to describe the mass migrations and displacements of the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in reference to independence movements in formerly colonized areas, waves of refugees fleeing war-torn states, and fluxes of economic migration in the post-World War II era (Brazier and Mannur 4). Diaspora is often connected to such concepts as hybridity and heterogeneity – cultural, linguistic, and national. Despite the celebratory nature of many recent works on diaspora, some question the usefulness of the concept as a theoretical framework.

Theorizations of diaspora have been hotly contested and critiqued. The term ‘diaspora’ has been critiqued as being theoretically celebrated, while methodologically indistinct and ahistorical. Some scholars, arguing that diaspora enters into a semantic field with other terms and terrains, such as those of exile, migrant, immigrant, and globalization, have asserted that diasporan communities are paragons of the transnational moment; other critics have resisted and critiqued such celebratory models for thinking diaspora, noting that such celebrations are often ahistorical and apolitical, failing to note the different contexts allowing or prohibiting movements globally (and even locally). (Brazier and Mannur 6)

Diasporan experiences are also frequently linked to global capitalist forces, for it is these forces that shape migrations out of home countries and into new territories.

As such, diaspora is often paired or used interchangeably with the concept of transnationalism. Most scholars tend to move back and forth between terms, but Braziel and Mannur challenge us to view them as theoretically distinct.

Diaspora has been loosely associated with other terms, particularly transnationalism, to describe the disjunctures and fractured conditions of late modernity; however, diaspora needs to be extricated from such loose associations and its historical and theoretical specifications made clear. While diaspora may be accurately described as transnationalist, it is not synonymous with transnationalism. Transnationalism may be defined as the flow of people, ideas, goods, and capital across national territories in a way that undermines nationality and nationalism as discrete categories of identification, economic organization, and political constitution. We differentiate diaspora from transnationalism, however, in that diaspora refers specifically to the movement—forced or voluntary—of people from one or more nation-states to another.

Transnationalism speaks to larger, more impersonal forces—specifically, those of globalization and global capitalism. Where diaspora addresses the migrations and displacements of subjects, transnationalism also includes the movements of information through cybernetics, as well as the traffic in goods, products, and capital across geopolitical terrains through multinational corporations. While diaspora may be regarded as concomitant with transnationalism, or even in some cases consequent of transnationalist forces, it may not be reduced to such macroeconomic and technological flows. It remains, above all, a human phenomenon—lived and experienced. (Braziel and Mannur 8).

Traditionally, the nation-state has been defined in terms of a people sharing a common culture within a bounded territory. Anderson (1983) reconceptualized the nation as an imagined political community. All communities larger than the primordial village of face-to-face contact, he argues, are imagined. What connects community members is not necessarily common soil, but a belief in their commonality. This belief

reached far enough to form the modern European nation-states through particular innovations that were made possible because of capitalism. The development of print-as-commodity, for example, both enabled information to be widely disseminated, and also led to the spread of languages of power – in particular the vernacular languages that replaced Latin. Print capitalism has given way to “electronic capitalism,” such as television, cinema, and the Internet. It is with the collective experiences of both print and electronic capitalism that citizens imagine themselves as belonging to a national society.

Anderson argues in a later piece that the forces of capitalism, which had created the conditions that helped to define the modern nation-state, nevertheless sowed the seeds of its demise (1994:320). From the mid-sixteenth century on, industrial capitalism, with its demand for labor, spurred the movement of millions of free, indentured and enslaved bodies across thousands of miles. Contrary to the popular view that immigrants naturally “assimilate”, scholars acknowledge that in fact, many of them forged and sustained multi-stranded social relations which linked together their societies of origin and settlement. These linkages transcended geographic, cultural, and political borders.

As a consequence, what Anderson calls “long distance nationalism” began to emerge (1994:327). The home country became something that was less experienced than it was imagined. This imagining included the use of flags, maps, and ceremony to represent the homeland. At another level, communities formed ‘self’ or ‘representative’ governments, in defiance of the official state under which they lived. Furthermore, the globalization of capital, in the forms of multinational corporations,

communications networks, and financial structures, contributed to the undermining of the authority of the nation-state. “In an age where capital, communications, and populations travel across the globe at an accelerated pace, the ability of any one nation-state to determine its people’s life changes has become greatly constrained” (Lipsitz 1994:34).

This challenge to the traditional nation-state has been termed “transnationalism” and its members “transmigrants,” of which the diasporan group is a major category. “In contrast with the past, when nation-states were defined in terms of a people sharing a common culture within a bounded territory, this new conception of nation-state includes as citizens those who live physically dispersed within the boundaries of many other states, but who remain socially, politically, culturally, and often economically part of the nation-state of their ancestors” (Basch, Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994:8). A related concept is “deterritorialization,” which Appadurai defines as referring “not only to transnational corporations and money markets, but also to ethnic groups, sectarian movements, and political formations that transcend specific territorial boundaries and identities” (1990:192).

As a consequence of the ever-increasing number of transmigrants and their loyalties to a “homeland”, the nation-state is conceived of not so much in connection to language, blood, soil, and race, but in terms of a “quintessential cultural product, a product of the collective imagination” (Appadurai 1990:414). “One major fact that accounts for strains in the union of nation and state is that the nationalist genie, never perfectly contained in the bottle of the territorial state, is now itself diasporan. Carried in the repertoires of increasingly mobile populations of refugees, tourists, guest

workers, transnational intellectuals, scientists, and illegal aliens, it is increasingly unrestrained by ideas of spatial boundary and territorial sovereignty” (Appadurai 1993:413).

In current anthropological writings about the Southeast Asian Chinese, transnational processes form the basis of most analyses. Christina Szanton Blanc (1997) explores the mutual impact between capital accumulation and culturally infused consumption patterns in the town of Sri Racha, Thailand. Local entrepreneurs of Chinese ancestry have formed a new middle class there, and are developing new preferences in consumption, tastes, and lifestyles that reflect a Sino-Thai, rather than Thai aristocratic vision of modernity. High culture in Thailand is increasingly being modeled on a corporate, new-wealth style which caters to the tastes of international Taiwanese and Hong Kong business travelers.

Aihwa Ong (1997) looks at the interplay between transnational economic practices and the political status of citizenship. She argues that post-Fordist capitalism (cf. Harvey 1989) has led ethnic Chinese (businessmen) to construct themselves as “modern Asians,” “successful entrepreneurs,” and “Confucian capitalists.” The relatively rapid transfer and set up of production sites wherever the most advantageous conditions lie allow affluent Hong Kong businesspeople to invest in China while they seek passports from Canada, Australia, Singapore and the U.S. They avoid restrictive Chinese state control while at the same time taking advantage of economic access to China’s markets. As “flexible citizens,” they also partake minimally in the civic responsibilities of their countries of citizenship.

VI. My Approach

The bodies of work I have explored in this chapter have focused on Southeast Asian Chinese society from the vantage point of particular historical periods. The “Overseas Chinese” approach grew out of the fact that Mainland China was largely closed off to Western social scientists between 1949 and the early 1980’s. Scholars looked to the Southeast Asian Chinese communities as a way to understand Chinese culture, albeit displaced from the “original” country. As a result, Overseas Chinese studies tended to focus on the ways that ethnic Chinese communities either maintained their cultural authenticity or began to assimilate into their host societies. This category of scholarship has been most influential in terms of the rigor by which the cultures of the Southeast Asian Chinese were documented. The weakness of this approach, in terms of the Hoa experience, lies in the assumption that communities begin as authentically Chinese, but as time goes by, eventually assimilate into majority culture. As will be explored in the following chapters, Hoa community identity has not followed an evolutionary framework of “more Chinese” to “more Vietnamese”. Rather, recent historical events, the influx of ethnic Chinese capital into Vietnam, and the changing policies of the Vietnamese government have affected the strength and expression of Chinese identity.

The “Middleman Minority” approach grew out of a political economy approach towards the Southeast Asian Chinese. The role of the ethnic Chinese was analyzed primarily in relation to colonial and indigenous governments in power, as well as in relation to majority populations. The scholars of this approach sought to understand why the Southeast Asian Chinese, like the Jews of Europe, tended to

dominate the trade and entrepreneurial sectors of their host societies. The strength of this approach is in placing ethnic Chinese social forms in the context of political and economic structures. I make extensive use of a political economy perspective in the following chapters, because of the role the Hoa have played in French Indochina, under the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese regime, and now, under a Communist regime that is liberalizing its economy. The weakness of this approach in terms of the Hoa experience, however, is that it tends to be focused exclusively on the effects of the political economy. As will be explored in the rest of this dissertation, Hoa social forms are also influenced by emotional issues regarding family, love, and marriage.

The “Chinese spirit of capitalism” approach grew as an alternative to the “middleman minority” theories for explaining the economic success of the Southeast Asian Chinese (as well as other minority Chinese communities in the West). This approach stressed the connection between business activities and Chinese cultural characteristics. In essence, the proponents of this approach underscored the link between traditional beliefs and practices and their applicability to entrepreneurial problems. The strength of this approach has been in the questioning of common assumptions about the growth of capitalism in a so-called Western rational environment. Supporters of this approach argue that there is a Chinese model of capitalism, based on Confucian principles, and the Chinese family structure. The weakness of this approach in terms of the Hoa experience is that it tends to view Chinese culture in static terms, and does not account for the wider political and economic circumstances that are also at play.

The most recent approach towards an analysis of Southeast Asian Chinese communities has grown out of diaspora and transnational studies. This approach analyzes Southeast Asian Chinese identity in the context of mobility, relationships with the homeland, and global networks of cultural, political, and economic connections based on common ethnicity. While the terms diaspora and transnationalism tend to be used in conjunction, and sometimes interchangeably, “diaspora” tends to be used in reference to the people who live outside of the homeland, whereas “transnationalism” is used to describe the political, economic, and social processes that develop across national borders. This body of work has been extremely influential on my analysis of Hoa society post 1975, because of the link between Hoa community identity and the growth of ethnic Chinese investment from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The limitation of this approach in terms of an analysis of Hoa society is the assumption that there is a consistent “homeland” by which diasporan communities define themselves. As will be explored in the following chapters, the Hoa have, throughout the last few decades, shifted their concept of the center from China to Taiwan and now, to the West.

Each of these four bodies of work have laid the foundation for the following exploration of Hoa society, and its apparent “reemergence” in the last decade after a period of persecution and mass exodus due to the Communist takeover of South Vietnam. While the field of Southeast Asian studies has been multidisciplinary, including historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists, my analysis focuses more on a classic anthropological problem: how social forms are created, maintained, and changed. The following chapters explore the different structures

within which the Hoa operate – I call these “local”, “national”, and “transnational”. Each structure has arisen out of specific historical events, and each has its own logic, social networks, and implications for the expression of Chinese identity. What I found during my ethnographic fieldwork in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s was that the Hoa often moved between these structures as they negotiated the economic, social, and emotional aspects of their daily lives.

At the *local level*, the Hoa created organizations and systems that allowed them to operate independently from the rest of society. These were called bang, and they were based on common dialect and ancestral province in China. The bang were banned in 1975, but smaller social groups have re-emerged. More importantly, the Hoa remember their history in terms of the power and prevalence of their local structures. They remembered the good old days when the bang, or local Chinese networks, were their de-facto governing bodies. Chapter 3 explores how identity and entrepreneurialism is formed on a local level, within Cholon, and among close-knit Hoa groups.

At the *national level*, the Hoa have an identity as ethnic Chinese within the Vietnamese national body. Since the 1950’s, the Vietnamese Communist regime has sought to define the meaning of Chinese ethnicity in Vietnam. Their tactics have included coerced naturalization as Vietnamese citizens, the banning of Chinese dialects and the forced integration of Cholon. At the same time, the Vietnamese state has held up its Chinese minority as the premier example of Vietnam’s burgeoning entrepreneurial spirit. The An Dong Market, for example, is typically celebrated as one of the centers of ethnic Chinese capitalism and an example that Vietnam is ready

for international investment. For younger people, who grew up entirely within these frameworks, being Chinese means speaking Mandarin, learned after school or as a “foreign” language. Chapter 4 explores Hoa identity as it has been affected by Vietnamese national agendas and the transformation of Hoa official status from “overseas Chinese” to Vietnam’s ethnic minority.

At the *transnational level*, the Hoa are not only diasporan in terms of living outside of their ancestral homeland of Mainland China, but they have been dispersed a second time due to the persecutory policies of the VCP after 1975. Nearly half of the Hoa population of Vietnam fled in the decade after the fall of Saigon, the majority settling in North America. The reality of having immediate family members living abroad has affected Hoa attitudes and behaviors, as well as their strategies for the future. Chapter Five explores the impact of transnational family structures on those Hoa who could not emigrate.

Also at the transnational level, the overseas Chinese from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the U.S. form an integral part of the Cholon social and economic world. Such interactions have formed the basis of Cholon’s so-called “reemergence” in the 1990’s as a center of economic activity and foreign investment. Their ever-increasing presence in Vietnam, as entrepreneurs, investors, representatives of larger companies, and tourists, has hinged on their ability to create mutually beneficial relationships with the Hoa community. These relationships are based on a sense of common language and culture, and issues of trust that emerge from them. These relationships are also highly gendered, and generally take the form of foreign Chinese businessmen establishing professional and personal relationships with Hoa women. Chapter Six

examines these transnational relationships, which are often fraught with conflicting perceptions of identity and what it means to be Chinese.

This dissertation explores the specific experiences of the ethnic Chinese community of Vietnam. The goal of this analysis, however, is to offer conceptual tools for rethinking our framing of Southeast Asian Chinese communities and other diasporan populations. How does a transnational or diasporan identity work with or against other forms of identity, based on local or national structures? What value does the concept of a “homeland” have when a population has experienced multiple dislocations? What roles do gender and mobility (or lack of it) play in the day to day relationships between diasporan Chinese with different national citizenships? In the following chapters, I explore these questions and in Chapter Seven: Conclusion, offer some suggestions for how the experience of the Hoa may offer fresh perspectives on other Chinese diasporan communities.

Chapter 3: Nostalgia and Reinvention of the Bang

I. Introduction

By 8 a.m. in Cholon most people are already done with breakfast and fully into their daily routines, fighting off the inertia which the heat and mugginess brings, and which eventually drives everyone towards the inevitable noontime nap. Cholon feels different from Saigon. Saigon has a modern feel to it--a handful of high rises, housing shiny new offices and luxury serviced apartments, mark the central area. Green and white taxi cabs line the block which leads up to the French style music hall and borders the famous Continental Hotel, featured in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. Japanese tourists wearing Thai sarongs, Western businessmen with sweat patches already forming on their crisp white shirts, and Vietnamese salaried workers duck into the air-conditioned Delifrance for flaky pastries and coffee.

The heart of Cholon feels old, run down, dilapidated. The French style houses which surround Cho Binh Tay, the expansive wholesale market which Cholon, "big market" is a reference to, look tired with their peeling paint and rusted window bars. There do not seem to be any nouveau riche carrying cell phones. Rather, I see sturdy women with babies on their backs, spitting out phrases in Cantonese to bargain for fruit, half naked children running barefoot by heaps of garbage, and groups of elderly men, wearing light blue and white pajamas, sitting around on plastic stools, and drinking glasses of steaming coffee. There are no more high rises, no more European-style cafes, and no more English or Japanese speaking cyclo drivers. Central Cholon

bustles with a more erratic energy than central Saigon. Food and petty trade vendors take up the sidewalks with their stalls and wares. Bright red and green plastic stools and tables, often on uneven concrete, mark snack stops.

My visits to “To Ma-ma” a seventy year old Hoa woman whose son was a Communist Party member, often left me with a sense of nostalgia for a vanishing Cholon, which of course I had never known. To Ma-ma’s home is now a tribute to her late husband, who passed away the previous year. The walls are nearly completely covered with photos of him, mostly from the 1950’s and 60’s, she says. He was a body builder, she explains of the shots of him posing in only his underwear. There are also several large shots of the two of them, all taken decades ago. One shows the two of them in a horse-drawn carriage, with the mountains of Dalat behind them.

During one visit, she also pulls out her photo albums for me. I am delighted to find that the pictures are not of the typical variety of wedding poses and family get-togethers. Rather, she shows me several unstaged photos of the couple laughing, walking around, and holding hands, with scenes of 1950’s Cholon as the background. This is what life was like before. I would teach school during the day, come home and eat, and then we’d go to a Chinese opera show. Sometimes we had French food. Under the French, my husband’s business prospered. All the Chinese prospered then.” She showed me another picture of herself and two girlfriends, wearing cat glasses and sleeveless, form fitting Jackie Kennedy style pastel dresses, their curled hair sitting neatly on their shoulders. They were sitting at an outdoor café. “This place was our favorite. It was on Tran Hung Dao street. I don’t think it’s there anymore.

Like To Ma-ma, older Hoa are nostalgic for what life in Cholon used to be. Several women mentioned that their mothers never had to work as hard as they did, for their fathers’ incomes could support the whole family. Two former teachers, who were jailed in 1978 for “anti-nationalist sentiment,” described pre-’75 Cholon as the

domain of the Chinese tycoons. They dominated in import/export businesses, trading directly with Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and the United States. “The government didn’t dare interfere with their business,” Teacher to Mama exclaimed when I asked about restrictions. Another middle-aged man, Mr. Ha, showed me pictures of the house and car he used to own, which were confiscated after he was jailed for working as a South Vietnamese interpreter. Now, he lives in a run-down, two-bedroom apartment with his wife, two children, and several extended family members. They have not been able to save up to buy a new home.

People bragged about the former glory of Cholon as a Chinese enclave. One forty-five year old Hoa woman described the compound she lived in.

This compound was built in 1948 by the French. There are thirty-two private residences in all. My father bought this home from a Hoa man who had lost all of his money gambling. He was a banker. My family wasn’t as rich as all the others here. They were mostly gold sellers. We felt they looked down on us, but my father stressed that we should get good educations so that we could “raise our heads” without shame. After 1975, most of these families had fled. I heard that two whole families perished trying to escape by boat. The government gave the empty homes to Vietnamese people. Now, only seven out of the thirty-three homes are owned by Hoa. Everything has changed.

People remembered pre-’75 Cholon as an entirely Hoa enclave, which they contrast with the present integrated nature of the district. An Dong market, which is commonly called the city’s “Chinese market,” is now only about 30% Hoa, most people speculated. Some of the busiest streets of Cholon’s past now mostly house Vietnamese, a majority of them cadres from the North who have become the city’s new breed of tycoons. The half finished An Dong Market 2, on which construction

was halted due to the mysterious death of its Hoa investor, stands as a symbol to the Hoa of the changes that have disenfranchised them.

Middle aged to elderly Hoa never failed to tell me of how different Cholon is now than it was in its glory days, before 1975. Central to these narratives about Cholon's glory days was the dominance of the *bang*. The bang are associations based on Chinese dialect. The most powerful bang were the Cantonese, Hakka, Fujianese, Hainanese, and Chaozhou. Members shared familial ties back to particular provinces in China as well as particular dialects. For most Hoa, the bang were central to Cholon's business development.

"Before, there were lots of Hoa of high status here. The Hoa were bankers, cloth merchants and gold dealers. Most of them have gone abroad. The Vietnamese used to say that Cholon was just like ("next to") Hong Kong. This meant that Cholon was very modern and business was good. If you say this now, people will think it's funny. Binh Tay used to be the biggest market. Now, Ben Thanh (in central Saigon) is the biggest. Before liberation, Saigon was the capital of South Vietnam, and Cholon was the Hoa business center. These were the important cities of the south," explained Mr. Thanh, a thirty-six year old tour guide.

This chapter explores the reemergence of common dialect based networks within the Hoa community as a response to the Vietnamese Communist Party's (VCP) more liberal attitudes towards ethnic Chinese activities. These networks, or *bang*, allowed the Hoa to organize economically and socially, leading to their entrepreneurial dominance of the local economy. The bang were dismantled by both the South Vietnamese and, subsequently, the Communist regimes. They have,

however, re-emerged in recent years as organizational forms that allow the Hoa to participate in the country's economic liberalization and market reforms.

The bang are remembered with great pride, yet the next generation of bang leaders are struggling to define their relevance in the present-day economy and social life of the Hoa. In this chapter, I examine how memories of Cholon's glory days under bang rule affect the bang experience today, and how present day bang leaders utilize nostalgia for the past to recapture their social, political, and economic power.

II. The historical development of the bang

Anthropologist Clifton Barton's dissertation, *Credit and Commercial Control: The Strategies and Methods of Chinese Businessmen in South Vietnam* (1977), is the most comprehensive western work on Hoa history and society to date. I draw most of the material in this section on the historical development of the bang in Vietnam from his work.

Chinese emigration into present-day Vietnam began in the third century AD. These migrants mixed with the indigenous peoples, resulting in the ethnic Vietnamese of today. During the 16th century, however, larger waves of migrants from China created more enduring Chinese communities. The lower Mekong delta largely remained a separate Chinese state until the eighteen century, with the coming of the French. Cholon was established as a city, and became the principle commercial center of the southern region. Chinese settlement rapidly increased from this point on. By the time the French arrived, Cholon was a city of 40,000 modeled after the large cities

of China while Saigon was still a squalid collection of grass-shack villages (Barton 1977:40).

The Nguyen emperor Gia Long encouraged the Chinese to organize into associations for the purpose of self-administration. These associations, or *bang*, united people who shared a common place of origin in China and spoke the same dialect. The bang were, in essence, a federation of all organizations and individuals from a particular region in China. Each of these bang had a chief, who managed all of the internal affairs as well as collected the taxes owed by his group on behalf of the Vietnamese officials. The bang were organized to extend the benefits of mutual assistance to merchants who shared a common place of origin. They arranged for passage from China, then helped the newly arrived to find a job and place to live, and to arrange for credit. The bang set up schools, cemeteries, and hospitals for its members, financed by donations to the particular temple deities that served as an ideological center for the group.

The system of rule through their bang leaders was not unique to Vietnam. Ethnic Chinese communities throughout British Malaya and Singapore, Dutch Indonesia, and the Spanish Philippines organized under these dialect-based groups. Furthermore, the bang were not unique to overseas Chinese, but were in fact an outgrowth of the political structure of China's Qing dynasty. The Qing administration, being thinly spread over a large land mass, was content to rule the people through the social entity of the clan. The clan heads were made responsible for the maintenance of law and order and were also held responsible for the members. The clan thus exerted

considerable judicial autonomy as the state was willing to relinquish such power to the clan which could maintain law and order more effectively.

Under the Vietnamese Nguyen dynasty, the Hoa were able to remain separate and distinct from the main currents of Vietnamese life. By granting special favors to the Chinese and entrusting them with the commercial function, the government could more easily control the local population and direct their energies to the tasks of opening up, settling, and cultivating the land. Nguyen dynasty leaders fostered Chinese commercial activities, allowing them to build ships and houses, acquire land, and invest in the mining of iron and coal. They were exempted from military service, and given monopoly concessions in the distribution of salt, opium, and alcohol, awarded gaming concessions, and given special considerations in the export of sugar, rice, and other native products. The ethnic Vietnamese, on the other hand, were discouraged from industrial and commercial undertakings. By granting favors to the Chinese and entrusting them with commercial functions, the government could more easily control the local population and direct their energies to the tasks of opening up, settling and cultivating land (Barton 1977:33).

In the absence of a well-functioning formal legal system, the bang allowed collective action and trade to be carried forth (cf. Milgrom, North and Weingast 1990, Grief, Milgrom and Weingast 1994). Economically, the bang functioned like guilds, providing members who spoke the same dialect the advantages of mutual assistance and collective strength. They served as sources of credit and information on markets, business partners, customers, and employees. The larger merchants, who were involved in international trade, provided credit for the smaller merchants, and needed

a way to readily assess the credit worthiness of a potential customer. The bang distributed information on the credit ratings of individuals, based on their investment histories as well as personal character. Word of one's disgrace could be spread through informal channels of conversation and gossip, or through published notices in Chinese newspapers. One could not simply join another bang since they were based on sub-ethnic affiliations.

These relationships enabled businessmen to exchange information more easily, and to determine the creditworthiness and overall reliability of prospective customers and business associates. They also provided social and moral sanctions to enforce business agreements and increase likelihood that business agreements are settled promptly and equitably. Businessmen who are unable to obtain credit on favorable terms are unable to compete with those who have more ready access to credit.

The bang also provided the means for members of one group to preserve certain trade secrets, control the sources and flow of market information, and engage in group action to drive competitors out of the market. Thus, different sub-ethnic groups developed monopolies in different occupations. The Hakka dominated the trade in Chinese medicine, the Cantonese controlled the wholesale grocery business, the Hainanese prospered in the management of restaurants, the Hokkien monopolized the hardware trade, and the Teochiu congregated in the rice trade.

Clifton Barton argues that the bang organizations were key to ethnic Chinese commercial dominance over the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese, under the Nguyen dynasty and French colonial leaders, were discouraged from entering commercial activity, and were instead steered towards land owning, agricultural and government

professions. None of these required extensive networks of association based on personal relationships. There were thus no incentives, as there were for the Hoa, to establish such institutions. Furthermore, Barton argues, the bang were also less likely to develop among the Vietnamese because petty trading activity was traditionally handled by women. Because they were also expected to handle childcare and other household matters, it was less practical for them to engage in the various activities of organization that ethnic Chinese males participated in (1977).

In 1829, the French began to assume political control over the southern provinces of present-day Vietnam. By this time, the Hoa were firmly established as the dominant commercial group while the Vietnamese engaged primarily in agriculture, landowning, and government service. The French originally took over this area to secure their share of the trade in the region and gain a foothold for expansion into the China market. But after assuming political control over Cochinchina, they realized they could not compete with the better organized and longer established Hoa. The French decided that their own interests could be better served by cooperating with the Hoa. Without having to bother about many details, the French were able to sell large quantities of imported goods, and Hoa merchants were able to gain substantial profits without large capital outlays.

Thus, the special status of the Hoa vis-à-vis the Vietnamese continued under the French. They were allowed to own land, travel without restriction within the Indochinese Federation, establish commercial organizations, return to China for visits, and transfer wealth out of the country. They could deal freely in rice, opium and alcohol. The French encouraged such activities to continue being organized by the

bang, which they called a *compradore* system. Just before the division of Vietnam in 1954, the Hoa, who constituted 8% of the population, controlled nearly 90% of the wholesale and retail trade in the country, while the French dealt in the import-export sector.

The official status of the Hoa as compradors ended with the end of French colonialism, and the division of the country into the southern Republic of Vietnam and the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1954. By this time, the Hoa made up roughly 8% of Vietnam's total population, and were primarily traders, shopkeepers, and urban laborers. They controlled 80-90% of the wholesale and retail trade of the country, leaving only certain types of import-export trade to foreign firms and certain areas of petty trade in the bazaars and rural areas to Vietnamese women traders (Barton 1977:99). In an effort to control Hoa economic power, President Ngo Dinh Diem withdrew formal legal recognition of the bang and confiscated their property.

Despite the official demise of the bang in early the 1960's, Chinese businessmen continued to organize. In order to appear compliant with the ban on bang activities, the businessmen simply reorganized into different types of groups. Associations originally based on common place of origin multiplied from the original model based on same province to include associations of Hoa from same prefecture, same district, and even the same village. Unofficial economic groupings took over many of the responsibilities of the original bang. In addition, organizations such as hospital committees, burial associations, athletic assoc, and school committees provided social cohesion, power and influence, as well as sources of business contacts and market info within the Hoa community (Barton 1977:167).

Through these revamped organizations, the Hoa continued to control a sizable proportion of the commerce, industry, and finance of an economy increasingly tied to US government programs and the consumption needs of foreign troops. Thru a massive program of imports financed largely by the US government, a huge array of manufactured goods were pumped into the country to absorb the abundant amounts of cash that were being fed into the economy by foreign troops and government programs. Motorcycles, televisions, transistor radios, cameras, watches, sewing machines, gasoline engines, refrigerators, and a host of other goods became commonplace in remote areas.

Hoa economic success during the post-colonial period also depended upon circumventing restrictive and inefficient official regulations in order to carry out business activities without attracting the attention of numerous tax collectors, inspectors, policemen and other officials. In order to bypass bureaucratic constraints, businessmen developed relations with political patrons who could provide them with a measure of protection. They could thus more easily obtain import licenses, and approvals for visas and exit permits. Such relations were not developed instantaneously: they depended on knowing the tastes of the officials, catering to them without overtly bribing them, and developing trust. In many cases, successful Hoa firms operated in conjunction with Vietnamese front men, either persons with political connections who could provide protection or special licenses and privileges in exchange for a fee, or straw men who were owners in name only and allowed Ch to operate in area reserved for VN nationals. These tactics were used to get around

prohibitive legislation, and to operate beyond the arm of local officials and tax collectors.

During the 1960's and early 1970's, Hoa commercial activities were also bolstered by the presence of Chinese Nationalist (KMT) representatives from Taiwan. The KMT were naturally motivated to join South Vietnam's regime and the U.S. to combat communism in China. Chinese teachers from Taiwan revived Chinese language schooling and the promotion of a (non-Communist) Chinese identity throughout Southeast Asia. Technology and skilled manpower for industrial projects also flowed into the south in order to produce the capital needed to contain communism. Hoa businesses, as the main recipients of such investment, expanded in quantity, scope, and sophistication. Many Hoa businesses transitioned from small-scale to larger wholesale enterprises. Traditional traders and middlemen made way for modern industrialists.

These activities, however, came to an abrupt halt after 1975, with the Vietnamese Communist Party's victory in South Vietnam. The state took over private schools, hospitals and companies. In 1978, the government launched its "socialist reformation" campaign, shutting down all vestiges of private industry and trade. The Hoa in the south were hit hardest, prompting tens of thousands to escape to neighboring countries as "boat people." Furthermore, as hostilities between China and Vietnam escalated, Hoa national loyalties were regarded as increasingly suspect by the Vietnamese government. Many Hoa were stripped of party membership, lost army or police jobs, saw their children barred from attending universities, or were forced to move to remote "new economic zones." For the next decade, economic and physical

survival depended upon disavowing all “Chinese” ties, and identifying solely as citizens of the unified Vietnamese nation-state.

In 1986, the Communist Party commenced removing restrictions on private business. The Hoa were given greater freedom to resume some of their former economic and social activities. In 1988, the Ministry of Education allowed primary and secondary schools with high concentrations of ethnic Chinese to resume teaching in Chinese, although the teachers were required to follow a curriculum prepared by the ministry. The re-establishment of official diplomatic ties with the US and the lifting of the trade embargo opened the floodgates to foreign investment.

Since the late 1980’s, bang-like organizations have sprouted up within Cholon. While they may seem to play the same role as the former bang, they differ from their predecessors. For one, the former leaders are all but gone. They were either persecuted and forced into obscurity or they used their connections to obtain passage to other countries. The new bang are run by a new generation of leaders.

Furthermore, the term *bang* cannot be officially used, as it connotes the economic and political autonomy the Hoa were granted under the Nguyen imperial dynasty, the French colonial regime and, to a large extent, the South Vietnamese government. Rather, the dialect networks are now called *huiguan*, which can be translated simply as association. The surname associations are called *zhong qin hui*. Smaller associations also meet on the basis of common ancestral village, province or city in China. I will refer to all of these types of associations simply as *hui*.

Officially, the primary purpose of the hui is to raise money for charity. Government sanctioned newspaper articles and academic writings in fact celebrate the

organizational skills of the Hoa. During an interview with Dr. Tranh Khanh, known as the leading specialist in Hoa studies (Khanh is not Hoa himself, but can speak some Chinese), I was told of the tremendous ability the ethnic Chinese had for pooling their resources together to take care of their own.

Despite the apparent downgrading of the hui's influence vis-à-vis their predecessors, former bang members as well as a new generation of Cholon's leaders have sought to recreate the influence and support that of the bang of the past. enjoyed They do so in various ways, but never explicitly so as to draw attention from authorities. The next section explores these efforts to resurrect the bang in ways that both conform to official regulations and while still resonating with Hoa memories of their community's glorious past.

III. Remembering the bang leaders

Mr. Guo spoke in a hushed but excited tone.

The newspapers told us that Chen Jin Cai committed suicide, but people are suspicious. For one, his wife didn't bring him to their neighborhood hospital, which they always went to. She traveled halfway across the city to take him to a Vietnamese hospital. And two, they didn't let us see his body for days. That's very strange.

Chen Jin Cai was, in the eyes of the Hoa, the most powerful man to have emerged in their community since 1975. He was in his sixties and had, according to rumor, sixteen wives. The youngest wives were sixteen and eighteen, and were living in the United States. He owned the Hoa bank, the first private bank to open under Communism. He owned An Dong market, the five-storey structure which housed

hundreds of vendors who paid their rent directly to him. Sensitive to the social responsibilities his tycoon status entailed, he donated generously to Chinese language schools and other cultural events. He reinvigorated the *Chaozhou* network, banding together with those in his linguistic group to bully Hoa businessmen of other dialect groups. All in all, he recaptured the power and mystique of the pre-75 business elite.

But his fall was fast and hard. In 1997, state officials accused him of embezzling millions of U.S. dollars from Hoa Bank and investing it overseas. A trial date was set for him, and not only his business associates, but also several of his wives. Trials in Vietnam did not even take on the pretense of impartiality. An accusation by the state of this nature meant the death penalty.

Under house arrest while awaiting the hearing, he allegedly killed himself by swallowing opium balls. All of Cholon was shocked. What did this mean? Was he shamed by his guilt, which had come to light? Was he, as Mr. Guo insinuated, murdered because of what he might testify to? The sudden death of the main defendant caused an equal amount of consternation among authorities, who decided that the trial could not proceed, and thus dismissed charges against the others involved.

Days later, all of Cholon came out into the streets for Chen Jin Cai's funeral procession. During such processions, the casket is driven slowly down some main streets in a wagon, with mourners and a strangely upbeat marching band in accompaniment. Several witnesses told me of how people poured out of their homes, businesses and schools to pay tribute that day. Never mind that most of the money he embezzled belonged to the Hoa themselves, who were never reimbursed once the bank was nationalized. A year later, in response to the inquiries of this anthropologist,

several Hoa explained his death by saying that he killed himself as a sacrifice. He knew that if he died before testifying, all of his associates and wives would go free, they said. Chen Jin Cai is now remembered as a Hoa hero, one who protected his family, his business networks, and ultimately, his community, in the face of an intrusive state. The illegalities of his actions, as well as the financial hardships he inflicted upon the Hoa, were collectively “forgotten.”

Chen Jin Cai’s rise and fall and transformation into the last great Hoa tycoon raises several issues concerning the interconnected nature of the reemergence of the bang and how Cholon’s past is remembered. Today, Hoa are reluctant to call their organizations bang because of the political ramifications. Instead, they describe the hui as innocuous versions of the former bang, emphasizing their charity work. What I found, however, was that such positive images of the associations as apolitical charity organizations frequently masked their other functions—which were more political and capitalistic in nature. Like their memories of Chen Jin Cai, Hoa descriptions of the bang tend to emphasize their value as symbols of Cholon’s glory days, but also deemphasize the hierarchy, exploitation, and control that they enforced within the community.

IV. Resurrecting the bang through the hui

Why are the bang, in their current-day manifestation as hui, still relevant to the Hoa? What needs do the hui fulfill within the community, and what is behind their reemergence since the late 1980’s?

First of all, the hui provide financial support that is unofficial and unmonitored by the state. Hui members typically engage in an informal money-lending system called rotating credit associations. Every month, hui members are obliged to “donate” a certain sum of money. The total pool is then given to one hui member, to be used for business investment purposes. This is repeated on a regular basis, such that every hui member is given a large sum of money to use for their own entrepreneurial activities. It is not uncommon for tens of thousands of U.S. dollars to be passed around among hui members. As Mr. Guo described it, most Hoa were very suspicious of the state-owned banks. Hoa businesspeople do not want the Vietnamese officials to have access to information on their economic activities, profits, and wealth. Furthermore, as Guo argued, “it’s not good to be dependent on the state. They persecuted us before, who’s to say they won’t seize all of our stuff again. Best to not use the banks and keep our wealth in other forms.”

The hui also provide a sense of belonging among others who speak the same dialect or whose ancestors hail from a common province in China. While core hui members engage in financial transactions, the wider hui community, which may include thousands of people, view the hui as a social community. They provide opportunities to speak regional dialects such as Cantonese, Fujianese, and Hakka – languages which are not taught in schools or used in official media. Although the hui do not command the same official power as the bang, it is clear that the lines between hui are significant, and give individuals a sense of group identity. While the Vietnamese state has focused on defining the Hoa as Vietnam’s ethnic Chinese minority, the hui members continue to base their social identities around sub-ethnic

allegiances. As Guo described, “I’m Hakka. I speak Hakka and my friends are Hakka. There aren’t many of us left in Vietnam, but we were once a powerful group.” Some parents lamented the fact that their children would grow up speaking Mandarin, the official Hoa language, and Vietnamese – but not their local dialects. The hui provided social events that fostered dialect retention.

Furthermore, the hui are symbolically central to Hoa perceptions of their community’s re-birth since the period of persecution and community exodus after 1975. As the reactions to the bang tycoon who died mysteriously reveals, the Hoa are fascinated by and drawn to figures that represent the power and prestige of pre-1975 Hoa society. The nostalgia they have for the time when Cholon was a proper city of its own and viewed as a mini-Hong Kong, center on the bang. For the Hoa, the bang represent a time when Hoa society was independent of the Vietnamese state, and how fortunes could be made on their own terms. The resurrection of the bang, in the form of the politically correct hui, is seen by older Hoa as a sign that the life they are nostalgic for has not entirely disappeared.

Hui members themselves were always careful to present the official version of their activities upon first meeting me. Mr. Guo, aged fifty-five, spoke superficially about his duties as a hui leader when we first sat down for our interview. He raised money for charities; he participated in weddings and funerals. Eventually, another story unfolded. He spoke of the bitter rivalry between his group, the Kejia hui, and the Chaozhou hui. “Those guys are so arrogant!” he exclaimed, in between bites of the papayas and beef jerky I had set down as a snack. “A few of us and a few of them had originally gone into investing in An Dong market together. But, with Chen Jin Cai

behind them, the Chaozhou hui pushed us out altogether. If they hadn't ganged up on us, we would be collecting a lot of rent money from the market today. The Chaozhou guys always want to one up us. Well, I showed them when I opened the first privately owned supermarket over in Tu Duc. You should have seen Chen Jin Cai's face, to be beaten by someone from the Kejia hui!"

Like most other hui members, once Guo had towed the official line, he freely revealed what people were really doing. His comments resonated with many others in portraying the hui primarily as business guilds often locked in bitter struggle for economic control. The hui generally meet twice a month, not in an established meeting hall, as they had before 1975, but in banquet halls. To an outsider, they seem like a casual gathering of old friends.

One of the most popular meeting spot for hui members was Ai Hua Restaurant, owned by a 35 year old woman named Ming. Ming inherited the business from her father, who ran the popular banquet hall throughout the 1960's and 70's. It had the reputation of being Cholon's most elegant dining hall. Ming's family had escaped during the exodus, settling in Texas. Ming returned in 1992 to reclaim her family's restaurant. She re-opened it, bought a house a few doors away, and dedicated herself to re-establishing Ai Hua's reputation as having the best Chinese banquet food in Cholon.

I came to know Ming very well, and for a time, lived with her in her three story house just a few blocks away from Ai Hua. What struck me most about her was that she was very young and still single when we lived together, yet single-handedly ran Cholon's most prestigious restaurant and, as I would eventually discover, central

meeting place for various hui activities. As a result, she was incredibly connected. She knew all of the major hui leaders, and they looked to her as the keeper of their secrets. As the organizer of major hui events, Ming was privy to hui information that each leader often preferred to keep secret from both the Vietnamese authorities as well as other the other, competing hui. Ming handled this with the finesse and charisma of a natural-born hostess.

Ming's schedule revolved around the busy evenings, when the restaurant would be packed with not only hui meetings but wedding parties and other celebrations. She went in to check on things in the early afternoon, came home for a brief rest, and then got dressed for the evening. Ming oversaw everything, making sure the food was up to her standards and seating honored guests herself at the best tables. When hui members came in, she saw to them personally, offering complementary bottles of whiskey or her famous walnut shrimp platters. As I observed on several occasions, the most powerful men and women in Cholon thought the world of Ming, appreciating her gestures of generosity.

I was initially surprised that Ai Hua would command such a dedicated clientele such that wedding parties needed to be booked at least a year in advance. The place was very worn down, the carpets gray with stains and worn bare. The paint had faded, and on some walls, was also peeling off. I often visited with Ming in the late morning, when the place was empty. During those times, it was difficult to imagine the celebratory atmosphere that it would take on later in the evenings, as people entered in their finest clothing and dined on luxurious dishes for hours.

Eventually, I came to understand that the Ai Hua experience was not so much about what it was today as what it *had been*, and by extension, what Cholon and the bang had been. The elderly hui members, those who were legitimate bang members of the past, came to Ai Hua because they had come before, and they knew that Ai Hua was a place that deal could be made over good food and service. Those who stood to gain the most from the hui—middle aged to elderly Hoa men—bolster their legitimacy by engaging in acts of collective remembering which favored a *hui* or *bang* run society. They celebrate certain aspects of the past, evoking the power of the hui, the infallibility of the tycoons, and the stability as well as progress Hoa society has experienced under the leadership of the hui networks.

Mr. Bieu promoted his particular hui – the Kejia association – as a link between past and present. Bieu was a self-proclaimed public relations representative for the Kejia hui. He was a fifty year old, slightly stout man whose every word and gesture connoted his experience as a host. He had a sweeping manner about him, graciously taking control of every social situation he found himself in, trying to make everyone comfortable with his unfailing amiability. His facial and verbal expressions were often exaggerated, as if he were a theater performer. He spoke several dialects of Chinese, Vietnamese and English fluently. He was so gracious, though, that he kept apologizing for his near-perfect English. At times, I thought we would both collapse from the battle of humility which defines the politest exchanges in Chinese.

As my own web of relationships grew and became increasingly entangled, I would come to see Bieu almost weekly at one Hoa function or another. His participation in any well known Kejia family or community event was a given, but he

was also frequently invited to host general Hoa celebrations. I have to admit there were times I hoped I would not see him. As his special American born friend, he treated me somewhat like a celebrity, seating me at tables reserved for immediate family members, and calling me up on stage to speak or, even worse, sing. The fact that my mother is Kejia, even though we do not speak the dialect, made me even more of a beloved friend to show off. Here is an except from my field notes, describing some interactions with Bieu:

Tonight I attended the eightieth birthday party of a prominent Kejia family matron. There were about three hundred guests, filling up the whole floor of a new banquet hall. Bieu waved me over from the seat I had taken to introduce me to the elderly woman and her husband. They had no idea who I, nor, I suspect, who most of the guests, were. But they greeted me warmly, as if I had been a close family member. I was seated, along with my Taiwanese friend, at a table close to the stage. There, we waited for almost an hour with nothing to eat or drink but peanuts and bottles of Coke. "Chinese dinners always start late," the man next to me remarked, as we all became increasingly agitated from drinking Coke on empty stomachs.

Finally, at 8pm, Bieu ascended the stage. He was dressed in an olive green suit and a tie. He began to speak about the family, telling the story of their humble beginnings to their current prosperity. Through it all, Bieu said, the elderly matron endured silently and supported wholeheartedly.. She and her husband now had successful sons, a beautiful daughter, and several grandchildren to show for their efforts. This family, Bieu emphasized, generously supported the Kejia hui, making it possible for other children to have the same opportunity to succeed. Bieu spoke in both Kejia and Mandarin, adding a few gratuitous phrases in English for the family members who had returned from the United States.

After the lengthy introductions were over, the twelve-course banquet finally began. As the guests were eating and talking among themselves, Bieu continued to introduce various family members and friends on stage. One of them was a well-dressed, middle-aged woman who had been sitting at my table. Bieu cajoled her to sing some songs. She feigned shyness, but it was clear that she had been expecting to sing. She had even brought along some karaoke tapes to

sing along with. The Taiwanese friend I came with recognized the tunes as Taiwanese pop songs from the 1960's. We seemed to be the only ones listening, however. As the guests became increasingly intoxicated from the free-flowing beer, the din of laughter and conversation grew louder, almost drowning out the performances. Near the end of the evening, the stage had become a free for all, as anyone who wanted to could go up and sing a tune. Before dessert could be served, people unceremoniously got up and started to leave. The performances on stage had tapered off, and there were no closing remarks by Bieu or thank you's from the family members.

A week later. I saw Bieu again tonight, at an even larger event. This was the annual Kejia hui celebration. Over a thousand people were invited to a banquet at the Asia Restaurant, a Cholon fixture. Someone told me the place had been around since the 1940's. From the looks of it, it had never been remodeled. The carpet was worn thin, the furniture old, and the walls darkened with water stains. But that didn't seem to matter to any of the guests, most of whom came dressed in high heels and cocktail dresses or well-pressed white shirts and suit pants. Taxi cabs, cyclos and motorbikes were parked erratically outside the entrance, bringing their guests. It was easy to imagine this as the center of Cholon's downtown social scene, a place where the well-to-do drove up to in American cars.

As the crowds made their way up the stairs to the second floor banquet hall, rows of restaurant employees, standing to the side, applauded us, shouting "huanying" (welcome). There were red silk banners decorating the doorways, and waiters, lined up like soldiers, ready to start serving the food. At the welcoming table, there were different sign-in sheets, depending on one's surname. "Yang is one of the more common Kejia names," remarked the woman as I wrote the Chinese characters of my name. Bieu was running around frantically, trying to organize the various people he would later introduce on stage. The celebration was mainly in honor of those who had contributed to the Kejia hui, and had thus benefited the Kejia schools. Different grades of schoolchildren performed songs in Chinese and dances on stage, as if to show the contributors what their money had produced. The thirty year old woman who had accompanied me remembered most of the songs as ones she had learned as a child, before her family fled Vietnam in 1978. Different groups of people were called up on stage, and given plaques in recognition of their service or donations. They were mostly middle aged to elderly men, all owners or representatives of prominent Hoa businesses.

What initially surprised me about such events was the fact that the guests often seemed oblivious to what was happening on stage, and would talk and laugh loudly over the speeches and performances. As I eventually discovered, the songs sung, the dances performed, and the speeches given were invariably the same. The individuals honored were also of a rather predictable group of wealthy Hoa businessmen, usually forty and older. Even the dishes served were generally the same. People did not come to see anything new, but to witness the comforting re-enactment of community power that had existed before 1975. This constancy formed the backdrop for people re-acquainting themselves with each other, for there were few enjoyable public spheres in the city.

Such celebrations, tied in with hui activities and authority, provided a space for Hoa autonomy, albeit constricted. For a few hours, guests could be assured that they would hear the same songs they grew up with, see the same kinds of people get up on stage and represent their community, and imagine their children growing up in a Chinese speaking society. They simply ignored the shabbiness of the banquet hall. The hui-sponsored events reinforced a certain memory of what the Hoa community was once like—and still was.

Bieu played a central role in legitimizing the power and prestige of the male hui members, in his role as “professional emcee.” His gracious, educated, refined air made every event run so smoothly that guests did not have to pay attention to what was happening on stage. It was only months after first meeting Bieu that he revealed to me his actual economic and familial circumstances. I had assumed that he, himself, was a wealthy hui member, who emcee’d as a favor to his fellow businessmen. Rather,

the monetary “gifts” he received for hosting was barely enough to support his wife and child, who lived with the wife’s parents in the countryside. Bieu stayed with his sister’s family, to save rent on his own home. He was mostly self-educated, as his parents could not afford to send him to school. He owned only one suit, a gift from a wealthy hui member, which he carefully pressed before each event. He did not let many people in on his “secret,” for his job, he said, was to represent the best and most refined Chinese mannerisms.

Bieu and the hui powers he represents, actively play upon collective memories of life before 1975 to favor their own perpetuation. Nostalgia is thus more than an innocent sentiment—it is strategically deployed to ensure the survival of certain types of social networks. What is invoked in such longings for the past is not, I would argue, a timeless Chinese tradition. Rather, the hui construct pre-’75 life as a time of prosperity and progressiveness.

In contrast to pre-1975 life, the influence of the hui is limited today, despite the appearance of autonomy. The state continues to monitor hui finances, and allegedly sends spies to infiltrate the networks. According to Bieu, after one especially large celebration sponsored by the Lin surname hui, authorities detained several participants, questioning them about the nature of the event. Hui members are thus extremely secretive about their true activities, always insisting that their groups do nothing more than hold charity and other celebratory events.

The reach of the hui into the lives of Hoa is also limited. The people who attend hui-sponsored celebrations are overwhelmingly middle aged to elderly people and their young children. There is a conspicuous absence of young adults, both as

guests and as celebrated hui members. The hui also continue to be overwhelmingly male. The revival of the bang in the form of the hui seems to be most relevant for those older Hoa who actually remember the bang, or even participated in them prior to 1975.

Bieu says he is hopeful that a new generation of Hoa youths will understand the importance of the hui and begin to take leadership. The banquets and celebrations are, he argues, a great way for younger Hoa to learn about the associations, and to discover the importance of having trustworthy networks. Most of all, he believes that it is critical for the younger Hoa to understand their history through the hui. “The Kejia association was once very powerful, the most powerful bang in Cholon. We had the richest businessmen – far richer than the Cantonese. Young people can be proud of that and continue to remember their Kejia identity.”

V. Conclusion

This chapter as sought to put the Hoa dialect-based associations in historical context, and to explore their relevance today. The reemergence of the bang in form of the hui raises several questions about the relevance of these sub-ethnic associations in the social life of the Hoa.

First, will the hui transition from being vestiges of the bang to becoming powerful associations that represent a new generation of Hoa? Although it was still too early to tell in the late 1990’s, when I conducted my fieldwork, it seemed that the hui were most attractive to older Hoa – those who had actually participated in or

remembered the bang before 1975. Indeed, the social activities that the hui sponsored were tailored to those with a certain amount of nostalgia for Cholon's "better days."

Younger Hoa that I knew tended to view the hui as old fashioned and irrelevant to their daily lives. They had no connection to a place like Ai Hua, and perhaps little appreciation for the run down banquet hall given the fact that there were numerous more hip and glitzy restaurants in downtown Saigon. Furthermore, younger Hoa were less likely to be fluent in the various sub-ethnic dialects, such as Hakka, Cantonese, and Hainanese – the languages of the hui. Sub-ethnic networks have no place in such new formulations of modern identity. The following chapters will explore the new forms of Hoa identity that have emerged since the 1980's, based not on dialect but on a more generalized Chineseness.

This brings us to a second, interrelated issue: will sub-ethnic networks continue to be relevant in Hoa economic, social, and cultural activities? As was explored in the section on the history of the bang, Hoa society pre-1975 was structured by the powerful bang leaders and their groups based on these allegiances. Since 1975, however, the VCP has promoted Hoa identity over the sub-ethnic identities, and defined Mandarin as the language of the Hoa people. Such official declarations have served to undermine the relevance of the sub-ethnic affiliations, and also to somewhat criminalize the expression of such identities. Bieu told me that the hui are not officially supposed to use their own dialects in public events – everything must be in Mandarin or Vietnamese. It has proved difficult for the VCP to monitor all hui events, and thus many members fall back to using their specific dialects.

Furthermore, the hui are now competing with other forms of Chinese identity. As will be explored further in the upcoming chapters, the Hoa are increasingly engaging with ethnic Chinese from places such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. In the economic and social networks that they form with these overseas Chinese businessmen, it is a generalized Chinese identity based on the use of Mandarin, which is becoming most salient. Mandarin has become a language for international business, as popular as English and Japanese in a country that is courting foreign investment.

Will a generalized Chinese identity replace the older social forms, based on dialect? Although there is evidence that the hui are less relevant to younger Hoa, they also have the potential to expand beyond what they were historically. In the history of the Hoa, the bang organized local business and social activities, providing structure and social support. There is some evidence that the hui of today are also forging ties with other associations throughout China and Southeast Asia. Bieu described several instances in which his Kejia hui socialized with other Kejia associations from Thailand, the Philippines, and other countries with significant ethnic Chinese communities. Bieu was also planning a trip for his hui group to visit their ancestral home back in China. He eventually revealed to me that this was also going to be used as an opportunity to create business ties with people back in China. These activities suggest that transnational Chinese networks may also be formed at the sub-ethnic level, rather than primarily on a more generalized level of Chinese identity.

This chapter has also explored the link between social networks and nostalgia for a certain image of Hoa society. In their characterizations of the past, various Hoa expressed a desire to recapture not a vanishing tradition, but rather, a fading modernity.

The elderly remembered life under the French, and the middle-aged life under Diem, as times of progressiveness. The Hoa were constantly advancing in both commerce and intellect. Cholon was likened to Hong Kong—a fast paced and cosmopolitan city which surged fearlessly into the future. Educated Hoa remember the order and rigor of their educational system under KMT influence. They feared that present-day Cholon, as well as the rest of Vietnam, was becoming mired in the inefficiencies and irrationalities of the Communists. *Luan*, or chaotic, was the word most people used to describe the general political and economic environment.

In the Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth and Modernity In Java, Suzanne Brenner argues that the nostalgia she perceived in the neighborhood of Laweyan was not as much for tradition as for modernity.

Thinking about Laweyan has made me think more about the problems inherent in the concept of modernity, especially in its evolutionary assumptions. Is it possible, I have wondered, to avoid the traps of evolutionary models of modernization, while still retaining a meaningful conception of modernity? It has also made me realize how fragile modernity is, at least in some of its aspects, and how easily it can be undone. While the Indonesian government is obsessed with the idea of modernizing Indonesia, the community of Laweyan has clearly been demodernized.

How do we use concepts such as modern or postmodern to interpret changes in social forms in Vietnam? I would spend time in Cholon or downtown Saigon, looking at old buildings. There were different layers of paint, peeling off. Likewise, there were different modernization attempts—the imperial Nguyen dynasty's attempts to model itself after the Chinese system, French colonialism, the U.S.-backed Diem regime, Communism, and now, market reform. The people who came of age in each era still operate in the principles and logics of that era. For elderly Hoa, like To Ma-

ma, the French era was a time of vitality, reflected in the picture of her young, body-building husband posing in front of Cholon's French cafes. For middle aged Hoa, like Bieu and his fellow hui members, the Cholon of the fifties and sixties represents the height of economic and cultural progress.

But, in mirroring the past to fix the present and future, there are cracks. In the next chapter, I explore how the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts which led to the exodus of nearly half a million Hoa—a third of the total population--the late 1970's, has affected the Hoa psychologically, and the Hoa community structurally. I will argue that the tremendous sense of dislocation and insecurity which the exodus entailed has led to new patterns of allegiance formation, which reach outside of the bang or hui networks of elite businessmen.

Chapter 4: Hoa Identity in the Context of Vietnamese Nationalism

I. Introduction

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons that I hope will become clearer below. Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.

—Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*

Boats figure prominently in Hoa conceptions of their past. In Marguerite Duras' novel, *The Lover*, a wealthy Chinese man embarks on a relationship with a poor young French girl, with colonial Cholon as the backdrop. The novel, as well as the movie, begins and ends with the image of a ship sailing in and out of Cholon harbor. Such images underscore the experience that binds these two unlikely figures together—they are both outsiders in French Indochina, she because of her family's low status, and he, because he is Chinese.

The Vietnamese phrase for the Hoa, “Nguoi Tau” literally means the boat people. As was common across Southeast Asia, the indigenous populations as well as the European colonizers characterized the Chinese as traders—merchants who came and left by ship. To the Hoa, the term is a reminder of the negative aspects of being outsiders. At times, the Hoa embrace their roles as outsiders, for they do not want to be associated with the chaos and stagnant growth of Vietnam. At other times, the

outsider's status is a reminder of the insecurity they experience as individuals or through collective remembering. The term *Nguoi Tau* has mixed connotations. On the one hand, the merchants who came by ship were known to be wealthy, entrepreneurial, and somehow gifted with experience above the indigenous population. On the other hand, merchants were seen as greedy, and uncommitted to their countries of residence. Since 1954, the Communist regime has officially referred to the Hoa as Hoa, Vietnamese nationals of Chinese ethnicity, in its attempt to erase any suggestion of them being from or of *outside* the national space.

From the late 1970's onwards, however, the Hoa would collectively challenge the state's attempts to situate them within its national project. Over half of a million Hoa fled Vietnam, some by land across the border into China, and the majority via sea, in the hopes of landing in Hong Kong or other Southeast Asian destinations and seeking asylum as refugees. Once again, the Hoa would be called "boat people"—this time by the international community who saw them as part of a larger exodus of South Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon. This exodus has created new forms of diasporan relationships for the Hoa—linked not "back" to the homeland but forward, to the future home.

Hoa history is defined by ships in a third way. During the height of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict in 1978, the Chinese government sent word that it would "rescue" its overseas nationals in Vietnam by sending two ships to pick up whoever wished to "return" to China. The Hoa, most of whom had lost much of their wealth and feared further persecution, flocked to the port areas. Hoa tell stories of selling or abandoning their belongings, and waiting for the ships from China to pick them up and bring them

to safety. The overwhelming image is that of the ships, off in the distance, waiting for a few days. People are confused, they expect the ships to dock. And then suddenly, the ships leave, without picking up one single “Chinese national.”

During the last fifty years, the Vietnamese state has attempted to domesticate the Hoa as a national minority, yet at the same time has enacted policies that led to their mass exodus. In this chapter I explore how the Vietnamese state has sought to control Hoa identities and reformulate them from being “overseas Chinese” to being one of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities. I also explore how the Hoa experience such ascribed forms of identity, and negotiate around their realities as national subjects. I discuss the interdependence of national and transnational identities for the Hoa—how they are not necessarily in tension but in fact, have developed together. This chapter explores how it is in fact the Vietnamese state which has created the context for the Hoa to be both Vietnamese nationals and Chinese transnationals.

II. From Overseas Chinese to Vietnam’s Ethnic Minority

Hoa community identity in Vietnam has, historically, been tied to national and international events. Colonialism, war, Communism, and the creation of new national projects involving Vietnam, China, and Taiwan have directly affected Hoa status, and the meanings around Chinese ethnicity. This section explores the relationship between these larger political events and how Hoa identity has been defined in official terms. After exploring such interdependencies, I will then discuss how such official declarations about the Hoa are experienced, assimilated, or resisted by the individuals themselves.

The Geneva Agreement in July 1954 brought the First Indochina War to a close. Vietnam was temporarily divided at the 17th parallel until general elections were to be held in 1956. Those elections were never held, however, and the northern region became the Communist controlled Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). The south became the Republic of Vietnam (RV) under Ngo Dinh Diem, backed by the United States.

After independence and up to 1958, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was allowed to have a great influence in the organization of the education of Hoa living in the DRV. Such tasks were carried out by the PRC's Commission of Overseas Chinese Affairs, which built schools and sent books to its "overseas nationals" in North Vietnam. By the early 1960's, however, the Hoa had for the most part become legal citizens of the DRV.

The situation for the Hoa living in the RV was very different. Compared to the Hoa in the north, those in the south were predominantly urban and played more central roles in trade and industry. It has been argued that the Hoa of the South were less assimilated into Vietnamese society because of their economic power and ability to maintain their own social forms. After the Geneva Agreement, however, they had no contact with Mainland China, due to the hostilities between North and South Vietnam and the South's anti-Communist government. The Hoa came under the political influence of the Nationalist Chinese, now exiled to Taiwan (the KMT). As was explored in Chapter Three, Hoa education came under KMT's political thought in the 1960's and 70's. Chinese schools in the South received text-books and teaching-aids through Taipei's Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee.

Like the government of the North, the RV sought to redefine the Hoa as Vietnamese citizens for the sake of nation building and controlling the Hoa's economic power. A series of decrees in the mid to late 1950's were designed to assimilate the Hoa. In 1955, decree No. 10 stated that all children of mixed marriages between Chinese and Vietnamese persons were considered to be Vietnamese citizens. In 1956, Decree No. 48 stated that all Chinese born in Vietnam were automatically to become VN citizens. Later that year, Decree No. 53 banned all non-Vietnamese citizens from engaging in eleven specified occupations. These occupations just happened to be the areas of trade that the Hoa were most active in. Furthermore, RV authorities attempted to gain control over the Chinese educational system by requiring that Vietnamese be used in all Chinese schools, and that all school principals should be Vietnamese citizens.

Despite these attempts by the South Vietnamese regime to integrate the Hoa, life in Cholon largely went on as it had before. The majority of Hoa in South Vietnam chose not to become Vietnamese nationals. To circumvent the difficulties in doing business as non-Vietnamese citizens, they typically paid a Vietnamese "front person" to help with bureaucratic issues. In addition, local officials were often easily bribed in order to look the other way. The local Hoa leaders were able to continue funding the Chinese language schools with little to no interference from the Vietnamese. The 1975 Communist victory in the south actually led some ethnic Chinese to believe that they now had a powerful protector in Communist China. When the Vietnamese Communist forces entered Cholon on April 30th, the streets were lined with thousands of PRC flags and portraits of Mao Zedong, the new leader. One conclusion regarding

this public display might be that the South's integrationist policies had only a superficial effect and the Hoa continued to think of themselves as subjects of China. Another interpretation is simply that the Hoa believed the Vietnamese Communists would treat them better if they displayed their loyalties to communism.

In any case, Sino-Vietnamese relations eventually turned sour. Conflicting claims on the Paracel and Spratley archipelagoes in the South China Sea, and border disputes led to hostilities. In December 1976, the pro-China faction of the Vietnamese government was purged at the Fourth Party Congress, leading to the rise of the pro-Russia faction. The status and treatment of the Hoa then became a direct function (and barometer) of Sino-Vietnamese relations (Amer 1991:2).

In the north, all working Chinese were placed under surveillance and were prohibited from speaking Chinese. In October 1977, Hanoi began to expel ethnic Chinese residing in five Vietnamese provinces bordering China. In 1978 the government launched its "socialist reformation" campaign, shutting down private industry and trade. The Hoa in the south were hit hardest. On the pretext of taking inventory of goods and assets, a special force ransacked every house and shop in Cholon, confiscating goods and valuables from about 50,000 retailers. All wholesale trades and big business activities were outlawed, forcing some 30,000 businesses to close down. All private trade was banned, depriving thousands of small traders of their livelihood. Many Hoa were stripped of party membership, lost army or police jobs, saw their children barred from attending universities, and were forced to move to remote "new economic zones" to engage in physical labor.

Approximately 2000,000 Hoa tried to escape such conditions by crossing the border into China. Each side blamed the other for causing the exodus. The PRC accused the Vietnamese government of atrocities against the Chinese, including mass arrests, mass killings, and firing at refugees crossing the land border or escaping by boat. The Vietnamese government put the blame on a campaign launched by the Chinese government to scare the Hoa community. Loudspeakers along the border, Chinese radio broadcasts and Chinese agents allegedly spread messages of a probable outbreak of war, and promises of a better life in China. The border was finally sealed on July 12, 1978.

From China's perspective, the outflow based on the maltreatment of ethnic Chinese intensified rumors of war between the two countries. Beijing accused Vietnam of mass arrests and killings of China's "overseas nationals." On May 26th 1978, China announced: "In view of the continued persecution of the Chinese residents in Vietnam by the Vietnamese authorities, the Chinese Government has decided to send ships to bring home the victims." (Peking Review, June 2, 1978, p. 15).

On June 15, two Chinese ships left Guangzhou for Haiphong and HCMC to bring home "persecuted Chinese residents" from Vietnam (Peking Review, June 23, 1978, p. 4). China ended all economic and technical aid to Vietnam and withdrew all experts working in Vietnam. Vietnamese authorities refuted charges of persecution and attacked China for supporting Kampuchea in its "aggression" against VN. The ships were laid off the coast for almost six weeks. China's actions provoked

Vietnam's sensitivities regarding issues of nationality and interference in what they considered internal affairs.

In 1978, Beijing sent two ships to pick up any Hoa wishing to resettle in China. The ships returned empty, the Chinese government being unable to reach an agreement with Hanoi. Thousands of Hoa waited, their possessions sold off and their children withdrawn from school. Furthermore, it was the Chinese who sealed the border with Vietnam, and thus the northward flow of refugees. Mrs. Ding was an elderly woman who described the feeling of having been betrayed by China, who ultimately did nothing to protect the Hoa. In short, both the Vietnamese and Chinese governments made claims about Hoa loyalties which were eventually contradicted by their actions.

My whole family tried to escape in 75. The Chinese government prepared ships to come and get us. But for mysterious reasons the ships never picked anyone up. We waited by the harbor for weeks. When the ships didn't come, we couldn't go back to the city, we had nothing left there. So we stayed in the countryside. In 1978, the Vietnamese arranged for some ships. If you had enough gold, you could get on one. If the police caught you, and you have the correct papers, you would not need to go to jail. The government extracted some money from each person, which was nonrefundable, and turned a blind eye when these people went to My Tho to board the boats. Each person could only take two bags. Everything else had to be carried on their bodies or mailed to the US. My younger sister and I didn't get on, it was too dangerous.

The outflow of refugees – both Hoa and ethnic Vietnamese – did not escape the notice of the international community. The International Conference on Southeast Asian Refugees was held in Geneva in 1979. This even drew worldwide attention to and criticism of Vietnam's refugee problem. In order to appease the international community, Vietnamese representatives pledged to do their utmost to stem the outflow.

On May 30, 1979, an agreement reached with UN High Commissioner for Refugees to implement this “Orderly Departure Program”.

Nonetheless, the exodus continued unabated. During 1979 alone, over 200,000 people left Vietnam by boat hoping to reach other Southeast Asian countries. By the end of 1980, about 400,000 had left as “boat people,” 70% of whom were ethnic Chinese. The total number of Hoa refugees has been estimated at 600,000.

After the Communists defeated the South and unified the country under one regime, their explicit goal in terms of integrating the Hoa was to make sure that the ethnic Chinese did not get the same grip over many sectors of economy as they had before. Their primary mechanism for ensuring this was to tie any market-related activities to national identity. So long as the Hoa acted as if they were integrated Vietnamese citizens, they would be allowed to resume their trading activities. Acting like Vietnamese citizens involved not participating in Chinese cultural organizations, supporting Chinese language education, and the use of Chinese in any business context.

“The Hoa in Vietnam, whether they are Hoa people in the North or the Vietnamese of Chinese origin in the South, are all Vietnamese and no longer Chinese national. This is an irreversible reality.” (Statement by Vice-Minister of Foreign affairs Hoang Bich Son, Head of the delegation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam at the 2nd Session of the Vietnam-China Talks, August 15, 1978.)

For Vietnam’s economy in general, and Hoa society in particular, 1986 was a pivotal year. *Doi Moi*, which literally means *change and newness*, is the Vietnamese Communist Party's term for reform and renovation in the economy. This term was

coined in 1986 for a transition from the centrally planned Stalinist command economy to a "market economy with socialist direction," what is often referred to as market socialism. In contrast to Eastern European reforms Doi Moi favors gradualism and political stability over radical change, with economic restructuring to come before privatization. Vietnam was more like China in its economic structure than the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the role models for successful economic development in East Asia did not promote political liberalization.

The role of the Hoa came to be, once again, redefined under the Doi Moi policies. Rather than continue to suppress ethnic Chinese entrepreneurialism, under Doi Moi, the Hoa were encouraged to re-energize their pre-1975 activities and take a central role in the country's market liberalization. After nearly a decade of national policies that sought to stamp out ethnic Chinese identity and capitalistic activities that depended upon ethnic Chinese community resources, the VCP took an abrupt turn. These policy changes were reflected in official statements about the Hoa post-1986. While the emphasis before Doi Moi was on the Hoa's political status as Vietnamese nationals (and thus, not overseas Chinese nationals), the emphasis during the Doi Moi period was on the vitality of Hoa entrepreneurialism. Below, a Vietnamese scholar comments on the effects of the "releasing process" (Doi Moi reforms) on the Hoa community.

It is no mere accident that the releasing process has been especially effective in the 5th and 11th districts where the most active handicraft and small-industry undertakings and the most amply supplied shops of the City are concentrated. This also used to be a Hoa stronghold: the bankers and major industrialists have left, but the great majority of small traders and artisans—diligent and hard-working—remain. The streets of Cholon are noisy and animated as before. The hustle and

bustle never fails to amaze people venturing into that part of the city. The panic which had set in before and after the war started by Beijing and had caused a number of people to leave, is over. Now with the releasing process, trading and industrial activities have been resumed with renewed vigor.

Thus the Hoa community has a chance to work with diligence and ingenuity to take its place in the Vietnamese nation, as the Chinese migrants of the 17th century who had worked alongside the Vietnamese in South Vietnam to open virgin lands in the deltas of the Mekong and Dong Nai Rivers did. Their descendants, the minh huong, were gradually integrated into the Vietnamese national community. The colonial period, French and American, is gone: the Hoa can no longer hope to carve for themselves a privileged position as compradors in the colonial system to the detriment of the indigenous people. They must also forgo their reliance on Beijing to force the Vietnamese people to grant them a higher status, especially with a view to carrying on profitable capitalist exploitation.

One may say that the majority of Hoa people in the 5th and 11th districts, and in other districts of Ho Chi Minh City and other cities of South Vietnam as well, now enjoy a better standard of living than the majority of Vietnamese. Generally speaking, this is something they deserve owing to their industry and ingenuity. If they abstain from serving Beijing's hegemonic ambitions the Hoa will preserve their place in Vietnam indefinitely and without any hitch. (Nguyen, Khac Vien, Ho Chi Minh City – 1982: *The Releasing Process*, p. 200-202.).

The VCP thus began to define Hoa entrepreneurial activity in terms of its contribution to the national project. The decade of active persecution of the Hoa, the expelling of the ethnic community, and the anti-Chinese cultural policies are no longer part of official Vietnamese narratives. The Hoa were (re)defined as a hard-working community, who were able to prosper because of the VCP's policies. Hoa entrepreneurialism was thus cast as a form of nationalistic behavior, rather than as an indication that they continued to live a separate and privileged existence as "overseas Chinese."

How do the Hoa themselves experience this official redefinition of their status, and what is their relationship with the Vietnamese state? The remainder of this chapter explores how the Vietnamese state's official image of the Hoa resonates with actual everyday realities. What we will see is that the Hoa alternately resist these official definitions, as well as co-opt them for their own benefit.

III. How the Hoa Define Their Place in Vietnam

Hoa perceptions of their status in Vietnam are fraught with contradictions and ambivalence. These were made explicit during a weekly conversational group that I hosted, which we called the "English Club." The club was founded on the premise that its members could practice their English conversational skills and I could, through these conversations, learn about issues pertinent to the Hoa community within a group discussion setting.

The English club quickly became an establishment among a small group of Hoa that either knew Wong or were introduced in through trusted sources. It started out as a casual gathering for people to practice their English with me. It also became a forum for the participants to talk about social issues in their community. The half a dozen regulars were extremely passionate about the group, treating it as an important weekly event during which their views could be heard and debated. We decided early on to be selective about our group, as we wanted to keep the atmosphere safe, and for everyone to feel as if they could speak their mind without censorship. The minimal requirements were that the participants were Hoa, and could speak relatively good English.

We met weekly at a house in the center of Cholon, not far from the main boulevard, Tran Hung Dao. There was a core group of about six people. Ms. Wong served as our hostess. Although the house we met in wasn't hers, but rather, one that she looked after for her Taiwanese clients, she sought to keep this detail a secret from the other participants. She took great pride in the fantasy that this was her home, and what she perceived as jealousy among the others for her good fortune.

The different characters that brought the English Club to life were, in many respects, representative of different attitudes about the status and future of the Hoa in Vietnam. To a certain extent, this variation in attitudes and perceptions was by design: Miss Wong and some of the other founding members were dedicated to showing me a range of Hoa experiences. Thus, they purposely chose club members who were trustworthy but whom they knew would agree to disagree. Besides the ability to communicate in English, however, there was one other requirement – the club members should be middle aged and older. As Teacher Du put it, younger Hoa were mostly already brainwashed by their Vietnamese educations and would have nothing useful to say about what it meant to be Hoa in Vietnam. I will explore the perceptions of Hoa youth later, but below, I explore how the English Club members both accommodate and resist the definition of Hoa identity that the VCP has supported since Doi Moi reforms began.

Mr. Thanh was easily the heart of the group. His quick wit and self-deprecating humor earned him the trust and the admiration of everyone. Thanh was a tourist guide. His company headquarters was in the heart of Cholon, and primarily served Chinese speaking customers. Thanh worked with both local Hoa and overseas Chinese from

Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States. Thanh was fluent in English, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese – his multilingualism was a critical part of his success at work. His easy mannerism, particular with women, was another factor in his success. Thanh was never flirty or inappropriate, but he was very gentle, gentlemanly, and kindhearted. He would often help serve drinks and food, rather than waiting on the women to do so. I remember one particular incident when he drove to where I was living during a power outage to see if I needed candles. Linda, another middle aged English Club member, often tried to flirt with Thanh and liked to ask me, when we were alone, to speculate on his love life. Thanh was married with a young daughter, but never spoke about his family unless we prompted him to. While he was open with his own thoughts and generous with his time, when it came to his family, he was extremely private and protective.

Thanh moved easily and effortlessly between worlds – whether they involved Americans, Vietnamese, Hoa, Taiwanese, Hong Kongers, or Singaporeans. He was also well-traveled compared to the others in the English Club, and compared to the average 35 year old professional in Vietnam. His tour guide duties often took him to Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, where he would take Vietnamese and Hoa. He had a broad range of friends. His best friend was Eric, the Taiwanese entrepreneur whom we will meet in a later chapter.

Despite Thanh's ability to charm and get along with everyone, he was very sensitive to national differences.

My favorite tourists are from Mainland China, although they are in the minority. Coming from a Communist country, they are accustomed to the restrictions we Vietnamese people face, which people from other

countries don't understand. Mainland Chinese won't ask me to bring prostitutes to their rooms, they know that the police have the right to arbitrarily check hotel rooms. They also treat me like an equal. They call me "tongbao", which means of the same womb. For them, I am Chinese like they are Chinese. No difference. Even though I have many Taiwanese friends, like Eric, my least favorite customers are from Taiwan. They think they can just come here and not care about the laws and rules. They always pressure me to find prostitutes for them. I can't personally arrange for girls to visit them, but I can take them to hotels that offer these services. I warn them about the police, but they don't care, they think that it's a free for all in Vietnam. They also complain, saying that they should be able to do whatever they want since they are paying. Unlike the Mainland Chinese, the Taiwanese don't care that I'm Chinese too. They just think of me as a local Vietnamese. We're all the same to them.

When the conversations turned to his own identity, Thanh was emphatic: he was *Hoa*. What he meant by this term was that he was ethnic Chinese by culture, but Vietnamese by nationality. He was alone in defining a hybrid identity – the others did not acknowledge that there was something "Vietnamese" about themselves. For Thanh, the Vietnamese aspect of his identity was one that he was constantly confronted with as someone working in tourism. Every time he left Vietnam's borders and entered another country, he was singularly Vietnamese by way of his passport. Every time he applied for a tourist visa for himself, he did so as a Vietnamese national. The Taiwanese and Hong Kong tourists who benefited from Thanh's ability to speak multiple Chinese dialects, generally viewed him as a Vietnamese person, rather than a fellow ethnic Chinese. For Thanh, these distinctions were matters of fact, rather than matters that evoked an emotional response.

For Mr. Cai, identity was a very different matter. Cai had been jailed for nearly a decade for allegedly encouraging Chinese nationalism. Cai claims that all he did was teach Chinese language and literature. When I first met him, Cai was in his early

fifties, a tall and elegant looking man. I was initially impressed by his apparent intellectualism and soft-spoken demeanor. However, as time went by, there seemed to be certain disconnects in his image and behavior. In my interactions with him, he was always gentle, talkative and well-dressed. But a few things betrayed the fact that he had spent many years as a prisoner. He was hesitant to let me visit him at his home. When I did, he was nervous, and surprisingly unsophisticated in matters of courtesy. I wasn't offered any refreshments—a given in most Hoa and Vietnamese homes. He later on told me he felt very nervous having me in his home, as he suspected it was under surveillance and his neighbors kept watch over him. On another occasion, he visited the guesthouse I was staying at, and worried that my room was bugged. Beneath his soft-spoken demeanor was an intense paranoia and fear that the government monitored his every move.

In 1978 I was arrested due to the conflict between China and Vietnam. The police came to my home and accused me of being a reactionary. I was not so surprised because I was a Chinese teacher, and expected that I had been watched. In our teachers' circles, there were spies. Somebody must have accused me of teaching Chinese nationalism. I never did such a thing. We just all complained about the content and teaching hours.

Most of the people arrested during this time were teachers. Others included businessmen, whose property was taken. There were not so many businessmen in jail with me. About one hundred teachers were arrested in the city. Most stayed in jail for nine years. The police inquired about our acquaintances and our curriculum. In jail, we were confined to a small room. Inside were sixteen to seventeen of us. We were all men. We were mostly Chinese, but there were some Vietnamese who were arrested for different reasons. The Chinese were mostly all teachers, although some were Viet Cong cadres who were arrested for having different opinions on the Chinese community than the authorities, concerning policies.

I stayed in this jail for two to three years. I got along more with the Chinese than the Vietnamese. After that, I was transferred to a reformation camp. I labored there for six years. All of the people in the camp were Chinese. There were about eighty people, some of them women. We were all released around the same time because China and Vietnam were on their way to normalized relations. After the Sixth Vietnamese Communist Party Congress, we were suddenly released.

After I was released, I was watched by the authorities. Sometimes at midnight they would come to my house and question me. If a delegation from China came to Vietnam, the Hoa could not freely contact them. If you did, the police would call them into the station. We are third class citizens here. We have no future if we have any cultural occupations, like being teachers. If we earn too much money, we also become targets for the authority. We cannot teach Chinese history and literature in the Chinese schools.

My life has not been so stable since my release. I have had problems finding work, as the local police question me about everything. In my residential area, only a few families are frequented by the police. Every three months, I get a visit, and they ask me where I'm working. I work part time now, translating contracts for a US company. I receive documents, and translate them at home. I also teach Chinese. Every month I earn about two million dong. I support my mother, with help from my sister.

For Cai, there was nothing reassuring about Vietnamese citizenship. Rather, he believed that he would always be set apart, always be a "third class citizen" because of his ethnic identity. Whereas Thanh's sense of Vietnamese identity was very much the result of his work in travel, and the constant need to declare his national allegiance, Cai's sense of Vietnamese identity was formed as a prisoner both behind bars and now, as someone under constant surveillance. For Cai, being ethnic Chinese meant, by definition, that one could not be Vietnamese. He believed the VCP defined Vietnamese identity exclusively, and pointed to his own experience to prove his point. Whereas Thanh believed that if he did not break any rules and worked hard, he could

continue having a good life in Vietnam, Cai believed that security could only come after leaving Vietnam.

Mr. To was about the same age as Cai, but the polar opposite in terms of appearance and demeanor. While Cai was slim and composed, To was short, fat, and rough in tone and language. While Cai wore neatly pressed slacks and collared shirts, To was always sweating profusely into his ill-fitting suits. Mr. To attended the first few sessions, but did not return after that. He had been invited by one of the regulars, but it was soon clear that the senior English Club members did not accept him. He was sensitive enough to pick up on the fact that he was not welcome, but that did not impact my relationship with him. We continued to meet separately, and he introduced me to his elderly aunt, a widow who lived alone. We often met at his aunt's home to chat and drink iced tea.

To was not welcome because of the fact that he was a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party. This was never articulated to him by the other club members, but To understood their apprehension. Nonetheless, he was very proud of his affiliation.

I've been a VCP member now for three years. Before 1986, they didn't allow any Chinese to become members. It's true that the VCP discriminated against ethnic minorities. But since Doi Moi, things have changed. The Party is really making an effort to represent everyone, and that includes the Chinese, the Hmong, the Lao, and other minorities. I think that it's important for us Hoa to not just stick to our own kind but try and integrate with the Vietnamese. It's important for us to be active in politics and education, not just making money all the time. Vietnamese think that all Chinese care about is getting rich, and they don't care about their country. By being a VCP member, I can represent the Hoa.

To spoke passable English and fluent Vietnamese, but he did not speak any Chinese at all. In fact, it was a bit of a struggle to communicate with his elderly aunt. She spoke Cantonese to him, which he struggled to understand, and he spoke Vietnamese back to her. They spoke mostly of everyday practicalities – if he had eaten yet, how his wife was doing, and so on.

I don't think the Hoa should keep insisting on Chinese education. We live in Vietnam. This is our home. We should speak Vietnamese. I never understood why those people in Cholon can't speak good Vietnamese. It's embarrassing, it makes us Hoa look uneducated and isolated. My son is in Vietnamese school. I want him to have a good university education. Speaking Chinese is useless in this country – a person needs a solid education.

While To was very careful reflect the Party line, he was, nonetheless, sometimes surprisingly proud of his heritage, and made comments that seemed to contradict other things he had said.

Hoa people are smarter than Vietnamese people. We know how to earn trust through hard work. The Vietnamese are always looking for shortcuts, always trying to take advantage of the situation. That's why they need more Hoa in government. The others in the party know I'm Chinese, it's just a fact. They don't really treat me differently, but whenever an issue comes up, they say something like, 'well you're Hoa, it's different for you.' It's true, I think. I am different. I have an upbringing that is rooted in Chinese values. We care more about the people around us, and we work hard. We try not to complain.

For To, Vietnamese identity was tied to the idea of having the right to participate politically. It was more important for To to declare his Vietnamese nationality above his Chinese ethnicity because of his official status. But also, To seemed to feel some defensiveness about his inability to speak Chinese. This was always painfully apparent in our interactions, as his aunt and I would converse fluidly and warmly in Mandarin, while To would only occasionally interject in Vietnamese

while his aunt strained to understand. For To, being Vietnamese seemed to mean being educated, and being upwardly mobile. Being Chinese meant being insular, misunderstood, and perpetually outsiders. Cai's relationship with education was the polar opposite, as Cai believed that a Chinese education was the core of Hoa identity, an inalienable right that the VCP had tried for over a decade to stamp out.

Thanh, Cai, and To have differing attitudes about the Vietnamese state and what it means to be Hoa under such a regime. For Thanh, Vietnamese citizenship is a pragmatic identity that affects his work and mobility. Thanh sees his Vietnamese nationality as a fact that does not necessarily affect how he sees himself, but does affect how foreigners view him, and also affects how he negotiates his travel. Thanh's sense of belonging in Vietnam is predicated on following the law. For Cai, there is no such thing as having rights under Vietnamese rule. His experience is about exclusion from the national whole, and the inflexibility of the VCP in defining patriotic behavior. Cai believes wholeheartedly that the Hoa are an inalienable part of Vietnam's fabric. As such, he believes they have the right to express their heritage and emotional connections to China (whether real or symbolic). For Cai, Vietnam's national project has come at the expense of the Hoa community. To, in contrast, saw Vietnamese nationalism as a means to uplift the Hoa community and get them out of their isolated nature.

The relationship that individual Hoa have with the Vietnamese state defies simplistic descriptions. While they are officially defined as Vietnamese nationals of Chinese ethnic origin, the ethnic side of their hyphenated official identity as Hoa is often perceived as the emotional side, while the national side is perceived with deep

ambivalence. Even To, despite his calls for assimilation, is at heart an ethnic chauvinist with his beliefs about Hoa superiority. How does a community transition from being an overseas Chinese outpost to being an ethnic minority? The next section explores how both the Vietnamese state and the Hoa themselves use language and education to define identity.

IV. The Role of Chinese Language Education in the New Vietnam

Older Hoa inevitably brought up the high quality of Chinese education in Vietnam, when I asked about their memories of pre-‘75 life. Between 1954 and 1975, Chinese Nationalists (KMT), now exiled to Taiwan, played central roles in the education of the Hoa. Consequently, most Hoa currently in their forties and fifties received their Chinese education within KMT financed schools.

Like the *bang* members that I explored in Chapter 2, Chinese teachers invoke a time of progress, when the Hoa controlled their own politics, economics and culture. They also engage in particular forms of remembering, which serve to bolster their own legitimacy. Unlike the hui leaders, who derive power and status from largely male-dominated, sub-ethnic networks within the Hoa community, Chinese teachers privilege educational ties with Taiwan as markers of Chinese authenticity and, thus, social legitimacy.

Teacher Chen, aged 45, considered herself well-known throughout Cholon because of her teaching skills. Her talent was undeniable, but what made a stronger impression was her miniature stature—about four feet eight inches and eighty-five pounds--coupled with her volcano-like temper. She proudly told me of the times she

hit her adolescent male students, twice her weight, making them cry. She was well respected by parents tired of disciplining their children themselves, and thus never wanted for work as a private tutor. She also attracted a large number of adult students, mostly Hoa who wanted to improve their Mandarin, and some ethnic Vietnamese women who hoped to marry Taiwanese men. As one of her students, I was accorded a certain amount of respect. “With her, you’ll learn to read and speak Chinese just as well as a Taiwanese person,” others would say to me. (Only I seemed aware of the irony that I, a Taiwanese-American, would have to go to Vietnam and study with a Cantonese woman in order to transform myself into a fluent Taiwanese person.)

Teacher Chen viewed me, her only American born student, as another testament of her teaching skills. Delighted with my “accurate” (*biaozhun*) Taiwan-Mandarin accent (which she saw herself as refined), she would often take me around to visit other colleagues of hers. I was expected to make polite conversation about my time in Vietnam while emphasizing how much my understanding of Chinese culture had improved. When I didn’t follow such a script, Chen would fill in for me. Invariably, the other teachers responded with delight and nodded with approval. Although I made it clear that my family was not from Vietnam, they commonly remarked that it was good that I “came back” to learn about Chinese culture (*hui lai yan jiu Zhong guo wen hua*). They found it completely natural that I would be studying Chinese in Vietnam, and rarely, if ever, asked me about my Vietnamese studies.

For educated Hoa over forty, memories of life before 1975 often centered on the Chinese educational system. As I argued in the previous section, *hui* members

conceived of Cholon as both a financial and cultural center. Hoa teachers emphasize the latter. Unlike the hui members, whose claims to cultural legitimacy stem from their success as business tycoons, however, teachers invoke their ties to Taiwan as markers of their authority in matters pertaining to Chinese identity.

Liao is a middle-aged woman, somewhere between forty and forty-five. Her husband runs a computer importing company, in conjunction with a Taiwanese investor. Their office is the first floor of the Liao's home, in central Cholon. During the day, about a half dozen office workers, half Hoa and the other half Taiwanese, work at their computers. During the evening, Mrs. Liao teaches Vietnamese to the Taiwanese employees. "They like learning with me because I have the same education as they do. It's important for students to respect the teacher," she says.

After we chat for a bit, she pulls out her high school yearbook for me to see. She was among the last group to graduate from Chinese high school before liberation. Afterwards, there would be no more Chinese education for over a decade, and no high school level classes ever again. That is why our class remains so close, she says. We were the last group to squeeze out. As she turns the pages, she points to and gives a short commentary on a few students. This one escaped by boat and is now living in Australia, this one emigrated to Taiwan, this one organizes our yearly get-togethers...She stops at a portrait of her Taiwanese teacher, who at the time was a graying, benign looking man. "We really respected him. After he was kicked out in '75, he kept writing us and hoping to see us again. Just last year, he was finally able to get a visa to come back to visit."

She finds a carefully folded piece of paper in between two of the pages. Printed on it are some piano chords and lyrics in Chinese characters. At the top of the page is the Republic of China flag. She explains that this was the song they sang every morning, the same song that other Chinese children sang.

Teachers remember Cholon as an outpost of the Chinese “nation,” which centered not on China, but on Taiwan. For them, Taiwan represented the last stronghold of authentic Chinese culture, for the mainland had been corrupted by Communism. The KMT educators and advisors from Taiwan, who played active roles in supporting the anti-Communist, South Vietnamese regime, are remembered only in positive terms.

Their collective remembering of a vital and rigorous Chinese educational system is their primary attestation of their successful belonging to such an imagined community. Teacher Chen and her colleagues often sat around the faculty room, complaining about how different students are today than they were before 1975. Back then, she explained to me, students respected their teachers, and there was order in the classroom. Nowadays, students come and go as they please, and teachers have no control over them. Miss Ding, a soft-spoken teacher in her early sixties, remembered how strict school supervisors would be, spying on the teachers during class to see if they wrote the Chinese characters correctly or spoke only in Mandarin. Teachers faced harsh reprimands for failing to do either. This was good for the students, she said, for they didn’t have the situation they have nowadays of one teacher saying one thing, and another one teaching something else. “There was a good system before. Now, it’s just chaotic.”

Although they do not explicitly support Chinese nationalist politics, teachers continue to evoke KMT influence on language and culture in their memories of the past and in their desires for the future. Indicative of this is the refusal of many, such as Teacher Chen, to refer to Chinese as “Hoa yu,” or the “language of the Hoa people.” This term, Chen explained, is a new one, created by the state to indicate that the Hoa are a national minority, with their own minority language. Rather, Chen and her colleagues continue to refer to Chinese as “guo yu,” or the “national language.” The term “guo yu” came into use after 1911, as the KMT sought to define Mandarin as the uniting tongue of all Chinese nationals.

Despite the fact that Cantonese is the first language of most Hoa, only Mandarin is considered either guo yu or Hoa yu. This privileging of the “dialect” the KMT standardized as the uniting language of the Chinese people continues to be manifest in teachers’ strategies to recreate pre-’75 conditions.

During a two-day faculty trip to the beach side resort town of Vung Tao that I attended, the nostalgia for Chinese nationalist ideals concerning language, and struggles to reinvent them, could be seen in a generational context. There were two general groups of teachers, mostly women, who packed into the chartered bus for that trip. One group included younger teachers, averaging 25 years of age. The older group, which Teacher Chen was a part of, included teachers forty years and older. There were only three men out of the thirty or so teachers, including the school principal.

During mealtimes or recreational activities, the teachers naturally grouped themselves along this age divide. As someone closer in age to the younger women, I

had expected to be included in their activities. Instead, I found most of them shy and quiet around me, as opposed to the older teachers, who sought me out for conversation. I asked Chen and her older colleagues about this, as I had not encountered this type of shyness before in young adult Hoa. They all agreed that the younger teachers were not being unfriendly. Rather, they were afraid that I would be shocked at how poorly they spoke Mandarin, even though they taught it themselves. Most of them had been born around 1975, and thus their entire educations were spent either within the Vietnamese national system or within the constricted new Chinese language system. They end up teaching their students mainly in Cantonese, the home language for most Hoa.

How were young Hoa to learn *guo yu* if their teachers could not speak it properly, the older teachers complained among themselves. I asked why Cantonese isn't taught in the schools, since it, for the majority of Hoa, is the first language they learn. They seemed confused by my question. Cantonese is what our ancestors spoke in our *guxiang* (native land), answered Teacher Du, in an attempt to explain what they all saw as obvious. We can use Cantonese to explain Chinese (*zhong wen*), but it is not the language of China (*zhong guo hua*). Conceptions of Hoa identity thus continue to be tied to conceptions of Chinese nationality, originally fostered by the KMT. I sometimes met individuals who spoke several dialects, yet claimed they could not speak Chinese (*zhong wen*)—meaning they could not speak *guo yu*.

The desires of both parents and teachers to recreate pre-'75 conditions led Chen and her colleagues, in 1997, to petition the state to allow Chinese to be considered a national language, alongside Vietnamese. The Hoa have contributed so

much to Vietnam, Chen reasoned. Why shouldn't our language be recognized as equal to theirs? What the teachers sought was in fact the ability to put into practice their belief in Mandarin as the *guo yu*. They created a petition, which they brought to Chen Biao, the Hoa Communist Party member.

The petition got no further than Chen Biao, who immediately dismissed the request. Teacher Du, a colleague of Teacher Chen's, remarked that nobody was surprised. Chen Biao was Hoa himself, but his first loyalty was to the Communist Party. "He would sell us down the river for his own career," Du replied, using the English phrase. Teachers representing Chinese education within had to remain on cordial terms with him, but they frequently criticized him among themselves. One common grumbling was that he did not set a good example by having his own children educated in Chinese. Another issue of contention was that he was sent by the Vietnamese Communist Party to Beijing to be further educated in Chinese. The teachers were skeptical of the quality of learning he could have received in Communist China, pointing to his use of the simplified characters they believed corrupted the written language.

During an interview with me, Chen Biao brought up the issue of the petition himself as an example of the misunderstandings people like Teacher Chen had of their national allegiances. "They keep calling Chinese *guo yu*. Well, that's incorrect. Vietnamese is their *guo yu*." He explained, in an increasingly agitated tone, how the Hoa, as a national minority, had no grounds to claim that Chinese was a national language. Besides, the state already allows the Hoa to have Chinese language education up to the eighth grade, and for those who want to study further, they can

major in Chinese studies at the College of Foreign Languages. Isn't this a lot more than what they have in the U.S.? When I nodded deferentially, he smiled with satisfaction and relaxed his shoulders.

The teachers' failed attempt at civil action has resulted in two main reactions. The first was to stay in the system but work around the rules. Teacher Du was so frustrated with the curriculum Chen Biao mandated, which taught the simplified characters of Communist China and not the traditional complex characters, that she began to photocopy Taiwanese texts for her students. She received these texts from friends and family members who returned from abroad. Unlike the books Chen Biao allows, these texts teach Chinese as a native language. Teacher Du's goal is to teach her third and fourth graders as if they were third and fourth graders in Taiwan. She says there hasn't been a problem so far, as she suspects Chen Biao knows of her schemes but turns a blind eye to them so long as she does not publicly contradict him. Several of her colleagues were engaging in the same practices.

The second reaction was to leave the schools altogether, and attempt to regain cultural authority by bringing Chinese education into the home. As I will discuss further in the next chapter, Hoa parents arranged for their children to be educated surreptitiously in Chinese after 1975 by hiring private tutors. The phenomenon of home schooling among the Hoa has only grown, despite the state's lift on the banning of Chinese schools. Teacher Chen is thus able to find lucrative work tutoring students at home for a few hours a week. For many of these students, her tutorials constitute their primary form of education. As I mentioned earlier, parents accord Teacher Chen immense respect and responsibility over their children, for she is seen as able to mould

students into authentic Chinese speakers. Teacher Chen, as well as a growing number of other teachers disgruntled with the low pay and lack of autonomy within Chen Biao's school district, encourages Hoa parents, and their children, to think of the home as a more authentic site of learning than the schools. In the home, children can be properly taught to speak "just like the Taiwanese."

Despite these attempts to recapture their professions on the terms they remember as having prevailed before 1975, teachers ultimately saw themselves as increasingly marginalized in the battle to define Hoa culture and Hoa futures. Those who stayed with the state-approved Chinese schooling system found themselves restricted from teaching anything with historical, political or scientific content. They also found themselves in competition with an increasing number of ethnic Vietnamese teachers of Chinese. The Vietnamese Communist Party regularly sent approved candidates to Beijing as foreign exchange students. The Hoa teachers complained bitterly about the deteriorating standards of Chinese education.

What we see in this struggle between the teachers and the state is that the latter is attempting to become the authority in Chinese language proliferation, thus co-opting the influence and power that Cholon's educational leaders had enjoyed. Indeed, under the revamped Vietnamese educational system, Mandarin language classes are among the most popular classes for both ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese. I heard several Hoa complain that it is no longer possible to discern ethnicity by the ability to speak Chinese, as many Vietnamese are becoming sufficiently fluent through the university "foreign languages" offerings. Indeed, the notion that Mandarin is a foreign language that can be taught and mastered by anyone in Vietnam who is enrolled in

school is a definitive shift from the perception that Chinese language skills marked one as an overseas Chinese. This last section explores how the Vietnamese state further attempts to define Hoa community identity beyond language.

V. Branding Cholon as Vietnam's Chinatown

Since Doi Moi reforms were implemented in the late 1980s, the VCP has been courting foreign ethnic Chinese investors. One of their primary strategies has been through the portrayal of Cholon as a thriving entrepreneurial community, full of opportunity and promise. As part of that campaign to attract private foreign investment, Cholon has been rebranded as Ho Chi Minh City's "Chinatown." Ethnic Chinese tourists and entrepreneurs from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore are automatically encouraged to visit Cholon's sites and to stay in its hotels. The presence of overseas Chinese – particularly the Taiwanese - has led to a proliferation of mini-hotels, banquet halls, karaoke clubs, discos, tourist agencies, restaurants and brothels in Cholon. Hoa women fill the majority of work positions created by such businesses catering to the Taiwanese. As will be explored further in Chapter 6, Cholon is the natural home base for Taiwanese living in Vietnam, their first and often permanent stop where they set up their businesses and their networks.

An Dong is the most famous of Cholon's indoor markets, and the one that is commonly advertised in Chinese language tourist brochures. Vietnamese cyclo drivers know it as the Chinese market. An Dong covers one city block, and has three floors of privately run stalls selling clothing, textiles, foods, and household items. The vast majority of vendors working out of An Dong are in fact ethnic Vietnamese.

Historically, however, An Dong was primarily Hoa – and it is upon this history that its present-day branding as Chinatown’s premier Chinese market is built.

I spent many afternoons hanging out with Hoa vendors in the market, sitting on little stools in the crowded stalls, as goods were exchanged and snacks were ordered. The largest stalls were about five eight feet wide and five feet deep. These spaces were typically packed full of goods, piled on top of each other .The vendors would sometimes sit on top of their wares if that was possible. Otherwise they stood around in the narrow passageways, chatting with their neighbors. Because of the small size of each stall and the density of the market, each vendor was keenly aware of the activities around her. And because the vendors were grouped together in different sections of the market based on what they were selling, the owners had a clear sense of who their competitors were. The prices that another vendor charges, the goods she sells, the customers she gets – these are all common knowledge in each “community” of vendors. Ms. Yang on the first floor sold dried fruits, nuts, and coffees. I visited her often, sitting on the small stools in the midst of her bags and boxes of dried goods and coffee beans. When business was slow, we sipped young coconut juice and watched the action all around.

A walk through any An Dong reveals that the majority of working people are women. While men may control the largest Hoa businesses, Hoa women dominate in a variety of small-scale economic activities, many directly related to the influx of Overseas Chinese capital. "Women are better at dealing with customers than men. We are gentler with our words, and more able to persuade customers to accept our prices. Men usually lose business by being too inflexible about bargaining," Yang argued.

Most Hoa women have no choice but to work in order to support themselves and their families. "Some husbands come to help their wives set up their shops in the morning, and then they disappear to drink or gamble with their friends, leaving the women to make all the money," Yang said. She points around her, to the many single, middle-aged women who work in the market. "Lots of Hoa women choose to stay single rather than working to support a husband."

An Dong market also happens to be the most popular destination for Chinese speaking tourists. Thousands of Taiwanese used to come through every day, Yang explains, but the regional economic crisis has affected their numbers. Her biggest customers nowadays tend to be Hoa who have immigrated to Western countries, and who have returned to Vietnam to see relatives or to start businesses.

Yang was, as she described herself, the only Hoa in her immediate vicinity. All of the competitors around her were ethnic Vietnamese. She seemed to have a cordial relationship with her neighbors, but not a particularly friendly one. Yang was aware that there was high competition for tourist dollars, as the dried fruits and coffees made excellent take-home gifts. Yang's advantage was that she spoke both Mandarin and Cantonese, in addition to Vietnamese. Taiwanese tourists typically purchased from her because of the ease of communication. In addition, lots of her regular customers were Hoa who had emigrated to the West, and returned periodically to visit family.

While Yang courted Taiwanese customers, often calling out "welcome" in Mandarin as she spotted non-locals approaching, she also displayed a distinct disdain for them when they were not around. What bothered her the most was that Taiwanese tourists did not honor the bargaining process. What typically happens in this process is

that the vendor will suggest at some percentage higher than actual value. The customer will try to bargain down, and finally the two will reach a settlement and the sale will be made. The explicit goal is for the seller to feel like she has made a decent profit, and for the buyer to believe that she has gotten a bargain. Implicitly, the goal is for both sides to leave the transaction feeling that they have “saved face” – that they have not publicly compromised themselves beyond a certain point.

Yang complained that the Taiwanese didn’t understand these customs, despite the fact that they were Chinese and that other overseas Chinese seemed to understand the implicit rules for bargaining. The Taiwanese were so much richer than the locals in Vietnam, she argued. They should not be so stingy in the marketplace. Indeed, I observed on several occasions that Taiwanese, both male and female, seemed to be the most difficult among Yang’s customers. They would typically stop at her stall upon hearing her shout out welcoming phrases in Mandarin. But the tone they took with her tended to be rude and condescending – with no hint of appreciation that she spoke their language. Rather, they treated her no differently than the other Vietnamese, it seemed. They criticized the quality of her goods as a way to justify paying less, and complained that she was asking for too much.

Yang seemed to detest selling to the Taiwanese, but at the same time knew that her ability to communicate with them put her at an advantage over her neighboring colleagues. Her favorite customers were Hoa who had emigrated to the U.S. and other Western countries, and were returning to Vietnam to visit family. The tone and mode of interaction with such customers was totally different than with the Taiwanese. In these relationships, there was rarely any bargaining. Her overseas Hoa customers

trusted that she was being fair with her prices, and never haggled. In turn, she was always generous with them, throwing in free samples here and there. She explained to me after one such transaction that these customers understood how hard it was to make a living in Vietnam. The Taiwanese, on the other hand, treated her with suspicion, as if she were trying to cheat them.

Yang's biggest problem was her competition. When she first started her business eight years ago, there were almost no Vietnamese vendors competing with her. Now, not only is An Dong swamped with Vietnamese businesses, the owners also speak some Chinese, she complained. She credited her competitors with being clever enough to learn some Mandarin so that they could attract some of the thousands of visitors from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, who went through the market every week. "Tourists can't tell who's Hoa and who's not. That makes it difficult for me, the Chinese customers don't automatically come to my shop anymore."

While An Dong market continues to be promoted as Vietnam's premier "Chinese" market, the reality is that, by some estimates, the vendors are 60% ethnic Vietnamese – and that percentage is growing. Tourism agencies continue to tout An Dong as a symbol of Vietnam's ethnic Chinese entrepreneurial re-awakening, but the reality is that An Dong's "Chinese" character has been carefully constructed by state and local officials.

In fact, the Cholon district has, in general, been subject to a kind of hyper-branding as Vietnam's "Chinatown." When I returned for a visit in 2001, I was surprised to find a Chinese temple style arch that had been resurrected at Cholon's main thoroughfare. The arch was red with gold Chinese characters reading "Chinese

food street.” Red Chinese lanterns as well as little Vietnamese flags had been strung up on the electrical wiring up and down Cholon’s main streets. While Cholon was already well known as Ho Chi Minh City’s Hoa district, the new decorations seemed to place an official stamp of approval on this fact.

Cholon’s Hoa residents, however, often saw things differently. Teacher Chen, the leader of the rebellion against the VCP’s efforts to downgrade Chinese education, lamented what she viewed as the Vietnamese impact on her neighborhood. She pointed to the homes up and down her block as we stroll back from breakfast one morning. 17 out of her 19 immediate neighbors are Vietnamese, she complains. This was not the case before 1975, when everyone in her neighborhood was Hoa.

Vietnamese were encouraged by the VCP to take over the abandoned Hoa homes during the exodus of the late 1970’s. Chen says that her own family had to fight to keep their property. While they maintain civil relationships with her neighbors, “It’s not the same. Cholon isn’t the way it used to be. It’s just like Saigon now,” Chen says.

While official accounts laud the achievements of the Hoa, and play up the Chinese nature of Cholon’s markets, businesses, and tourist spots, ironically, the community sees itself in terms of decline. This disconnect reflects a tension between the Hoa themselves and how the state seeks to portray them. It also reflects a shift in the state’s approach towards its Hoa, from emphasizing complete assimilation to the current emphasis on ethnic entrepreneurialism.

VI. Conclusion: National Identity

Scholars of the Southeast Asian Chinese argue that in recent years, there has been a resurgence in expressions of Chinese identity. Those who conduct research across Southeast Asia note the growth in Chinese language schools, media sources, public celebrations, politicians, and businesses. The anti-Chinese policies and sentiments that had swept through Southeast Asia in the 1960's and 1970's seem to have subsided, allowing for the reemergence of ethnic communities and businesses.

In short, after decades of adapting their ethnicity to local political requirements and cultural norms – practicing “situational ethnicity” – the hitherto bicultural Chinese of Southeast Asia are suddenly reverting to open expressions of their Sinic culture and flaunting rather than hiding their commercial success. It is now not only socially acceptable but even socially and economically desirable to be Chinese. The ascent to power of democratically elected ethnic Chinese political leaders such as President Aquino of the Philippines, who, while president, made a highly publicized visit to her family's ancestral village in China's Fujian province, and Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai of Thailand appears to set the official seal of approval on overt Chinese ethnic identity. (Lim and Gosling in Chirot and Reid, 1997: 291).

China's economic rise and increased influence in the East Asian region is often cited as one reason for this shift. The Southeast Asian regimes of the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia have sought to stay on friendly terms with their gigantic neighbor. The treatment of their ethnic Chinese minorities or, as China still refers to them, the “overseas Chinese,” has been an area of contention between China and the various Southeast Asian nations. Allowing for more economic and cultural freedom among its ethnic Chinese minorities is one way the Southeast Asian regimes can stay on civil terms with Beijing.

Scholars have also pointed to the political assimilation of the Southeast Asian Chinese as a factor in the more liberal stance the governments have taken with regards to expressions of Chinese culture. Southeast Asian Chinese tend to be at least the second or third generation born in their respective countries, largely educated within the Thai, Malaysian, Indonesian, and Philippine school systems. Issues regarding nationality are no longer salient, it seems, as PRC nationality is neither desired nor pragmatically feasible for the Southeast Asian Chinese. Instead, ethnic Chinese seem to have an active voice in mainstream politics throughout the region, participating in major political parties and even, in the case of the Philippines and Thailand, reaching the highest levels of elected office.

This chapter, however, questions some of these assumptions behind the resurgence of Chinese identity as it pertains to Vietnam. The experience of Chinese ethnicity has been mediated and affected by the various efforts of the VCP to assimilate and domesticate the Hoa into their national whole. The Hoa remember life before 1975 as one in which they lived independently of the social and political contexts of the Vietnamese. The decade after the fall of Saigon saw rapid and often violent efforts to stamp out Chinese identity and create a consistent vision of Vietnamese nationality. The next decade, after Doi Moi market reforms were implemented in 1986, saw the gradual relaxation of anti-Chinese policies and the VCP's attempts to actually portray Cholon as a thriving community due to Chinese cultural practices and entrepreneurial tendencies. The current image of the Hoa in general and of Cholon in particular is, however, at odds with how the Hoa view their own community.

The current boom in Chinese language education and cultural studies is, in fact, driven as much by ethnic Vietnamese interest in it for business purposes as it is by the Hoa themselves. The vitality and economic force within Cholon can thus be misleading. While it has at its core the legacy of Hoa entrepreneurialism, it is also very much directed and orchestrated by the state. Cholon's economic reemergence is thus not entirely due to Hoa endeavors, but also due to the careful public relations efforts that the VCP has put forth in order to attract overseas Chinese investment.

Amidst all of these changes, there is not a consistent evolutionary path that Hoa identity seems to be taking. Younger Hoa are not necessarily more assimilated than their elders. The trauma of persecution after 1975 has influenced parents' decisions to disengage from Vietnamese society even more and not put their children in Vietnamese schools (Chapter 5 explores this further). Middle-aged Hoa, such as To, Cai, and Thanh, reflect differing relationships individuals have with the nation-state. For some, like Thanh, Vietnamese nationality is a pragmatic fact that brings with it obligations to regulations and laws. For Cai, true Vietnamese nationality is impossible for those who are Hoa. And for To, Vietnamese nationality offers freedom from the isolationist attitudes that he attributes to the Hoa community.

This chapter also explored the interrelated nature of Vietnamese national and Chinese transnational identities. Through its Doi Moi program, the VCP has actively courted overseas Chinese investment through portraying the Hoa as a bridge between the domestic and international economies. In fact, being a productive transnational Chinese entrepreneur who brings in Taiwanese investment is now part of the state's official narrative around the contribution of the Hoa to the nation's progress. We see

here that national and transnational identities are not necessarily in tension, but in fact, may overlap in certain ways due to the agenda of the regime in power.

As was explored in this chapter, Hoa community development depends on much more than the behaviors and values of the Hoa individuals themselves. The economic and political agendas of the Vietnamese state, the relationship between Vietnam and China, and the continued salience of memories of persecution all influence the daily decisions Hoa make about cultural practices. In addition, the Hoa are making these decisions within the context of a country that is moving towards global integration, as Vietnam opens its market and encourages more international exchange. The Hoa are no longer the sole owners of all things “Chinese”, as the Vietnamese co-opt the symbols of Hoa identity through learning Mandarin, setting up shop in An Dong, living in Cholon, and courting business partners from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

Chapter 5: Transnational Families and the New Homeland

I. Introduction

After the Vietnamese Communists defeated the U.S.-backed South Vietnam regime in 1975, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fled or attempted to flee the country. They feared persecution due to their association with the South Vietnam government or for their entrepreneurial activities. The Hoa community was especially vulnerable due to the high concentration of capitalistic activity within Cholon. Border skirmishes and geo-political competition between Vietnam and China further intensified anti-Hoa sentiment within the new Vietnamese regime, and the Hoa were portrayed as a nationalistic threat due to their “allegiance” to Beijing. Throughout the late 1970’s, hundreds of thousands fled by boat to neighboring Southeast Asian ports, where they remained in camps—sometimes for years—until allowed to enter the U.S., as well as Canada and Australia, as refugees. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, emigration out of Vietnam continued, but mainly through the sponsorship of those who had already made it to the West. The total number of Hoa who fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon is estimated at 600,000—one third of their total population. As a consequence of this mass exodus, nearly all of Cholon’s Hoa have immediate family members, including parents, siblings, and children, living abroad.

People are allowed to leave through two means. First, immediate family members can sponsor them. Statistics show that about 55% of Ho Chi Minh City’s total Chinese households had relatives living abroad. About half of the Hoa living abroad are in North America. Second, they can marry foreign passport holders. This

option for emigration is far more common among Hoa women. How quickly the paperwork is approved depends on several factors, including the age of the applicant and his/her relationship with the sponsor. For example, when sponsoring family members, parents and unmarried children under the age of 18 are given primary consideration. Siblings sponsoring siblings takes longer—up to ten years, according to some sources. Sponsorship through marriages takes about a year to complete.

Within the first few weeks of my fieldwork, I noticed an incredible consistency: the majority of Hoa I met wanted to emigrate, usually to the United States, Australia, or Canada. Some had concrete plans and timelines, whereas others only hoped. For them, the West held the promise of financial and political security, where they would no longer fear random taxes, corruption, and an unreliable legal system. Others wanted a nationality that would allow them to travel freely. Almost everybody wanted to be reunited with their immediate family members, who had escaped during the exodus.

Places such as San Jose, Orange Country's "Little Saigon" and Toronto figured prominently in people's geographies of everyday life. The one consistent characteristic of my interaction with the Hoa, regardless of their age and socio-economic status, was that they were all eager to speak of the sisters, brothers, grandparents, children, uncles, or aunts who lived in such places. My having "come from" the U.S. gave them instant permission to invoke those ties. It also served to quickly deepen our bonds, for now I could be placed in their imaginary geographies, in which California was a much closer and more relevant place than Thailand, India, or even China. And, being "placeable" in their familial geographies meant that I could play a role in these familial

communications. I was asked to carry packages, letters, and pictures back and forth. While these things could have been mailed and received without my involvement, the fact that I personally delivered them intensified the meaning of the goods. Along with the goods came my news of how the other family members were doing: “What does their house look like in the U.S.? Are they rich? What do they eat? Do they drive a car?”

On the surface, people spoke of their immediate family members abroad with a tone of normalcy, as if things had always been this way and could not be imagined any differently. As my relationships deepened with certain respondents, I began to find that the normalcy was not because of a passive acceptance of the situation. Rather, people were cognizant of and coping with these familial situations, and this transnational familial state infused so much of their daily decision making. Oftentimes people carried letters in their pockets, which they pulled out to show me the addresses of their loved ones: “They are in a place called California. Is that close to San Francisco, where you live?” And then they would often reveal that they were either hoping to join their relatives or send their children to live in America. I found most people in various stages of engaging in sponsorship paperwork, including the very primary stages of hoping that their relatives would soon begin the process.

What struck me most was the intensity of the desire to leave Vietnam. On one occasion, an informant asked me to marry her son and bring him to the U.S. On another, my Chinese teacher, who was 45, gave me a set of photos of herself and asked me to find her an American husband. While most people were not as explicit, I was nonetheless often asked advice on immigration procedures. For the Hoa, the fall

of South Vietnam to the Communists figures prominently in their life histories. For those who were already adults in the 1970's, the Communist takeover is a social memory that is used to explain the chaos, lack of opportunity they perceive, and their desire to leave. For younger Hoa, born around or after the time of the fall of Saigon, the outcomes of the fall, including the creation of dispersed families, and the sense of impermanence fostered by their parents and schooling system, structure their everyday choices.

In this chapter, I explore Hoa personal and social behaviors that are linked to the possibility (realistic or not) of leaving Vietnam, which in turn have been fostered by the mass emigration to the West and the creation of transnational families. The particularities of the Hoa experience call into question several key pillars within diasporan theory.

First is the idea that diasporan Chinese identity is dependent on the ongoing and consistent notion of a center, or “homeland.” This homeland may be a tangible reality in terms of a geographical location that overseas Chinese visit, have family members living in, or send remittances back to. This homeland may be more symbolic – a “place” that signifies origin and a place to return to someday. After the fall of Saigon and the persecution of the Hoa community, Hoa orientations shifted from the homeland, which did nothing to protect them, to a kind of aspirational destination, where they imagined their relatives living in peace and prosperity. This shift calls into question the salience of the concept of a singular homeland – namely China - in defining diasporan identities.

Second is the issue of *mobility*. Diasporan theory is based on somewhat dichotomous notions of people's physical, social, and economic mobility. At one extreme are the highly mobile "astronauts"—as Aihwa Ong calls them—and professionals that the Taiwanese in Chapter 6 represent. At the other extreme are the immobile – those poor in resources and connections. What current theory does not address is the state of being in-between. The Hoa are neither fully mobile nor fully immobile, but live within the *possibility of mobility*. This state of being in limbo while looking to a future elsewhere has created particular strategies around education, work, and marriage. This chapter will explore how the mass emigration of Hoa to other countries has affected those individuals who were not able to leave, thus creating the conditions for both evolving notions of the homeland, and new social forms based on the promise of mobility.

II. Left Behind

In March of 1978, the communist government ordered a sweeping campaign against Cholon's "capitalistic class." The police and party cadres ransacked shops and houses and confiscated goods from about 50,000 retailers, nearly all Hoa. Families who were stripped of their properties without prior notice or explanation were ordered to move to the "new economic zones" (Chang, 1982). There, they were given shovels and a three to six month food supply in return for developing a tract of land in the zone to which they were assigned. Some wealthy Hoa traders and industrialists were placed on trial for "economic crimes" against people (Duiker, 1987). Most Chinese schools and newspaper agencies were closed down. Hoa were not able to find jobs

within the new system. Children were denied admittance to Vietnamese schools or colleges. At the same time, young men in the whole country were drafted into the armed forces and sent to the Cambodian-Vietnam border to fight against the Khmer Rouge soldiers (Chang, 1982).

The discriminatory policies in Vietnam from 1977 to 1979 created a mass exodus of Hoa refugees. People who could afford to pay were permitted by the government to leave in crowded and unsafe fishing boats. However, anyone with access to a boat quickly saw an entrepreneurial opportunity, and promised safe passage for a family's life savings. Over the next few years, hundreds of thousands of Hoa crossed the South China Sea to seek asylum in neighboring Southeast Asian countries, and eventual opportunities for emigration elsewhere. The number of ethnic Chinese people fleeing Vietnam was estimated to be between 400,000 and 600,000 from 1978 to 1980 (Hess, 1990).

This mass exodus had a profound effect on Hoa family structures. The expense of securing a place on a boat, and the perils of the journey meant that whole families usually could not go. In some cases, parents sent some of their children, usually the older male ones; in other cases, husbands left and wives stayed behind. In still other cases, family members split up, leaving on different boats in order to elude authorities. Some made it out, while others were caught. As a consequence, nearly everyone in Cholon has at least one immediate family member living abroad, typically in the U.S., Canada, or Australia – the countries most willing to accept refugees from Vietnam.

Like many others that I knew, Du Min Hua had family members scattered all over the world, while she and a younger sister remained in Cholon. I called her Teacher Du, as a sign of respect for her years teaching Chinese language to both children and adults. Below is Teacher Du's narrative about the effects of 1975 on her family.

When the Communists took over, several of my family members took a boat from a province in the south. At that time, it was partly legal – the government allowed us Hoa to leave since they wanted to get rid of us. It was fourteen pieces of gold per head. It was quite a lot of money. When my family reached some port in Indonesia, they stayed there for sixty six days. They were driven away, and in the middle of the high seas, they met a German ship. At that time, all the engines of the boat had broken down, so it was a very dangerous situation. The German ship took them in, and put them in some camp, for just a week, in Indonesia. They were there for a week to carry out the procedures.

Later, all the people on the ship went to Germany. My eldest brother is nine years older than I am. He's probably fifty eight. But he's already gone, from throat cancer. The next brother is fifty six. He's in Guam. I don't know what he's doing exactly, but because it's a tourist area, he's doing something in tourism. He speaks English now. He used to be an interpreter in the US army. My older sister is in Germany. She's fifty two. She takes care of my mother, who has Alzheimer's disease.. I am number four. My youngest sister is forty four. She and I are the only ones left in Vietnam.

Only eventually, after I get to know her over a few months, did Teacher Du talk about the emotional side of having immediate family members in different countries, while she and her younger sister cannot emigrate. Despite the drastic change in her familial circumstances, she describes her situation as normal, characteristic of most Hoa families who lived in the south during the Communist takeover.

At the beginning, I was quite disappointed. But now, I'm used to the situation. I don't want to go to Germany because I don't speak German. Maybe ten or fifteen years ago, I wanted to go somewhere else, to an English or French speaking country. I see Vietnam as my

home, for now. Maybe ten or twenty years before, I was still eager to leave Vietnam. But now, it's okay. Before, I wanted to go someplace else. But my sister and brother didn't see that it was easy to move to another country. They were happy to stay here. I wanted them to move from Germany to another country, such as the US. But they said that it was not so easy. I wanted them to move to the states because it's not so easy to make a living in Germany. And besides, personally, I wanted to go to the States. I wanted them to sponsor me.

Teacher Du talks about both hope and disappointment around family sponsorship. Such themes permeated the attitudes of nearly every Hoa that I met. Each one had nurtured the hope and promise of going abroad through family sponsorship. And yet, because of strict immigration policies set by places such as the U.S., they were typically unable to leave Vietnam.

At that time (post 1975) everyone was rushing to the S*tates or to Australia. It's quite alright there if you're hardworking, you can make a comfortable life there. You can make some money. Now it's quite difficult. Life is alright here. If I had the chance to go now, I'm afraid I wouldn't. Just situation for travel is okay, but to stay there...I don't know the social there. Life is very expensive there. So, at this time, it's not so easy to get citizenship and a job. Life here is quite alright.

Teacher Du seemed to accept that it was not in her destiny to leave Vietnam. She justified this by saying that life abroad could be difficult and expensive, whereas things in Vietnam were familiar and easier. Such rationalizations were common among other Hoa as well, but, as I discovered, often hid deep disappointments. After Teacher Du and I had grown quite close, she suddenly started speaking of her mother, who has Alzheimer's disease. On one occasion, she started to cry, saying that her mother probably would not remember her anymore. At this time, she expressed a deep desire to see her family again.

Teacher Du's family rarely returned to Vietnam due to the mother's condition. For others, family members returning to Vietnam for visits often evoked mixed feelings among those who could not leave. These visits evoked excitement through the reuniting of family members. They also evoked wonder, as returnees brought back exotic stories of life in places such as Orange County. But most of all, they tended to evoke anxiety, as these visits only underscored the failure of those still in Vietnam to emigrate. Returnees brought messages of stability, refuge, and safety. Nobody in the U.S. could arbitrarily take what you've earned from you. The continual return of overseas relatives refueled these conceptions of what it meant to leave Vietnam, what it meant to become a citizen of a Western nation, and why they must continue to seek refuge.

For Mr. Cai, aged 55, visits from relatives abroad were opportunities to convince them of how dire his own situation had become. As was explored in Chapter Four,, Mr. Cai was a Chinese language teacher in Cholon before 1975. He taught traditional Chinese poetry as well as philosophy and literature. After the Communist takeover, he was arrested in 1978 on charges of fostering Chinese nationalism among his students. Cai adamantly argues that he was only teaching Chinese literature – and was not at all interested in politics. He was jailed for a year, and then eventually put into a labor camp in the countryside. Released in 1986, he believes his activities are still watched and his phone is being tapped. The police come to his home every few months to question him about his activities. He calls Vietnam a “big prison” from which he wants to escape.

Cai's sister, lives in the United States, was in the process of sponsoring his immigration in the late 1990's. When I knew Cai in 1999, he hoped to be able to leave Vietnam within the year. He believed that his testimony over having been jailed would expedite his application among U.S. authorities. I asked why he was not sponsored sooner, as he had been out of jail for twelve years by the time I had met him. He said that his sister did not realize the severity of his situation until recently.

When I returned to Vietnam in 2003, I found out through mutual friends that Cai had passed away suddenly from a kidney infection. He died without ever having the opportunity to leave the country he called his jail. While Cai's history of imprisonment and psychological torture made his case for leaving Vietnam quite powerful, other Hoa who were not jailed also viewed their stay as one forced upon them, rather than the outcome of free choice.

Such themes were often – as in the case of Teacher Du – hidden until some event or thought revealed the anxiety and sadness underneath. People initially speak of their overseas relatives in such an even, happy tone when I first broach the subject. They are eager to show me pictures, letters, and to talk about the accomplishments of their overseas family members. Gradually, certain details emerge: "They used to send money, but don't so often anymore. They said they'd sponsor me, but I haven't seen the paperwork yet. They seem to be so rich there, with their own house, but they don't help any of us out. When they come back to visit, they expect us to pay for everything." These bitter feelings are often unexpected, coming out at awkward moments, breaking the typical good natured and optimistic narratives about family members abroad.

During one such moment, I was sitting with Mrs. Hu, the mother of a young man who had placed his hopes on going abroad to join his uncle, aunt, grandmother and cousins. But the years went by, and the family members never sent the money needed to ensure the sponsorship. Mrs. Hu, who ran a lingerie stall in the An Dong market, suddenly broke down crying on one of the days I was visiting her. It surprised me, as she was always so cheerful, so generous, and so optimistic. She had even offered to let me stay with her family at one point. She said that she felt so powerless as a mother, not being able to give her son the things she had promised him. She had tried to send him to the U.S., but the relatives there just couldn't understand why they wanted to leave Vietnam – even though they had done the same thing years back. Mrs. Hu blamed herself for this outcome. When they last came to visit, she had treated them all very well. She wanted to show them that they were doing well, that they weren't the poor relatives back in Vietnam. The plan backfired in that the relatives all believed they were doing much better than they could if they went to the states.

Mrs. Hu was afraid of appealing to her husband, who didn't want to "beg" his own mother and sister for help. Quietly, he once told me that he blamed himself for their predicament. He and Mrs. Hu were actually Hoa refugees from Cambodia. They crossed over into Vietnam during the terrifying Pol Pot reign, when tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese, were slaughtered. In order to avoid being discovered in Vietnam, he took on a new family name. After his family members settled in the U.S., it became impossible to prove his relationship with them because of his name change, and thus he was denied emigration rights as an immediate family member. Every time I visited, Mr. Hu made it a point to show me the document sent to him by the U.S. immigration

authorities. I am not sure whether or not he remembered that I already knew this story already, or whether his repetition of it was more for himself than for me. In any case, the letter served as a reminder of what he considered his family's bitter destiny.

The notion of being left behind deeply permeated Hoa perceptions of their lives in Vietnam. As I explored in an earlier chapter, the Hoa felt a great sense of betrayal in that neither the government of Mainland China or Taiwan helped them during the period of persecution in the late 1970's. Both governments promised to send ships to save their "overseas nationals", with neither fulfilling on what they said. This chapter explores the intense, but often hidden, effects of being left behind by their own family members. Those who could not escape are continually affected by the lives of those who did. Whether it is the real or fantasized opportunity to emigrate, the awareness of life outside of Vietnam through visits, letters, and gifts, or the remittances sent from abroad – overseas relatives create continual connection to distant lands and diasporan families. These connections, as I will show in this chapter, affect Hoa lifestyles and behaviors profoundly. They are not just opportunities for small talk about loved ones living elsewhere. They are among the most salient driving forces for the shaping of Hoa society today.

III. A generation in limbo

The literature about the period after the Communist takeover of South Vietnam has largely been dominated by accounts of the "refugee" experience. This is due to two reasons. First, there was intense media coverage of what would come to be known as the "boat people." These were the South Vietnamese who fled the country, often in

dangerous and demoralizing conditions upon refugee boats. Second, after 1975, Vietnam was for the most part closed off to foreign researchers. What we know of that period of Vietnam's history, and the Hoa situation specifically, has largely depended upon refugee and military accounts.

But what of those who could not leave? A refugee is defined as someone who flees for safety, usually to a foreign country, in times of political upheaval and war. Those who missed the boats, couldn't afford the boats, or weren't chosen by their parents as the ones who should leave, experience a kind of refugee existence as well. For them, the promised land is still at bay, and they continue to lead lives in limbo, as if trapped in refugee camps. They develop certain survival strategies and psychological strategies that involve seeing their current circumstances as temporary, like an "in-between" camp in which they must make do and continue with daily life, but is in no way viewed as permanent. They may seem prosperous, settled, and functioning like other citizens, but underneath the surface of Hoa normalcy lie the continuing search for permanency and for refuge.

The majority of Hoa I met were not suffering or in physical danger, but they nonetheless believe that their lives would be better if they could emigrate to the West. For the Hoa, Vietnam represents yet another country, like Taiwan and Mainland China that betrayed them. They look to the West, as a kind of aspirational land where they can live in peace, without fear of persecution. Most of all, they look to the West as a place where they can grow prosperous. Their impressions of the West come from various sources – t.v. shows, pirated DVD's, and magazines. But most of all, their impressions come from their returning family members.

The normalization of economic and social ties by 1995 gradually increased the number of individuals from the Vietnamese diaspora who returned as tourists or to visit family members. Remittances grew dramatically from only \$35 million in 1991 to more than \$2 billion by 2002 (Nguyen 2002). The Vietnamese government estimates that currently more than one million *Viet Kieu*, a term referring to Vietnamese migrants living outside of Vietnam, return annually for tourism and to visit relatives, a dramatic increase from the 87,000 who came in 1992, and from the only 8000 who visited in 1988.

The majority of Hoa households are supported by remittances sent from overseas family members. These remittances range from \$100 every few months to a few hundred dollars a month. For the senders, this is typically not a large burden. For the receivers, even a few hundred dollars a year often makes the difference between struggle and comfort. Being the recipient of remittances is considered something to be proud of. People do not hesitate to tell others how much their relatives sent them – the more, the better. The ones with relatives who send more money live entirely off of these remittances. There is a certain kind of status associated with having remittances sent—they signify that one had ties abroad. These ties represent potential for mobility. That potential for mobility is not necessarily realistic in all cases, but it does serve as a kind of social capital.

Having such familial ties abroad means that one is potentially mobile. But these remittances also have tangible effects on Hoa society. A hundred to two hundred dollars every month allows a family in Vietnam to live comfortably without working. No matter the time of day, Cholon's outdoor cafes are filled with men and

women who would, in other countries, be expected to have full time jobs. As an anthropologist, I was initially surprised at how available working aged people were, even in the middle of the day.

Such remittances, and the familial ties that prompted them, deeply affect Hoa society beyond the issue of work. For older Hoa, those who remembered the trauma of 1975, and the persecution of their community, the remittances were a reminder that their lives in Vietnam were inherently insecure, and that some of them had managed to find financial and political security elsewhere. Mr. Cai, the teacher who had been jailed for over a decade, lived off of the money sent by his sister in the U.S. He spent his days reading up on his beloved Chinese literature, rather than worrying about work. But while this situation would seem relaxed and idyllic from an outsider's perspective, Cai wanted nothing more than to be able to join his sister in the U.S., even if it meant a drop in his standard of living. For him, being supported by his relatives abroad was a reminder of his own inability to work in his field, and the politicized nature of being a Chinese language teacher.

For parents of school-aged children, familial ties abroad and the financial benefits these brought were reminders that their children's futures could potentially be elsewhere. These parents had their own, firsthand memories of the period of persecution, and the mad rush to vacate Cholon. They may have even tried to leave themselves, but were in one way or another unable to do so. Hoa parents with children born in the 1970's have tended to prepare their children for life somewhere else, rather than life in Vietnam. The idea that their present lifestyles were impermanent was most pronounced in the educational choices parents made for their children.

After 1975, the government closed down all Chinese language schools in Cholon. Previously, the Hoa were allowed to live almost autonomously in Cholon, funding their own banks, hospitals, religious centers, and schools. After 1975, the Communist government declared that the Hoa should not be considered overseas Chinese nationals, but Vietnamese citizens. The only officially recognized schools would be the Vietnamese public schools. For nearly a decade after 1975, any privately funded Chinese language schools were explicitly illegal. After the Doi Moi reforms in the mid-1980's, and the opening of Vietnam to foreign investment, the teaching of Chinese language was no longer illegal. However, Chinese was considered a foreign language, and could not replace a proper education within the Vietnamese system.

Despite this, Hoa parents continued their efforts to have their children educated in Chinese, despite the illegality (in Chapter Four, I explore the strategies of a particular group of Chinese language teachers). In many cases, they hired private tutors into their homes and made do with ad hoc educational methods. By not putting their children in the public Vietnamese schools, they made it impossible for the children to ever enter Vietnam's university system. The ad hoc, in-home schooling emphasized Chinese language and literature. Math, science, geography, and other standardized topics were inconsistently emphasized. And most importantly, Hoa youths educated in this manner were left on their own to learn proper Vietnamese speaking and writing. Many of the young adult Hoa that I knew had the equivalent of 2nd or 3rd grade educations in Chinese, and despite having been born in Vietnam, had poor Vietnamese skills. My own Vietnamese language teachers often warned me to

not spend too much time with the Hoa, as I would develop their strange accent and bad grammar.

Vi, a young Hoa man who lived with his family in the heart of Cholon, exemplified the kinds of choices and life strategies that defined his generation of Hoa. When I first met Vi, Mr. and Mrs. Hu's son, he was 22 years old, a recent graduate of Chinese junior high school. He was taking privately run English and computer classes. He had an aunt and grandmother who lived in California, and he hoped to soon be sponsored by them. But such plans were thwarted as there was no way to prove their familial relationships due to the Hu's name change and missing birth certificates. Mrs. Hu began planning to send her son abroad as a student, rather than applying for him to immigrate. This was possible if the sponsoring person could provide a \$20,000 guarantee for the student.

Two years later, in 1998, Vi still had not been granted a visa. Mrs. Hu's lingerie business had taken a downturn since 1997, and Mr. Hu was unemployed. They had not been able to save up the money they thought they could a few years earlier, when Vietnam's economic situation was more optimistic. Furthermore, as Mrs. Hu revealed to me, the grandmother in the United States had not followed through on her promise to help Vi by putting up some of the sponsorship money. Mrs. Hu was too embarrassed to ask her mother-in-law again, not wanting to appear like a money-grubbing relative. Mr. Hu just fell deeper into his drinking.

Vi would not give up hope, though, and neither would his mother. Although her son was in his mid-twenties, Mrs. Hu did not pressure him to find work.

Meanwhile, she managed several small side businesses in addition to her lingerie store, in the hopes of earning enough money to send him abroad as a student.

Vi was never placed in Vietnamese schools. His parents, thinking they would eventually emigrate, had him schooled entirely in Chinese: “Why learn Vietnamese—it’s not a commonly spoken language around the world, and this is only their temporary residing place.” Because of the ban on Chinese language schools throughout the eighties, Vi was largely educated by private tutors, who came to his home and taught him a few times a week. When Chinese language learning was reinstated in the late eighties, Vi continued his schooling, along with other Hoa around his age. At the age of 21, he graduated from junior high school. The fact that he was much older than his schooling would indicate is not an unusual situation for Hoa of his generation, whose schooling was typically ad-hoc due to the tumult of the war and familiar dislocation.

After graduating, Vi began taking adult English courses, where I was teaching. He had a group of friends there—all Hoa—who seemed like high school graduates to me, enjoying the summer before college or “real life” began. They were all in their early twenties, and had gone as far as they could in the Chinese language schooling system, but were beginning to realize they were unemployable in Vietnam’s rapidly growing economy. Vi continued to take English language courses, telling people that he was going to join his relatives in California sometime soon. When I first knew him, the possibility seemed tangible. All his grandmother had to do was sponsor him and put up \$20,000 as a guarantee. He could then move to the U.S., and work for his

uncle's computer store. In the meantime, he would take some English and computer classes, and otherwise enjoy himself and wait until the time came.

The putting off of work is another characteristic of Vi's generation of young adult Hoa. During the late 1990's, Vietnam was abuzz with energy and optimism as foreign investment increased yearly, and young adults were able to find lucrative work in global companies. I found, however, a distinct difference between the attitudes of young ethnic Vietnamese adults, and their Hoa counterparts. For the former, graduating from university with some English language education under their belts was a first step towards a well-paying office job. The young adults Vietnamese that I knew were striving towards white-collar work. For them, there was nothing more desirable than entering a multinational corporation and working one's way up the corporate ladder, learning new things along the way.

For Hoa of the same age range, the priorities and options were differently defined. For Vi's generation, finding white collar work like their Vietnamese peers was not an option. They had neither the university degrees nor the language skills to do so. And, more often than not, they did not have the political and social ties within the Vietnamese business community to get a foot in the door. But most significantly, their families encouraged them to disregard Vietnam as the site for their future lives. Any energy put into establishing a career there would be wasted. As Vi wholeheartedly believed, it was better to just hang out and wait for the visa paperwork to be approved.

In addition, there was a strong bias towards entrepreneurship rather than salaried work within the Hoa community. This bias is partially based on Hoa history in

Vietnam. As was explored in Chapter One, the Hoa were, since the 1800's, Vietnam's entrepreneurial elite, dominating in the region's trade with the colonial powers as well as neighboring markets. The persecution of Hoa business owners after 1975 changed Vietnam's entrepreneurial landscape, however, and as private businesses reemerged in the 1990's, the Hoa faced strong Vietnamese competition. For Hoa of Vi's generation, however, owning and running one's own business, whether it be in products or services, was the "safest" career choice one could make. A business could be largely hidden from the state, depending on one's reporting methods, and thus could protect the owner from being taxed. A business was also seen as something potentially exportable, so if one did emigrate, the business could be taken with him. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, entrepreneurialism was viewed as an important part of the Hoa community. Being one's own boss, or at least working within a family owned business, was preferable to working in a corporation where one did not have close, social ties.

Two years after I first met Vi, I returned to Vietnam to find that his chances for emigration had dimmed considerably. As a 26-year old, he was well beyond the age when most Vietnamese men began working full time or were studying at the university level. Vi was not inclined to pursue the former, and was unable, due to his lack of a formal Vietnamese education, to pursue the latter. By this time, he had given up his English studies, and had started his own small computer graphics business. He shared a small space in central Cholon with two other young men. His mother had put up the money for him to rent the space—a hefty price for a prime location on one of Cholon's main boulevards. He seemed to have only a few clients, for whom he

printed out business cards and advertisements. According to his mother, he was only able to make some pocket money.

Soon after, Vi closed his business, and started studying again. He was taking a certificate course in business, taught in English, Mandarin and Cantonese. He hoped that through getting this certificate, which was marketed as a college equivalency course, he would be able to move into the realm of salaried work with an international company. Unable any longer to resist the pull of entering mainstream Vietnamese life, Vi gradually and quietly gave up on the idea that he would join his relatives in the U.S.

Marriage was another area that Hoa put off in order to stay focused on emigrating. Vi's parents had, for many years, discouraged him from developing any romantic interest while still in Vietnam, fearing that the "heart would keep the body from leaving." This behavior around delaying marriage or romantic was yet another common strategy among the Hoa to support the belief that Vietnam was not their permanent home. Miss Du, the schoolteacher whose family lived in Germany, had several suitors when she was in her 30's. But, as she put it, this was when her family had just left Vietnam as boat people, and were getting settled abroad. There was still hope that she would be able to join them, and she did not want anything to make the situation more difficult. Now in her 50's, she is coming to terms with the reality that her emigration paperwork has been rejected several times. She believes it is too late to find a life partner now, and is considering adopting a child. "Who will take care of me when I'm old? I have no one here besides my younger sister, and she hasn't worked a day in her life."

Younger Hoa women were also putting off marriage, but for very different reasons. In the next section, I explore how the strategies of Hoa women differed from Hoa men, due to the possibility that had for emigration through marriage.

IV. Transnational marriages

Young Hoa women – those in their early twenties– were equally affected by the knowledge that their close relatives had escaped Vietnam, and that they should also hope for their futures to be elsewhere. Hoa women, however, also had options that were not available to men, and this was reflected in some very different behaviors.

Miss Yang, a 23 year old student and friend of Vi's, explained it this way. "Boys like Vi are the pride and joy of their families, and so everybody expects that they will be able to go to America and make lots of money. But parents are more careful with daughters. They don't trust that we'll be okay going off all by ourselves to a foreign country, unless we are married already. So girls should get a good education and a good job, and find nice husbands with foreign passports."

For women like Yang, Vietnam was a place to prepare one's self for life abroad as a wife. These differing expectations also affected mutual perceptions among Hoa men and women. Young women like Yang thought Vi and his peers were "losers." While they were fine for hanging out as friends, there was absolutely no romantic interest between the Hoa men and women in this group of about a dozen friends. Yang and her female friends described the men as spoiled and unrealistic. "Their moms baby them and don't let them grow up," the women complained to me, one evening when we met for coffee without the men. Young men like Vi were seen

as uneducated and lacking in ambition and practical skills. The men, likewise, were discouraged by their parents from seeking serious love interests in Vietnam, as that could interfere with their emigration mindset.

Miss Mai, a 25 year old professional, reflected these views. Mai is fluent in Mandarin but also university educated in the Vietnamese system. She works in a Malaysian trading company as an executive assistant. Mai had a polished and sophisticated demeanor – it was clear she was used to interacting with a wide range of people from different countries. We often spoke about love, as she was interested in finding a boyfriend. Her previous love interest was a Taiwanese client she had met on the job. He wanted her to go back to Taiwan with him, but she refused to leave her family. Mai wanted to marry someone Chinese, but was not interested in local men. The problem, she said in frank terms, was that Hoa men were uneducated, small minded, and boring. They were only interested in opening up their own businesses, but not in educating themselves and functioning in the wider Vietnamese society outside of Cholon. She vehemently believed that the best men – Hoa and ethnic Vietnamese – had left during the post-war exodus. The ones who were left were weak and unworthy.

Young adult women like Yang and Mai differed significantly from their male peers in that they were more likely to be enrolled in Vietnamese schools, and more likely to be employable in salaried office jobs. In the group of friends that included Vi and Yang – all Hoa in their early to mid-twenties – the women were by far more engaged with educational and work structures in Vietnam than the men. The women were more likely to have been educated in the standard Vietnamese schools, and thus

eligible for university enrollment. They were also more interested in jobs as office workers for Vietnamese national or international companies. As Yang had put it, their ideal destinies were not in Vietnam, but in order to leave as wives of foreign passport holders, they needed to make themselves as attractive as possible. This included being well-educated and productive workers.

While Vi, and other young men, were seen as potentially burdensome by family members abroad, young women were viewed as potential wives: productive and able to bear children. Friends of family members abroad commonly sent their overseas Chinese sons to Vietnam to court these young Hoa women. Hoa women were viewed as exportable commodities, in a sense that Hoa men were not. Hoa men, who did not speak English or have exportable skills, were viewed as unproductive financial burdens on their family members abroad. Hoa women were seen as immediately productive as wives, mothers, and helpmates. Vi's family in the U.S. simply did not want to invest in him.

Hoa Kieu (referring to ethnic Chinese born in Vietnam, but who emigrated to the West) who come to Vietnam to look for marriage partners are nearly always men. Unlike the Taiwanese, who commonly marry Vietnamese, Hoa Kieu males tend to choose Hoa females. Also unlike the Taiwanese (explored in Chapter Six), Hoa Kieu males seem more concerned about the background of the girls they marry. They look for well-educated girls from respected families. A family's prestige is thus enhanced if they can, for example, marry a daughter off to a Chinese-American.

While marriages, legal and otherwise, between Hoa women and Taiwanese men were usually perceived as economically driven, marriages between Hoa women

and Hoa-Kieu men from Western countries, such as Canada, Australia, and the U.S., were perceived in a dramatically more positive light. I befriended a group of young Hoa women, all in their early to mid twenties, who were "in training" to join their fiancées in the West. There were about half a dozen girls in this loose group of friends. I first met them at an English speaking club, where I was the guest speaker. They gravitated towards me because I had expressed interest in the Hoa community. Soon I was a regular at their frequent outings.

What they shared with one another, besides their ethnic Chinese background, was that they were engaged to Hoa Kieu men with Western citizenship, and were now waiting out the six months to year for their fiancée visas to be approved. They were all young and attractive women, some more fluent in English than others, some more self assured than others. Miss Linh, the one who had arranged for me to come, laughed easily and seemed completely at ease with her upcoming role as wife and new émigré in Philadelphia. Her fiancée was the son of family friends, who had all left during the turbulent years. They owned a sandwich shop in Philly. Her husband's family insisted she learn some skills before arriving in America, including English conversation, cooking and hairdressing. These skills would ensure that she would be productive, in one occupation or another. The formation of this group of friends was through the commonality of taking such courses in preparation for marriage abroad.

Vietnamese scholar Hung Cam Thai has studied such marriage patterns among overseas Vietnamese men and women still in Vietnam. As he puts it, once they become engaged, the women go through a migration waiting period, during which the women are waiting to be united with their husbands through migration. "In this

distinct and emergent global marriage market, the immigrant Vietnamese men typically go to Vietnam to marry through arrangement and subsequently return to their places of residence in the Vietnamese diaspora to initiate paperwork to sponsor their wives.” (Hung Cam Thai 3: 2003).

Miss Linh was the first to leave. Her going away party was held at a trendy Vietnamese restaurant. The guests, about twenty in all, were treated to *Banh Xeo*, a Vietnamese crepe, and spring rolls. With the exception of her father and brother, the guests were all girls. The future groom was not there—he was in the U.S. awaiting her arrival. The guests spoke about how lucky she was, and what a good match this was between the families. Linh looked tan and happy, as she had just spent the day at a water park with her family as part of their farewell festivities.

I couldn’t help but wonder at how her life would change. Here in Vietnam, she was surrounded by family and friends. Her days were spent on self-improvement, as her fiancée paid for her to take English, cooking, and hair dressing classes. She was not expected to work during this period. She was readying herself to be a productive and proper “Western” wife. But once in the U.S., she would be living in a two bedroom condominium that her fiancée shared with his parents and younger brother. She would be working at the deli her future in-laws owned, making sandwiches or stocking the shelves. She would be leaving Vietnam’s perpetually tropical weather for Philly’s winters.

While Linh and their friends felt some genuine affection towards their fiancées/husbands, in other cases, Hoa women sought out Hoa Kieu specifically in order to emigrate. Jenny, aged 41, hired a matchmaker to find a Hoa Kieu willing to

sponsor her through marriage. Jenny was considered a beautiful and successful businesswoman. She owned her own home, and ran her own trading business. But her age and the fact that she had two daughters from two previous relationships did not make her an attractive prospect for the typical Hoa-Kieu man looking for a life partner. The one thing Jenny did have going in her favor was her personal wealth. She was thus able to guarantee a potential suitor financial compensation. The matchmaker found a Chinese-Canadian willing to marry Miss Lin on the condition that she paid for all of the paperwork and visitation expenses, and that he would share in the ownership of her properties.

After visiting her in Vietnam, he actually became quite smitten with her. Jenny remained focused on her objectives for marrying him. She wanted to get her two daughters, ages 16 and 19, out of Vietnam. On the eve of her own departure, Jenny revealed to me that she was in fact in love with someone else – a Taiwanese businessman that she had been partnering with for several years. He had invested in her business, and became one of her key clients. He had a family in Taiwan, but when he came to Vietnam, they lived as man and wife, and her daughters even acknowledged him as their father. As much as she loved him, that relationship was not going to get her and her daughters out of Vietnam, she acknowledged.

The ability to leave Vietnam through marriage was open to Hoa women, but rarely to Hoa men. Only in one instance did I hear of the reverse happening—a Hoa Kieu woman coming back to find a husband. This was such a rare occurrence, that it was a well known story within the community. Some thought the woman was crazy,

others characterized her as ugly but rich. In any case, she was considered abnormal—why would she marry a man back in Vietnam when she could marry in the U.S.?

Demographer Daniel Goodkind (1997) has called this phenomenon the “double marriage squeeze,” a unique situation in the worldwide marriage market. A high male mortality rate during the Vietnam War, combined with the migration of a larger number of men than women during the past quarter of the twentieth century, has produced a low ratio of men to women in Vietnam, as well as an unusually high ratio of men to women in the Vietnamese diaspora, especially in Australia and the United States. Unlike two-way flows of capital and goods, the divide between the “first-world” economy of the West and the “third-world” economy of Vietnam makes it impossible for women in Vietnam to go abroad for grooms, but very easy for men to go to Vietnam for brides. This marriage market is invariably gendered because very few overseas women return to Vietnam for husbands.

In addition, those who study marriage markets have long documented a nearly universal pattern, called the marriage gradient, whereby women tend to marry men who are older, better educated, and higher earning than they are, while men tend to marry younger women who earn less money and have less education (Fitzgerald 1999). Men “marry down” economically and socially; women “marry up.”

Hoa women are thus encouraged to develop themselves in ways that Hoa men are not in order to attract a foreign passport holder and thus “marry up.” Hoa men of Vi’s generation grew up believing that they should only prepare to leave Vietnam, and that they would learn whatever skills they needed to once they arrived in the West. I met many other young Hoa men who were similar to Vi in their outlook—they were

financially irresponsible and comparatively uneducated. Hoa women, on the other hand, were more encouraged to seek educations, to better themselves, to be productive. Their worth as wives was in this productivity: being able to help their husbands out with his business and being able to earn a living themselves. Hoa men, however, were of worth in terms of their future potential, not what they did today. They were encouraged to defer to the future--that unspecified time when they would make it abroad and be able to start their productive lives.

V. Conclusion

The academic literature on Southeast Asian Chinese communities has focused on a so-called “sojourner” mentality (Blalock 1968). The first migrants from China to Southeast Asia were, indeed, sojourners in the sense that they did not view their new homes as their permanent residences. These migrants typically left their homes in order to find more lucrative work through trade. Converging with the needs of the French, Dutch, and British colonial powers, they filled a niche as “middlemen” trader who bridged the natives and the foreigners.

In more recent academic literature about the Southeast Asian Chinese, the question of national “loyalty” frequently emerges. On one end of the spectrum are observers who argue that the ethnic Chinese in places such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia, continue to foster a sojourner mentality, and are not dedicated to their countries of residence. This line of arguing is typically based on the idea that ethnic Chinese, no matter how many generations separated from their ancestors’ birthplace, are still drawn to China as their “homeland.”

On the other end of the academic spectrum are those who argue that the Southeast Asian Chinese are in fact integrated and acculturated into their countries of residence. They argue that while China as a “homeland” continues to be important as part of defining heritage, these communities have become ethnic minorities within the national whole, and have developed hyphenated identities such as Chinese-Thai, or Chinese-Vietnamese.

The experience of the Hoa seems to suggest that they have weak affiliation with Vietnam, and that it serves as a stop on their sojourn. Hoa lived in a suspended state, as they continued to anticipate the day they would be able to leave. They put things off, believing that these things would happen or would be better once they joined their family members abroad, or they made career, educational, and romantic choices based on the expectation of emigration. Vi’s choices and lifestyle reflected those of his generation of Hoa. Like others in his age group, he deferred his education, career, and marriage plans.

I would argue, however, that this suspended state is not, as is often attributed, due to a “sojourner” mentality that characterizes ethnic Chinese society in general. Rather, this suspended state results from the memories the persecution by the Vietnamese state in the late 1970’s, as well as the sense of being left behind by family members in the West.

Memories of persecution continue to shape ethnic Chinese society, and create desires and fears around leaving Vietnam. As we have seen in this chapter, individuals invoke these meanings in their strategies to obtain cultural, economic and

political security elsewhere. But what happens when the expectations around these familial relationships fall short?

In *Other Modernities* (1999), Lisa Rofel writes of the critical arena of history and memory for which we have not yet found adequate language: how memories of violence persist in the silence of apparently untroubled lives, to be blurted out in odd moments, and then to disappear again, seemingly without a ripple:

“In portraying the fragmented nature of memories of violence, we move one step toward challenging the power of master narratives to organize memory into teleological tales. Then, perhaps, we will be in a better position to fracture the illusory seamlessness of modernity (p. 153).

I look at how the past is often suppressed, but comes up in unexpected instances, in outbursts which belie the process of “restoration” the Hoa community is commonly portrayed as being in. Memories of this period have affected how the Hoa perceive their diasporan landscape, and where the center and periphery lie. Official accounts of Hoa society emphasize that the community has bounced back or recovered from the events of the late 1970’s, and were able to nearly seamlessly pick up where they left off. On a superficial level, this proved to be true. People did go back to living their lives. But the undercurrent would sometimes pull people down, revealing the troubled waters which influenced and even defined the choices people made. There was no resolution—not yet, anyway. People lived in search of it, waiting for it and anticipating it. As Mr. Cai, the former prisoner of nine years said, once he emigrated to America, then he would write the story of his life. It was as if he did not think his life had reached a state where a conclusion could be made.

Anthropologists have developed a body of literature exploring the transnationalization of overseas Chinese families. In *Flexible Citizenship*, Aihwa Ong explores individuals such as “Hong Kong taipans” who work in one location and settle their family in another. These “astronauts” shuttle across borders on business, and their “parachute kids” are commonly dropped off in another country by parents on the trans-Pacific business commute. These transnational subjects and their families are commonly multiple passport holders, who are able to benefit from flexibility and mobility through global capitalism (1999).

Thus, while mobility and flexibility have long been part of the repertoire of human behavior, under transnationality the new links between flexibility and the logics of displacement, on the one hand, and capital accumulation, on the other, have given new valence to such strategies of maneuvering and positioning. Flexibility, migration, and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for rather than stability.

If, as I intend to do, we pay attention instead to the transnational practices and imaginings of the nomadic subject and the social conditions that enable his flexibility, we obtain a different picture of how nation-states articulate with capitalism in late modernity. Indeed, our Hong Kong taipan is not simply a Chinese subject adroitly navigating the disjunctures between political landscapes and the shifting opportunities of global trade. His very flexibility in geographical and social positioning is itself an effect of novel articulations between the regimes of the family, the state, and capital, the kinds of practical-technical adjustments that have implications for our understanding of the late modern subject. (p. 19).

Ong’s work provides a starting point for understanding the values and social forms these transnational Chinese families taken on. This chapter explores the phenomenon from the vantage point of those who are not “flexible,” yet are still caught up in familial webs that include individuals who travel, and capital that crosses borders. The Hoa provide an example of overseas Chinese who strive to break free

from the “inflexibility” of the structures they are in through their familial connections. They are not of the privileged group of overseas Chinese *taipans* who can choose locations of work and leisure and home. This is a different model for the transnational Chinese family, based less on individual agency than on the weight of macro-structures which define people’s everyday realities.

What is the relevance of the notion of “flexibility” when individuals are not able to control their movement, translocality, and migration? How do individuals work through the paradox of their lives becoming increasingly transnational while their location as Vietnamese subjects is increasingly fixed? The movement of the overseas family members serves to further fix the immobility of the Hoa in Vietnam. It is a point of comparison that gets reiterated each time someone visits, sends remittances, or brings up the topic of emigration. The conversations around those who are abroad are inevitably about their social and physical mobility.

This chapter explores how the Hoa have developed strategies that leverage the *potential* for mobility. Such strategies point to the issue of what role *geography* and *place* play in the experience of Hoa identity. Diaspora studies have typically focused on communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration, or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion (Brazier and Mannur, 4). As Robin Cohen puts it:

Diaspora signified a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile. Other peoples who have also maintained strong collective identities have, in recent years, defined themselves as diasporas, though they were neither active agents of colonization nor passive victims of persecution...The idea of diaspora thus varies greatly. However, all diasporan communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that

“the old country” – a notion often buried in language, religion, custom, or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. That claim may be strong or weak, or boldly or meekly articulated in a given circumstance or historical period, but a member’s adherence to a diasporan community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background” (Cohen ix).

These notions of the “old country” or “homeland” have deeply defined what it means to be ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia in the academic literature to date. In such studies China is both a real and a symbolic location, which infuses overseas Chinese imaginations about both ancestral and future experiences. China is the place that people desire returning to, and it is this desire that creates a sense of diasporan Chinese identity.

The experiences of the Hoa, however, call into question the salience of the concept of a homeland in defining diasporan communities. For the Hoa, it was not nostalgia for China that created a sense of commonality. For them, China was a place where their ancestors had come from, but it was also a place that had betrayed them in their hour of need. After that betrayal in the late 1970’s, the Hoa community’s relationship with China changed. China was no longer a realistic option in terms of being a place one could go. Neither the Communists nor the Nationalists (KMT), now exiled to Taiwan, defended the Hoa.

Memories of being abandoned by China, as well as persecuted by the new Vietnamese regime, created the opportunity for new “centers” to form in the Hoa imagination. In particular, the desire to rejoin family members in such places as San Jose resulted in new conceptions of where the homeland really is. I would argue that the Hoa have developed a new sense of a geographical center, around which they

continue to articulate their community identity as well as individual strategies for economic and cultural security. This center is not based on memories of the past, but on expectations and desires for the future. The West, and more specifically, places like San Jose or Orange County, have become the new symbolic centers. As we have seen in this chapter, these emerging centers – or “futurelands”, have created new behaviors and values within the Hoa community.

In conclusion, what the Hoa experience suggests is that a static concept of the homeland is not necessarily an integral part of the diasporan experience. The Hoa that I met created strategies around education, work, and marriage that depended upon someday settling in the U.S. (or other Western countries). An expectation for the future can be just as powerful as a memory (real or mythical) of the past in terms of defining community identity. This opens up the possibility of multiple centers around which diasporan communities revolve, and also suggests a potential transformation of the homeland from one of memory to one of future opportunity.

Chapter 6: Diasporan Chinese Businesses

I. Introduction

“There are two kinds of tourists in Saigon,” my cyclo driver confidently informed me. “Westerners and Japanese who come to take Vietnamese classes and spend their time in cafes and discos in downtown Saigon. They stay in hotels on Pham Ngu Lao (a street known for its concentration of businesses catering to foreigners). The second kind are the Taiwanese. They are different. They stay in Chinese hotels in Cholon (Ho Chi Minh City’s Chinatown) and have two things on their mind: making money and finding local girls.”

The cyclo driver thought it a good idea to clarify this for me, as he found it odd that I was asking him to find me a hotel in Cholon. As a female student traveling on my own, he thought it best to not so delicately inform me that the hotels in Cholon were not for people like me. “You should stay in a nice guesthouse in Pham Ngu Lao. Lots of Japanese and Americans and French there, they come to Vietnam for tourism”, he explained, “But here, just Taiwanese men.” Indeed, when I enquired about a room at what looked like a busy hotel in the heart of Cholon, the receptionist seemed confused. Was I asking for myself? Was I part of a tour group? After some prodding about my status, she gave up on trying to figure out why a single woman would want to stay there, and handed me my room keys.

At this point, I had been living in Vietnam for a few months. Like any good American tourist, I rented a guesthouse on a street with other guesthouses and cafes catering to Western and Japanese backpackers. My neighbors tended to be young

adults from developed countries who wanted to learn Vietnamese for the summer, travel across Southeast Asia, or just live in a place where the housing and beer were cheap. However, as my research was increasingly focused on the Hoa community in Cholon, I decided that it would make sense to move to that district. I planned to stay in that hotel in Cholon for a few days as I checked out different housing options.

Travel guides and tourist services geared towards foreigners typically describe Cholon as Ho Chi Minh City's Chinatown. Its "Chinese" markets and temples form the main attractions for day trips into the district. But its tourist facilities are considered inappropriate for the general tourist, as they cater to a Chinese-speaking traveler – and more specifically, to Taiwanese entrepreneurs looking for business and romantic opportunities. This was the point my cyclo driver was trying to make to me as he let me off in front of one of Cholon's more established hotels.

My intent in staying at the hotel was to start getting an insider's look into the role the Taiwanese entrepreneurs have played in Cholon's growth. Indeed, it did seem a world away from the Westernized establishments in central Ho Chi Minh City, more popularly known as Saigon. For one, nobody spoke English – they all addressed me in Mandarin, assuming I was a tourist from Taiwan myself. The elevators were crowded with Taiwanese men – some in more formal business attire, and others in shorts and t-shirts. They often came in large groups of a dozen or so, having breakfast together in the café and then leaving briskly together for whatever was next on their agenda. At night, the top floor disco came alive – so much so that I could hear thumping and music through my ceiling until 3am.

While conducting research within Cholon in the late 1990's, I was struck by how deeply the influx of Taiwanese capital affected Hoa lives. Since the early 1990's, Vietnamese officials have been actively courting investment from neighboring Asian countries – particularly Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and Korea. Investors from these countries have been among the most active in Vietnam's economy since the Doi Moi market reforms were implemented in 1986. Among the earliest to explore Vietnam's new economy were the Taiwanese. The Vietnamese government has, in fact, actively promoted its market as an ideal place for ethnic Chinese, like the Taiwanese, to invest in because of the strength of its local Hoa communities.

Such efforts by the government to attract overseas Chinese capital through the promotion of its local ethnic Chinese community is a direct contradiction of policies set in place after the Communist takeover of South Vietnam. As I explored in Chapter One, in the years after 1975, the Hoa community of Cholon experienced immense turmoil as anyone of ethnic Chinese descent, and particularly those who were entrepreneurially successful, came under ideological attack. The richest and most powerful Hoa were persecuted or jailed, and over a million people from this ethnic community fled the country as “boat people.” Those who did not leave faced continual ethnic persecution, as all signs of Chinese culture were banned from public life. Ethnic Chinese who did not take on Vietnamese citizenship were not allowed to own property, and their assets were seized by officials. Chinese temples, schools, hospitals, and other privately run institutions were shut down. The government's explicit intent was to nationalize the ethnic Chinese, foster in them a Vietnamese identity, and to suppress Cholon's entrepreneurial activity, which was antithetical to the formation of a socialist

state. Such policies lasted only a little over a decade. In the late 1980's, anti-Chinese policies began to soften, and the government quietly courted investment from markets such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The Hoa, who had once been persecuted for their culture and entrepreneurial activity, were now being encouraged to do business with the Chinese speaking investors.

Of all of these early investors, it is the Taiwanese who have endured and made the biggest impact on Cholon's ethnic Chinese businesses, as well as on Vietnam's overall economy. Today, there are some 30,000 Taiwanese living part time or full time in Vietnam, running or working for privately own businesses. The majority of them are concentrated in Cholon and the Special Economic Zones just outside of Ho Chi Minh City. While foreign business people from Japan, the U.S., France, and Korea had grown their presence and influence throughout the decade, the Taiwanese were entrenched in local society in a way that went far beyond typical business investment patterns. Taiwanese investment is unique as compared to other foreign investment in that it draws upon the ethnic connection to Vietnam's Chinese community. Rather than come and go as visiting businessmen, or living as expatriate communities in Saigon's foreign enclaves, Taiwanese entrepreneurs actually integrated themselves into Hoa society, and Cholon's socio-economic landscape.

The patterns that the Taiwanese entrepreneurs exhibited – such as marrying Hoa women, partnering with locals, and living part or full time in Vietnam to oversee their investments – were also shared by other overseas Chinese businessmen from Hong Kong and Singapore. Nonetheless, the Taiwanese were by far the most visible of

the overseas Chinese entrepreneurs, as well as the most notorious and the most tenacious in the eyes of the locals.

Furthermore, the Taiwanese have historical ties to the Hoa community that create a more complex relationship with locals than other overseas Chinese businessmen have. As was explored in an earlier chapter, Kuomintang (KMT) Nationals who had been exiled to Taiwan after the Communist takeover of China in 1949 continued their political efforts and sought to integrate the Southeast Asian Chinese into their national strategies. During the 1950's, 60's, and early 70's, KMT from Taiwan courted South Vietnam's ethnic Chinese with ideologies about Chinese nationalism and educational programs reiterating connections to the homeland. They sought to maintain their own legitimacy as Mainland China's rightful government through continuing their diplomatic relations with the overseas Chinese. When Vietnam was split between the Communist North and the U.S.-backed regime in the South, the KMT stepped up its efforts to convey to its "overseas nationals" in the south that they were an important part of the national whole. This perception was reflected in official statements, but also in daily interactions between KMT representatives in Vietnam.

As we explored in an earlier chapter, middle-aged Hoa remember the Taiwanese from the 1950's and 1960's fondly. They often speak about them with reverence – they were teachers of language, culture, and national identity. The enduring persona the Hoa hold in their imaginations is of the kind, elderly teacher who brings Mandarin studies to Hoa children.

Since the early 1990's, Taiwanese have returned to Vietnam in ever increasing numbers. But these are not the benign teachers and trumpeters of Chinese nationalism that the Hoa remember. Rather, these are mostly male entrepreneurs, investors and tourists. These men almost always go to Vietnam alone, and if they are married, they leave their wives and children in Taiwan. Those who start businesses commonly spend approximately half to two thirds of their time in Vietnam, usually renting out rooms in proximity to other Taiwanese entrepreneurs, and forming "bachelor" enclaves in various parts of Cholon. They commonly open up their own textile factories, food processing plants, retail stores, or snack bars. The majority come as private investors, rather than as members of multinational corporations. Because of this, they must deal directly with a myriad of bureaucratic procedures and taxes. By taking on a local partner with Vietnamese citizenship, and placing the business under the partner's name, they avoid the taxes and surveillance foreign investors are routinely subject to.

The memory of the KMT Taiwanese is, for many, at odds with the reality of the Taiwanese presence today. While the Taiwanese of the past are remembered for their intellectualism and ideals about Chinese culture and national identity, the Taiwanese of the present are viewed as primarily concerned with making money and finding Hoa women to have both sexual as well as long term relationships with. While the Taiwanese of the past symbolize transborder ethnic and national ties, the Taiwanese of the present embody Vietnam's re-emerging ethnic Chinese capitalism. This chapter explores the role the Taiwanese play in the revitalization of the Hoa community and the reemergence of their entrepreneurial activities.

II. Current frameworks for understanding transnational Chinese capitalism

The case of the overseas Chinese is a particularly rich and complicated one for discussing transnationalism because not only have Chinese diasporas and their relationships with China and host countries historically been salient, but there is a huge body of scholarship concerning overseas Chinese, especially in Southeast Asia. As was discussed in Chapter's Two's literature review, within the last decade there has been a proliferation of scholarly writings on transnational business practices. Defined as the flow of people, ideas, goods, and capital across national territories, transnational processes challenge conceptions of the nation-state as the primary unit for analyzing economic organization, political construction, and identity formation. Scholars of transnational phenomena have explored how political, economic, and cultural flows across borders have increasingly characterized the late 20th century in ways that affect social practices. They have called for expanding traditional conceptions of territorially bounded communities and to explore how a community's practical and imagined realities transcend multiple borders.

Within the field of anthropology, there has been a rich history of writings devoted to the social, political, and economic relationships between ethnic Chinese from different nations – the so-called Chinese diaspora. The history of such scholarly work has been tied to the politics of the Asian region. During the period right after the Communist takeover of Mainland China in 1949, Sinologists found it difficult to conduct primary research in China. In order to continue their studies in Chinese culture, they sought out ethnic Chinese communities, mainly throughout Southeast Asia. While their initial interest was largely driven by the assumption that they could

find discrete and authentic pockets of Chinese culture outside of the PRC, which was off limits to foreign researchers, their writings eventually focused on the interplay between ethnic, national, and transnational identities.

In particular, scholars sought to explain why certain ethnic Chinese communities tended to become entrepreneurial elite in their respective countries of residence. One major theoretical framework that arose out of these early works centers on the notion that there is a “Chinese” type of business culture. Many of the initial hypotheses – around Chinese cultural work ethics, superiority in entrepreneurial talents, and communal values – have more recently been challenged by scholars who argue that they present idealized, celebratory, and static versions of culture. Recent scholarly work on ethnic Chinese business “success” has focused more on the social and structural forms that favor particular minority groups to succeed in trade and business.

One social form that has garnered much interest is that of ethnic Chinese networks, based on some form of cultural commonality, be it dialect, ancestral village, surname, or alma mater. As was explored in Chapter Three, these networks can be leveraged locally – that is, between ethnic Chinese within a community. The literature on Southeast Asian Chinese culture is rich with ethnographies on how same surname or ancestral groups such as the Hakka, Teochiu, and Cantonese form powerful economic and business groups among minority Chinese in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Ethnic Chinese networks can also span national boundaries, and draw in resources and alliances between ethnic Chinese across East

and Southeast Asia, as well as the major emigration destinations of Canada, the U.S., and Australia.

Literature focusing on the latter phenomenon tends to fall in one of two camps. The first prioritizes the perspectives of the ethnic Chinese businessmen from more developed markets, such as Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Aihwa Ong's work (1998) stands out in its theoretically rigorous analysis of how capitalistic practices and mobility across national borders intertwine in the economic strategies among the ethnic Chinese business elite. These "astronauts" are businessmen who live in one location but move across national borders to conduct business in multiple locations. Often, they may set up their wives and children in one location, and their offices in others. Ong calls these "flexible citizens" – ethnic Chinese who are highly mobile in both their physical selves and their investment patterns.

The second camp prioritizes the perspectives of those who are not in positions of privilege, mobility, and control – in other words, those who are not flexible citizens. Literature in this camp tends to focus on the employees, factory workers, and other service providers that make transnational Chinese capitalism happen. This set of literature tends to explore how people become "disenfranchised" or "victimized" by the practices of those in superior positions – typically the types of flexible citizens that Ong examines. Another prominent topic within this camp deals with the status of women within transnational networks, and how they experience as well as resist various forms of exploitation by their employers and other, more privileged ethnic Chinese.

From a structural perspective, it seems to make sense to begin my analysis of Hoa economic reemergence in a similar vein. Wealthy Taiwanese entrepreneurs (wealthy by Vietnamese standards, at least) go to Vietnam to invest their capital, and find it easier to work with Hoa than the ethnic Vietnamese due to cultural affinity. The Taiwanese are able to grow their businesses in Vietnam because of the low price for labor. The Hoa who work with the Taiwanese are overwhelmingly young, unmarried women. This sets up a power dynamic in which the foreign male owns the capital and the resources, and local female constitutes the labor. And, as I will describe in more detail later, these relationships are often not solely professional, but are also typically imbued with sexual and/or romantic tones.

Despite this set up which seems to skew towards a “disenfranchised” analysis, I found that the dichotomies between skilled and unskilled, powerful and powerless, mobile and immobile, and flexible and inflexible did not always comfortably fit in terms of the relationships between Taiwanese and Hoa. Under certain circumstances, the experiences of Hoa women who worked with Taiwanese men actually defied common theoretical frameworks about power relations within Chinese transnational processes. And beneath these economic and sometimes personal or sexual relationships between bosses and employees, clients and service workers, lay deeply held and often conflicting notions of who was more “Chinese”, and who was culturally superior.

Thus, I draw upon frameworks originating from both perspectives – elite and non-elite ethnic Chinese – in order to explore the dynamics between Taiwanese entrepreneurs and their Hoa connections in Ho Chi Minh City’s Cholon district. I

explore how economic behavior around business and money making is imbued with complex historical beliefs that each group has about the other, as well as about their own ethnic communities. Because of these multiple historical layers that inform current day relationships between Taiwanese and Hoa, the nature of their interactions shifts with different contexts. Sometimes the male Taiwanese hold the power, other times the female Hoa run the show. And most often, the relationship is a complex interplay that defies typical categorizations.

In this chapter, I explore the role of the Taiwanese entrepreneurs in the reemergence of Vietnam's ethnic Chinese community. The goal is not to offer a comprehensive look at all of the various types of economic and social behavior that the Taiwanese engender in the Hoa community. Rather, I focus on how the presence of the Taiwanese and their specific behaviors have created contexts for the Hoa to redefine their sense of ethnic commonality, national difference, and gender roles.

III. Everyday diasporan interactions

In my daily interactions with the Hoa in Cholon, I quickly came to realize that the Taiwanese entrepreneurs that lived in their neighborhoods, set up businesses on the busiest boulevards, and worked in myriad ways with locals were actually a significant part of these neighborhoods. They were not merely visitors, but had become influential within Hoa society, the Cholon economy, and, in many respects, in Vietnam's market revitalization.

There were many types of relationships between Hoa and Taiwanese individuals. These types of relationships reflected the various motivations that drove

Taiwanese to visit Vietnam, and to, in many cases, stay on a semi-permanent basis. On one end of the spectrum were the ephemeral interchanges between tourists and locals selling products or services.

Every day, hundreds of Taiwanese tourists enter Vietnam, and the majority of them make Cholon their first stop. The large boulevard of Tran Hung Dao connects the center of Ho Chi Minh City, still affectionately called Saigon by locals, with Districts 5 and 6, which together make up Cholon. Historically, Saigon and Cholon were considered twin, but distinct cities. Saigon was the political capital of Indochina, where French colonists and Vietnamese elite co-mingled in outdoor cafes and high class hotels. Cholon was considered the business capital, where the ethnic Chinese carried out lucrative trade in textiles, grain, and other food products. Today, the former twin cities are considered merely districts of Ho Chi Minh City. In the minds of the residents, however, the areas remain distinct in character, form, and function. As the “Chinese speaking district” of Ho Chi Minh City, Cholon is often the center of tourist itineraries for Taiwanese visitors. The streets of Cholon are filled with restaurants, retail shops selling knock-offs of the latest Hong Kong fashions, and cafes. Tour guide services are also prominent. Unlike the services in central Saigon, which feature English, French, and Japanese languages, the ones in Cholon are exclusively in Chinese.

When I first met Mr. Thanh, who I first introduced in Chapter Four, he was 35 and had been working for a tourist agency catering to Chinese speaking tourists for several years. His customers typically included local Hoa taking tours to Thailand and Hong Kong – destinations that had recently become options for Vietnamese nationals

with enough money to travel. He also accompanied tourists from Taiwan and Hong Kong around Vietnam. Like many other Hoa who spoke Vietnamese and Mandarin, in addition to other Chinese dialects, Thanh found it easy to play a bridging role between locals and overseas Chinese visitors. And perhaps most importantly, his easygoing manner and attention to detail rarely failed to charm his customers, male or female, local or foreign. Although he always seemed congenial and patient, away from the office, he revealed deeply ambivalent feelings about some of his customers. His stories reflected a deeply ambivalent attitude towards his customers from abroad.

My favorite tourists are from Mainland China, but there aren't many of those. They come from a Communist country, they are accustomed to the restrictions we face in Vietnam, which people from other countries don't understand. They don't bring prostitutes to their rooms, because they are afraid of the police. The Taiwanese and others don't care, they think nothing bad will happen to them. Mainland Chinese treat me like an equal. They say we are "*tongbao*" (of the same womb). My least favorite customers are from Taiwan. Over half of them are men, who expect to be taken on sex tours. I can't personally arrange for them to meet prostitutes, but I can arrange for them to stay at hotels that offer such services. There is always a risk of police involvement, and I always warn the Taiwanese to not be too blatant about what they are doing. They complain, saying that they should be able to do whatever they want since they are paying. That's their choice, but they can act stupid sometimes. Even though I speak Chinese to them and I am Chinese, they just think of me as any other local Vietnamese, they don't listen to me.

Thanh's sentiments were echoed in the comments of other Hoa who regularly came into contact with Taiwanese tourists. When I asked them what the Taiwanese were like, most Hoa immediately described them as arrogant ("*jiao ao*"), and excessively proud of their own nationality. "They say everything in Taiwan is better than it is here, the food, the roads, the stores. Well, if they love it so much there, why do they come here at all?" one elderly shopkeeper asked impatiently.

Other Hoa complained that Taiwanese tourists made little distinction between Hoa and Vietnamese. Thanh found this particularly irritating, because the tourists that he guided around ignored the fact that he was fluent in Mandarin and Cantonese, and instead, regarded him as any other Vietnamese. Such annoyance was common among other Hoa, who did not like the idea that they were undifferentiated from the other locals. The discomfort at being lumped in with the other locals reflects Hoa attitudes about their own ethnic superiority, and also challenges how they define their own difference.

While Hoa who encountered Taiwanese tourists complained about Taiwanese chauvinism, they also had very strong and consistent opinions about the low quality of contemporary Taiwanese culture. Here, it is important to contextualize these comments in the history of Taiwan's involvement in Vietnam. For middle-aged and elderly Hoa, the Taiwanese of their youths represented the true China – uncorrupted by Communism, and dedicated to the preservation of true Chinese culture, language, and history. The Taiwanese tourists of today, in contrast, were viewed as a completely different breed – unconcerned about Chinese nationalism, and more concerned about making money and sleeping with local women. Hoa described the Taiwanese as lacking in the more dignified aspects of Chinese culture.

These perceptions underscore the profound sense of difference between the Hoa and the Taiwanese, felt strongly on both sides. It can be argued that casual daily interactions between tourists and service providers were based on ethnic commonality – specifically, the ability Hoa had to communicate in Mandarin with the Taiwanese. And yet, based on these casual encounters, both sides claimed cultural superiority. The

Taiwanese construct themselves as part of a modern world, perceiving the Hoa as stuck in underdevelopment. The Hoa see themselves as more authentically Chinese, while the Taiwanese have lost their cultural roots. National and historical differences define the relationships between the Taiwanese and Hoa, and not diasporan commonality.

IV. Taiwanese settlers in Cholon

On the other end of the spectrum were long term romantic and business relationships. While most Hoa encountered Taiwanese tourists in some context or another in their daily lives, a smaller number had more personal involvement with Taiwanese who settled in Vietnam. These part to full time settlers were entrepreneurs, hoping to open successful businesses in Vietnam's emerging market. Such Taiwanese entrepreneurs typically head straight to Cholon. There, they are able to obtain nearly every type of service they need in Chinese. The majority of those who come tend to be men who are 30 and older. While some are from Taipei, a large number come from Taiwan's smaller cities and rural areas. While there are always exceptions, the Taiwanese in Vietnam tend to be struggling or unsuccessful businessmen back home, who are looking for opportunities to establish themselves elsewhere. They can be characterized as street smart and savvy, but not necessarily textbook trained.

This type of background is significant in that it determines a particular settlement pattern in Vietnam. Unlike foreigners who come to Vietnam as part of expatriate packages, the Taiwanese do not move into the high-rise, luxury apartments in downtown Saigon. For economic and social reasons, they prefer to rent local-style

flats or single rooms in larger complexes. And unlike other expatriates who have been invited to work in Vietnam, they typically don't bring their families. Most of the Taiwanese I knew had wives and children back home, and they would spend a few weeks or months here and there, setting up in Cholon as if they were bachelors.

I gained access to one such bachelor enclave through my friendship with Eric, who came from Taizhong, Taiwan, and had been living in Vietnam for about a year at the time we met. Eric was short and stout, with a ready smile and loud laugh. In his typical outfit of shorts, baggy t-shirts, and sandals, he always looked as if he were holidaying in a tropical locale. When I first met Eric, he had a small but relatively stable bread and pastry business. His slightly sweet and fluffy products were exported to Taiwan, and he also maintained few retail stores in Cholon. While this gave Eric a certain measure of credibility among his Taiwanese peers, he still had ambitions to develop a more lucrative business.

Eric lived in a complex of about a half dozen studios which were all rented out to Taiwanese men – entrepreneurs like himself, who hoped to establish successful businesses in Vietnam. It was conveniently located in the heart of Cholon, along an alleyway with an outdoor café. The studios tended to be bare and functional, and the men would spend minimal time in their rooms. During the day, they were out managing their stores and factories. In the evenings, they often met in the courtyard to grill their dinners and share beers. Some of the men were married, others were not. But they all lived in Vietnam alone, going back to Taiwan every few months for a week here and there. They lived like bachelors, spending their free time in Cholon's

myriad nightclubs and karaoke bars – hence the nickname for their group, the “bachelor’s club”.

What struck me as unique was that, unlike other expatriates from the U.S., Europe, and Japan, these Taiwanese businessmen lived frugal lifestyles which were close to typical local conditions. Other businessmen who went to Vietnam to work for multinational corporations typically lived in posh condominiums in downtown Saigon. They also tended to belong to more insular expatriate communities, made up of people from their home countries. The Taiwanese entrepreneurs, on the other hand, usually chose local-style housing in Cholon, rather than the shiny and new condos kept locals out and created illusions of living in the first world. Eric’s room held little more than his bed, a portable gas stove, and dozens of Taiwanese magazines strewn about.

Despite these modest surroundings, however, Eric and other entrepreneurs like him represent some of the most important catalysts for economic development in Vietnam. As the largest foreign investor in Vietnam, Taiwan accounts for nearly 30 percent of new foreign investments in the country (The China Post - October 27, 2004). In 2004 alone, the Vietnamese government had approved 110 Taiwanese investment projects worth US\$167 million in total, roughly equivalent to 28.9 percent of all the approved foreign investment projects of the same period in terms of investment value, or 23.8 percent in terms of approved projected investments. The actual amount of Taiwan's investments may be much higher if it includes those made by companies which made investments through their overseas-registered holding companies. Taiwan's investors in Vietnam are mostly manufacturers of motorcycles, bicycles, textiles, garments, shoes, and furniture. More recently, Taiwanese companies have

ventured into information technology as well. Analysts predict that Taiwanese investment will only grow in Vietnam.

While a few large Taiwanese companies dominate the news, it is the sheer number of various small businesses, like Eric's, that make up the bulk of Taiwanese investment in Vietnam. The Taiwanese presence is often invisible to foreigners from the West, who typically live and build their social and business circles in downtown Saigon. For those businessmen, Cholon is far outside the sphere of what is relevant to their professional lives. For the Taiwanese, however, Cholon is the center of their economic activity and where they find their resources. How does the Taiwanese presence affect Hoa lives, and what roles have the Hoa played in such economic activity?

V. Diasporan business relationships

To begin examining such questions, I return to Eric's story. He spent two years in Vietnam running his modest bread and pastry business, while investigating opportunities for a more lucrative investment. After experimenting with different food products, he decided to shift his business towards frozen foods. Eric saw an opportunity to produce frozen egg rolls in Vietnam, and sell them to Taiwanese grocery stores and restaurants. The egg rolls were unique in that they featured fillings made from Southeast Asian fruits and spices. His products became a hit in Taiwan and Japan. By 2002, Eric was no longer a struggling small time entrepreneur, but had firmly moved into the ranks of a medium sized business owner. He had also moved out of his bachelor's enclave, and now lived in a private room within the complex of

his factory, located in a special economic zone about thirty minutes from the city center. Neighboring businesses in this SEZ included other Taiwanese, Korean, and Japanese factories.

Eric employed over 200 people. The majority of factory workers, who cooked and packaged the egg rolls, were ethnic Vietnamese. The dozen managers, however, were all Hoa, as well as his general manager, a woman named Miss Jia. I asked Eric why he chose a Hoa woman as his manager. “Local men here are lazy. The women work hard. If you go to the markets, who is doing all of the work? The women! Plus, she can speak both Chinese and Vietnamese, so she can communicate with me and then turn around and communicate with the factory workers.”

Eric’s high esteem of Hoa women and his preference to partner with them in business matters was common among his entrepreneurial peers. As a consequence, Hoa women were more able to find work in leading positions in Taiwanese companies than the men. Local men were viewed as lazy and unwilling to assume ownership of duties. The Taiwanese thus developed a hierarchy for preferred business relationships, with Hoa women at the top.

While Taiwanese attitudes towards locals, whether they were ethnic Chinese or Vietnamese, were not necessarily always based on respect, they tended to view ethnic Chinese women as playing important roles in their entrepreneurial pursuits. Eric’s experience was typical among the half dozen Taiwanese entrepreneurs that I got to know. And, as these men described to me, all of their experiences followed a general pattern that was common among their peers. When Eric first visited Vietnam with the intent to explore business opportunities, he headed straight for Cholon. There, he met

other Taiwanese male entrepreneurs who introduced him to various people within Cholon, both Taiwanese and local. One of those acquaintances was Li, a successful Taiwanese entrepreneur with several steel producing factories. Li had married a Hoa woman and considered himself permanently settled in Vietnam. Mrs. Li, or Mrs. Boss, as she was affectionately known within the Taiwanese community, managed her husband's factories and ran a popular night club.

Eric described her as ambitious and invincible. While his explicit friendship was with Mr. Li, it was actually Mrs. Li who provided new businessmen like Eric the social connections necessary to jump-start their endeavors. Mrs. Li served as a matchmaker between new Taiwanese entrepreneurs and local women who were business savvy. It is this type of partnership between Taiwanese men and local women that has allowed Taiwanese investment to flourish and the Hoa community to re-emerge as the country's entrepreneurial elite.

It was through Mrs. Li that Eric met Miss Jia, whom he eventually made the general manager of his food company. Mrs. Li recommended Jia as someone who was experienced and trustworthy – the qualities needed in a local partner. Vietnam's investment laws since Doi Moi reforms had made foreign direct investment extremely challenging and laden with ever-changing rules and regulations. To circumvent these challenges as well as the enormous taxes levied to wholly foreign owned enterprises, small and medium sized business owners from Taiwan partnered with locals, opening up the business under the locals' names. Thus, the business appeared to be a wholly domestic venture on paper. While local officials were savvy about such practices, they turned a blind eye in exchange for bribes. Eric explained that although taking care of

greedy local officials was a hassle, it was still preferable to dealing with official regulations around foreign businesses.

Local partners, such as Mrs. Li and Miss Jia, serve as critical links between Taiwanese capital and the Vietnamese market. They allow for foreign investment in otherwise hostile market environments, plagued with inconsistent laws and prohibitive tax regulations. Most importantly, they create structures of trust for the investors in otherwise unpredictable environments. Had it not been for these trustworthy locals, small and medium sized investors from Taiwan would not have found Vietnam's market as attractive as they did. When Eric first set up his modest bread and pastry business, he made Miss Jia the legal owner of all of the assets.

As with Mrs. Li, Miss Jia not only played the role of front person, but also of the hands-on manager. Eric relies on her for several reasons. First of all, she is fully bilingual, able to speak to Eric in Mandarin and also able to converse with employees and officials in Vietnamese. This allows businessmen like Eric the ability to immediately employ and manage local workers without having to learn a new language. He looks to Miss Jia to control the Vietnamese workers in his factory. In addition, he looks to her to appease local authorities. Miss Jia takes care of all of the bribes and favors that are part of the unspoken agreement with local police. She protects Eric from any awkward encounters with Vietnamese officials, and allows the latter the ability gain some side revenue outside of their paltry state-dictated salaries. Miss Jia does all of this while never usurping Eric's role as the *lao ban* or boss.

In return, Miss Jia is the recipient of Eric's full trust. Whenever he goes back to Taiwan to visit his wife and children, she takes over as *lao ban*. Whenever she

suggests certain types of gifts and favors to local officials, Eric takes her word that these are necessary for the security of his business. Miss Jia handles all of the hiring and firing under her, and for the most part runs the business for Eric. Her ability to move between the linguistic and cultural worlds of her Taiwanese lao ban, the Hoa managers under her, and the Vietnamese workers who make up the majority of factory employees, allows Miss Jia a type of flexibility that Eric does not have in this cultural context.

Eric's partnership with Miss Jia is far from unique; it is the dominant model for Taiwanese investment in Vietnam. The type of local partner varies. In some cases, as with Mr. and Mrs. Li, the partnership is also a love relationship. In a minority of cases, the local partner is a Hoa man. As Eric describes it, most Taiwanese prefer to work with local women, as they are viewed as smarter, more hardworking, and more trustworthy than men.

Among the Taiwanese, as well as other ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs throughout Asia, this pattern is not new. Since the late 1970's, Taiwanese individuals have been traveling to Mainland China to set up small and medium sized enterprises. The majority favored areas in the Fujian province, where their ancestors hailed from. This allowed the Taiwanese to do business in a dialect they could speak but more importantly, to leverage their sense of historical and familial connection.

Practically, however, the Taiwanese could not set up their businesses without the help of local officials in China. Gift-giving and bribery were common techniques for convincing the local officials to relax restrictions. A typical Taiwanese entrepreneur spent months establishing relationships with local officials before starting

a business. As You-Tien Hsiang notes, “Taiwanese investors obtained favorable investment conditions from local officials on the basis of their understanding of such flexibility in the interpretation and implementation of regulations. ..Given the loose control of the Beijing central government on small businesses and the negotiable policy implementation in Taiwan, Taiwanese investors have found few cultural barriers to ‘finding the holes’ in south China” (You-Tien Hsiang in Ong and Nonini, 151: 1997).

In order to avoid the penalties and restrictions placed on foreign-owned operations, the Taiwanese entrepreneurs typically set up a front person – a Mainland Chinese national who would legally own everything. Sometimes this was an official himself. Other times it was a distant or not so distant relative from the ancestral province. And in other situations, it was a local Chinese woman whom the Taiwanese entrepreneurs married.

As Ong and Nonini write,

We have traced at least two major variants of capitalism associated with Chinese transnationalism. In one, Chinese transnational capitalists act out flexible strategies of accumulation in networks that cut across political borders and are linked through second-tier global cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur. These overlapping business, social, and kinship networks stitch together dynamic productive, financial, and marketing regions that are not contained by a single nation-state or subject to its influence. In the other, Chinese transnational capitalists flourish not only outside the striated space of the nation-state but also within it, aligned closely to non-Chinese state bureaucratic elites in joint ventures with state capital.” (1997: 324).

In Ong's subsequent work that further explores processes of Chinese transnationalism, she coins the term "flexible citizenship" to describe highly mobile subjects.

Flexible citizenship refers to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions. In their quest to accumulate capital and social prestige in the global arena, subjects emphasize, and are regulated by, practices favoring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to markets, governments, and cultural regimes. These logics and practices are produced within particular structures of meaning about family, gender, nationality, class mobility, and social power. (1999: 6)

As she describes them,

Among transnational Chinese subjects, those most able to benefit from their participation in global capitalism celebrate flexibility and mobility, which give rise to such figures as the multiple-passport holder; the multicultural manager with 'flexible capital'; the 'astronaut' shutting across borders on business; 'parachute kids,' who can be dropped off in another country by parents on the trans-Pacific business commute; and so on. Thus, while mobility and flexibility have long been part of the repertoire of human behavior, under transnationality the new links between flexibility and the logics of displacement, on the one hand, and capital accumulation, on the other, have given new valence to such strategies of maneuvering and positioning. Flexibility, migration, and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for rather than stability.(p. 19).

Like the flexible citizens of Aihwa Ong's analysis of transnational Chinese businesses, Miss Jia is able to transcend cultural borders in order to connect foreign capital with local structures. She acts as a bridge between Taiwanese investors with capital but no local influence, locals with resources who seek investment, and officials with political power who seek additional financial support. Eric's success in Vietnam is dependent upon his trust relationship with her. Since she is the legal owner of his

business and, equally if not more important, the owner of the key relationships local figures, Miss Jia can effectively pull the plug on Eric's endeavors at any time. Yet, like many other Taiwanese entrepreneurs who invest in Vietnam, Eric builds his business on unwavering trust in his local partner.

Unlike Ong's flexible citizens, however, Miss Jia does not possess physical mobility across borders. What Eric and Miss Jia have created is a type of *flexible network* that encompasses resources, political connections, power relationships, and bonds of trust. Such a network creates the conditions for transnational business practices to flourish. Eric brings capital and the privileges of a non-Vietnamese citizenship to this relationship. While Miss Jia commands the local resources, Eric commands the foreign resources in his ability to garner financial support and buyers from abroad.

I thus depart from Ong's model of the flexible citizen by shifting the emphasis away from the one who commands physical and economic mobility, and towards a type of *partnership* in which each player brings his or her own forms of flexibility. Ong's framework for defining flexibility privileges the physical mobility of elite overseas Chinese businessmen, like those from Hong Kong who invest in the Mainland. Indeed, the Taiwanese who are able to sojourn to Vietnam for entrepreneurial purposes and split their time between native home and work home, are a driving force behind the economic reemergence of Vietnam's ethnic Chinese community. Their presence, however, is not in itself enough – they require the cultural flexibility and resources that local ethnic Chinese possess. In Mainland China, Taiwanese, Hong Kong, and other elite overseas Chinese entrepreneurs can leverage

their cultural ties to the majority population in order to hire, retain, and control laborers. Likewise, they can directly appeal to local officials in their own language, allowing for the nuanced communications and relationships that typically mask acts of bribery. In Vietnam, they depend upon the abilities of Hoa to move between languages, cultural norms, and the expectations of both impatient entrepreneurs and local political figures who view corruption as a necessary part of economic survival.

The notion of a flexible network shifts focus away from the elite and towards the daily give and take between individuals that allow for the creation of transnational capitalism. Furthermore, it captures the complex power play within the network. While the Taiwanese may appear to call the shots, entrepreneurs like Eric make it clear that their businesses are nothing without that trust relationship with a local partner. In fact, the biggest fear that the Taiwanese have is to be duped by their partner, and find that they are cut out of their own businesses. Stories abound within the Taiwanese community of friends and acquaintances who flew home for a couple of weeks, to come back to Vietnam and find that their trusted partners had sold their businesses and disappeared. They have absolutely zero legal recourse in such cases. A businessman who enters such a partnership must take all precautions and must be clear as to how vulnerable he can be.

Taiwanese entrepreneurs and Hoa partners create flexible networks that defy the structural constraints of both Vietnam's and Taiwan's economies. Eric and his peers leave Taiwan because, as they describe it, doing business there is too difficult. They do the only thing they feel is worthwhile – taking money out of Taiwan and

investing it elsewhere. Vietnam in the late 1990's was described as full of potential, and at the same time, difficult to penetrate.

VI. Nostalgia and Defining “Chineseness”

Taiwanese perceptions of Vietnam extended beyond rational assessments of economic opportunities. What I found among Eric and his group of business buddies was a genuine admiration for the Hoa and envy for the type of lifestyles that they had. As I spent more time with the Taiwanese bachelor group, as they called themselves, I found that they tended to romanticize the Hoa as a pure and child-like, with a more authentic Chinese culture still uncorrupted by modernization.

Such comments reflected a particular mindset that drove Taiwanese entrepreneurs to look to Vietnam as a site for making their own futures. Eric and the others in the “Taiwanese bachelor club,” as they liked to call themselves, were not particularly privileged individuals back in their home country. They saw themselves as “self made” businessmen, who fought to succeed despite all of the obstacles in front of them. They described Taiwan as a difficult place for people like themselves, who didn't come from a place of privilege and wealth. Running a business was bitter (*ku*) and there were few rewards. It was difficult to admit that they were not important men back in Taiwan, and had no prospects for becoming so. Taiwan was overdeveloped and over modernized, they argued. Good “old fashioned” ways for making money didn't exist anymore. And, as Eric often emphasized, Taiwanese women were becoming too Westernized. They didn't want to get married and support their husbands.

In Cholon, however, things were different. The Taiwanese bachelors liked to describe Cholon as “Taiwan, 20 years ago.” Cholon satisfied their nostalgia for a Taiwan that held more opportunities for men like themselves. For the Taiwanese who came to Vietnam as entrepreneurs, this market held the kinds of opportunities that they could no longer find in their own homeland. These opportunities were not only economic, but also personal and emotional. Those who come to look for lovers and wives also expect to find the kind of women they can no longer find in Taiwan—obedient, accommodating, and satisfied to be housewives.

The Hoa capitalized on this sense of nostalgia that infused Taiwanese perceptions of their community. Hoa businesses catering to the Taiwanese played on theme of bringing back the past. One such site of nostalgia is Café Lolo, a popular spot in central Cholon for Taiwanese businessmen and tourists. As one enters the place, the waitresses shout out greetings in Mandarin—indicating that they expect the customers to be Taiwanese or other Mandarin speaking Chinese. The first floor is dimly lit, and decorated with American 1950’s motifs. Pictures of Western stars from that era hang from the walls. Near the door is a magazine rack, which holds a variety of Chinese language magazines and newspapers. At the back of the first floor is a counter with stools around it—a kind of coffee bar reminiscent of American ice cream parlors. On the second floor are more dimly lit booths. Glass cabinets display what look like traditional English teapot and teacup sets. The back of the second floor is decorated in sailor/marine motifs. The windows are round cubbyholes like those on a ship, the walls are made of wooden panels, and the floor is covered with bluish-gray rocks, simulating water.

The décor of Café Lolo suggests a bygone era that isn't specifically Taiwanese. However, the place clearly aims to give Taiwanese a feeling of recapturing the past. The menu serves "traditional Taiwanese snacks." The waitresses are all young Hoa with model-like figures. They wear matching cheerleader outfits—miniskirts, crop tops and platform shoes. Not surprisingly, the majority of Café Lolo's customers is male. Café Lolo reflects Taiwanese views of the Hoa as a reflection of their own past, a purer, simpler version of who they are today.

While Cholon evokes a sense of nostalgia for a traditional, easier lifestyle, the Taiwanese also view the Hoa as inferior and child-like. These contradictory views existed side by side, and Eric and his friends often moved between the two views at any given moment. One moment Eric would be telling me how invaluable Miss Jia was for his business success, and the next moment, he would be complaining about how difficult it was to work with locals, be they Vietnamese or Chinese. While Eric had great admiration for the simpler values and conditions that he found in Cholon, he also believed that the Hoa were potentially untrustworthy and even dangerous.

Taiwanese constructions of Hoa identity were based on gendered dichotomies. The Hoa were often described as childlike in that they embodied a purer form of culture, uncorrupted by the modernization that Taiwan and the West have seen. Hoa also take on the characteristics of traditional women, who are willing to work alongside their husbands and allow them to prosper in the public sphere while they labor in the private sphere. Indeed, Eric's relationship with Miss Jia very much resembled a traditional Chinese marriage, although they were not romantically or sexually involved. Eric described himself as the one who "went out" to get new

customers and investors. Miss Jia “watched over” things back in the factory. The Taiwanese also ascribe qualities to the Hoa that they fear in women. While Miss Jia and Mrs. Li are considered good “wives”, there are also Hoa who are only out for money.

VII. Second Wives

Partnerships between Taiwanese entrepreneurs and local, Hoa women are rarely purely professional. The past decade has thus seen the proliferation of Hoa women as wives, girlfriends, and, most commonly, “second wives” to Taiwanese men. Young Hoa women of a variety of educational and economic backgrounds are, in increasing numbers, aspiring to become such “second wives.” One articulate and attractive nineteen year old explained it to me like this: Hoa girls who become first wives are usually expected to move to Taiwan and live with the in-laws, becoming their virtual slaves while the husbands return to Vietnam to oversee their investments. Second wives, however, are usually given the reins to run the business. First wives may never know how much their husbands are making, but second wives control the wealth.

Mrs. Li was such a second wife. Her husband ran a medium sized steel manufacturing factory. Among the Taiwanese entrepreneurs that I knew, it was generally acknowledged that Mrs. Li was the real boss, and, as mentioned previously, she was affectionately called Lao Ban Niang (Mrs. Boss). I met Mrs. Li in their newly opened Ciao Nightclub on the trendy Nguyen Trai road in District 1. Like other Taiwanese entrepreneurs, Mr. Li wanted to expand his economic activities to include a

variety of businesses. It was said that Mrs. Li strongly opposed the opening of the nightclub, but Mr. Li would not give up. In the end, as everyone had expected, Mrs. Li ended up planning and running the nightclub herself, with Mr. Li more often than not just enjoying the business with friends.

Mrs. Li struggled in her relationship with her husband, however. Mr. Li was a known playboy, and frequently sought the company of other women. Mrs. Li revealed to me that he had fathered a child with a Vietnamese woman, and that this woman was demanding more and more money all of the time. Mrs. Li begged her husband to stop his philandering ways, but he countered that she was his wife, and not only had enormous control over all of his businesses, but was in fact the legal owner, and that she should trust that this arrangement wouldn't change.

I had many opportunities to observe Mrs. Li at work. In the nightclub, she commanded total respect as the boss. In the factory, it was the same. She was not seen as the boss' wife, but as the real boss. Mr. Li was seen as a smart but flaky man, more interested in enjoying life than running his own businesses. The Taiwanese entrepreneurs agreed that he was very lucky to have found Mrs. Li, and that his success in Vietnam was almost entirely because of her.

The Li's nightclub was an unofficial meeting place for Taiwanese men and local women--both Hoa and Vietnamese. Here, both seasoned and new entrepreneurs could network with each other and also meet potential local partners. As one entrepreneur put it to me, they were all looking for their own "Mrs. Li's". A bevy of beautiful women in revealing outfits came as "friends" of the Li's. Mrs. Li was careful to not allow prostitutes or other women who were obviously hostesses to enter her

nightclub. Rather, these were women who had been approved of by the club management and were thus all considered good material to become the wives and girlfriends of Taiwanese entrepreneurs.

While the Li's attempted to create a "natural" environment for the meeting of local women and Taiwanese men, other establishments were less careful with such images and more direct in fostering these unions. Dozens of mini-hotels in Cholon were in fact established for such a purpose. Here, Taiwanese tour groups were taken with the explicit purpose of finding a wife. In fact, ads in Taiwan boasted "Vietnamese brides for a set price". The price included a general tour of Vietnam, an assortment of women to choose from, the fee for the introducer, and preliminary marriage arrangements.

There were many variations of how these relationships were fostered, both individually as well as by larger entities such as the tourism industry. Zhenyi was a 35 year old Hoa woman with a child from a previous relationship. She worked as a housekeeper at the Caesar hotel. Located in the same building as the An Dong Market, the Caesar is known to cater mainly to ethnic Chinese tourists, particularly from Taiwan. It is also known for its nightclub, at which foreigners can find a troupe of hostesses waiting to entertain them. Zhenyi didn't hide the fact that she used the position to meet men, and hoped to find a man from Taiwan or Hong Kong who would commit to her. In the meantime, she had one regular lover who did some business in Vietnam, and came every few months for a short stay. He was old, she admitted, and wasn't particularly generous with her. He gave her some pocket money and had

bought her the gold necklace that she tucked under her blouse. Zhenyi said that in taking a Taiwanese lover, it was important to ask for a new motorbike and a new home.

Taiwanese entrepreneurs and tourists are known to look in Vietnam for "second wives," or "little wives." Men who already have wives and families living in Taiwan also support women and potentially children in Vietnam. While there cannot be a legal marriage commitment, there is sometimes a wedding banquet held in Vietnam, to "legitimize" the relationship in the eyes of the community. The fact that the woman has the status of second wife, however, is rarely a secret.

Second wives occupy a peculiar status within the Hoa community, wrought with contradictions, jealousies, and disdain. Miss Zhu, or Jenny, as she called herself, spoke very frankly to me about her life as a second wife. Her husband, as she called him, was a Taiwanese businessman. Like Mrs. Li, Jenny ran his business for him, and was the legal owner. The relationship started out purely professional, as she was wary of becoming a second wife, and all that this entailed. She had two teenaged daughters from a previous marriage to a Vietnamese man. Eventually, however, the personal relationship developed, to the point where her daughters considered him a father figure. He came to Taiwan every few months, staying a few weeks here and there. His family back home knew nothing of his second family, and as Jenny put it, she respected him for ferociously protecting them. Nonetheless, as Jenny put it, "he takes care of this family too."

Jenny lives in a large, comfortable home. When I first met her in 1996, she was considered exceptionally wealthy in that she had modern appliances such as a microwave and large screen television, which average Vietnamese could not afford.

By 1999, she had sent her older daughter to Australia to receive an English language education, and footed the costs herself. The ability to do this took both good connections as well as a certain amount of wealth.

Jenny was a well educated, poised, and stylish woman. She was not at all what locals might consider the type who was out to trick a foreign man. Nonetheless, she experienced disdain and prejudice from those who knew she was a second wife. She felt that few believed she worked hard for what she had, and that she actually ran her husband's business. Rather, she felt that she was seen as a kind of prostitute or kept woman.

Scholars of transnational Chinese networks have examined the role of gender in shaping business processes. The analyses most often focus upon the power imbalance between men, who typically invest capital overseas, and women, who typically make up the local labor force. Women, as well as local men who also make up the labor force, often enter the analysis in terms of either their “victimization” or “resistance” to the more powerful capitalists. The exploitation of young, often poor and uneducated women as cheap factory workers has been documented not only in Southeast Asia but across other developing markets. Work that focus on transnational phenomenon have also pointed to how culture and ethnicity are used to control labor.

Ching Kwan Lee’s work focuses on how Hong Kong managers operating factories in Mainland China have developed modes of labor regulation that deploy various local, family, and gender identities of the predominantly female labor force. As Ching points notes, studies of migrant workers in south China reveal that women outnumbered men, 70% to 30%. To churn out low-cost toys, sport shoes, watches,

factory managers from Hong Kong employ a largely female labor force. As he described it, control in the Shenzhen plant was “overt, visible, punishment oriented, and publicly displayed.” Women were subject to physical controls, timed labor, and the docking of wages.

The formation of the south China manufacturing region resulted from political economic development in both mainland China and Hong Kong. After rural decollectivization in 1979, the demand for young migrant labor began to rise. In many plants, women make up 80% or more of the employees. As Lee argues,

Management manipulated the gender hierarchy embedded in localistic networks to exert additional control over the majority of the young single women. The notion of “maiden worker” (in Cantonese, women were called *buk mui*, meaning “maidens from the north”, or *dagong mui*, meaning “working maidens”) emphasized young women’s single status, immaturity, imminent marriage, short-term commitment to factory work in Shenzhen, low job aspirations, and low motivation to learn skills. The social construction of women as maiden workers was not purely ideational; it was embedded in practices as well. It facilitated kin control over women’s discipline inside the factory and legitimized management’s relegation of women to low-ranked unskilled job positions. Because supervisors and foremen were usually men, management used the familistic or localistic authority of supervisors or foremen from the same local area over female kin to control women’s behavior and ensure their commitment to (the factory) (Lee 124 in Ong and Nonini 1997).

Gender analyses of transnational business practices have also focused on the domesticating and controlling influences of the Chinese family. As Ong writes, “...the familial regimes of diasporan Chinese...are not without their own violence and exploitation of workers, family members, kinsmen, and so on.” (Ong 1999:116).

Ong continues,

Among overseas Chinese, cultural norms dictate the formation of translocal business networks, putting men in charge of mobility while

women and children are the disciplinable subjects of familial regimes. Over the past century, Chinese emigration to sites throughout the Asia Pacific region, including North America, has entailed localizing the women at home, where they care for their families, thus freeing the men to work abroad. While the sojourning men may themselves have been treated brutally in diaspora by the colonial powers, they also exerted patriarchal power over their wives in China. In many cases, the men had two transnational families – one located in China, the other in diaspora. Today, transnationalism has prompted a revival of the sojourning practice: Elite Hong Kong executives who jet all over the world sometimes transfer their families to ‘safe havens’ in California, where the wives care for the families while earning residency rights. In some cases, the peripatetic father has set up another family ‘back home’ in Hong Kong or China (20: 1999).

While the unequal balance of power is also a reality among Taiwanese male entrepreneurs and their female Hoa partners or girlfriends, what we see in Vietnam are different levels of power relationships. On one end of the spectrum are Miss Jia and Mrs. Li, trusted partners who typically control the business and finances for their Taiwanese bosses. On the other end of the spectrum are individuals like Zhenyi, who look for romantic or sexual relationships with Taiwanese hotel guests as a way to improve her lifestyle. The Taiwanese were viewed in contradictory terms: more modern than the Vietnamese, yet more feudal in their marriage practices; rich businessmen yet also deceptive country bumpkins; their presence indicative of Vietnam’s emergence onto the global scene yet also a reminder of their dependence upon “second rate” developed nations. The Hoa were viewed in feminized terms – pure and attractive, productive as partners; yet potentially dangerous and deceptive. At every point in the spectrum are various mutual perceptions of what it means to be Taiwanese and Hoa, and how Chinese ethnicity is relevant to the fostering of these relationships.

VIII. Becoming Chinese

When I returned to Vietnam for follow up research at the end of 2003, The Taiwanese had increased in number but decreased in terms of their influence upon the Hoa community. The demand to learn Mandarin Chinese had decreased dramatically within the Hoa community. Chinese language teachers, who experienced a boom in the mid to late 1990's, were finding themselves out of work as private language schools closed and their former students started studying English and Japanese instead.

The reprioritization of language goals among the Hoa was directly tied to larger economic processes. In 1998 and 1999, learning Chinese to work with overseas Chinese was thought to bring prestige and much coveted forms of work. By 2003, various individuals told me that positions in Taiwanese companies weren't very high paying and if one wanted a good job, English and Japanese were more important to learn.

In fact, Hoa spoke of work with the Taiwanese in increasingly disparaging tones. The Taiwanese were thought to be stingy bosses, who looked down upon all locals and didn't distinguish between Hoa and Vietnamese. Furthermore, they were expected to "work hard without adequate compensation," to "obey the boss even if he is wrong," and to "suffer through anything for the sake of the good of the company."

By 2003, Singaporean capital had increased, and Hoa society had begun to adjust to this change. Working with Singaporeans was very different--being ethnic Chinese was not an advantage. Rather, the ability to speak English was the main advantage. The Hoa were thus not as able to gain advantage in these relationships due to their ethnic background, and they found themselves on more of a level playing field with the

ethnic Vietnamese in terms of working with Singaporean companies. The ability to speak Chinese, and Chinese identity in general, become a secondary asset--still salient but not as important as a professional degree and fluency in Japanese or English.

Hoa community members also believed that the number of women marrying Taiwanese men had decreased. This was largely due to the negative press Taiwanese men had gotten, and the growing belief that these marriages, no matter how rich the man was, were an embarrassment to the family and would only mean hardship for the women.

In fact, by 2003, more ethnic Vietnamese women were marrying Taiwanese men. They lived for a time with an intermediary to learn enough Chinese to live in Taiwan. One such intermediary was known within the community as *Mama-san*. The term originates in Japan, and refers to the usually older women who run hostess clubs, looking after the women who work there to entertain and provide various levels of attention and sexual service to customers. The Mama-san that I knew was a Taiwanese woman in her mid-fifties, otherwise known as “Miss Lin”. She was an unusually large woman by Asian standards, with bulging eyes and a short haircut that accentuated her bloated face.

She had come to Vietnam in suspicious circumstances. Rumor had it that she had fled Taiwan because of gambling debts, and that thugs were after her. When I confronted her with such rumors, she vehemently denied that she was hiding in Vietnam, and insisted that she felt very comfortable living there as Cholon reminded her of the Taiwan of her childhood. Besides, she said in her brusque manner, Vietnam was cheap. She rented a three story home and had two maids—all for US\$200/month.

Mama-san was incredibly suspicious of me and didn't reveal her role as a matchmaker until I had visited several times. Although she was never explicit about it, I had the impression that she saw me as too privileged and educated. She remarked several times that my Mandarin was so proper and intellectual, whereas hers was more "countryside" and heavily accented with the Taiwanese dialect that she felt more comfortable in. I feared we would never form any kind of rapport. It was only after she realized that I had come to Vietnam alone – virtually friendless and connectionless at the start - that she warmed up. This was our point of connection—two ethnic Chinese women who left everything they knew to live in Vietnam.

Mama-san introduced Taiwanese men to Vietnamese women, with the explicit purpose of arranging marriages between them. This was informally done—she found the men and women through personal networks, offering an alternative to the heavily advertised "tour groups to find Vietnamese brides" business in Taiwan. Thus, instead of bringing in dozens of men at one time and lining up dozens of women for them to choose from, she prided herself on being selective and discreet. She only worked with men that she trusted and found to be of solid character. After getting a good impression of his personality and tastes, she would then choose whom she felt was the right match.

She explained that Taiwanese girls, who crave a modern lifestyle, do not want to marry these kinds of men. Thus, these men come to Vietnam, where the poor economic situation makes them appear wealthy by comparison, in order to find women. In fact, there are billboards throughout the Taiwanese countryside, advertising "bride-finding tours of Vietnam." The total cost of an arranged tour is

about US\$20,000. This includes airfare for the man as well as his parent's accommodations, food, entertainment, and a \$5000 "gift" to the family of the chosen woman.

Marriage procedures take about six months, during which the men return to Taiwan. In the meantime, they pay for their fiancées to live in special boarding houses, which provide a number of services to orient the women to life in Taiwan. Mama-san runs such a service, taking in young women, teaching them Chinese and how to cook Taiwanese dishes.

Mama-san attributes the rise in cases of Vietnamese girls marrying Taiwanese men to two causes. First, Taiwanese men actually prefer Vietnamese girls. They are seen as sweeter, more subservient, and "easier" than Hoa women. Second, Hoa women are more concerned about face than the Vietnamese, and marrying a Taiwanese man would indicate that they are financially desperate.

I asked Mama-san whether her clients specifically asked for Hoa women, who could already speak Chinese and who were culturally closer. She observed that this was a pattern that was changing. Taiwanese men who do not care to live in Vietnam and succeed in business actually prefer Vietnamese girls.

Hoa girls are very picky and Taiwanese men feel like the Vietnamese girls are easier to get along with. They also find them more attractive. An ugly old guy can marry a beautiful 18 year old from the countryside, no problem. But if the girl's family is Hoa, they are more likely to object.

Nonetheless, Taiwanese parents will often pressure their son to marry a Hoa girl in the hopes that communication will be easier. These Hoa girls tend to come from the

countryside rather than the city. A common ethnic background, however, does not mean that these women are safe from the abuses other Vietnamese women face in Taiwan. Miss Du, a fifty-year old Chinese teacher, told me of the scandal in her family. Two of her cousins married rural Taiwanese men. One was beaten by her husband, and treated like a servant by her in-laws. Her family, however, would not allow her to return, saying that she would bring more shame upon the family in acknowledging that her marriage failed. Unable to stand the abuse, she nonetheless returned, but has been disowned by her parents. According to Miss Due, she lives a miserable life alone, selling lunch boxes to eke out just enough money for food.

When I visited one afternoon for lunch, Mama-san was celebrating the return of Mr. Huang, the twenty-something son of a wealthy Taiwanese businessman. Mr. Huang frequently visited Saigon to help his father out, and was being primed to take over the business. Mama-san was very affectionate with Mr. Huang, putting food on his plate and teasing him. He described Mama-san as someone who has helped him a lot in Vietnam, treating him as her own son. Mama-san had also introduced him to Bibi, a Vietnamese girl.

Mama-san proudly explained to me that Bibi was a Vietnamese girl from the countryside, but had been one of her best students. Like most of the other women that Mama-san picked out for her Taiwanese clients, Bibi lived for several months in Mama-san's home. There, she learned Mandarin from a tutor several times a week, as well as some fundamentals of Taiwanese cooking and culture. In the meantime, her fiancé's visa was processed, and on this day we were celebrating her imminent departure to Taiwan, where she would live with Huang's family.

By 2003, such services provided by intermediaries—mostly locals at this point—had grown into established and proliferating businesses. The demand for Vietnamese brides among Taiwanese males had increased yearly. Unlike the entrepreneurs who partnered with and married Hoa women like Mrs. Li, these were men who intended to live in Taiwan with their new brides.

Such unions also attracted the attention of the Vietnamese media. Throughout the last few years, a slew of articles has appeared in the leading Vietnamese language papers warning Vietnamese families of the perils of marrying their daughters off to Taiwanese men. One particular story served to epitomize the entire experience of these inter-national marriages. A family in the countryside needed money and thought it would be a good idea to marry their 18-year old daughter off to a Taiwanese man in exchange for a “gift” of cash. They went through a matchmaker and were pleased to see in the photo that the man was good looking. The man sent money to prepare for the wedding banquet. When he arrived, the parents were dismayed to find that he was not the handsome young man they had seen in the picture, but was in his late 50’s and, to make things worse, walked with a pronounced limp. Although it pained them to see their daughter marry a man older than they were, they believed they were doing the right thing and could benefit from their new son in law’s wealth.

When the new bride arrived in Taiwan, she discovered that not only was he not young, he was also not the wealthy man the matchmaker had promised. In fact, he was a farmer and lived with his parents in the countryside. She was expected to do all of the housework and found herself treated less like a wife and more like a servant. Her in-laws and husband were even abusive, hitting her and denying her food when they

felt she had not performed her duties. She wrote to her parents for help, begging them to let her go home. They refused, saying that the family would lose face. Isolated from others on the family farm, the girl had no means of escape. Her only reprieve was to write to the Vietnamese newspapers with her story, as a warning to other families thinking of marrying their daughters to Taiwanese men.

IX. Conclusion: Rethinking Chinese Transnational Theory

How do the connections between local women and Taiwanese men illuminate and challenge prevailing theories about transnational relationships? What models can we use to understand the role of Chinese ethnicity in these economic – as well as romantic and or sexual relationships? Furthermore, what roles do these connections play in terms of the wider issue of Hoa community and social change?

The literature on transnationalism has focused more on macro-trends rather than the actual human relationships that allow these macro-processes to occur. Anthropologists have been among the most fervent champions for the need to understand transnationalism “from below” – that is, from the perspectives of the people whose mobility – whether actual or virtual – create webs of economic, social, cultural, and political connections.

Transnationalism from below has tended to focus on two perspectives. The first revolves around the highly mobile professional, typically male. Aihwa Ong’s work on “flexible citizenship” is among the most elegant and illuminating analyses of mobile businessmen who have citizenship in one locale, residence in another, and family in either or both. While Ong’s work is groundbreaking in its attention to the

interrelationships between economic and social forms, it has been somewhat unfairly criticized for being exclusively focused on an elite group of transnationals. The world that Ong describes is indeed a privileged one, in which individuals have some degree of freedom to move their money, ideas, and their own selves across borders without fear.

The second perspective that prevails among proponents of transnationalism from below centers on the exploited. From this perspective, anthropologists have focused on uneven power relationships as the basis for capital accumulation. Female workers in factories that generate products for multinational corporations, prostitutes, construction workers and other laborers – these are groups of people who play pivotal and central roles in the creation of capital, and yet are not the primary beneficiaries of this accumulation. The literature has mainly been about the exploitation of women within the "family firm," and the use of familial duty to keep women in subordinate positions.

The stories in this chapter of men and women illustrate how ethnicity, gender, and national identity are being played out in the context of Vietnam's developing market economy. Transnational Chinese capitalism has increased living standards throughout much of Southeast Asia and China and it is the engine driving the economic boom in the region. Yet throughout the region, economic gains have been underwritten by the emergence of gross disparities in economic, social, and spatial power and by the revival of modes of gender exploitation that had previously been partially dismantled. As Ong and Nonini argue, "There is nothing intrinsically liberating about diasporan cultures. (325 in Ong and Nonini, 1997).

The Hoa experience with the Taiwanese appears, at first glance, to fall into a standard power relationship, in which the mobile Taiwanese entrepreneurs exploit Hoa resources under the guise of diasporan relationships. In addition to their superior positions as “flexible citizens” who live, work, and raise families in different countries, the Taiwanese in Vietnam are overwhelmingly male, setting the stage for gendered dynamics with local Hoa.

Despite these tell-tale signs of a transnational power relationship based on gender, economic, and national differences, what I found was that prevailing theories of the exploiter and exploited, power and resistance, could not adequately explain the relationship between Taiwanese men and their Hoa female partners. Just because the Taiwanese were more physically mobile, and able to travel back and forth across national borders, did not make them more *socially* and *economically* mobile. In this chapter I suggest that there are various forms of mobility, and while the Taiwanese possessed some forms, the Hoa possessed other, equally and sometimes even more critical forms. Here, I want to introduce the notion of *flexible networks* as a way to think about transnational relationships.

Hoa women possessed the greatest intercultural mobility among all of the “players” – including Hoa men, ethnic Vietnamese men or women, and Taiwanese entrepreneurs. They have the linguistic ability to communicate with the Taiwanese as well as Vietnamese. They have the emotional ability to give the Taiwanese entrepreneurs a sense of connection and “home” in a country that can otherwise seem very alien. They have the social permission to be connected to the Taiwanese, without loss of status. Hoa women occupy a variety of roles vis-à-vis the Taiwanese

entrepreneurs, but more often than not they end up playing significant roles in the businesses, as well as in the personal lives of their Taiwanese partners/husbands.

While I am not arguing that the Hoa women are necessarily “equal players” with the overseas Chinese men, I am suggesting that their roles are more significant than their lack of physical mobility implies. The social capital they own is their Vietnamese nationality, and their ability to move within Vietnamese society as locals. They perform important roles as cultural arbiters between the Taiwanese and their local employees, who are usually ethnic Vietnamese. They also mediate the legal issues for their Taiwanese partners, providing a cover such that the businesses are viewed as locally owned. Finally, and not insignificantly, they also provide the emotional and personal support for their partners that allows for the overseas Chinese men to consider Cholon a second home – and in some cases, their primary home. Hoa women enjoy certain forms of flexibility that are not available to Taiwanese entrepreneurs.

What I have found is that there are few models for understanding the power that Hoa women have access to because of their gender and ethnicity.

Family regimes that generally valorize mobile masculinity and localized femininity shape strategies of flexible citizenship, gender division of labor, and relocation in different sites. Transnational publics based on ethnicized mass media, networks of Asian professionals, and circuits of capital add a geometric dimension to Asian male mobility, power, and capital vis-à-vis women...New regimes of sexual exploitation—keeping mistresses, pornographic culture, prostitution—proliferate alongside translocal business networks (Ong 1999: 21).

As we have seen through the series of stories in this chapter, Hoa do not entirely fit into a structure that places them as victims or resisters of transnational Chinese capitalists. What I found, in fact, were more complex stories oftentimes

involving tenderness, love, and respect in terms of how individuals viewed these relationships, and co-dependencies. Frameworks of domination and subjugation are thus inappropriate for describing the relationship between Taiwanese and Hoa. The reality was that Hoa women were very active agents in creating new opportunities for themselves through their connections with Taiwanese men. In understanding Hoa experiences through transnational theories, we need to expand our frameworks to account for intercultural mobility, and for the notion of not just of flexible individuals, but flexible networks.

On the one hand, entrepreneurs such as Eric attribute immense social and economic importance to Hoa women. They are seen as the ones who are truly able to traverse boundaries – cultural and social – in order to actually run a business in Vietnam's difficult market environment. While on the one hand the Taiwanese idealize Hoa society as purer culture, a child-like state, they also acknowledge a certain ability to get things done in Vietnam. This ability to progress is tied to Hoa women.

Consequently, Hoa women have more access to economic resources and opportunities to emigrate than Hoa men, or any other Vietnamese in general. It is specifically through their relationships with overseas Chinese men who come to Vietnam, that these opportunities emerge. While a portion of these relationships, like Zhen Yi's, are marked by inequities and a sense of powerlessness, others can be characterized as empowering and beneficial, both practically and emotionally. Here then, we see that in discussing transnational capital and networking within a Vietnamese context, we must have ways for incorporating romantic/sexual/gendered

relationships. Chinese transnationalism cannot be analyzed apart from gender and domestic relationships. It is thus not in high rise board rooms and in stock markets and among suited businessmen that Vietnam's ethnic Chinese community has connected to the Chinese diaspora. Rather, it is in Mrs. Li's disco, and by the hand of skilled and/or greedy middlepeople, and in various mini-hotels in Cholon that transnational Chinese capital, and transnational Chinese identities, are created.

This chapter has also explored how networks based on diasporan Chinese ties are also fraught with tensions over what it means to be "Chinese." Hoa perceptions of the Taiwanese have a specific genealogy, based on their personal and collective memories of KMT involvement in Vietnam. Because of that history, Taiwanese have represented the very best of Chinese culture and nationalism. And yet, current-day interactions are very different from how the Hoa remember the past. They are torn between their nostalgic perceptions of the Taiwanese as cultural ambassadors, and their present-day interactions with them as tourists and entrepreneurs. Likewise, Taiwanese perceptions of the Hoa are informed by nostalgia for a more traditional lifestyle, represented by Cholon's emerging economy yet still underdeveloped state. At the same time, they define themselves as culturally superior to the Hoa, who are child-like and potentially untrustworthy.

As this chapter also shows, the fluidity of identity in the context of Vietnam's emerging ethnic Chinese community extends to ethnic Vietnamese as well. As ethnic Vietnamese are learning Mandarin in increased numbers and beginning to play the role of trusted local partners, how will the nature of Cholon's economic revitalization change? Within the context of Cholon's economic reemergence, Chineseness has

become an identity that can be appropriated, learned, and used strategically. The increase in the number of ethnic Vietnamese women who are learning Mandarin in order to marry Taiwanese men points to the salience of a Chinese identity in the longing for alternate futures. It also suggests that transnational Chinese relationships aren't necessarily built on an immutable notion of heritage. As Ong and Nonini note, "Transnational publics are forming new Chinese subjectivities that are increasingly independent of place, self-consciously postmodern, and subversive of national regimes of truth" (Ong and Nonini 26 in Ong and Nonini, 1997).

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to explore the nature of transnational Chinese relationships involving Hoa and Taiwanese. As we have seen, these relationships are based on these conflicting tendencies - the fostering of a common, generalized Chinese identity, and the articulation of difference. The ability for ethnic Chinese to travel, and form economic and personal relationships with other ethnic Chinese, has created both specific and global forms of "being Chinese." As the Hoa negotiate through Vietnam's economic liberalization and the rebirth of entrepreneurialism in their community, these cross-border relationships become a context in which to express ethnic difference, and to claim a greater legitimacy for their identity as Chinese.

Chapter 7: The Hoa and Diaspora Theory

I. Introduction

This dissertation has been an examination of how the ethnic Chinese community in Vietnam rebuilt their economic and social structures after the persecution they faced post-1975. In the decade after the fall of Saigon to Communist forces, the wealthiest and most powerful Hoa were forced out of their positions, and over half a million people from that community left Vietnam as refugees. By the mid-1980's, it seemed that Cholon, once the thriving center of Vietnam's Hoa entrepreneurial activity, had lost its identity as a "Chinatown" and was becoming an undifferentiated district within what was now called Ho Chi Minh City.

The Communist government's Doi Moi reforms, beginning in 1986, sought to transform the sagging economy through gradual market liberalization. This shift in the government's economic policies was accompanied by a change in the official treatment of the Hoa. Seemingly overnight, they were no longer deemed a potentially antinational community with stronger ties to a belligerent Mainland China than to Vietnam. Rather, they were upheld as the country's shining example of entrepreneurialism. The government encouraged ethnic Chinese investment from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and among overseas communities relocated in the United States. Throughout the late 1980's and 1990's, the Hoa community of Cholon seemed to revive itself and regain its former position as Vietnam's most energetic business center.

My ethnographic research within Cholon has explored the everyday practices and social forms that have contributed to this “reemergence” of Hoa society, after what seemed to be its demise post-1975. The official, state endorsed version of the story is that the Hoa are a hard working ethnic minority and have leveraged their entrepreneurial talents to help rebuild Vietnam and create the conditions for the country’s reintegration into the global arena after a period of isolation. This dissertation has explored how the Hoa have actually experienced the reemergence of their ethnic community. How has their Chinese identity been experienced, shared, and transformed along the way?

The goal of this analysis has been to offer conceptual tools for rethinking our framing of Southeast Asian Chinese communities and other diasporan populations. How does a transnational or diasporan identity work with or against other forms of identity, based on local or national structures? What value does the concept of a “homeland” have when a population has experienced multiple dislocations? What roles do gender and mobility (or lack of it) play in the day to day relationships between diasporan Chinese with different national citizenships?

Chapter Two explored the four main bodies of work that have informed theories about Southeast Asian Chinese society: The “Overseas Chinese” approach, the “Middleman Minority” approach, the “Chinese Spirit of Capitalism” approach, and the “Transnationalism/Diaspora” approach. Each body of work grew out of specific historical circumstances. The “Overseas Chinese” approach grew out of the fact that Mainland China was largely closed off to Western social scientists between 1949 and the early 1980’s. Scholars thus looked to the Southeast Asian Chinese as proxies for

the “real” Chinese. The “Middleman Minority” approach grew out of the shift from colonial and indigenous governments in power in Southeast Asia. The scholars of this approach sought to understand why the Southeast Asian Chinese, like the Jews of Europe, tended to dominate the trade and entrepreneurial sectors of their host society. The “Chinese spirit of capitalism” approach grew out of the period in the 1980’s when various Asian markets such as Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines were booming, primarily through the efforts of their elite ethnic Chinese business classes. This approach stressed the connection between business activities and Chinese cultural characteristics. The “Transnationalism/Diaspora” approach is the most recently developed one, and has grown out the argument that we need to understand ethnic Chinese communities in the context of mobility, relationships with the homeland, and global networks of cultural, political, and economic connections.

Each of these four bodies of work have laid the foundation for the following exploration of Hoa society, and its apparent “reemergence” in the last decade after a period of persecution and mass exodus due to the Communist takeover of South Vietnam. As I explored in Chapter Two, however, each of these approaches are also limited in terms of their ability to explain the current Hoa experience in this period of reemergence and transformation.

In conclusion, I will focus on three themes that have emerged from this research, that build upon and also expand our understanding of existing theories about ethnic Chinese social forms. These three themes are as follows:

- The Hoa community's reemergence in the last decade has resulted from various developments on three structural levels: local, national, and transnational.
- Hoa perceptions of a "homeland" have not remained static and tied to China. Rather, the notion of a homeland has transformed into the idea of a future or promise land, now represented by the West.
- Hoa entrepreneurial activity must be considered in terms of the gendered and emotional nature of economic business relationships – which often transcend into the personal realm.

II. Local, National, and Transnational Structures

Within the last decade, there has been an explosion of scholarly writings about the phenomenon of transnationalism. Defined as the flow of people, ideas, goods, and capital across national territories, transnational processes challenge conceptions of the nation-state as the primary unit for analyzing economic organization, political construction, and identity formation. Rather, scholars of transnational phenomena have explored how political, economic, and cultural flows across borders have increasingly characterized the late 20th century in ways that affect social practices. They have called for expanding traditional conceptions of territorially bounded communities and to explore how a community's practical and imagined realities may transcend multiple borders.

Transnationalism in itself, however, is not enough to explain why the Hoa maintain a distinct and even prospering ethnic community, after over two decades of

persecution. The reality of Hoa daily lives involved continually transitioning between local, national, and transnational identities. As I explored in the preceding chapters, it is a combination of opportunities that have created the conditions for the Hoa to rebuild their ethnic community. On one level, the boom in investment from Overseas Chinese such as the Taiwanese has led to the fostering of transnational ethnic networks and the expression of a more generalized and global Chinese identity. As I explored in Chapter 6, Hoa women play a critical role as intermediaries in an economy driven by Taiwanese investment in local opportunities. The ability to speak Mandarin (as opposed to other Chinese dialects) and an understanding of how to network among these transnational business players have become critical in the development of the post-1975 Cholon economy.

Despite the centrality of Taiwanese investment and the growing importance of Overseas Chinese networks in Cholon, these transnational connections are not the only structures upon which Hoa society has built its recovery. Equally important are local networks, based on sub-ethnic affiliations of ancestral province. As I explored in Chapter 3, the reemergence of the bang signals a desire among the Hoa to recreate the social structures that defined pre-1975 life in Cholon. These structures essentially defined Cholon as a separate city, governed by the powerful bang leaders. Also, the reemergence of the bang signals the development of not only a generalized Chinese identity based on Mandarin and transnational business, but also, the continued proliferation of various Chinese dialects and more specialized social identities based on ancestral province and familial associations.

In addition to these local and transnational structures, Hoa society is also under the influence of the Vietnamese state's national agendas. As I explored in Chapter 4, the state has hardly taken a laissez-faire approach towards the reemergence of Hoa society. In fact, it has actively sought to foster but also control the rebirth of Cholon as Vietnam's premier "Chinatown". In defining the Hoa as one of the nation's ethnic minorities, and casting Hoa entrepreneurial activity as acts of patriotic nation-building, the Vietnamese Communist regime has sought to direct Hoa business activities towards its Doi Moi reforms. In addition, the state has sought to define the Hoa as ethnic minorities by casting any expressions of ethnic Chinese identity (such as language learning) as tolerable only within the structures of Vietnamese citizenship.

While it may seem that the transnational modes are becoming increasingly powerful as Vietnam integrates into the global economy and the Hoa are increasingly connected to ethnic Chinese communities through media, travel, and financial networks, I would argue that the national and local modes will continue to play key roles in defining Hoa behavior and values. In exploring Hoa society through ethnographic research in Cholon, I have found that these three structures – local, national, and transnational – are all salient in their daily decision-making processes. Individuals did not always experience their ethnic identity through one structure. Rather, we can consider these three different modes that an individual might move between, depending on the circumstances and what needed to be accomplished.

III. Multiple Centers

Theoretically, the concept of a “diaspora” is based on the distinction between center and periphery – or homeland and all of those locations outside of the homeland that a particular ethnic group has settled in. A group of people continue to be defined as diasporan so long as they retain their emotional and/or practical ties to their homeland. In terms of the Overseas Chinese, their diasporan identity is typically characterized in terms of their attachments to China. China may be a real, practical, geographical location. It may also be an imagined location, one that is part of folklore or imagination among a Chinese community. However, what is consistent in all of the analyses is that the homeland is singular and it exists in the past. The notion of a homeland, real or imagined, is the core that defines the diasporan experience.

In my research with the Hoa, I have found that the notion of a homeland continues to be relevant; however, it is neither static nor necessarily fixed to China. China was only one of several places, real or imagined, that figured in their perceptions of identity and community. As was explored in Chapter 6, Taiwan has historically been thought of as the more “authentic”, non-Communist homeland. Although the Hoa did not necessarily have ancestral ties to Taiwan, they developed a sense of Chinese nationalism throughout the 1950’s to 1970’s, based on Taiwan as the center. Taiwan thus came to symbolize traditional Chinese culture, values, and language.

Chapter Six also explores how Taiwan has become a different kind of center today, with the influx of Taiwanese entrepreneurial capital and the proliferation of partnerships between Hoa (usually women) and Taiwanese businessmen. In this

emerging view, Taiwan is reformulated as an economic center, rather than a cultural one. It has become integrated into Hoa conceptions of their personal universe, in terms of the love relationships formed between business partners. And, for an increasing number of Hoa families, it is a place where their daughters go to live with their Taiwanese husbands and in-laws.

Chapter Five explores the development of a different kind of center, which challenges the idea that a “homeland” must have an ancestral connection. As was explored in that chapter, the post-1975 exodus of the Hoa community created a situation in which nearly all Hoa have immediate family members living in North America. For younger people, this has created the strong desire and expectation that their futures will also be abroad, once they are properly sponsored. A kind of lifestyle in limbo has emerged, as young adult Hoa see Vietnam as a temporary location on their way to their eventual homeland of Orange County, San Jose, or other such locations. For older Hoa as well, the U.S. has become the center of their emotional connections, as they imagine the lives their loved ones – children, grandchildren, brothers, and sisters – are living out.

The Hoa indeed thought of themselves as people in dispersion, but for them, China was not the primary symbolic and/or practical center to which they looked. I would argue that the experiences of the Hoa in fact challenge the polarized view of center and periphery within the literature on diasporan experiences. Based on this research, I would argue for expanding our theoretical concepts of diaspora to incorporate a more fluid notion of the center, and also to open up the possibilities for multiple centers.

IV. Gendered and Emotional Business Ties

Over the last decade, there has been a proliferation of anthropological studies on transnational business networking. The Southeast Asian Chinese, as well as the diasporan Jews and Armenians, are common case study subjects in this literature. Anthropologists such as Aihwa Ong have shed light on how these networks are often gendered, with male entrepreneurs benefiting the most from their mobility and ethnic networks, while women represent cheap or unpaid labor.

Transnationalism is often theorized from two perspectives: those of powerful male entrepreneurs with cross-national networks, and those of exploited women who make up the majority of the labor force for the former. Women, thus, are typically viewed either as exploited subjects who work for wages, or victims of more powerful and influences males. These males may be ethnic Chinese businessmen from more economically developed countries or even family members.

My research into Hoa society, however, revealed that the post-1975 economy has actually developed, to a large extent, around Hoa women. While there was certainly also a large number of women who toiled in foreign-run factories, I also observed how important the Hoa-Taiwanese partnership has been in driving small and medium sized business investment. In particular, I have found that the relationships between Taiwanese male investors and Hoa women is a key component in the success of transnational business networking. As was explored in Chapter Six, these relationships are based on trust and, more significantly, are often also based on emotion or love. These love relationships between people such as Mr. and Mrs. Li create the structural conditions for business to prosper. The combination of the “wife”

partner who can traverse Vietnamese, Hoa, and Taiwanese cultural and linguistic barriers, and the “husband” partner who brings in capital and foreign connections, has driven Cholon’s economic revivalism in the 1990’s. These conditions include a sense of stability for the Taiwanese entrepreneurs, who are far from home and in an unfamiliar market. For the women, these relationships represent a way to move beyond the lack of opportunities they experience locally, and experience a type of mobility.

Emotional ties such as love are certainly not a part of every male-female partnership. As I also explored in Chapter Six, some women, Hoa and ethnic Vietnamese, approach these partnerships in tactical terms, viewing them as means to get out of their current situations. Likewise, many Taiwanese entrepreneurs like Eric are only looking for professional partners, and not a family (or second family) in Vietnam.

What I have shown in this dissertation is another lens through which to view male-female relationships in the context of transnational capitalism. Women are sometimes, in the case of the Hoa, central players who hold power over others, including men. Furthermore, they may do so despite the fact that they are less physically mobile than the male entrepreneurs. The Hoa women I knew were not able to travel or traverse borders as their Taiwanese bosses or husbands were able to. Nonetheless, they possessed cultural mobility – the ability to communicate and negotiate across Vietnamese and multiple dialects of Chinese. These skills made them indispensable in the quest to get around Vietnam’s bureaucratic hurdles, corrupt officials, and ever-shifting laws.

V. Conclusion

This dissertation has explored change and continuity in Hoa society from 1975 to 2000, through ethnographic research and personal histories. This is, of course, just a snapshot of what Hoa social forms are like. How will they change over the next few decades?

A few emerging developments should be called out at this point. First and foremost, Mainland China is becoming an increasingly powerful global economic force. The economy has grown at an unprecedented rate of 9% per year over the last few years, and the Mainland Chinese business elite are beginning to rival their Asian and European peers as players in the global market. This may have several consequences for the Hoa.

During one of my last visits to Cholon in 2001, there seemed to be a small but growing number of Mainland Chinese businessmen scouting out investment opportunities. My Taiwanese acquaintances were both annoyed and anxious. They believed that their Mainland Chinese peers were even more ruthless than they were regarding business practices, and more willing to take risks. The Mainland Chinese will, similar to the Taiwanese, need local partners to help them navigate through linguistic and bureaucratic hurdles. Whether they create gendered business relationships, like the Taiwanese, will be a significant development to monitor. As China grows in power and influence, and Chinese businesspeople are increasingly allowed to explore other investment opportunities, how will the political and economic relationship between China and Vietnam shift? As I explored in the introductory chapter, the history between these nations has nearly always been fraught with tension.

Vietnam continues to be wary of its northern neighbor, and popular national stories continue to exalt the fact that China has never been able to subdue the Vietnamese in war. The Hoa have, historically, been the victims of tensions between the two nations. Their persecution in the late 1970's was directly linked to the tensions and border bars between China and Vietnam. With China rising in power, and the forthcoming 2008 Beijing Olympics which will throw even more international attention on the region, will the Vietnamese government once again cast the Hoa as anti-national? Or will they continue to build up the Hoa as cultural and economic brokers, a bridge between Chinese capital and the growing Vietnamese market?

Another development that may have significant effects on Hoa society is the growth of Chinese studies among ethnic Vietnamese. Chapter Six touched upon the growing trend among Vietnamese college students to learn Mandarin for business purposes. If language is no longer a barrier between ethnic Chinese investors and Vietnamese entrepreneurs, will the Hoa continue to have an advantage in this area? A related trend is the growing educational gap between young adult Hoa and their Vietnamese peers. While young Hoa continue to look forward to their futures elsewhere, and avoid engaging in the Vietnamese school system, they are also losing out on opportunities for work in global businesses opening up branches in Vietnam. As one ambitious Vietnamese college student told me in 2000, "the Hoa are good at business but in the old fashioned way; they will find themselves falling behind in computers and other necessary skills unless they seek higher education."

The question of whether Hoa society remains resilient or fades over the next few decades draws our attention to the fact that ethnic identity and the social forms

that support it are neither static nor always enduring. What we have seen in Vietnam is that an ethnic community can reemerge after a period of trauma and persecution, but that this reemergence has depended upon several structural factors. The influx of Taiwanese capital, the interests of the Vietnamese state, and the ecosystem of transnational families have all created circumstances for the Hoa to rebuild Cholon. What it means to be “Chinese” has in fact shifted during this period, and what we see today are multiple manifestations of ethnic identity, each offering different opportunities as well as challenges. Which will endure, and how they will transform over the next few decades will depend on both the emotional resonance they continue to have for people, as well as how larger political and economic factors affect these social forms.

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