

Constitution of Multiple Ethnicities as a Process of Capital Accumulation: The Ethnic Identity Construction of Oversea Vietnamese in Udon Thani Province of Thailand

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Abstract

It can be seen that ethnic identity is an important issue addressed in many migration and diaspora studies. Globalization has provided opportunities for flows of people across national borders and collapsed geographical boundaries between regions, states and nations. However, it does not mean that cultural differences are disappearing or that the whole world is being packed into one global culture. Remarkably, it has been discovered that ethnic identity is beneficial to members of diaspora communities when they confront difficulties when adapting and sustaining their lives in the countries of destination. It contrasts with a traditional idea that ethnicity is a factor which could lead to the marginalization of a group. Conversely, in these times under globalization impacts, ethnicity could bring economic and socio-cultural advantages for an ethnic group. Especially, living in-between two or more cultures raises a necessary demand for diaspora groups managing multiple identities which is a highly complicated process involving negotiations at different levels of individuals, groups, communities, institutions and even nations. Therefore, it suggests an increasing need to reconsider how diaspora groups construct or reconstruct their identities under the new context. This paper proposes an attention on the process that Vietnamese diaspora living in Udon Thani Province, Thailand construct their multiple identities and in what ways their fluid ethnicities enhance their accumulation of capitals which help them better integrate into Thai society and sustain their livelihoods as well as connections with Vietnam - their country of origin.

Key words: multiple identities, hybridity, identity construction, capitals, overseas Vietnamese

1. Introduction

It is estimated that there were 100,000 Vietnamese residents living in Thailand by 2005 (Sidel 2007). Most of them nowadays have settled down in the northeast provinces, or also known as the *Isan* region in Thailand which includes Udon Thani Province. They have a long history of migration and making livelihood in the country. They are called by the Vietnamese government and they call themselves as *Viet Kieu* or “Overseas Vietnamese” - a literal translation. In my study, I use the terms *Viet Kieu*, overseas

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Vietnamese, Vietnamese - Thai, and Vietnamese diaspora, interchangeably but they all refer to the group of Vietnamese people who have settled down for a long time and held Thai citizenship or a Thai permanent residence card in the northeast Thailand. This paper proposes to bring attention to the process of how the Vietnamese diaspora living in Udon Thani Province construct their identities and in what ways their ethnicities enhance their accumulation of capitals which help them better integrate into Thai society and sustain their livelihoods as well as connections with Vietnam - their country of origin.

Concerning the issue of the migrant's identity in the countries of settlement, familiar notions embed the idea that the ethnic immigrants need to fully assimilate to the host society. It means that migrants would abandon cultures of their national origins and completely integrate into their host societies. In this sense, migrants would gradually lose their original identities. Skinner (1958) in his research about overseas Chinese in Thailand indicated that the fourth generation of overseas Chinese would become fully assimilated into Thai society. However, it is indicated that immigration in modern days is not viewed as one-way or two-way journey (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). Rather, immigrants connect here and there by continuously crossing borders. They participate economically, socially, culturally and politically in their host country while living abroad but simultaneously, maintaining close linkages with people and events in their countries of origin.

Modern migration thus raises questions about identities. Globalization has provided opportunities for flows of people across national borders and geographically collapsed boundaries between regions, states and nations. However, it does not mean that cultural differences are disappearing or that the world will become a single, global culture. As such, it is ever-increasingly necessary for us to consider a new look at identity, hybridity and contemporary diaspora experiences that stretch multiple spheres. Managing multiple identities is a highly complicated process which involves negotiations at different levels of individuals, groups, communities, institutions and even nations.

Looking at the overseas Vietnamese in northeastern provinces in general and Udon Thani Province in particular, the second generation speaks Thai and wears Thai traditional clothing; but at the same time, they speak Vietnamese within their communities, they wear *Ao Dai* (Vietnamese traditional dress) and eat Vietnamese food. At their parties, there are both Thai and Vietnamese dishes. Moreover, the second generation of *Viet Kieu* attempt to teach Vietnamese language to their children and grandchildren nowadays. These realities question the idea of complete assimilation which is linear and implies that migrants once assimilate to the host society they cannot come back to their culture of origin. It contradicts with the

globalization trend mentioned above which emphasizes that although globalization - world markets, mass media, rapid travel and modern communications have been disseminated worldwide, cultural forms have not yet become homogeneous.

It therefore could be argued that overseas Vietnamese residents in Udon Thani Province embrace multiple social embeddedness or multiple social relations. Looking at *Viet Kieu*, the possibility could be that they both integrate into Thai society by developing social relations with the majority of Thai people and at the same time sustaining social embeddedness with members within their ethnic group in Udon Thani Province and with people in Vietnam. In this way, the overseas Vietnamese maintain ties to multiple sites. Hence, it would be possible and necessary for them to develop an “in-between” identity which could be shifted and negotiated depending on various contexts and their interactions with the surrounding communities. As such, it brings out the consideration of viewing the ethnic identity of *Viet Kieu* as a process and be constructed through different contexts and situations.

In addition to the problem shown as above, I realize that studies on migrant’s identity often look at ethnicity from a negative perspective. They imply that ethnic identity could lead to unequal and a disadvantaged position for migrant groups. Simmel (1950) pointed out that traders beginning to establish their career in a foreign society usually are confronted with marginality when they are basically mobile people who do not have original connections in ties of kinship, loyalty or occupation with members in the host societies. Park (1950) illustrated a different example of a marginal migrant group because of their attachment with their ethnicity. He used a typical case of Jews who are not keen on detaching from their past and traditions, and not popularly accepted because of racial distinction in the new society where they sought to settle down. Wienk (2018) in her research exploring exclusion and oppression of Haitian population in a rural community in SouthWest Florida indicates that language of Haitians has been a tool to marginalize the population in social order. Language is identified as a form of color-blind racism which consequently leads to the exclusion of the Haitian community.

However, there are a number of researchers addressing the development of ethnic identities and its role of making positive functioning for migrant communities (Hill et.al. 2012). It has been found that a strong and positive ethnic identity is usually in correlation with different aspects of adaptive processes, comprising self-esteem, lowering drug use, succeeding in education, lowering aggression, and becoming more integrated into host societies (Caldwell et.al. 2004; McMahon and Watts 2002). In this line, many studies have also discovered that a firm, positive ethnic identity and sense of belonging are beneficial to

members of migrant communities, and may play a role as a protective factor when migrant groups are confronted with discrimination and prejudice (Caldwell et.al. 2004).

Under globalization impacts and in time of modern-day immigration when immigrants can cross borders and maintain connections with their origin country while living abroad, ethnic identity could bring economic and socio-cultural advantages for a group. In other words, ethnicity benefits a diaspora group by gaining necessary capitals to sustain their livelihoods and become active in transnational activities. In this paper, I propose an argument that the identity construction of the overseas Vietnamese in Udon Thani Province is a strategy to obtain capitals which facilitate the group build their livelihoods in the province they settling down in and achieve multiple cultural citizenships.

In order to explore how the overseas Vietnamese in Udon Thani Province form their identities and how this identity construction helps them to accumulate different capitals, facilitating their lives in the host society, I will make use of participatory observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The participatory observation is expected to help me immerse in the everyday lives of the Vietnamese diaspora in Udon Thani Province in which I can see their interactions among members of the group and between members of the group and other groups such as major Thais or Chinese - Thais. By making this participation I could find out the way that the overseas Vietnamese perform their identities in their everyday lives both on individual and community levels. Semi-structured interviews would be useful to explore reasons for the identity construction and actors involved in this process.

2. Notes on the History of Vietnamese Migration to Thailand

The Vietnamese migrated to Thailand in different waves over a long period of time and ended in the middle of the 20th century (Trinh 2003). In the early time of this period, Siam did not endorse any specific policies toward different migrant groups, including Vietnamese. However, as the Thai government realized the necessity of managing migrants and started making regulations on migrants from the second half of the 20th century, they divided Vietnamese migrants into three categories: ancient Vietnamese (*Yuon Kau*), Vietnamese owning resident permits as foreign nationals (*Yuon Tang Dao*) and Vietnamese refugees (*Yuon Op Pha Yop*) (Trinh 2003).

There are four waves of Vietnamese migrants coming to Thailand, lasting from the end of the 17th century to post WWII (Trinh 2003). The earliest migration wave occurred in the time that Nguyen Lords¹ - a feudalist clan ruled in the south of Vietnam. This clan opened sea links and relations with the kingdoms in and near the Gulf of Siam. However, they countered the spread of Christianity and repressed the Vietnamese who followed this religion. Consequently, those following this religious faith went to the Gulf of Siam and migrated to Ayutthaya. In Thai history, they were recorded as mainly peasants who held skills in navigation, fishing and the processing of aquatic products and handicrafts. They contributed to the kingdom of Ayutthaya their labors and other obligations such as constructing roads and religious buildings.

The second wave of migration occurred when Nguyen Anh² and his troops were defeated by Tay Son³ troops and had to go to Phu Quoc Island and then to Siam in February 1784 (Trinh 2003). These migrants gained a higher status and received better treatment than those who had migrated to Ayutthaya in the earlier wave because on the one hand, they were relatives, loyal officers and soldiers of Nguyen Anh; on the other hand, many of them who were peasants before owned good skills in making handicraft products which were necessary for the development of Bangkok, the new capital of the Siamese Kingdom. Before 1786 the Vietnamese migrants settled down in the Samsen area in Bangkok and made their livelihoods by doing carpentry, casting bronze, distilling liquor and processing food. After 1786 when Nguyen Anh left Siam to go back to their home country to fight back the Tay Son troops, many of his followers remained in Siam and requested for asylum. King Rama I accepted their request and arranged for them to live in the Bang Pho area. Many of Nguyen Anh's followers were registered in the Thai armed forces and some others were assigned as commanding officers working for the Royal Thai Army or were selected to hold a position as village heads (Chantavimol 1998).

The third wave of Vietnamese migrants to Thailand took place from the end of the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century (Trinh 2003). This was the period that most Southeast Asian countries

¹ Nguyen Lords (in Vietnamese Chúa Nguyễn), also known as Nguyen clan, ruled the southern region in Vietnam (now central and southern Vietnam) in 1558 - 1777. This clan was in opposition with Trinh Lords (in Vietnamese Chúa Trịnh) - Trinh clan ruled in the north of Vietnam in the period of 1545 - 1787. The two clans fought in a long and bitter civil war lasting for 45 years from 1627 to 1673. In 1673, the two clans gained an agreement to end the fighting by making Gianh River (now located in Quang Binh Province, on the north central coast of Vietnam) as the borders between their lands. (Tran 1971).

² Nguyen Anh or Nguyen Phuc Anh was a descendant of Nguyen Lords. He defeated Tay Son troops in 1802, then unified what is now modern Vietnam and found the Nguyen Dynasty - the last of the Vietnamese dynasties. He was the first Emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty (Tran 1971).

³ Tay Son used in Vietnamese to refer to the period of peasant rebellions taking place between the end of Le Dynasty in 1770 and the beginning of Nguyen Dynasty in 1802 (Tran 1971).

were colonized by Western imperials, including Vietnam ruled under the French. By the end of the 19th century, there were many movements against the French rule taking place in Vietnam, which led to the third wave of Vietnamese migrants to Siam. As the movements against the French rule failed in Vietnam, many leaders and members of the movements contacted their relatives in Laos and Siam which could help them to seek refuge and find new opportunities for the revolution against the French colonization in Vietnam. Those who could reach the Siam territory lived temporarily in the northeastern provinces. Among these migrants, there were many knowledgeable scholars and they could establish good relations with the Thai people and their officers in Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani.

The fourth wave of Vietnamese migrants to Thailand occurred in post-World War II years. At that time in Vietnam, the August Revolution in 1945 succeeded and the government of Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) led by President Ho Chi Minh was declared as an independent state and it established relations with other countries, including Southeast Asia countries. The DRV requested the French to recognize it as a free state, maintaining peace in Vietnam and internationally promoting its recognition (Hall 1989). At the same time with Vietnam in 1945, the people in the neighboring country of Laos also fought to seize power. They successfully gained control in a number of towns bordering the Mekong River, particularly Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Thakhek and Savannakhet where there were many Vietnamese residences incorporating with the Laotian forces (Trinh 2003). However, later on the French gathered their forces and implemented strong attacks to take back the control in the border towns in 1946. In this severe situation, about 60,000 Vietnamese left these bordering towns to take refugees mostly in northeastern provinces of Thailand. Most of the migrants in this fourth wave worked as manual workers, handicraft makers, small traders or fruit and vegetable gardeners in Laos. Some of them were government officers and teachers, and even intellectuals.

The fourth wave of Vietnamese migration to Thailand presented the biggest number of Vietnamese migrants and it formed the Vietnamese community as it is nowadays. In 1946, Thailand established a civilian government headed by Prime Minister Pridi Panomyong who supported the national liberation movements in Southeast Asia, including the movement in Vietnam. Thus, the Pridi government supported the fourth-wave of Vietnamese migrants in obtaining temporary permission to stay in Thailand, getting accommodation and employment. Nevertheless, they held the status of “refugees” - they were not being given residential permits and their status was kept unchanged until the 1980s. This made them become subjected to political changes which had heavy negative impacts on their livelihood for many years. Since

1947 after the Pridi government was overthrown until the 1980s, the Thai government employed heavy restrictions toward the Vietnamese refugees. They were restricted to live and move within particular provinces located at the border of the Mekong River and their movement and actions were put under a close watch. Vietnamese women were not allowed to keep their traditional hairstyle and wore traditional black pants and all Vietnamese refugees were prohibited from speaking Vietnamese in public places (Trinh 2003).

However, moving to the 1990s, when Thailand introduced its policy of “change the battlefield to the marketplace” and in the counterpart of Vietnam *Doi Moi* (Reform) policy was implemented opening opportunities for Vietnam to integrate into the globalized world, which contributed to Vietnam reaching a milestone of becoming a member of regional organizations of ASEAN and Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), the relationship between Thailand and Vietnam has been positively and strongly developed. As a result, Thai government has granted Thai citizenship and permanent resident permits to the overseas Vietnamese living in the northeast provinces of the country. Nowadays, with the acceptance of the Thai government, the overseas Vietnamese are allowed to establish their own associations in various provinces in Thailand where they live and work. In many cities in northeastern Thailand, the overseas Vietnamese are quite dominant in the local economic sector. They produce and sell Vietnamese sausages or rice-noodles and run Vietnamese restaurants, garages, machine shops, watch shops and construction companies.

Under the context that regional integration is significantly promoted in the region, combined with the positive development of the relationship between Thailand and Vietnam, the overseas Vietnamese are given legal status to live and work in Thailand. They have more freedom to show their identities in public places in the provinces that they settle down in. Moreover, it provides them convenient conditions to continue connections with Vietnam. In other words, they have opportunities to participate in transnational, everyday lives of both countries. This transnational context would have made it possible to construct or reconstruct the identities of the *Viet Kieu*, in Udon Thani Province, not just in accordance to host-land assimilation processes but in relation to wider changes of socio - political situations of both origin and destination countries. As such, it could be seen that the identity construction process of the overseas Vietnamese in the province has involved participation from various sides.

My study focuses on the Vietnamese migrants who migrated to Thailand in the fourth wave in 1946. The second and third generations of these migrants will be main objectives for me to pay attention to and explore the way they constitute their identities. The reason that I choose the second and the third generations to focus on is because the first generation have reached the age of 90 and many of them have passed away.

Those of the second generation are at the age of around 65-75 years old and the third generation of around 18-40 years old who are children of the second generation, which are available for me to approach and include as informants in my research.

3. Overseas Vietnamese in Udon Thani Province

Geographically, Udon Thani is known as one of four major cities of the *Isan* region along with Khorat, Ubon Ratchathani and Khon Kaen. Udon Thani is the gateway to Laos and northern Vietnam. Most of the Vietnamese diaspora in Udon Thani migrated from Laos during 1946 when southern and middle lands of Laos were invaded by the French colony and up to now, after 70 years of living in Thailand, their descendants comprise of four generations.

According to the document about the meeting between Mr. Nguyen Hai Bang - Ambassador of the Social Republic of Vietnam in Thailand and the Governor of Udon Thani Province on 24th November 2017, there is the highest number of overseas Vietnamese people living in the province, estimated at around 60,000 people. The economy of Vietnamese people in this province is stronger than their counterparts in other northeastern provinces; so Udon Thani Province has become the center of seminars on trading and economy between Thailand and Vietnam (Watrasoke et.al. 2015).

4. Identity Construction of Overseas Vietnamese in Udon Thani Province

Identity can be broadly defined at the individual (personal) and collective (social) levels. Individual identity of a person refers to his or her particular attributes and his or her response to the creation of self-image. It includes aspects of physical features, likes and dislikes, beliefs and values, interests, and family and social relationships. Individual identity also embraces aspects of age, sex, political affiliation, nationality, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, soon and so forth. Collective identity implies individual's self-concept deriving from his or her membership in a group, along with the value and emotion attached to the membership (Tajfel 1978). As the social identity is perceived as the acceptance into a social group, it comprises learning systems of symbols, values, norms and rules. In other words, it emphasizes cultural affiliation of individuals toward their social groups. Social identity affects the way we live within an environment with diverse groups and relates to different social groups and institutions (Jenkin 2008).

It is indicated that diaspora groups continuously implement a culture-switching process as they both integrate into their host societies and maintain ties to their countries of origin. In this sense, this process is a response to situational demands (Triandis 1989). From the social constructionist's point of view, social actors use cultural resources such as language, symbols, customs, traditions or cultural practices to continuously construct and reconstruct individual and social identity (Schilling-Estes 2004). In argument with this approach, a post-structuralist approach insists that identities are constituted by the social context; hence, there are multiple, shifted identities (Brah 1996). This perspective proposes considerations on hybrid identity in which individuals develop a third culture mixed of parts of two or more cultural elements.

Kraidy (2005: 1) defined hybridity as a "trend to blend". According to Bhabha (1990), hybridity opens the third space or in-between space for diaspora which allows other positions to emerge. Hall (2003) conceptualized the fluid nature of identity by emphasizing that identity should be viewed as an ongoing process. Hybrid cultural identities do not simply refer to choices of home culture, the host culture, both or neither. Rather, it represents a new space of negotiation of meaning and representation (Bhabha 1994). In this sense, hybrid identities would be expressed through negotiations and interactions in everyday life (Mishra and Shirazi 2010).

Ien Ang (2001) conceptualizes hybridity as a notion referring to the space of the frontier, the border, and the contact zone. Therefore, hybridity always implies a blurring of boundaries, and as a consequence, an "un-setting of identities" (ibid 2001: 16). Similar to Bhabha, Ien Ang emphasizes that hybridity recognizes the third space and she adds that this third space allows diaspora to possibly return to their origins and cultural context of the host country always informing and articulating the meaning of the origin country. Thus, it could be said that hybridity marks emancipation of diaspora. Ien Ang insists that hybrid cultural formations are necessarily considered in particular contexts or in "situated" contexts. As such, identity could be (re)invented and (re)negotiated. The construction of hybrid identities results from multiple social embeddedness that diaspora groups embrace. When they migrate to other countries they bring their histories, memories and cultural aspects with them from their home countries to new contexts. However, as it is necessary for them to adapt to their way of life to gain a better chance of success in new places, they also adopt new elements from the host societies in which they settle down.

The identity construction of the Vietnamese diaspora residing in different countries is addressed in many studies. Thu Suong (2006) illustrates the way that Vietnamese American teachers and students in an urban public elementary school, located in Texas, construct their dual identities as both American and

Vietnamese through their practice of everyday life. They decorate their classrooms with moral teaching sentences written in Vietnamese. The students say “hello” and “goodbye” to their teachers in Vietnamese style. Moreover, the Vietnamese American teachers and students hold Tet and Full Moon ceremonies, which give opportunities for the members of the Vietnamese diaspora community in Texas to come to talk and share their stories of their daily lives. The teachers both teach in Vietnamese Language and Culture Programs and participate in the school’s official tasks and administer exams. They try to help students adapt to the educational system of America by being fluent in English and pass American standard exams with good scores. On the other hand, they promote a sense of Vietnamese culture among the students by teaching the students Vietnamese language and morals by Vietnamese cultural standards.

In a study of the second generation Vietnamese Youth in Perth, Australia, Tang (2012) revealed that most of the participants considered that they embraced multiple identities of both “Australian” and “Vietnamese”. This research also highlighted the situational characteristic of ethnic identification. The participants identified as Australian and/or Vietnamese independent of the context. Especially, the second generation Vietnamese in Perth indicated that their multiple identities were intertwined and could not be separated. Their ethnicity was closely linked to their positions as student, daughter, son, friend and partner. Place of birth, country of origin (Vietnam), physical appearance, clothing style, cultural values and practices, food consumption, religion and ethnic socialization (parent-child relationship in families or relationships in the Australian school system) were indicated as salient factors in ethnic identification of the Vietnamese Australian youth. For their ethnic identity negotiation, Tang explored that the participants in her research did not feel predominantly as Australian or Vietnamese. They were confident in their dual identities. They had friends of various ethnicities and cultures. Although many of them had more Vietnamese friends they reported getting acquainted with other cultures.

In a research on Vietnamese in London, James (2010) indicated that Vietnamese Londoners’ identities have been influenced by multiple cultures. Their attachment to the culture of the host country facilitated their lives in London while the attachment to the Vietnamese culture maintained them grounded in Vietnamese communities and provided Vietnamese Londoners resources for making transnational lifestyle in their everyday lives. They developed their multiple loyalties to both Britain and Vietnam and this multiplicity was expressed through their choices and activities of everyday lives.

Those studies mentioned above address the identity construction process of overseas Vietnamese in western countries and their migration mostly takes place after the fall of Saigon in 1975. However, my

study considers the process of constructing the identity of an overseas Vietnamese community in a Southeast Asian country and their migration occurred a long time before 1975. As such, the Vietnamese diaspora in Thailand, particularly in Udon Thani Province, constitute their identity in a different context. As I have not yet implemented fieldwork, in this paper I propose a hypothesis and a way to look at the process of constructing identity of the Vietnamese diaspora in Udon Thani Province.

My hypothesis is the *Viet Kieu* has experienced the process of deconstructing and reconstructing their identities, which dependant on particular situations in the province. As mentioned above, the overseas Vietnamese in Udon Thani Province were confronted with lots of hardship and difficulties when building their livelihoods in the host society in the period from 1947 until the 1980s. This was due to the fluctuation in the relationship between Thailand and Vietnam. During this time, the *Viet Kieu* held refugee status and were not publicly allowed to express their identity as Vietnamese. As such, they had to deconstruct their Vietnamese identity in public but they still attempted to maintain it secretly within their families and their community⁴. Since the 1990s after the *Viet Kieu* were granted Thai citizenship or permanent resident cards along with positive development in the relationship between Thailand and Vietnam, it brought good opportunities for the overseas Vietnamese to reconstruct their Vietnamese identity publicly, and at the same time develop their ethnicity as Thai. In this sense, identity construction of the overseas Vietnamese is implemented not only by the community itself, but also involving participation of states.

In order to explore how the Vietnamese diaspora in Udon Thani Province constitute their hybrid ethnicities, the researcher plans to look at sites of restaurants, religion (temple), public event locations; and aspects of language, clothes, food, and cultural practices such as weddings/funerals, ancestor worship practices and New Year celebrations. The Vietnamese diaspora's identity constitution will be considered on both individual and group levels. Social interactions of the overseas Vietnamese will also be involved for observation and analysis. These interactions will be seen through activities and social relations in their everyday lives. It could be indicated through trading between the *Viet Kieu* with their fellows and Thai partners, through their group meetings with *Viet Kieu* fellows or Thai friends, or through their relationship with local governments. By looking at their everyday live interactions, I could see how multiple social embeddednesses influence the way the *Viet Kieu* expresses their identities and in what way they make negotiations for their identities depending on situations and whom they communicate with.

⁴ Information collected from interviews with *Viet Kieu* in a preliminary trip to northeast provinces of Thailand in May 2018.

As ethnic identity is constructed, it will be a continual process. Thus, it would be interesting for me to explore how different generations of the *Viet Kieu* constitute their sense of identity. For the second generation, their ethnicities mostly refer to Vietnamese and Thai. However, the third generation who may have intermarriage with members of other ethnic groups (e.g. Chinese Thai); so it could be possible for them to embrace more than two ethnic identities. I could hypothesize that identity is not important for the third generation, but they need to express their multiple identities to gain acceptance from different communities that they participate in. They will switch themselves to negotiate their identities in different situations when they are with their parents, their friends, or their husbands/wives.

In reference to the previous problematization, the ethnic identity construction of the diaspora group nowadays positively contributes to sustaining the livelihood of the group and achieving more successes in their lives in the countries of destination. Therefore, my study not only pays attention to the process that the Vietnamese diaspora in Udon Thani Province constitutes their ethnicities, but also draws interest to the reason why it is necessary for them to do that and what purposes and benefits they can gain from the construction of multiple identities.

5. Multiple Identities - Strategy to Accumulate Capitals

Ien Ang (2001) points out that diaspora are often positioned as “different”, “foreign” or “others” in the societies of their destinations. On the other hand, they are also displaced from their cultural heritage so that the passing of historical time meant that when they go back to their countries of origin after a very long time of being dispersed, they find themselves disoriented because they recognize that the place they left behind is no longer the same. Diaspora groups employ different practices of their everyday life to negotiate their “otherness” and facilitate their lives in the host societies. Through these practices, they construct their multiple identities which help them better adapt within new living environments, identify their social locations, and achieve success in different areas.

Bourdieu (1986) proposed that human actions or human practices are based on their source of power. Thus, he developed the concept of “capital” from Marx who considered capital as a source of power in the capitalist system. Bourdieu argued that there are four forms of capitals, including economic, cultural, social and symbolic capitals. Economic capital comprises property, finances, wealth and assets, which are very concrete and can be accumulated by an individual. Cultural capital is constructed through

institutionalization; for example the knowledge and ability that people obtain from holding memberships of institutions. Social capital comes from social networks, kinship ties, friendship networks or alumni networks. Symbolic capital is composed of taste and prestige, which reproduces the established social order and reveals relations of domination; for instance the acquisition and display of major credentials or luxury goods.

Many studies indicate that diaspora communities around the world constitute their multiple ethnicities in order to accumulate different forms of capital which help to facilitate their lives in the host countries. Aihwa Ong (1999) in one of her dominant studies on overseas Chinese indicated that hybrid identities of Chinese diaspora living in western countries help them to re-assert their Chineseness when living abroad and strengthen their social and economic powers in China and countries of destination. The multiple ethnicities explain the overseas Chinese's rationality to participate in transnational practices or obtain a "flexible citizenship". According to Ong's illustration, Hong Kong emigrants in western nations express their Chineseness through "feng shui" which concerns the importance of location of real estate where they live. Location is a form intertwining economic and cultural capitals for Hong Kong emigrants. They choose the destination and the house itself with careful calculation on its location and this is never reduced simply to economic consideration. On the other hand, in order to gain acceptance of the host societies, Hong Kong emigrants do philanthropy. It is a mode of cultural accumulation that works quite effectively in breaking down barriers to acceptance of the host community toward newcomers.

In a different case, Vietnamese American students at a school in Texas benefit from the construction of multiple identities by not being subjected to the discourse of "otherness" that is if they are not Americans, they cannot study well (Thu Suong 2006). Instead, they can reverse their negative image and prove that if they have their own identity (multiple identities) they can perform well in school. In this way, the Vietnamese American students can negotiate with the dominant power of American society. It is not necessary for them to fully assimilate to American culture and in fact it is impossible for them to be considered as American. They can partly absorb American values in the everyday social interactions in the school, and at the same time they produce their hybrid identities, which could help them to locate to their social location and adapt better with the new living environment.

The study on Vietnamese Londoners done by James (2010) also proved that their constitution of hybrid identities benefits them not to be subjected to being characterized as "others" in the host society and facilitates them in their careers. Participants in the study describe themselves as Vietnamese British which

means Vietnamese origin but a British citizen or culturally Vietnamese and politically British. This hybrid identity helps Vietnamese Londoners accumulate cultural, social and economic capitals. For instance, one of the participants in this study can move in and out of several different contexts because she embraces shifted identities. She works at a local primary school and edits a web-based magazine reaching Vietnamese across the globe. She also works as an administrative assistant and consultant for a large London-based company and travels to Vietnam, Paris and other parts of Europe. Moreover, she plans to establish a publishing house aiming to disseminate books and information about Vietnam for British readership. As such, this participant plays a key role as a communicator both within and for the Vietnamese communities in London as well as for the wider Vietnamese and English-speaking population.

In my research, I propose that overseas Vietnamese in Udon Thani Province constructing their multiple identities aim to accumulate economic, cultural, social and symbolic capitals that benefit their lives in the province and their connections to Vietnam. However, this process of capital accumulation would be considered when the Vietnamese diaspora in the province successfully obtained Thai citizenship or Thai permanent resident cards from the 1990s until now. As mentioned above, over a long period in the past, the overseas Vietnamese in the province particularly, and in Thailand generally, were limited in expressing identity publicly and in making livelihoods in the host country. Since they have been granted citizenship, along with the development of diplomatic relationships between Vietnam and Thailand, and the opening of national borders of the two nations, the overseas Vietnamese have been provided opportunities to (re)construct their identity.

The hypotheses in my study could be that the *Viet Kieu* who have relatives in Vietnam would identify themselves as Vietnamese more than those who do not have relatives in Vietnam; *Viet Kieu* involved with local politics would be more inclined to identify themselves as Vietnamese than those who do not in order to gain political power; or those who have Vietnamese restaurants and trade with other Vietnamese would like to reconstruct their Vietnamese identity or connect with Vietnamese traditions. As such, it could be seen that people benefit from their attachment with Vietnamese culture. On the other hand, holding Thai citizenship and Thai permanent resident cards, having the ability to speak Thai and being familiar with Thai traditions, helps the *Viet Kieu* to gain cultural acceptance of the host society and social capital (network) to make business with Thai partners.

6. Conclusion

It could be proposed that constructing multiple ethnicities is a “workable” way for a diaspora group to identify their social location and perform well in different fields of life in their new living environment. The chances to establishment of the multiple identities is provided as globalization facilitating flows of goods, laborers and people has resulted in the turning point on perception of space and place. Rather being viewed as static and “bounded”; instead, they are recommended to be seen as “unbounded” - place as locality (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). This turning point brings change to the understanding of culture. Traditionally, culture is perceived as being attached to a particular place. However, as place becomes unbounded, culture becomes unfixed and able to be constructed. Therefore, it provides opportunities for diaspora to form their new identities (multiple identities) which is a mixture between partly assimilating to the host culture whilst maintaining positive aspects of their original identities.

As I have not yet done the fieldwork, this paper is limited in providing concrete evidence and analysis on the issue of identity construction of the overseas Vietnamese in particular. However, it proposes directions and framework that I would use to collect data and analyze ethnicity construction of the Vietnamese diaspora. It is one of the important aspects that I address in my dissertation about the Vietnamese Thai community in Udon Thani Province. In reference to what is presented above, there are three major points that I would like to emphasize in the conclusion. First, ethnic identity is a product. In this sense, it can be purposively (re)constructed by a migrant or diaspora group. Second, as it is possible for the ethnicity to be intentionally constituted, ethnicity is strategic. The construction of ethnic identity includes aspects chosen by members of the diaspora group, which are beneficial to the ethnic community. Third, because ethnicity is viewed through the constructionist lens as such, it is necessary to consider the ethnic identity as a continuous process which is expressed through interactions and social relations (social embeddedness) among members within the diaspora group and between the community and other ethnic groups in their everyday lives.

Constructing hybrid identities through everyday actions opens the possibility of holding a sense of multiple belongings, multiple homes and multiple cultural citizenships among members of the diaspora. In this way, they can negotiate their identities in situated contexts, accumulate necessary capitals which help them become more flexible in making livelihoods and motivate them to engage in transnational practices. As such, it can be said that nowadays, with the effects of globalization, ethnicity embraces a new meaning

in the sense that being ethnic does not make a diaspora group a minority, dropping into marginal situations; rather, being ethnic can bring economic and socio - cultural advantages to the group.

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