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## Vietnamese in Central Europe: An Unintended Diaspora

In the German film, *Sunday Menu*, written and directed by Liesl Nguyen in 2011, a Vietnamese teenager, Mi, on the outskirts of Berlin struggles with a sense of isolation and dislocation as the threat of bankruptcy looms over the family restaurant.<sup>1</sup> Caught between a wistful grandmother, a desperate mother, and an assimilated cousin, Mi negotiates the conflicting feelings of familiarity and foreignness that she encounters in everyday language and cultural practice through the metaphor of food—the weekly menu that pulls her between her German and Vietnamese social worlds. On the surface, the film explores themes commonly found in the literature on Vietnamese diasporic subjects that tends to be “immutably connected to the nexus of war and refugee displacement:”<sup>2</sup> precarity, racism and alienation, conflict across cultures and generations, and struggles with identity. And yet, there is something curiously distinctive here that sets this story of alienation apart to reveal other Cold War migrant trajectories: the setting—towering blocks in a massive housing settlement—positions the protagonist within a very different history and genealogy of Vietnamese migration outside more familiar diasporic spaces that privilege the West, especially the United States. The discerning viewer of *Sunday Menu* knows how to read the grey, concrete urban landscape as a metaphor for the socialist East. This is affirmed as Mi

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gazes on the family album in the company of her grandmother with black-and-white photographs of her parents arriving as hopeful contract workers in the 1980s in what was then the Democratic Republic of (East) Germany.

As contributors to this collection show, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism had a tremendous effect on Vietnamese populations in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. As Damani J. Partridge has argued, and contributors to this collection confirm (especially Raia Apostolova and her study of Vietnamese workers in Bulgaria), with the end of the Cold War, new racialized subjects and forms of exclusion replaced fading sentiments of solidarity as once-invited guests (the carriers of technology back to the homeland) became *personae non gratae* or what Partridge calls “leftover bodies.”<sup>3</sup> In this collection, I refer to these “leftover bodies” in a post Cold War era, those students, trainees and workers who were expected to return home (with new technical skills and expertise for nation building) but stayed, as constitutive of an “unintended diaspora” in former socialist countries. In so doing, the collection enacts another “worlding” of the Vietnamese diaspora<sup>4</sup> by shifting the focus to those pathways of migration that took place beyond the so-called Iron Curtain. Contributors thus draw attention to other frameworks of race and nation that can enhance our understanding of the global operations of state socialism, if not its intersections with capitalism, insofar as both systems relied on the labor of expendable migrant bodies.

Due south of Berlin, the border area between eastern Germany and the Czech Republic has become another symbolic site for the cultural examination of an unintended Vietnamese diaspora populated by leftover “comrades of color”<sup>5</sup> who came on temporary visas and stayed after the disintegration of communist regimes when their labor contracts were annulled. This left vulnerable migrants to turn in large numbers to the black market for survival, which had already been growing for years under socialism, as the literature shows.<sup>6</sup> Rimini Protokoll’s theatrical production, *Vùng biên giới* [Border Zone] on the illicit trade in goods across borders and across generations (passing down skills and memories, like in *Sunday Menu*), makes the provocative claim that Vietnam and its diaspora also lie somewhere “between Prague and Dresden.”<sup>7</sup> Moving between the Sapa Market in Prague and the Đồng Xuân market in Berlin, the same market where Mi purchases restaurant supplies in *Sunday Menu* (and where Gertrud Hüwelmeier conducted

fieldwork for her essay), the German- and Czech-speaking traders grapple with similar questions of belonging, mobility, and vulnerability—economic but also bodily vulnerabilities with the rise of xenophobic attacks. Unlike Mi, however, the traders occupy a liminal zone of legal uncertainty; in Partridge’s words, they have become de facto *noncitizens* who no longer enjoy certain (though delimited) rights that came with their labor contracts. The promise of free movement across open EU borders—signified by abandoned border stations and an increase in the circulation of counterfeit goods—is mitigated by a lack of lawful residency and the looming threat of deportation, if not the threat of physical assault. Few migrants in Germany can forget the violent Rostock Riots in August 1992 when right-wing mobs fire-bombed a dormitory housing Vietnamese “contract workers,” as they were called in the socialist East to distinguish them from the “guest workers” in the capitalist West, for three frightening days.

*Sunday Menu* and *Vùng biên giới* are but two examples from an extensive repertoire of cultural productions made by and about Vietnamese communities in the former East Bloc, in what today, in post Cold War terminology, is typically referred to as *Central Europe*. The essays here examine the historical development of this unplanned diaspora during the global Cold War era of anti-imperialist “fraternal solidarity,” and its continued vibrant presence in eastern Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria. A comparative history of socialist mobilities to Eastern Europe and the USSR is beyond the scope of this brief introduction.<sup>8</sup> The essays do show, however, that despite striking similarities (sometimes down to the language used in bilateral agreements), there were notable differences in the scope and conditions of migration to each country; for example, in the case of the indebted Vietnamese workforce in Bulgaria in Apostolova’s piece, where Vietnamese labor was used to reduce Vietnam’s national debt. This was not necessarily the case in other countries where the terms of debt and its repayment were subject to other negotiations, as Alena K. Alamgir demonstrates. We have also excluded the large Vietnamese population in Russia to keep the focus on Central Europe, the alleged gateway to the West that generated unique opportunities and aspirations.

On the whole, the histories of migration explored here do overlap and intersect at certain points, despite the existence of different models to suit

individual national needs that were subject to negotiations with the Vietnamese state. As revealed in the essays, socialist internationalist policies starting in the 1950s, directed at the technological training of Vietnamese university students and apprentices (Grażyna Szymańska-Matusiewicz, Hüwelmeier) in order to build a postcolonial nation-state, gradually gave way to the mass labor exchange programs of the 1980s (Alamgir, Apostolova, Phi Hong Su) in a desperate attempt to save the floundering command economies of the more industrialized socialist countries of Europe. This marked an important shift from an external, collective focus on rebuilding Vietnam (with the larger goal to keep it under the Soviet sphere of influence) to a more internal focus on maintaining political and economic stability within individual nation-states. Apostolova, in particular, shows how an “ethos of internationalism” changed over time as Vietnamese workers took on value as surplus labor. And yet it would be a mistake, she argues, to see them only as exploited, racialized victims who became the target of hostile resentment (and a gaffe to see racism simply as a byproduct of capitalism). After all, travel to what the Vietnamese identified as “the West” [*đi Tây*], what was capitalism’s “East” at the time, promised Vietnamese men and women access to a socialist dreamworld or “paradise” as they often described it: an escape from war and poverty into peace and material plenitude.<sup>9</sup> Alamgir’s observations also support a more critical positioning of the worker, as well as the Vietnamese government, which she argues, was not wholly unresponsive to the needs of its workforce and the conditions of their labor, as commonly assumed. In all cases, top-down approaches to understanding state power and the diversity of Vietnamese experiences with everyday socialism in Europe are shown to be largely deficient. On the contrary, the methodological tools employed by contributors here—multi-sited and transnational ethnography (Hüwelmeier and Szymańska-Matusiewicz), archival work with previously inaccessible records (Alamgir and Apostolova), and the use of the Vietnamese language among diasporic populations (Szymańska-Matusiewicz and Su)—allow for more nuanced narratives to emerge that challenge existing literature that downplays subaltern agency and overstates the “rigorous control” and presence of “intense and intrusive surveillance,” to cite Alamgir. While certainly true of state efforts in many cases, the authors show that such effects cannot be reduced to the dominant

experience of students and workers in labor migration programs. Rather, disciplinary regimes were often undermined by enterprising and desiring Vietnamese subjects, despite the threat of punitive measures that, in extreme cases, could result in being sent home.

That the fall of communism had a profound impact on Vietnamese students, trainees, and workers in socialist Europe also distinguishes their experiences from Vietnamese diasporics elsewhere, whose lives were less directly affected by the events of 1989 (with the notable exception of refugees in western Germany, as Su shows). Unlike exiles in Western Europe, North America and allied capitalist countries, these groups of Vietnamese (who numbered more than two hundred thousand) were meant to comprise a temporary workforce, rather than permanent residents; the “gift” of skills acquisition was intended to build a technologically-driven, socialist industrial economy back in Vietnam. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, factories in the East folded, and most workers were sent home, lured by compensation payments of 3,000 Marks (approximately \$1,800) in the case of reunified Germany. Others stayed or returned illegally, taking great risks to cross Ukraine to reach Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic.<sup>10</sup> As in the capitalist West, these migrants were also drawn by promises of certain freedoms.<sup>11</sup> But their everyday practices and means of livelihood look quite different: as Hühnelmeier shows, Vietnamese transnational connections within and across Central Europe, also seen in *Vùng biên giới*, are a distinguishing feature of the unintended diaspora, one that challenges the bi-national model of homeland and host-land that informs much of the literature. Rather, these migrants, because of their economic, social, religious, and political activities, as Szymańska-Matusiewicz reveals, are highly mobile, even as their relations to the Vietnamese state remain complex and ambivalent.

Cross-border trade has played a significant role here, and came to stigmatize Vietnamese migrants for their assumed hoarding and profiteering; that is, for contributing to the material shortages that emerged as a dominant trope of socialism.<sup>12</sup> And yet because of this very history, which forms the basis of much contemporary migration today, the geographies of these extensive networks of commodity exchange remain largely concentrated on circulations within the former East, as Hühnelmeier’s study confirms. To

a significant extent they build on previous transactional histories and flows of goods from Vietnam (and Thailand) across China and the Soviet Union, and into Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup> Su helps us to understand why this is: how Cold War imaginaries and constructs of the socialist Other remain firmly in place and continue to shape relations, particularly between Vietnamese refugee-citizens in the West and contract worker-noncitizens in the East. However, as she finds, such relations are now ensconced in a politics of EU integration (and notions of good/bad migrants), rather than merely anti-communism. Similarly, Apostolova shows how the “Vietnamese syndrome” connects unlawful migrants to economic crisis in post-transition Bulgaria. Once socialist friends in the struggle against imperialism, Vietnamese migrants are now the scapegoats for society’s ills in an increasingly nationalist Europe that imagines itself as homogenous and free from the bodies of foreign Others.

The distinctive histories and legacies of the diasporic groups discussed in the essays challenge the clichéd image of Vietnam as a closed and isolated country cut off from the rest of the world, a position that obfuscates the experiences of socialist-era mobilities and the unintended (and little known) migrant communities that subsequently formed.<sup>14</sup> Such migration genealogies also challenge any uniform notion of a cohesive, global Vietnamese diaspora. As Su reminds us, there is no better place than Berlin to study how divergent pathways of Cold War Vietnamese migration intersected after the fall of the Wall, when the figure of the refugee and the figure of the contract worker encountered one another in reunified urban space. One must then speak of the Vietnamese “community” in Berlin in the plural, given its vastly different political orientations and relations to the homeland, a position also taken by Kien Nghi Ha in the pioneering volume he edited, “Asian Germans” [*Asiatische Deutsche*].<sup>15</sup> That an ideological rift remains between these two communities was evident in an anti-China demonstration in eastern Berlin in 2015. The event, which was organized with the support of the Vietnamese embassy, drew a particular group of Vietnamese migrants (and eastern German supporters to boot!) who flew the flag of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, rather than the flag of the defunct southern Republic that one often sees among refugee-based populations in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in western Europe. Szymańska-Matusiewicz’s essay

articulates these homeland politics most clearly and yet cautions against any homogenous reading of post-socialist landscapes. In Poland, the Vietnamese population (mostly former students and trainees; unlike the other cases presented here, there were no contract labor agreements) is fraught with tension as migrants navigate the fine line between state and civil society organizations, reaffirming their allegiance to Vietnam and its institutions, while simultaneously pushing for democratic reforms, sometimes with their “co-ethnics” (Su’s term) in the West. In eastern Berlin and especially in Warsaw, loyal Vietnamese migrants face a perplexing dilemma: how to be a good socialist state subject in a post-socialist society where hostility toward the communist past remains palpable among the European population.

The essays presented here suggest the emergence of a new body of literature that, for the first time, has been collected and presented within the context of Vietnamese Studies. Most studies of the Vietnamese diaspora in the former East Bloc and Soviet Union are not published in English, and those that are tend to be placed in European area studies or migration-focused journals.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, knowledge of “the diaspora” remains strikingly bifurcated along a Cold War-inflected, East-West binary, where “transnational Vietnam” tends to privilege political displacement,<sup>17</sup> as well as bi-national circulations between Vietnam and western countries only. This collection aims to overcome this epistemological divide, while recognizing how the legacy of the Cold War continues to shape everyday practices (such as trade orientated toward the East in Vietnamese-named markets, as Hühnelmeier shows), as well as influence relations between groups of Vietnamese who live overseas in the same city no less, as Su demonstrates. The hope is to spark a more inclusive approach to, and understanding of, Vietnamese migrants in other parts of the world, and to do so, as Alamgir argues, without reducing people to mere tools or victims of the state, and by pointing to new, transformative connections. And while work on Vietnamese diasporas, including in the essays here, points to the stubborn persistence of Cold War frameworks, and to a new language of exclusion as Apostolova illustrates, these paradigms and divisions *are* gradually shifting. As Szymańska-Matusiewicz reveals, pro-democracy migrants in Poland are building new bridges with activists in Southern California. This image of Warsaw-Westminster solidarity might be the starting point for new diasporic possibilities.



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#### Notes

1. According to Alisa Kotmair, who also worked on the film, Phạm Thị Hoài's short story "Thực đơn Chủ nhật" provided inspiration for *Sunday Menu*. Alisa Kotmair, "Sunday Menu, the Film," *alisakotmair.com*, 2017, <http://alisakotmair.com/2009/09/08/sunday-menu-an-explanation/> (accessed November 10, 2015).
2. An Tuan Nguyen, "More than Just Refugees: A Historical Overview of Vietnamese Professional Immigration to the United States," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10, no. 3 (2015): 87–125, 88.
3. Damani J. Partridge, *Hypersexuality and Headscarves: Race, Sex and Citizenship in the New Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 25.
4. Fiona I. B. Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam, "Southeast Asian American Studies Special Issue: Guest Editors' Introduction," *positions: asia critique* 20, no.3 (2012): 671–684, 673.
5. Quinn Slobodian, ed., *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York: Berghahn Press, 2015).
6. See, for example, Melanie Beresford and Đặng Phong, *Economic Transition in Vietnam: Trade and Aid in the Demise of a Culturally Planned Economy* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2000).
7. Rimini Protokoll, "Vùng biên giới," *pimini-protokoll*, [http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project\\_4238.html](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project_4238.html) (accessed June 9, 2016). Thank you to Alisa Kotmair for introducing me to this production.
8. One particularly useful reference would be Alena K. Alamgir and Christina Schwenkel, "From Socialist Assistance to National Self-Interest: Vietnamese Labor Migration into CMEA Countries," In *Alternative Globalizations*, James Mark, Steffi Marung and Artemy Kalinovsky, eds. Forthcoming with Indiana University Press.

9. Christina Schwenkel, "Rethinking Asian Mobilities: Socialist Migration and Postsocialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany," *Critical Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2014): 235–258, 248.
10. Trangđài Glassey-Trànguyễn. "Risk as Mobility: Undocumented Vietnamese Migrants in A Transnational Legal Limbo." MA thesis, Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, Riverside, 2016.
11. Cf. Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012).
12. As Jonathan Zatin has argued, hostility towards foreigners focused not on competition for jobs, as is often the case with xenophobia in the West, but on competition for scarce goods. Jonathan R. Zatin. "Scarcity and Resentment: Economic Sources of Xenophobia in the GDR, 1971–1989." *Central European History* 40, no. 4 (2007): 683–720, 679.
13. Schwenkel, "Rethinking Asian Mobilities," 250.
14. *Ibid.*, 236.
15. Kien Nghi Ha, *Asiatische Deutsche: Vietnamesische Diaspora and Beyond* [Asian Germans: Vietnamese Diaspora and Beyond] (Berlin: Assoziation A., 2012).
16. Christina Schwenkel, "Socialist Mobilities: Crossing New Terrains in Vietnamese Migration Histories," *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 4, no. 1 (2015): 13–25, 14.
17. An Tuan Nguyen, "More Than Just Refugees," 88.