

Cultural Continuity and Fragments of Diaspora: A Comparative Study of Identity Construction by Second and Third Generations of Overseas Vietnamese in Northeast Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on research on how members of the Vietnamese diaspora in northeast Thailand construct their hybrid identities. Although “diasporic identity” is mentioned often in diaspora studies, it is crucial when investigating it to consider relevant political, social, cultural and economic contexts. This article investigates, compares and analyzes the similarities and differences in place-making and ethnic identity construction by the Vietnamese diaspora’s second and third generations, over different periods of residence, in northeast Thailand. Participant observation, in-depth interviews and desk research methodologies were utilized in this research. The findings reveal that second and third generations of the Vietnamese diaspora underwent dissimilar processes when constructing their hybrid ethnicities (as Vietnamese Thai) due to differences in their migration experiences and levels of social embeddedness in their home and host countries, and because of changes in the geopolitical context in the last 70 years. The differences in identity construction between the two generations reflects their journey from migrant group to diaspora community, their cultural continuity and fragmentation, and their ongoing negotiations to culturally adapt within the host country, and at the same time, maintain attachments with their home country.

Keywords: Vietnamese diaspora, Second generation, Third generation, Place-making, Hybrid identities.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of “diasporic identity” has long been important to diaspora studies. The ethnic identity of a diaspora group is often seen from an assimilationist perspective indicating that diaspora members will assimilate into a host society to facilitate settlement. For example, it is argued that the Chinese diaspora in Thailand adapted to “pro-assimilationist” policies serving the nation-state building project committed to by the Thailand government in the 1950s (Tungkeunkunt, 2010).

Pfeifer (1999) and Cao (2007) portray Vietnamese nationals in Canada and the United States, respectively, as being able to integrate into their host society due to language usage and socioeconomic position, in so doing stabilizing their livelihoods. In line with these examples, Loh emphasizes that assimilating into American society gives Asian Americans an opportunity to occupy elite social positions such as doctors, lawyers, and other professional roles (2021).

This assimilationist approach is challenged by globalization, facilitated by transportation and communication technologies; turning the diaspora into “transmigrants” (Schiller et. al., 1992). Under this approach, diaspora members involvement in social relations with both the host and home countries, and with other diasporic groups sharing the same ethnic origin, is highlighted. Therefore, the ethnicity of a diaspora is constituted through individuals and community’s multiple social embeddedness within and across national borders, and expressed differently depending on local, national, and transnational contexts. The construction of hybrid ethnicities has occurred in various diasporic communities around the world. James argues that Vietnamese Londoners’ identities have been influenced by multiple cultures. Their attachment to the host culture facilitated their lives in London while attachment to Vietnamese culture kept them grounded in Vietnamese communities and provided them with resources for making transnational lifestyles in their everyday lives (James, 2010). Williams (2019) argues that the Indian diaspora in the United States adopts host culture norms mostly in the workplace, but at home keep religious practices, consume ethnic goods and services, and preserve transnational connections to their families in India.

A diaspora shapes its identity and shuffles its power relations through the practices involved in settling down in a new place. As such, their ethnic identity is not fixed to a particular place but is constituted alongside processes of place-making and community formation. Conventionally, people’s identity is conceptualized as being based on their rootedness in a particular territory and culture. This conceptualization is criticized as a way that nation-states take people for granted in the “national orders of things” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 7). Flows of people across national borders have increased around the world and people bring their “package” of original culture along with their transnational mobility and adapt it into the new destination mass culture. In this way, cultural differences “become blurred, open-ended, unstable, contested and reconfigured” (Chiang, 2010, p. 34). The cultures that diasporas embrace are neither original nor wholly new. Instead, diasporic culture is formed by “social and spatial relations” that members of a diaspora engage in in their place of settlement (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 8). In this sense, place is not a natural entity, but is constructed by people and their embedded relationships.

The constitution of place through relational interaction leads diasporas to form “hybridized” or multiple identities configured between multiple nation-states. Hybridity is the third space or in-between space for a diaspora to construct a non-fixed identity and at the same time generate a new sense of identity which may outwardly resemble the old, but is not the same (Bhabha, 1990). Conceptualizing the nature of a fluid identity, Hall (2003, p. 234) and Mishra & Shirazi (2010) proposed that identity should be seen as a “production,” which means that identity would never be complete, is always an ongoing process, and is expressed through

negotiations and interactions in everyday life. According to Ien Ang (2005, p. 16), hybridity is “un-setting of identities” and should be analyzed in relation with “situated” contexts. In this sense, identity could be (re)invented and (re)negotiated according to concrete circumstances. Diaspora members as social actors can use their cultural resources such as language, symbols, customs, traditions, and practices to continuously construct and reconstruct individual and social identity (Schilling-Estes, 2004). Moreover, it is noteworthy that a diaspora’s hybrid identities are constructed to strategically serve various interests of ethnic groups (Balcha, 2008). Hybridity is a means to “empower marginalized collectives” and enables “subjugated collectivities” to claim “a part of the cultural space” in the locality that they move in (Yazdiha, 2010, p. 36).

Although the tendency to constitute multiple identities among different diasporic groups is often addressed in the literature, it remains important. The direction toward construction of hybrid ethnicities reflects a “together-in-difference” living style which results from transnational migration (Ang, 2003). In this sense, hybridity partly illustrates an aspect of globalization. The development of transportation and communication technologies advantage diasporic “transmigrants” who can integrate into the host society while staying connected with their homeland and groups sharing the same ethnic origin in other countries (Schiller et.al., 1992; Sheffer, 2003). As such, considering the constitution of a diaspora’s hybrid identities reveals social, cultural, political, and economic adaptation and transnational connection maintenance processes experienced by both the diasporic group collectively and its members individually. Moreover, hybridity is conceptually criticized as “anything but innocent, abstract theorizing” (Sharif, 2016, p. 160), therefore, it is important to contextualize the concept (Kraidy, 2002). Analyzing the construction of hybrid identities in relation to a specific diaspora group’s quotidian life practices and living circumstances can help clarify “down-to-earth” aspects of hybridity.

In my research, I focus on a Vietnamese diaspora (also known as overseas Vietnamese or *Viet Kieu* in Vietnam) that settled long ago in northeast Thailand and gained the status of permanent residents. Identity construction within Vietnamese diasporas, especially those in the West, has been much studied. Scholars have argued that the *Viet Kieu* successfully stabilized their livelihoods and embraced identities attached to both host and home cultures, which assisted them in fitting into various roles and navigating between different settings in their everyday life, which provided them with resources for making transnational lifestyles, and overall, they integrated into host Western societies (Cao, 2007; James, 2010; Tang, 2012; Tran & Bifuh-Ambe, 2021).

In comparison to these *Viet Kieu* communities in Western countries, the study of overseas Vietnamese living in Thailand has only started recently. Some studies do not clarify a theoretical standpoint and simply argue that the *Viet Kieu* have attempted to preserve their ethnic culture and live in harmony with the local Thai community (Laimanee, 2014; Phan, 2016). Others use a constructivist approach and look at Thailand’s *Viet Kieu* ethnicity as being constituted in interactions between members of the group and between the group and the local Thai community (Auraiampai et. al., 2018; Bunchavalit, 2014; Watrasoke et. al., 2015).

The ways identities are constructed within diasporas differ by generation and this has been addressed in two ways in the literature. Comparison is the first way. Alinia & Eliassi (2014) note differences in identity construction between older and younger generations of the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden. Vathi (2015) notes the same for Albanian immigrants and their children in Europe. The second way to address generational difference in identity construction is to focus on a specific generations' experiences. For example, studies of young Chinese-Americans by Baozhen (2006) and young Palestinian-Americans by Brocket (2020), which suggest that diaspora's second generations construct multiple ethnicities based on their parents' original countries and their countries of settlement. This hybridity helps young generations to flexibly position themselves in various relationships with their families and the host society.

Regarding studies of the overseas Vietnamese in the West, although most works on identity construction pay attention to generational differences, they consider the construction of ethnicity for only one specific generation—either the first or second generation (Nguyen, 2016; Tang, 2012; Tran & Bifuh-Ambe, 2021). In contrast, differences in generations are ignored in the studies addressing identity construction of the overseas Vietnamese in Thailand. This article takes a transnational perspective to compare processes of hybrid identity construction by second and third generations of the overseas Vietnamese diaspora community living in northeast Thailand and explores their place-making processes and cultural practices in a setting different to the West.

The *Viet Kieu* in Western countries are often recognized for escaping Vietnam at a difficult time and are labelled by the Vietnamese government as political dissidents who opposed the country's regime (Songkhramwongsakul, 2010). In contrast, the *Viet Kieu* in Thailand are pro-communist. Thailand has been an anti-colonial base for Vietnamese patriots since the nineteenth century (Goscha, 1999) and the *Viet Kieu* there supported President Ho Chi Minh's efforts to liberate Vietnam throughout the French and Vietnam wars (Nguyen, 2008; Sripana, 2013). This history is important to the construction of ethnicity for the overseas Vietnamese in Thailand.

This article aims to answer the following two questions: How did second and third generations of overseas Vietnamese in northeast Thailand construct their identities? In what ways did these identities facilitate settlement into the host society and maintenance of connections with their original country? In answering these questions, this article investigates and analyzes processes of place-making and identity construction. These processes reflect the journey of becoming a diaspora and its ongoing negotiation with the host country, which provides them with convenient conditions to both integrate into the host society and avoid being uprooted from their country of origin.

The Thailand *Viet Kieu*'s second and third generations are central to the conceptual framework. Their identity making is analyzed in accordance with contextual changings on the local, national, and transnational levels, through their long period of settlement in the northeast region, lasting from the French War and the Vietnam War (1945-1975) until recent times (1990-now), and from being initially categorized as refugees to being provided with legal citizenship. The article reveals continuity and fragmentation and differences in ethnicity construction generations,

which are attributed to differences in migration experiences and levels of social embeddedness towards home and host countries, and by changes in the historical context of more than 70 years in northeast Thailand.

My research challenges a total assimilationist model toward diasporas' different generations. Based on experiences shared by second and third generations of Thailand's *Viet Kieu*, I argue that both second and third generations of *Viet Kieu* express their "situated" identity as Vietnamese-Thai on different levels depending on their political status and living contexts. The second generation's hybrid identities are constituted by maintaining parts of their original culture and absorbing some of the host's. Dissimilarly, the third generation experiences "forced" assimilation into the host culture and then returns to their ancestral culture. This "in-between" multiplicity of identity reflects processes of cultural negotiation conducted by the Thailand *Viet Kieu*. Moreover, it helps them to accumulate various kinds of social, cultural, and economic capital to improve their quality of living in the host localities and maintain connections with their original country.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The content of this article is primarily based on fieldwork in Udon Thani province, Thailand, undertaken between January and August 2020. Udon Thani province was chosen as the primary fieldwork site for two main reasons. First, the number of *Viet Kieu* residing in this locality is around 10,000, which is one of the largest populations of overseas Vietnamese in the northeastern provinces, according to statistics for the year 2020 provided by the Vietnamese Consul General in Khon Kaen, Thailand. Second, the overseas Vietnamese community in Udon Thani have opportunities to disseminate their culture because their socioeconomic position has strengthened and diversified in recent years. More than 90 percent of the *Viet Kieu* there are business owners (Phan, 2016). In addition, Udon Thani has several sites of Vietnamese culture constructed and maintained by the overseas Vietnamese, where community events take place. In order to better understand the Vietnamese diaspora in northeast Thailand, I also traveled to other provinces with *Viet Kieu* communities, such as Khon Kaen, Ubon Ratchathani, Mukdahan and Nong Khai.

The data presented in this article were collected from participant observation and in-depth interviews with 20 overseas Vietnamese, including both second and third generation members of their diaspora community, in Udon Thani, Khon Kaen, Ubol Ratchathani and Mukdahan provinces. This small number is not representative of the many *Viet Kieu* communities in northeast Thailand, but I use this group of carefully selected research participants to examine their construction of ethnicity and to demonstrate that identity making is by no means experienced similarly between members of the two different generations. The diaspora's ethnic identity is strategically constructed in correspondence to their living circumstances, and to serve for capital accumulation, which helps to sustain and improve life outcomes.

There are now four generations of *Viet Kieu* who have settled in the Udon Thani, Khon Kaen, Ubol Ratchathani, Mukdahan and Nong Khai provinces. Many members of the first generation (at the time of writing, aged 90 years and older) have passed away, while those of the fourth generation are children and teenagers (3-16

years old). The second-generation informants in my study were aged 50-70 years old while the third generation were between 17-49 years old.

HISTORY OF VIETNAMESE MIGRANTS IN THAILAND

Four waves of Vietnamese migrants have come to Thailand, from the seventeenth century to the twentieth, and the post-World War II period (Trinh, 2003). The first wave occurred when a number of Christians were repressed by the Nguyen Lords—a feudalist clan ruling in the south of Vietnam. The second wave happened when a Nguyen Lord clan descendant was defeated in a peasant rebellion in the seventeenth century. The third wave took place at the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, with Vietnamese-patriot migrants coming to establish bases supporting the revolution against French colonial rule in Vietnam. The Vietnamese nationals who migrated to Thailand in these three waves are called “Old Vietnamese”.

The fourth wave of Vietnamese migrants to Thailand occurred in the post-World War II years and are known as the “New Vietnamese”. This distinction between old and new is not discrimination but simply refers to the different period of migration. The migrants in the fourth wave came to Laos first, for economic purposes. Before 1945, Vietnam was a semi-feudal colony of the French; and under this regime, a number of landless farmers became tenants and endured marginal livelihoods. In 1945, Japanese occupation created famine in Vietnam (Huynh, 1971), leading to the migration of many Vietnamese to Laos to find opportunities for work.

In 1946, the French gathered their forces and attacked Laotian border towns, so the Vietnamese left and sought refuge in northeast Thailand along the Mekong River, in Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom, and Mukdahan provinces. In Thailand, these Vietnamese nationals held the status of “refugees” and their status was unchanged until the 1980s. This affected their livelihoods and opportunities for several decades.

The group that migrated in this fourth wave is the target group in my study as they are now the majority of the ethnic Vietnamese community in Thailand. Today, the number of Vietnamese residents in Thailand is believed to have increased to more than 100,000 people. Demographically, the *Viet Kieu* in the northeast of Thailand mostly came from the north and central parts of Vietnam. Many second-generation *Viet Kieu* are in retail, or own restaurants, international schools, condominiums, and resorts. Their children (the third generation) work as government officials, and as both employers and employees in diverse fields, such as technology, the arts, medicine, and scientific research.

‘SITUATED’ EXPRESSION OF HYBRID IDENTITIES: BECOMING A VIETNAMESE DIASPORA COMMUNITY

THE SECOND-GENERATION VIET KIEU: VIETNAMESE REFUGEE TO THAI CITIZEN AND WAYS OF HYBRIDITY

The 1940s-1980s: During this period, the *Viet Kieu* in question held refugee status and could live in the northeastern provinces. The community supported the

communist regime in the north of Vietnam while the Thailand state was anti-communist and had an alliance with the USA. Until the 1980s, the two countries' diplomatic relations continued to be challenged by the Cambodian issue. Thus, the Thailand state considered the overseas Vietnamese community as a threat to national security and did not accept the permanent settlement of the *Viet Kieu* in the country (Trinh & Sripana, 2006). The host state put Vietnamese nationals under strict surveillance and discriminated against them with burdensome regulations, such as travel, education and native language restrictions, and forced relocation.

The first generation of overseas Vietnamese planned to return to their country of origin after the French War ended. However, the American War that followed meant their residence in Thailand lasted much longer. As such, they considered their residence in Thailand was temporary. This idea, and the uncomfortable living conditions in the host country, led to an intention to return home by the *Viet Kieu* community's first-generation members; and this feeling was transmitted to second-generation members. As a result, the second-generation overseas Vietnamese, following in their parents' steps, collectively conducted patriotic identity construction, an expression of their union which could help them pool their limited social and cultural resources under a difficult situation, serve their residence in the host society and simultaneously support their homeland in its liberal revolutions, which could possibly open a route of return to the home country.

Gathering in a secret overseas Vietnamese association in Thailand, setting up "fatherland altars" in *Viet Kieu* houses, and maintaining Vietnamese language competence and Vietnamese traditions within families and communities were attempts by second-generation overseas Vietnamese to remain attached to their original country. The fatherland altar was significant in resisting the host state's intention to detach the *Viet Kieu's* political affiliation from the communist regime led by President Ho Chi Minh in northern Vietnam. Ms. Hong, a *Viet Kieu* living in Udon Thani province revealed that:

Uncle Ho's picture has been hung in every Viet Kieu house since 1948. The local Thai soldiers wanted to pull his picture down to stop us from supporting Uncle Ho and his plans to liberate our home country. To avoid this, we put Uncle Ho's picture and an incense bowl in the middle of a Thailand-style altar. Bordering around the altar were messages written in Vietnamese which praised patriotism. In the Buddhist culture of Thailand, an altar as a holy place and cannot be touched freely.

The altar was not simply a static object, but rather, a relatively everyday-life experience of the Vietnamese in adapting to an inconvenient political context and helping them construct their identity as patriots living far from their homeland. By setting up fatherland altars, the *Viet Kieu* constructed new places of living, an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) who participated in the nationalist project of their home country from a distance.

Maintaining Vietnamese language competence by participating in underground communal education and then being alerted to the sudden patrols of local police was an unforgettable memory shared among the second-generation *Viet Kieu*. Mr. Hieu, a Vietnamese living in Ubon Ratchathani province, said his generation was allowed to attend Thailand state schools. However he emphasized

that the refugee status and poor economic conditions of his community limited opportunities for second-generation *Viet Kieu* to study in the state schools. In classes managed within the *Viet Kieu* community, Vietnamese was used as a teaching language for basic classes in mathematics, physics, literature, and history; this contributed to preserving the Vietnamese language in the community. These classes operated from 1948 until the early 1970s in the northeast. They took place confidentially in kitchens of *Viet Kieu* houses and utilized teaching materials sent from northern Vietnam, according to second-generation *Viet Kieu* teachers living in Udon Thani.

Preserving traditional customs such as the Lunar New Year celebration, ancestor memorial praying days, and ancestors' cemetery cleaning day, took place in every *Viet Kieu* family. These customs were passed down from the first to the second generation. In addition, the *Viet Kieu* celebrated President Ho Chi Minh's Birthday on 19 May and the Vietnam National Independence Day on 2 September. Vietnamese food, such as traditional Vietnamese rice cakes (*bánh chưng*), sausage (*chả giò*), and pickled vegetables (*dưa món*) were consumed in *Viet Kieu* families and sold in local markets in the northeast.

In parallel with this, the second-generation overseas Vietnamese attempted to increase their integration into the host culture by implementing "people-to-people" diplomacy despite not being provided advantaged conditions to do so. This strategy aimed to gain the cultural acceptance of the local Thai people, which would help the second-generation *Viet Kieu* in their daily lives. An important factor behind this *Viet Kieu* diplomacy was competence in the Thai language. The first generation spent time living in Laos, so they could use some Lao language, which shares similarities with the Thai language. In the very early days of arriving on Thailand soil, being able to communicate in the Thai language helped the first generation receive assistance from local people.

The second generation was born in Thailand; hence, although they lived in *Viet Kieu* villages, they were surrounded by Thai people and some of the second-generation members could attend Thai schools for a short time; thus, they could acquire better Thai language skill than their parents. Moreover, the *Viet Kieu* conducted an activity that twinned their families with local Thai people's families. As explained by Ms. Hong, a second-generation *Viet Kieu* in Udon Thani, the *Viet Kieu* called the families that they twinned with as "*xieu Thai*". After twinning, at any time, the Thai families brought gifts such as bananas and eggs to the Vietnamese families and the Vietnamese families sent back some gifts to their twinned Thai families at the time of the Tet Festival.

Carrying out such "people-to-people diplomacy" helped the Vietnamese gain both material and mental support from local Thais, which partly made their everyday lives easier. Mr. Phung Quang, living in Udon Thani, remembered traveling back and forth between Udon Thani and Nakhon Phanom provinces to visit his parents, accompanied by his close Thai friend who worked in the police in Udon Thani. Mr. Quang did not have to show any documents or travel permission, which was extremely difficult for *Viet Kieu* to apply for during the 1960s-1970s. Despite the Thailand government's anti-communist campaigns and discriminatory policies towards *Viet Kieu*, local people in Thailand did not fear the *Viet Kieu* and instead partially provided the *Viet Kieu* with assistance. This does not mean the host

state lost their power to burden the *Viet Kieu*; but their strict policies towards the community did not heavily influence daily interactions between the *Viet Kieu* and local Thai people.

1990 to Now: The second generation of *Viet Kieu* gained Thai citizenship and permanent resident cards in this period. From the 1990s, positive changes occurred in the diplomatic relationship between Thailand and Vietnam, in part due to the end of the Cold War. Moreover, significant political changes took place on a national level in both Thailand and Vietnam. Vietnam began implementing *Doi Moi* (Renovation) in 1986 and accomplished withdrawing its armed forces from Cambodia in 1989. The Thailand government led by Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhawan adopted a neoliberal development path and announced a policy to turn Indochina “from a battlefield into a marketplace” (Szalontai, 2011). This also contributed to the changes in Thailand’s foreign policy towards Vietnam.

Because of the diplomatic development between Vietnam and Thailand, the Thailand government started providing Thailand citizenship to the third generation of *Viet Kieu* living in northeastern Thailand in the beginning of the 1990s. From the 1990s until the 2000s, the Thailand government gradually issued Thai citizenship and permanent residency cards to second- and first-generation *Viet Kieu*. Perhaps more than 90 percent of *Viet Kieu* achieved legal status to settle permanently in Thailand. This was crucial in the second generation of overseas Vietnamese finding freedom and joy in being Vietnamese-Thai.

After 1975 the underground Vietnamese associations in Thailand and their branches in the northeast stopped operation. Then in the 2000s, when most of the *Viet Kieu* gained Thai citizenship, they reestablished the associations out in the open. They are officially registered with local governments at the national and the local/provincial levels. They rent or construct buildings to be the public offices of their associations. They decorate the offices with both pictures of President Ho Chi Minh and the Thai King and with the flags of both Vietnam and Thailand. Business associations have also been inaugurated and similarly operated. All the community organizations facilitate the sharing of *Viet Kieu* culture, reinforce solidarity and strengthen their position in the public sphere.

Citizenship also provides convenient conditions for the *Viet Kieu* to maintain, renovate and construct cultural sites in their places of settlement. Udon Thani province, as mentioned previously, is a location with many cultural sites belonging to the overseas Vietnamese community. The Ho Chi Minh Historical Site of Nong On village, the Martyrs Memorial Monument, the Khanh An Temple (*Wat Sunthorn Pradit*), and several other shrines are well-known cultural and religious sites of the *Viet Kieu* community in Udon Thani. When maintaining these sites, the second-generation Vietnamese diaspora straddles both Vietnamese and Thai customs.

Similarly to the past, the northeast *Viet Kieu* consume both Vietnamese and Thai food in their everyday life. They are familiar with and enjoy Isan food. Local Isan food restaurants are one of favorite places for the *Viet Kieu* to meet up and chit-chat. Papaya salad with fermented fish paste, Isan sausage (a fermented mixture of pork meat/fat, cooked rice, garlic, and salt), and Isan larb (cooked/uncooked meat mixed with ground toasted rice, herbs, chili, lime juice and fish source) are meals often ordered by the *Viet Kieu*. One community member in Udon Thani revealed that in the cultural occasion of ancestor worship, *Viet Kieu* often use Vietnamese food,

such as rice cakes, and fresh/fried spring rolls, along with local Isan food, such as a set of sticky rice with grilled/fried meat, when they offer and pray. However, in big events, such as the festival welcoming the Lunar New Year, and at the Vietnamese exhibition in Udon Thani province, only Vietnamese foods are presented. This is tactical; it strengthens solidarity in the community, as they need to gather and agree on the foods to prepare and show on the occasions. It manifests their pride in their origins and homeland, no matter how much time passes and how the situation changes.

In terms of cultural customs, the Lunar New Year celebration, ancestor grave visiting, and the ancestor worshipping ceremony are crucial Vietnamese customs that all *Viet Kieu* families in the northeast provinces maintain. In contrast with the past, nowadays, the overseas Vietnamese join a food festival welcoming the Lunar New Year along with the Chinese-Thai and Thai ethnic communities. The *Viet Kieu* also celebrate Songkran Festival, a traditional Thai water festival. For wedding and funeral customs, most of the second-generation overseas Vietnamese informants in Udon Thani revealed that their families follow Thai traditions. Although weddings follow Thai customs, they always try to present some distinct Vietnamese ethnic cultural aspects, such as having a group of *Viet Kieu* in Vietnamese traditional Ao Dai welcoming people guests. A majority of second-generation overseas Vietnamese respondents shared that despite holding Thai-style funerals, guests are treated to both Vietnamese and Thai foods. The *Viet Kieu* either bury (Vietnamese tradition) or burn (Thai tradition) the dead body.

In daily life, the *Viet Kieu* use both the Vietnamese and the Thai languages. When they speak with Thai people they use either Thai or Isaan, but when speaking with other *Viet Kieu* they mix the languages. This reflects the fluidity of Vietnamese daily life in Thailand. They can be Vietnamese, Thai, or Vietnamese Thai, depending on the circumstances.

A crucial part of the identity construction by second-generation *Viet Kieu* is their attempt to reestablish ethnic language education. As indicated previously, from 1948 to the 1970s, the second generation attended underground education. This played an important role in perpetuating patriotic propaganda and contributed to maintain Vietnamese language competence. This education was shut down after 1975 due to the regional political situation: the defeat of America and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in the American War in Vietnam.

The teaching and learning of the Vietnamese language have now been reestablished within the *Viet Kieu* community. This helps both the second and third generation to reinforce and accumulate competence in their mother tongue. Positioning as Thais, overseas Vietnamese can communicate fluently in the host country's language, critical for their successful participation in the host society. As Vietnamese people who settled down outside Vietnam, being able to communicate in Vietnamese is important for their ethnic identity. Speaking a mother tongue is a crucial marker for diaspora members and connects them to their cultural heritage (Smolicz et al., 1998). Because language and cultural identity are associated (Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo, 1999), the opening of classes for teaching and learning Vietnamese not only helps *Viet Kieu* members improve their Vietnamese communication, but also collectively helps to create their hybrid identities on the community level

through being bilingual (for the second generation) and multilingual (for the third and younger generations).

THE THIRD-GENERATION VIETNAMESE DIASPORA: UNEVEN EXPERIENCES OF BEING VIETNAMESE THAI

The third generation of *Viet Kieu* in northeast Thailand were mostly born after 1975. Their second-generation parents had by then gone through almost three decades of living in Thailand as refugees, discriminated against by the host state. They did not want their children to experience the same situation and hoped for a better future for them. Therefore, second-generation parents taught their children to hide their Vietnamese ethnicity and fit in more with the host society. Many of my second-generation informants in Udon Thani, Ubol Ratchathani and Mukdahan provinces indicated that they used both Vietnamese and Thai to communicate with their children within the family. However, they did not push their children to speak Vietnamese at home as the first generation did. Therefore, their kids speak very little Vietnamese and can handle only simple communication. In some cases, *Viet Kieu* parents found ways to adopt their children out to Thai parents, which helped their children attend all of the educational levels in Thailand state schools. Many second-generation members taught their children to hide their Vietnamese origin when they were out of the house (at school or when interacting with local Thais). As a result of this “forced” assimilation, the third generation have immersed deeper into the host culture. They mostly use Thai in their everyday-life communication and are familiar with Thai culture and customs. Being born and growing up in the northeast, it is undoubtable that the third generation feels close to Isan culture in many ways.

Even though the third-generation overseas Vietnamese were conditioned to assimilate, they still had opportunities to engage in Vietnamese cultural customs with their families. Mr. Gamon, working as a manager for his family company in Udon Thani, cannot speak Vietnamese, but knows some Vietnamese customs from family practice, such as celebrating the Lunar New Year and praying for deceased grandparents and parents. He emphasized that his Vietnamese would be better if he had lived with his grandmother when he was a kid. In contrast to Mr. Gamon, Ms. Bao Tran knows a lot about the important Vietnamese customs that her family practices and she loves Vietnamese food. She can listen to, read, write and speak Vietnamese fluently:

I can communicate in Vietnamese well as I had to use the language to talk with my grandparents. Furthermore, my work in the office of Vietnam Airlines in Udon Thani gives me the chance to use Vietnamese often.

Mr. Prasert, a shop owner shop selling religious items in Udon Thani province, is another example of a third-generation *Viet Kieu* speaking Vietnamese well and loving Vietnamese culture. More surprisingly, Mr. Prasert claims *Viet Kieu* in his hometown in Sakhon Nakhon province are more active in preserving their original culture than those in Udon Thani. According to him, burying the dead is preferred among the *Viet Kieu* of Sakhon Nakhon but in Udon Thani it is more common to cremate them.

The third generation sees themselves as Thai; but at the same time, they feel a “lack of something”. Revealing an affiliation with the Vietnamese community was taboo in the past, but now they are free to express their attachment. This transition fractures their perceptions of their ethnic origin. Because of this “lack of something,” members of the third generation today yearn to engage more with Vietnam by participating in cultural activities of the *Viet Kieu* community and by accumulating language competence.

In the Udon Thani province, third-generation *Viet Kieu* enthusiastically participate in Vietnamese language classes taught by second-generation *Viet Kieu* teachers. Ms. Vy, a third-generation student learning Vietnamese at the Khanh An Vietnamese language school, uses Thai in her daily life to talk with her parents and children; however, she wishes to be able to speak Vietnamese too. She hopes her children (fourth generation) will be able to speak Vietnamese better than her; so, she brings them along to study at the school. Ms. Preeda, although mostly using Thai for everyday communication, similarly embraces the Vietnamese part of her identity, and attends Vietnamese language school.

In daily life, the third generation of overseas Vietnamese follow both Vietnamese and Thai customs. Working in Udon Thani, Bao Tran returns to her hometown in Nong Khai and spends time with her family during the Songkran Festival. Her family always performs the Buddha-watering ceremony when the Buddha statue is paraded passing her house. In parallel, her family maintains Vietnamese traditions, such as the Lunar New Year celebration and ancestral worship. Ms. Chau, a daughter of a *Viet Kieu* family in Udon Thani province, does the *Rot Naam Dum Hua* ceremony with her family at the Songkran Festival. She practices Vietnamese customs with her family, including praying to welcome the Lunar New Year, the ancestors’ grave cleaning ceremony, and ancestor worship.

VIETNAMESE DIASPORA AND HYBRID IDENTITIES: MEANS FOR CULTURAL NEGOTIATION AND CAPITAL ACCUMULATION

Through considering place-making and identity construction processes of the second and third generations of the *Viet Kieu*, this article presents a discussion of four major points. First, the second and third generations of *Viet Kieu* living in the northeast Isan region express their hybridity in different ways. This is based on their settlement experiences in the host localities. The second generation make their hybridity by maintaining some aspects of their original culture while simultaneously absorbing new aspects of the host culture. The second generation has strong Vietnamese language competence and understand the migration history of the community and Vietnamese cultural traditions/customs, passed down from the first generation and reinforced by the community. The second generation absorbs new aspects of the host culture through interactions with local Thais and by sharing living space with the locals in everyday life. The third generation of *Viet Kieu* were encouraged to hide their Vietnamese ethnicity by their parents and assimilate into the host society, to return to their ancestral culture when the living context favors it.

As mentioned above, competence in Vietnamese language is an important indicator for connection with the ancestral culture. Many of the second generation

are worried about the weak Vietnamese language competence of the third generation and onwards, in that it could lead to the loss of awareness of their Vietnamese origin. This weak competence is a result of the “forced” assimilation encouraged by their families. It is not exceptional to the third-generation *Viet Kieu* and also happened to the second generation onward Chinese diaspora in Singapore in the post-WWII years. Their “de-Sinicization” and assimilation into the host society to adapt with the anti-Chinese mainstream in Singapore led to a situation whereby many ethnic Chinese people turned from being bilingual users of English and Mandarin to being monolingual English speakers by the 1970s (Ashton, 2019). However, the Chinese diaspora in Singapore later could implement “re-Sinicization” schemes, including accumulating Chinese language competence, when they were institutionally facilitated to by their host and home states.

Skinner (1957) stated that the young generation of the overseas Chinese community in Thailand would totally assimilate to Thai culture. This implies linear thinking, foregoing their return to their ethnic culture once they integrate in the host society. The case of the third-generation *Viet Kieu* contradicts Skinner’s point of view. Several decades ago, they underwent a forcible “de-Vietnamization” to help them achieve a better future in Thailand. However, when the context changed and they were offered freedom to express their Vietnamese ethnicity, they could come back to their ethnic culture. They are now involved in a “re-Vietnamization” process. They are more integrated into the host society than the second generation, while still maintaining connections with their Vietnamese origin through social practices within their families and with the community.

The second generation of overseas Vietnamese consider having Vietnamese language competence to be a crucial indicator for Vietnamese ethnicity, whereas the third generation does not. Ien Ang (2005) argues that Chinese language competence should not be considered the only signifier of Chineseness because different diaspora generations experience different cultural processes. Francis et. al. disclose that heritage language proficiency is not seen as the most fundamental indicator to being Chinese among young British Chinese; instead, the performance of cultural practices following Chinese traditions and customs creates a “package” of being “Chinese” in the UK (2014, p. 214). In this way, learning and using Vietnamese helps to embed the Vietnamese ethnicity of the third-generation *Viet Kieu* in northeast Thailand. As long as they practice certain Vietnamese cultural customs and traditions and embrace an awareness of their ethnic origin, they can identify themselves as Vietnamese, thus contributing to their identity hybridity.

The second point to be emphasized is the Vietnamese diaspora’s hybrid identity constitution is shaped by different actors and factors. Much of the literature on overseas Vietnamese living in Western countries (Cao, 2007; James, 2010, Nguyen, 2006; Nguyen, 2016), deemphasizes contextual factors and institutional actors involved in the community’s identity constitution. In studies on the Vietnamese diaspora in Thailand (Auraiampai et.al. 2018; Bunchavalit, 2014; Laimanee, 2014; Watrasoke et.al., 2015), the history of the diaspora’s migration to Thailand is mentioned only as general background and institutional actors are not sufficiently given weight to regarding their identity.

This article enlivens the historical context of migration and settlement on national and transnational levels for the *Viet Kieu*. This history reflects the flexible

adaptation of the Vietnamese diaspora settling in the host country. Moreover, the host (Thailand) and home (Vietnam) nation-states and their diplomatic relations are institutional actors and factors shaping *Viet Kieu* identity. It can be argued that the ethnicity construction of the *Viet Kieu* occurs within a triangle structure of the homeland, the host land, and the community. Vietnamese often embrace hybrid identities when settling in northeast Thailand. However, their hybridity is expressed in different ways in accordance with the interactions between their host and home states and between the community and the two states in different periods of their residence in Isan.

Between 1948 and the 1980s, due to the Thailand state's intention to discriminate against the community, the *Viet Kieu* planned to return to their home country, and their expression of hybridity was limited. The community focused more on preserving their original culture and on being accepted by local host communities. The experience of the second-generation overseas Vietnamese shows that a diaspora's construction of hybrid identity needs necessary and sufficient conditions. The active involvement of the migrant community in the host country, together with the cultural acceptance of people in the host society, is necessary. Encouragement from the host country's institutions, which depends on the diplomatic relationship between the group's home and host countries, is sufficient.

For the third generation of overseas Vietnamese who were mostly born after 1975, even though they were conditioned to assimilate by their parents, they actually had first-hand experience of their ancestral culture from their families. In this way, the third generation hinted at being hybrid. Nevertheless, they were taught to hide their Vietnamese ethnicity in public places and were given less chances to immerse in Vietnamese culture. This differed to their parent's generation who did not hide their Vietnamese identity, despite the host state banning displaying their Vietnamese ethnicity publicly, encouraging them to develop an attachment to it.

The achievement of Thai citizenship was the most significant milestone allowing the *Viet Kieu* to reside legally and permanently in the Isan region. This milestone reflects political and cultural changes by actors and factors that shape the Vietnamese diaspora's identity construction. The sufficient condition for the *Viet Kieu* to express their hybridity is provided when they gain institutional acceptance from the Thai state along with positive developments in Thailand-Vietnam diplomatic relations. The second generation of the overseas Vietnamese with Thai citizenship are considered to be part of mainstream Thai society and are given freedom to publicly constitute their ethnic space and express their Vietnamese ethnicity. The third generation are provided with advantaged conditions to return to accumulate understanding about their ancestral culture.

Being able to freely express hybridity does not imply the dissolution of culture. The experiences of the second and third generations of the *Viet Kieu* clarifies the point that hybridity comprises cultural de-bordering and bordering processes; and these two processes take place in parallel but are "situated". This is the third point emphasized in this article. Expressions of these two processes can be seen through the *Viet Kieu's* food consumption and their construction and maintenance of cultural sites. On the one hand, members of the second-generation consume both Thai and Vietnamese foods, which facilitates their life in the host society. This is the de-bordering process shown through their locally lived experiences with food

practice and it partly illustrates the constitution of a hybrid ethnicity as Vietnamese-Thai. On the other hand, they reinforce the border line of their ethnic group via presenting only ethnic food at big cultural events. This is a strategy to disseminate their ethnic culture in the host locality.

The second-generation *Viet Kieu*'s construction of cultural sites in Udon Thani pushes against the discourse of their "otherness," which relates to their past categorization as refugees in the eyes of the state. Today they are not "others," but instead, have a legacy of standing in the host society. Hence, they have rights and living space. In this way, the *Viet Kieu* deborder the living space in their locality. At the same time, they mark the border by practicing their traditional ethnic customs in those sites. As such, hybridity does not blur the ethnic border line in the society of destination; instead, it opens doors for the border line to be actualized. In this sense, hybridity is the intentional choices of where to be hybrid and to whom the hybridity or de-hybridity should be exposed.

The construction of a hybrid identity as Vietnamese-Thai facilitates the everyday life of the second-generation *Viet Kieu* in the northeast provinces, equips members of the community with the means to accumulate different kinds of capital assisting their residence, and extends of their linkages with the homeland. This is the fourth point of this article. Capital can be understood as resources social agents obtain to smoothen their power negotiation in social fields, and can be categorized as economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). For the second-generation overseas Vietnamese, a hybrid identity helps them accumulate economic capital. There is a common agreement among the *Viet Kieu* I interviewed that fitting into the Thai majority helps them improve their economic status. Land ownership rights is the most important factor here. In parallel, embracing Vietnamese ethnicity helps members of the Vietnamese diaspora claim their position in ethnic "niche" businesses such as food selling, motorcycle showrooms and motorcycle repair stations in their host localities.

Being Vietnamese-Thai helps the second generation of *Viet Kieu* achieve social capital at the local and transnational levels. Presenting as members of the majority in the host society with fluent Thai communication ability, and familiarity with the host culture, the *Viet Kieu* become involved in social relations with local governments. This is a way that the Vietnamese diaspora constitutes their image as a solid ethnic community with successful adaptation and integration into the host society. Mr. Hoang An, the President of the Vietnamese-Thai Association in Udon Thani, shared that:

My associates and I visit the province mayor's office at the Lunar New Year, to send our best wishes and to express the gratitude of our community to the local government for offering us a good environment for settlement and for making our livelihoods.

At the same time, claiming membership as Vietnamese offers advantages to second-generation *Viet Kieu* to receive support from their ethnic community's associations. Moreover, the status of being Thais with Vietnamese origin embeds them in Thailand as Vietnamese with transnational social connections with the Vietnamese state's leaders. In this way, they are eligible to receive cultural, economic

and political support from the home state and extend their connectivity with the homeland. This satisfies the *Viet Kieu's* personal emotional needs and opens doors for them to be more involved in trans-border social, cultural, economic, and political activities with the homeland and with different Vietnamese diaspora communities around the world.

Similar to the second generation, a hybrid identity equips the third generation of *Viet Kieu* to accumulate various kinds of capital. Being Thais helps them to acquire cultural and economic capital, important thrusts for social mobility. They can attend all levels of education and can work in all kinds of jobs: Ms. Bao Tran, from Udon Thani, has younger sisters and brothers who achieved good educational degrees and gained success in their careers in Thailand and abroad. One son of a President of the Vietnamese-Thai Association in Ubol Ratchathani province works at Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Gamon was a President of the Young Entrepreneur Commerce private commercial organization in Udon Thani province.

In parallel with the Thai identity, the Vietnamese identity gives young *Viet Kieu* generations the chance to build up their social, economic and symbolic capital. They can receive support for experiences and finance from the community's business associations to start up their businesses. Mr. Le Kien, Head of the Advisory Board of Business Association of Thailand-Vietnam, residing in Udon Thani province, discussed the popularity of starting businesses with steel products among the third generation of *Viet Kieu*, which results from their social networks with successful second-generation businessmen. Identifying as having Vietnamese origins helps the third generation gain symbolic capital in everyday interactions with local people. Most research participants in Udon Thani province shared their pride in being Vietnamese, a group with a reputation of always working diligently to earn a livelihood and achieve success.

CONCLUSION

My findings and analyses on diasporic identity construction contribute to the knowledge of Vietnamese diaspora communities, especially that which has long been settled, and have experienced considerable changes, in northeast Thailand. My findings accord with previous research indicating common construction of hybrid identities by members of the *Viet Kieu* in the northeastern provinces. But markedly, my work looks at *Viet Kieu* identity constitution with more concrete details throughout the two different periods of before and after they obtained Thai citizenship. In this way, this article argues that the Vietnamese diaspora's identity construction is contextually situated.

Without support from the host state and with less political, social, and economic capital throughout the period of 1946 to the 1980s, the overseas Vietnamese's hybridity was expressed within their families and community, and to some extent to the neighboring Thais in their host localities. By contrast, when the circumstance changed with more political and institutional opportunities, from the 1990s onwards, and with their increase of economic, social, and cultural capital, the *Viet Kieu* manifested their multiple embeddedness in connections to their host and home countries on both individual and community levels. The argument about the overseas Vietnamese's situated ethnicities, in my research, is illustrated by the

diverse materials that the community's members make use of to express their hybridity in everyday life, which are embedded in their interactions with their *Viet Kieu* fellows internally and with the host community externally.

This article challenges previous studies by stating the various ways that different *Viet Kieu* generations construct their hybrid ethnicities. The second generation of Vietnamese diaspora constructed hybrid identities by maintaining some aspects of the original culture and absorbing new elements of the host culture. Unlike the second generation, the third generation became more assimilated into the host culture and received less socialization with the Vietnamese culture from their families (forced de-Vietnamization), and then were engaged in a re-Vietnamization process with a deeper integration into the host culture. Certainly, the second and third-generation *Viet Kieu* hybrid ethnicities are shaped according to changes in the local, national, and transnational contexts. The fourth generation of *Viet Kieu* is predicted to continue assimilating into the host society. However, this assimilation can be characterized as one with an awareness of ethnic origins. The fourth generation will be provided with opportunities to engage more in communal socio-cultural activities with their families and their ethnic community. In this sense, it can be understood as a hybridity also experienced and undergone by their grandparents' and parents' generations.

In a broader sense, this article challenges the theory in traditional diaspora research. Scholars expertizing in diaspora studies, such as Safran (1991) and Cohen (2008), did not perceive a diaspora as being in a process of continually formation and reformation in accordance with the community's changing living circumstances. My findings on the Vietnamese diaspora's identity constitution demonstrates that the community is constituted by their own agency and in relation with host and home nation-states, and with the local people belonging to other ethnicities surrounding them. This process has gone on since they arrived on Thai soil, when they held refugee status, lasting to today when they are granted legal citizenship and will continue into the future. In this way, the overseas Vietnamese community consciously embrace not only "traumatic memory" (Cohen, 2008) about their immigration to Thailand, but also their lived present experiences. Framing a diaspora as an ongoing process also reflects the interrelations (within a community, between the community and hosts, and connections with host and home states) that a diaspora engages in. It furthermore critically proposes considering the diaspora-making process in two dimensions: consciousness and everyday-life practices.

My study encourages future research focusing on the role of religion in shaping the identity of overseas Vietnamese in northeast Thailand. How digital identity is formed today is also an opportunity for further research. Overseas Vietnamese use the Internet to share migration experiences, narrate their adaptation process to the host culture, and connect with their origin country and different Vietnamese diaspora communities around the world.

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