

Final manuscript of a chapter published in:

The Vietnamese diaspora in a transnational context : contested spaces, contested narratives [ISBN: 9789004513952] / edited by Anna Vu and Vic Satzewich (Brill, 2022).

Belonging in the UK Vietnamese community: Second-generation experiences

Tamsin Barber

The UK Vietnamese community has been an under-researched area in the international Vietnamese diaspora. The distinctive experiences and composition of the Vietnamese refugees to the UK, their subsequent reception, dispersal, and incorporation have generally led to a more fragmented and weaker sense of community. Attention to how the community has developed in the UK regarding the subsequent second-generation is of particular interest as scholars have identified this generation often comes under scrutiny regarding questions of identity, belonging, and concerns over the ‘nation’ (Anthias 2002, Hussain and Baguley 2005). The notion of second-generation is not neutral and tends to be accompanied by assumptions or anxieties over where this group ‘belongs’. King and Christou (2008) argue that ‘the second generation’ is used to refer to the expected trajectory of assimilation into host society, given the distance of their connections to the ‘homeland’. Others have noted that the notion of generation overlooks the ongoing and often important role of transnational relations and connections of both categories: those who migrated originally and their children (Brah 1992, Bradley 1996, Anthias 2009). This chapter responds to such debates by showing how notions of belonging in the ethnic community are never neat or straightforward. As I have shown elsewhere, belonging in Britain and Vietnam are both equally fraught with complexities (Barber 2015, 2017). This chapter sheds light on how identity and belonging

are shaped and negotiated through co-ethnic relations and experiences within ‘the Vietnamese community’. The chapter explores how themes of generation, homeland origins, ethnic ties, and networks within the Vietnamese community shape the experience of those born in Britain. It is argued that second-generation participants keenly navigate the differences and divisions within the Vietnamese community in London and actively seek alternative communities within which to construct a sense of ethnic belonging. After a brief discussion of the methodology, the chapter will explore young people’s experiences of ‘the Vietnamese community’ in London, to reveal the contested nature of the community and how this is experienced by the second-generation. The second part of the chapter explores participants’ alternative communities of belonging through their development of transnational networks and local pan-ethnic belonging. The chapter argues that the notion of ‘personal communities’ of belonging (Wetherell et al. 2007) provides a more useful way to understand young people’s participation in and development of ethnic networks. Such bespoke networks and constructions of community challenge mainstream constructions of homogenous and bounded ethnic communities.

This chapter draws upon a broader study of experiences of identity and belonging among young second-generation Vietnamese men and women in London. The research involved participant observation and in-depth qualitative interviews with 28 participants between the ages of 17 and 34 years. The research was conducted between July 2005 and February 2009 and focused upon the participants’ biographical experiences of being Vietnamese in Britain. The participants came from a range of social backgrounds, their families originated from both the former North and South Vietnam and from a range of socio-economic and occupational backgrounds. Most participants identified as Vietnamese, and some identified as Chinese Vietnamese. Their parents had migrated to the UK as refugees

after the end of the American war in Vietnam between the late 1970s and mid-1980s. Their families were dispersed across the UK but eventually gravitated to London where the majority of the UK Vietnamese population is based. All participants were born or raised in the UK and used English as their primary language. As a white British female researcher, I took on the role of an informed outsider. Notwithstanding the important racialized power-imbalances in this research relationship, my outsider status arguably facilitated discussions about community dynamics due to my ethnic distance from the community itself, and participants often reported feeling freer from scrutiny. The findings presented in this chapter do not claim to represent the experience of all second-generation Vietnamese people, but rather they provide a flavour and insight into how some of the young Vietnamese have engaged with notions of ‘community’ as part of their broader narratives and construction of their Vietnamese identity and belonging.

Navigating a fragmented community: ‘Generation’, language and ethnic networks

The majority of the participants in my study reported having little connection to the broader Vietnamese community in London, this was accompanied by a sense that they did not belong to the community and/or were not perceived by others as belonging. The differences relating to parent’s social origins such as ethnic origin, the context of migration, ideological position, and social class, were felt to provide the basis for filtering out some parts of the community from others. Earlier studies such as Sims (2007) found a lack of Vietnamese language skills and a lack of access to ethnic networks presented barriers to the second-generation to develop a sense of Vietnamese identity. In my data, specific generational issues including being born and brought up in Britain, parents’ origins, in

addition to Vietnamese language acquisition and diminished ethnic networks were factors preventing their acceptance as ‘authentic Vietnamese’ in the London Vietnamese community

Problematizing a cohesive, homogenous ‘Vietnamese community’

Access to, and inclusion in, ‘the local Vietnamese community’ was fraught with problems for the second-generation Vietnamese. The imagined local community (often described in terms of broader networks or community activities taking place in London) was experienced in marginal ways by participants from both South and North Vietnamese backgrounds. Rachel, a northern Vietnamese participant, explains how her distance from the local Vietnamese community was shaped through negative perceptions and suspicion of the northern Vietnamese population which led to a questioning of her belonging:

I don’t feel associated to it that much. I wouldn’t mind being part of it more and having a role in like the Vietnamese community but then you do feel a lot of the time that like people don’t like ... they disregard some things you do. Like, if you do something for the Vietnamese community, a lot of people thought ‘Oh it is just a scam’ or something like that, or ‘It is just people trying to make money’ sort of thing. (Rachel, 24, northern Vietnamese, East London)

Although Rachel expresses a desire to have a ‘role in the Vietnamese community’ she found it difficult to participating in it as she does not feel fully accepted by other members, here notably members of the first generation. The younger generation (and more recent migrants from Vietnam) were often viewed with suspicion and participants often perceived this as being a result of new waves of economic migration from Vietnam that have been linked to criminality (Silverstone and Savage 2010). For Rachel, a key aspect of this was related to not being embedded in the community due to her parents’ limited networks, an

aspect she feels is central in being accepted into Vietnamese community networks. The role of generational consent or approval featured strongly in accounts of acceptance into the London community by the younger generation.

By contrast, other participants whose parents had strong networks within the Vietnamese community and were more embedded within their parent's networks (e.g., Claire, Hanh, Quoc, Anh), did not automatically lead to a more positive sense of belonging. Instead, the close community ties were often experienced as oppressive due to the small and tight-knit configurations these entailed. The issue of internal community policing presented a particular concern and participants often described carefully monitor their social conduct and behaviour (Paul, Khanh, Matthew, Jenny, Mary). This aspect is described by both Jenny and Paul, northern Vietnamese participants, brought up in a densely populated Vietnamese neighbourhood in Southeast London:

Because it is a really small community, even in the UK you will know someone in Manchester, who will know someone else in Newcastle, and you all seem to congregate in the same sorts of places. One day there was a tipping point and I thought I can't do this anymore you know ... I'd rather not go to these places and have to deal with these types of people anymore. So in a way I wanted to distance myself from the Vietnamese and Chinese community because there was too much drugs going on there was too much destruction. (Jenny, 29, magazine editor, northern Vietnamese, North London)

... the thing about the community is that they have a really strong effect on your lives, through rumours and that ... that is why me and my friends when we go out, we use false names. So let's just say whatever you do, whatever you say, whatever they see you do, it goes around. For example, me smoking weed down by the river, me hanging

around with people that don't look good ... and it all comes around, and then you have got your mum and your sister coming down on you like a ton of bricks, so if you ask who I am – 'my name is Paul' you don't need to know who I am. (Paul, 28, IT executive, northern Vietnamese, North London)

These two extracts illustrate how being too embedded within the community can lead to a negative sense of community belonging. Jenny describes how her engagement with the Vietnamese community had a negative impact on her life. Her experience of close-knit community networks related to a youth social scene, related to drug-taking and various forms of social pressure to conform, in order to belong. This eventually led Jenny to move away from that area of London altogether. Jenny now lives in an area in North London where she has little contact with Vietnamese people.

Likewise, Paul, who was also brought up in a densely populated Vietnamese neighbourhood in East London, describes negative experiences of feeling under surveillance by the community, forcing him to monitor his social interactions with other Vietnamese. Paul's comment is usefully understood within the broader context of his narrative where he goes on to explain how he and his mother had moved from East to West London to avoid negative social attention from the community. Paul's mother has depression, so fearful of negative social perceptions due to the stigma attached to mental illness in the Vietnamese community, they moved out of the area.

Both experiences illustrate how, for the second-generation, community cannot be understood as consensual, homogenous, necessary or positive. Depending upon their position within the community axis, the area they lived in, and their encounters, participants often experienced these networks in negative ways leading them to actively choose to opt-out of engaging with the community altogether. The socio-economic and

neighbourhood dimensions of the community in East London were key to these perceptions, and were based on a fear of youth behaviour and delinquency.

'North/South' Vietnamese divisions

'North'/'South' differences, are a key axis of division across the broader Vietnamese community (Barber 2020). Participants from southern Vietnamese families often described a greater sense of social distance from North Vietnamese community members who make up the majority of the British Vietnamese population. This social distance was understood by participants as based upon ideological and cultural differences which shaped personal ties and social networks. An illustration of these differences is given by Hai a southern Vietnamese, male participant who compares North/South divisions in his experience of Vietnamese communities in London and Little Saigon in Orange County, USA.

I went to America recently with my father and that was a big reunion [of South Vietnamese from Vietnam] they were asking 'So how is life like in London?' and I would say 'It is really good, I love London' but I would say 'The Vietnamese community in London is not the same as it is in America' ... the Vietnamese community generally in Orange County is mostly made up of people from the South [of Vietnam], it just happens to be that way. I think it is a different mentality as well, I find people in London ... not everyone, but generally, I think it is a different taste, different habits, different mentality and they are not as nice to people that I found in Orange County. Yes because most of them from the North [of Vietnam] were influenced by the government more, and this is what my dad as well believes, that the government has in a way brainwashed people and affected their mentality. So it is just like China, it has

created a certain type of people that has learnt to be protective, that has learnt to be a bit distrustful, you know? (Hai, male 28, law student, southern Vietnamese)

Children of the South Vietnamese in Britain, like Hai, generally had a more acute awareness of North/South differences in comparison to northern Vietnamese participants. This can be explained in part due to the smaller numbers of refugees from the southern Vietnamese population and different forms of political participation. Hai's narrative is particularly noteworthy as his father has been an active political dissident of the Vietnamese Communist regime for many years and, as a result, the family were ostracised by the British northern Vietnamese community. North/South divisions also presented a further challenge to a sense of ethnic identity and belonging among participants from southern Vietnamese families based on their numerically more marginal presence in the British Vietnamese community. This can be seen in the case of Binh:

... one issue I slightly had with some North Vietnamese people was they didn't sort of treat me as being Vietnamese at all, they just treated me as being British and just there so ... it was not as if there was anything really rude in the way that they were doing it, but I was slightly annoyed about the way they were doing it. The guys from North Vietnam they didn't have any understanding about how the South Vietnamese people came here ... like they had to leave Vietnam and for me to get this level of education we had to move and so therefore I'd lost touch with my Vietnamese culture. South Vietnamese people tend to be much more sympathetic about that, where as the North Vietnamese they have access to like money, they have I guess power as well to be able to send their kids to other countries. So, it is nothing explicit, it is more like saying 'Oh you're British' and sort of comments like that and 'Oh you are not Vietnamese at all.'

(Binh, female, 19, medical student, southern Vietnamese, South London)

Markers of ethnic authenticities, such as being able to demonstrate first-hand connections with Vietnam and demonstrating particular forms of cultural knowledge, were often taken as indicators of belonging. For Binh, a loss of ‘cultural roots’ and relations with Vietnam excluded her from belonging as Vietnamese within these contexts. This is related to wider perceptions by the northern Vietnamese people about the southern Vietnamese as political exiles from the homeland. Having not developed a strong sense of identity as a Vietnamese person and having few Vietnamese friends when she was younger, the comments from Northern Vietnamese people were experienced by Binh as particularly exclusionary because they came from the majority group of the British Vietnamese population who act as ‘cultural arbiters’ of Vietnamese authenticity.

Exclusion from the local (majority Northern) Vietnamese community was also experienced by Southern Vietnamese participants. Here the role and prevalence of more vibrant social and business networks of the northern Vietnamese, was experienced as more difficult to penetrate for Southerner outsiders. Hoa, a young second-generation Vietnamese woman who works for a Vietnamese community organisation, emphasises the differential access to Vietnamese business and social networks among Northern and Southern Vietnamese:

They [Northern Vietnamese] have friends, relatives, it is their business they have a lot of friends, relatives and umm a lot of friends helping around. But in the South [Vietnamese community], hardly any. They [Northern Vietnamese] know people through people and they have a lot of relatives here, a lot of cousins and the cousin knows friends of friends, of friends and more friends so they are very good in communication. Yes, very good! That is why they will have a good network! You know,

you are helping around each other, and they will stand up for each other. But we don't have that. (Hoa, 25, community worker, Southern Vietnamese, Southeast London)

Extended family and non-kin networks were deemed an important feature of 'getting by' and for support, including developing close friendships with other Vietnamese. Here the majority of Southern Vietnamese participants described their upbringing as being with limited contact with other Vietnamese people, which they characterised as their source of cultural isolation in their younger years.

A further dimension of Vietnamese community fragmentation was experienced in relation to ethnic background. The same participant, Hoa, describes feeling excluded in social interactions and friendships in the community due to her ethnic Chinese Vietnamese heritage. Hoa's narrative illustrates how multiple intersections of difference can render inclusion in the Vietnamese community problematic:

... because I wasn't born in Vietnam but because my great grandparents are Chinese, they are Chinese so they took me as Chinese Vietnamese so you know 'Ok so you are different' so there is no long relationship or like communication there ... you just have that natural instinct, you just have this view and you can sense it. (Hoa, 25, community worker, South Vietnamese, Southeast London)

Here being ethnic Chinese Vietnamese and from South Vietnam seems to affect Hoa's ability to be accepted by either group or to find a place where she can belong. She is seemingly caught in a situation where she cannot fit in as Vietnamese both ethnically and culturally. These ethnic differences are further perpetuated by her experience of not feeling accepted within the proximate British Chinese community:

... there is a barrier between me and them and Vietnamese, like me, Hong Kong people and Vietnamese people, even though we talk, really friendly and we smile and we have a laugh and some ... but a different side of me feels like I just can't blend in with them, there is always a barrier because they see that even though you are Oriental, but you are still not from my original country, you see? So you know there is a stop there.

The incompatibility in cultural and homeland origins across the British Hong Kong Chinese and the northern Vietnamese communities demonstrates the complexity of belonging based upon networks, and cultural, national-regional and ethnic difference. The importance of 'pure' origins for full membership is important as while these cultures might be considered similar in a British context due to regional proximity, a clear distinction can be drawn between subjective ethnic identifications and external identification and inclusion within 'the community'.

Intergenerational issues

Generational differences were another important dimension for young people to navigate in the local Vietnamese community. Intergenerational issues were particularly prevalent among the children of northern Vietnamese parents, who had more contact with the community and the first-generation Vietnamese. These young people often recounted a sense of exclusion on them being born in Britain and the little connection to Vietnam this entails, such as limited access to the cultural heritage and language. The first generation was seen as often defining the cultural boundaries of community, and knowledge of the Vietnamese language was seen to be part of this. Claims of belonging and Vietnamese-ness were challenged based on markers of authenticity, such as their knowledge of the language, but also their appearance as young 'Westernised' Vietnamese people. This aspect is illustrated by participants in their participation in official community events and in specifically

Vietnamese areas. Karen exemplifies this in her experience as a contestant at the Miss Vietnam UK beauty pageant:

... in the morning the judges had to speak to us one by one and they kept asking me 'Do you speak Vietnamese?' and I was like 'No!' and it was like they were saying like 'You haven't got a chance, if you don't speak Vietnamese!' It was like they had decided it already, before the show. (Karen, 19, beauty therapist, northern Vietnamese, South London)

Notions of language, beauty, and gender are often central in processes of ethnic community-making. For example, Fortier's (1998) work showed how the role of beauty pageants was central in the Italian diaspora where gendered representations of culture and ethnic community are prioritised. The Miss Vietnam UK beauty pageant event organised by first-generation members and funded by successful British Vietnamese businesses, clearly denotes specific versions of Vietnameseness, where certain attributes, such as the ability to speak and understand the language, are prioritised as criteria of Vietnamese authenticity, purity, and beauty. Karen's experiences position her as inauthentic because she did not speak Vietnamese. Although this was something Karen participated in to 'find out more' about the community, her experience made her realise that she cannot be perceived as a 'true' Vietnamese due to her lack of Vietnamese language knowledge.

A similar form of exclusion was experienced concerning the actual and perceived ethnic differences. Jason, who is from a mixed heritage background – an English mother and Vietnamese father (from North Vietnam) – recounts a time when he was actively excluded from the Vietnamese community due to his mixed heritage background. He describes attending a large Tết party (Vietnamese Lunar New Year) organised by the local Vietnamese community where all the children had to queue up to receive their presents (as it is traditional

to give out money and presents during Tét), but when he arrived at the front of the queue, they refused to give him and his sister a present because they were not considered to be Vietnamese. He reflects:

... we were only little children, and they wouldn't give us the present because we were only half Vietnamese. Thinking about it now, that is a really nasty thing to do to little children and that is why I don't mix with them now. It is like we are not proper Vietnamese young people. (Jason)

Jason's experience at this event had an important effect on the way he understood himself as a mixed-heritage Vietnamese person and has changed his relationship with the Vietnamese community ever since. He now tends to avoid Vietnamese gatherings and events for fear of his ethnic authenticity being called in to question, and as a result, Jason feels he cannot properly belong as Vietnamese.

Perceptions of ethnic authenticity also led to experiences of exclusion from the community based upon expectations around performances of 'authenticity' articulated by the first generation. Here self-presentation and appearance were often linked to presumed knowledge of the Vietnamese language. Kieu, an ethnic Vietnamese participant explains how her ethnic identity is often called into question by other Vietnamese (often first-generation or new migrants) due to her Western sense of style and appearance:

The other day when I was in a Vietnamese supermarket, there were two men talking in Vietnamese about me, not realising that I was Vietnamese. They were saying 'Oh look at that girl she looks really British' and then I just turned around and said 'Do you know I speak Vietnamese!' and they said 'Ah I am really sorry!' But they would always think I am half Vietnamese, half English ... I don't know why! It makes me feel a little bit isolated like I don't really fit in. (Kieu, South Vietnamese, East London)

Kieu understands her experiences of being misread as due to her Westernised clothes and fashion sense which is strongly influenced by her main group of friends who are English. The above encounter took place in a main Vietnamese trading area in East London where Kieu had expected her Vietnamese identity to be recognisable. These experiences often lead her to feel she does not belong as Vietnamese and to avoid Vietnamese areas for fear of further judgement. However, in comparison to Karen and Jason who felt doubly excluded due to their lack of a fluent command of the Vietnamese language, Kieu's Vietnamese language skills allow her to gain more power in these encounters, as registered by the apologies made by the Vietnamese men in question.

The connection between language command, ethnic authenticity, and the ability to belong to the Vietnamese community is further highlighted by Jenny as both a barrier and an opportunity to earn acceptance:

Language is a big thing to me because I probably feel that my language is not good enough to converse with a lot of people and that is probably one of the reasons why I am not so integrated into the community, because I can't converse with them enough. So once that is sorted I will probably be a lot more confident and that will change, I am sure it will change. You know, I do want to do a lot and if I do go to Vietnam then my language will pick up and I hope to do something positive for the community. (Jenny, 29, magazine editor, northern Vietnamese, North London)

Jenny experiences the language barrier as a key feature of her lack of engagement and participation in 'the Vietnamese community'. This is felt keenly by Jenny and is evidenced

by the fact that she plans to return to Vietnam to learn Vietnamese so she can re-engage with her background and contribute to the community. This aspiration to return was a common trend among the second-generation Vietnamese in London, and was often used as a way to solidify a sense of ethnic belonging and ethnic authenticity (see Barber 2017). Return migration to Vietnam from the broader international diaspora has increased in recent years (Chan and Tran 2011, Chan 2013, Thai 2014, Hoang 2015).

Imagining alternative communities: New spaces of belonging in the Vietnamese diaspora

Due to the barriers to community engagement, experienced at the local level, as illustrated so far in this chapter, Vietnamese participants often pursued a desire to build a sense of ethnic belonging and explore their cultural heritage through other channels. This was achieved in different ways by participants, for example, among the southern Vietnamese participants this often meant making links with co-ethnics from other countries in the international Vietnamese diaspora. While among the northern Vietnamese participants, activities such as sending remittances, participating in ethnic niche economy networks in the international diaspora as well as forming trans-ethnic spaces of belonging in London were common. Among these transnational activities, women from both southern and northern Vietnamese families seemed to engage more actively in transnational activities, while it was more common for male participants to develop more local and pan-ethnic belongings and orientations as an alternative to the imagined 'local Vietnamese community' discussed above.

Ethnic belonging in the transnational diaspora

Transnational southern Vietnamese networks have been developed through a range of international community organisations (Carruthers 2008) which have provided access to a range of diasporic organisations¹. In the UK, these networks were often linked to the more professional and highly educated Southern Vietnamese diasporic networks and offered a place for exchanges of ideas and a sharing of social and professional networks and personal interests in addition to a sense of belonging to a broader community beyond the national boundaries. Reasons for participating in these networks were explained in the following way:

... when you go to these things you meet friends and you keep in constant touch with them, it is great because it is umm it is a good way to go on holiday as well because I've got contacts now in Australia, America, France ... it is really nice to know that when you travel all over the world there is always someone you can call on and you know that ... And although we don't see each other often, maybe once a year or every two years, when we meet up it is always instantaneous the bonding is really nice ... because you know that you have got a little amount of time to spend together and it is quality time, so it is really good! (Hanh, female, 34, banker, southern Vietnamese)

The specificities of this organisation and Hanh's background are important for a sense of belonging with 'like-minded' Vietnamese. As Hanh explains, some of the similarities and commonalities she feels she shares with other members are that they come from 'similar backgrounds', they are more 'family-orientated, education-orientated', and that their 'goals and ... aims in life [are] very similar'. These are the characteristics she feels she does not share with other Vietnamese in Britain. Although Hanh lives in an area highly populated by Vietnamese people, she does not mix with the Vietnamese in her area as they are largely northern Vietnamese and her parents are from the South. This demonstrates the way that transnational networks are still largely based on their North/South origins but offer a larger

and more supportive community than local ones. Hanh explains that while the majority of people are from South or Central Vietnam she doesn't feel it is a 'deliberate attempt' to exclude the northerners but 'it just happens that way' – explaining the extent of the separate networks for northern and southern Vietnamese. For Hanh, participation in this organisation seems to provide a strong channel to connect with others and explore her Vietnamese heritage, through attending conferences and keeping up to date with the events and news in other communities abroad. For other participants like Hanh, relations with the international diaspora seemed to be an integral part of maintaining a meaningful sense of Vietnamese-ness understood as membership to a community of 'like-minded' others, and these events and networks provided a strong sense of connection with other Vietnamese and a Vietnamese identity.

Outside of the 'local' Vietnamese community, second-generation southern Vietnamese sometimes participated in international Vietnamese student organisations at British universities. This is illustrated by Binh who found new friends at her university who consisted of Vietnamese students from the overseas diaspora including the USA, France, Germany, Poland, and Vietnam. For Binh, this sense of trans-local enculturation has provided her with a new opportunity to explore Vietnamese culture. For the first time she was able to learn more about Vietnam, Vietnamese culture, and language¹but without experiencing exclusion based on the British community differences. Such examples provide evidence of the increasingly fluid links between the diaspora and the ethnic community as argued by Caruthers (2013). What is notable here is Binh's greater sense of acceptance

among the overseas Vietnamese community regardless of national host country differences. This could be explained by the greater social class proximity shared by university students.

A similar engagement in the transnational diaspora was illustrated in the experience of Claire who had used her family networks to visit an uncle in the USA with the aim of finding work and experiencing life in the larger Vietnamese community in Orange County, California. Her trip represented a kind of 'rite-of-passage' to develop her awareness and sense of Vietnamese heritage. Claire explains the role of her trips to the USA in terms of developing a stronger ethnic network and a sense of belonging but also for strategic reasons, to develop her employment opportunities:

It is much easier to find a job over there because not only does the family know the lawyer or something personally, or something, it is much easier because, ok, there is a big Vietnamese community there you can help out there – over here umm the people do tend to look a lot for Vietnamese lawyers and doctors, you know, for certain issues and things or paperwork and certain family stuff, you know, going on they would prefer telling a Vietnamese than an English person or someone, umm, English, wouldn't really understand where they were coming from. (Claire, 21, law student, southern Vietnamese)

Patterns of transnational participation also revealed the distinctiveness of North/South Vietnamese relations. While northern Vietnamese participants drew upon social and business networks, those from the South drew upon intellectual and ideological networks in the diaspora. Among the Southern Vietnamese participants, it was notable that their engagement in transnational Vietnamese networks enabled them to develop a stronger sense of Vietnamese diasporic consciousness and belonging that they

described as missing in the UK. However, there was some evidence that local UK North Vietnamese business networks were themselves also enabling transnational networks in the Vietnamese diaspora. For example, Mary (northern Vietnamese) drew upon transatlantic diaspora networks through the Vietnamese nail industry to forward her own professional development in Britain:

That is why I visited my friends in America, because nails are big in America, its everywhere, and that is why nails came over here because everyone [Vietnamese] are very good. It's just for a short time, I've been doing it ... and that is why people say 'Oh Tina Nails [] is such a good place to work' ... so I wanted to do it and work with the public and so on.

Both Claire (southern Vietnamese) and Mary (northern Vietnamese) talk about their experiences of visiting the Vietnamese communities in California and New Orleans. Both participants took trips for work-related reasons, but while Mary visits her cousins who work in the nail industry in the USA, Claire goes to gain experience for her law training to assist Vietnamese migrants in their dealings with mainstream institutions and to experience another community. Participants of southern Vietnamese origin tended to build stronger diasporic networks with the community in the USA, due to their access to a long tradition of an active political community and a pre-existing South Vietnamese diaspora in the USA which formed the first refugee community of well-educated elites and scholars (Vo 2000, Pham 2003).

Remittances and the transnational community

Transnational practices such as raising money for charities in Vietnam and sending remittances were also practices undertaken by second-generation participants and were seen

as an important way to participate in ‘the community’ both locally and in Vietnam. Such activities were engaged in by young people to make sense of, and render more meaningful, their participation in the community in Vietnam and in Britain:

A group of friends like myself and some other friends we try to hold charity events once a year to try to raise money for charity ... half would go to Vietnamese orphanages in Vietnam so kids who don't have any parents and the other half would go to an English charity so for instance we have supported MS Multiple Sclerosis and NSPCC and we have supported cancer research ... they tend to be very successful events because you know it is once a year it is a disco, we also bring in entertainment in terms of like salsa dancers or something like that as a performance and we'd charge people something like £10–£15 for entry and we'd sometimes have like 250 sometimes 300 sometimes 400 people. So that is how I kind of mix with other Vietnamese people as well umm so I'd say in terms of the community it is not that strong but a group of us do hang around together and sometimes have events and things like that ... (Hanh, female, 34, finance executive, southern Vietnamese)

Sometimes for charities we have like in the Vietnamese churches and stuff, we put money in, you know, knowing that it is going to go back to Vietnam. So even though we know that it is not going to go back to our families in particular, we know that we are still helping our kind of people back in Vietnam. Like have you heard about the typhoon that they have just had? The places that was most strongly hit was actually the place my parents were from which was called Ben Tre. That was hit the most and quite a lot of buildings collapsed and quite a lot of people dead as well so ... so that is the thing, so we still help out for the community

because it is still our parents' homeland, our parents' village basically. (Claire, 21, law student, southern Vietnamese)

Hanh and Claire explain how engaging in these activities have enabled them to relate to the community in Vietnam and feel much more part of things at a local level. For Hanh this provides a way of relating to and meeting local Vietnamese people, while for Claire, remitting helps her connect to the homeland and strengthen parental links. Claire's use of the terms 'our people' and 'our homeland' indicates a claim to belong in the British Vietnamese community through articulating a sense of connection through parental links to Vietnam.

Sending remittances as well as 'helping family out' has been an important transnational practice among the Vietnamese in the USA, providing both a source of pride as well as, more broadly, an indicator of personal success and status, particularly among men (Thai 2014). A similar trend was also observed among the second-generation Vietnamese, as exemplified in Paul's narrative:

I bought them a house, it is like a 4 bedroom house, it is near the city centre not too far, yeah it is quite cheap over there actually. Four thousand US\$ that is £2000 UK pounds – it goes a long way over there. That is what everyone does now, all the Chinese and Vietnamese people over here they send their money back home so that is what we all do ... it is normal ... everyone does it. If you have got relatives living in foreign countries, yeah, that kind of helps. (Paul, 27, IT executive, northern Vietnamese)

Here being able to 'buy his relatives a house' strengthened Paul's sense of being part of a transnational personal community. However, while this practice was seen here

as ‘normal’, not all participants enjoyed this sense of connection and some perceived this sort of obligation to remit as a form of exploitation, particularly as the cost of living in Britain is so high. They complained that relatives in Vietnam tended to view them as overly privileged and having an easier life, without fully understanding their situation in Britain. These were largely people who had less connection with Vietnam and who visited it less often.

Panethnic ‘Oriental’ belonging in the local community

By contrast to the participants discussed so far in this chapter, other participants (predominantly men from northern Vietnamese families), instead mix socially with other young Vietnamese and neighbouring East and Southeast Asian ethnic peers in their local areas. These networks and social groups were referred to as an ‘Oriental scene’, as a place or community where they felt a sense of belonging and inclusion. The emergence of a local pan-ethnic Oriental² community tended to feature as a community in which they regularly engaged during their social lives and to which they could belong and feel at home. The ‘Oriental scene’ encompassed a range of events and gatherings from organised social events involving mainly Vietnamese and Chinese, but also other East Asian young people to the emergence of an ‘Oriental’ club scene (also see Yeh 2014). Participants who attended these events described a sense of community and shared collective identity or common bond within them as described below:

... if you are in London, and you are Oriental, I think the majority of people do know places where to go for Chinese nights, so everyone gathers around [laughs], everybody knows everybody so, it is a more sociable gathering than going to a club or ... where

there is mixed people ... because in those nights you have something in common, you have a common bond. (Xuan, 22, male, graphic designer, northern Vietnamese)

It is just like, when I see another Oriental person, I just feel like at home. It is not like I will get on better with them than anyone else but it just like we will come from the same background. Like for example, if I am out and I walk past a place with Oriental people in there I will just be really excited by it and want to go there. (Thi, 25, designer, Chinese Vietnamese, southern Vietnamese)

These narratives describe a relatively open sense of identification where one's background is more loosely understood as a mixture of origins from 'Oriental' backgrounds deriving from East Asia, rather than relating specifically to Vietnam. A sense of social inclusion seems to be prioritised over more narrow constructions of ethnic identification or sameness. In explaining a sense of belonging and identification with the 'Oriental community', Thi distinguishes between a form of place-based belonging and personal identification. While he does not necessarily identify personally with all other Orientals, being in an 'Oriental place' does provide him with a sense of belonging as being part of the same group where he is accepted and feels at ease. The same sense of belonging as safety and acceptance is also drawn upon in relation to an analogy with the family and being at home in the narratives below:

Oriental, it is like a family, isn't it! It is like a family. I've got a good group of friends, I've known a few of them for years but the rest of them, I have known for 8 or 9 years. You know, it's the way that we treat each other ... as if we are family. We treat each other with so much respect but with English people right it is a bit weird, that sense of family is not there. They need to get over that barrier where, you know, skin colour

doesn't matter anymore, it's who you are. (Luke, 24, finance executive, southern Vietnamese)

... when we go like to Oriental clubs, It feels at home, it feels more at home like if I compare that to raves with black people, I feel more at home, I feel more relaxed like ... I don't have to look around and see who is looking – I am just myself. I'm here to have a good time. Where as when I am there [black raves] I am like 'I want a good time', but I am wary so like, yeah! So it feels more at home, so I am happy.

(David 19, drama student, northern Vietnamese, East London)

The broader pan-ethnic 'Oriental' identity represented a place to feel comfortable and safe from the threat of racism. While 'Oriental' friendship groups are portrayed as family, as inclusively structured around respectful treatment, English friendships are, in sharp contrast, structured around racist exclusion. A similar finding was also observed among Vietnamese youth in California (Vigil et al. 2004). In addition to constructions of the 'Oriental scene' as 'home', 'belonging', and 'family', young people also engaged with the notion of an Oriental category as an identity category into which they invested their own meaning and cultivated a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

This chapter has problematised the notion of a 'cohesive' or homogenous community among the UK Vietnamese in London. For this group, the local Vietnamese community is experienced as internally divided and at times exclusionary, according to predominating perceptions of belonging and authenticity. Community configurations are still strongly

shaped by parents' migratory origins. Participants from 'North' and 'South' Vietnamese backgrounds still draw upon these respective networks rather than local ones, which do not always best represent their values, experiences, and identities. Participants' constructions of the community also differ significantly according to these networks, with southerners being more oriented towards the international diaspora, and northerners towards Vietnam and the UK. Neighbourhood was also another important factor shaping the community, as those living in more concentrated Vietnamese areas were more able to construct a sense of pan-ethnic local community compared to those from more sparsely populated Vietnamese areas who look to the diaspora to provide a sense of community and ethnic belonging. Generational relations were central to second-generation members' sense of inclusion and exclusion from the Vietnamese community as they sometimes enabled access to ethnic networks and at other times, they precluded it due to different perceptions of Vietnamese authenticity.

In response to contesting first-generation versions of Vietnameseness and community, second-generation participants have arguably created their own personal communities of belonging through cultivating ethnic ties through bespoke networks. The notion of the 'imagined community' is deemed important for individuals as a symbolic marker of their identity in wider society and in terms of personal identity. A sense of ethnic belonging and the notion of the personal community captures the understanding of 'community' experienced by second-generation members in London. Ethnic identification and ethnic belonging are constructed in the transnational diaspora, the homeland, and within locally specific pan-ethnic second-generation groups. These more imagined communities enable more fluid and complex negotiations of identity, belonging, and authenticity among the

second-generation Vietnamese, which by-pass narrowly designated notions of Vietnamese-ness.

¹ This was an organisation set up in the USA by Vietnamese refugees who were students and professionals from the former South Vietnam, but has developed a transnational network over the past 10 years, bringing together young Vietnamese from France, Australia and Canada

² While the term Oriental has strongly colonial and racist connotations, by comparison to the USA where there has been a more politicised rejection of the term by the American Asian community, in the UK these debates have been less advanced. The term Oriental has served as an externally imposed label of otherness as well as an internal active category of belonging and dialogue, one which delineates panethnicity and a way of distinguishing East and Southeast Asians from British South Asians.