Breaking Blocked Transnationalism: Intergenerational Change in Homeland Ties

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Migrant-homeland ties are the subject of much contemporary interest from scholars focusing on post 1965 immigration from Latin America and Asia. The profile of Vietnamese emigration is different from that of other Asian countries because the vast majority of overseas Vietnamese fled the country as refugees. The transnational practices of political refugees have been under-theorized; home country networks are likely to be different for forced versus voluntary migrants. Unlike most immigrants, refugees are generally barred from returning to their home countries, and hence their capacity to engage in transnational activities is more restricted.

For these reasons, refugees and political exiles – such as the Vietnamese – represent an interesting case study for understanding the continuity of, and constraints to, the maintenance of active homeland ties for immigrants and their children. While the transnational literature has largely focused on the occurrence of transnationalism, there has been comparably scant discussion about the factors that may hinder or curtail transnational involvement, despite the immigrants’ yearnings to maintain ties. One of the first attempts to theorize about the limitations of transnational engagement is blocked transnationalism – which argues that the political and social realities on the ground prevent the interest and concern with the home country to be translated into an effective presence (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). In the case of Vietnam, from 1975 to 1994, exiled Vietnamese in the United States could not legally travel to, invest in, or send large sums of remittances (Espiritu, 2002). Following Doi Moi – liberalization reforms in 1986, and the normalization of US-Vietnam relations in 1995 – formal restrictions against Vietnamese immigrants’ active homeland ties were lifted, which in turn, formally spearheaded the diaspora’s visible philanthropic initiatives back in Vietnam. The Vietnamese case illustrates
how the role of the state, the diaspora, and understandings of civil society influence overseas
engagement over time; transnationalism is thus, re-conceptualized to represent the complex
interplay between the state, civil society and individuals.

In our attempt to better understand the phenomenon of blocked transnationalism, we also
ask whether there are significant *generational* distinctions. First-generation contribute to
homeland development through remittances, in some cases totaling significant portions of the
country’s GDP; Central American Countries such as Costa Rica (35%), Philippines (22%), and
Vietnam (20%) in 2008 are all examples. Assuming that first-generation refugees and asylees
face external and psychic constraints in their effort to maintain homeland ties, do their forms of
transnational engagement carry into the second-generation? To address this, we examine the
degree of generational continuity in blocked transnationalism. Blocked transnationalism upends
conventional notions of transnationalism as a linear phenomenon; as a concept, it emphasizes the
constraints placed upon the capacity of individuals and even communities to be transnationally
involved. Of particular interest is whether these structural and psyche constraints affect the
transnational engagements of the first- and second-generation in a similar or different manner. If
formal state-enforced restrictions on homeland involvement circumscribe the first-generation’s
ability to openly engage in transnational activities, as well as create a psychic barrier between the
origin state and the exiled immigrants, how does this influence the stability of involvement with
the homeland for the second-generation or the first-generation after formal barriers have been
lifted? Or, is blocked transnationalism limited to being a largely first-generation phenomenon,
with minimal repercussions on how the second-generation interacts with the home country?
These are empirical questions that can be tested with our examination of transnational ties for
first- and second-generation Vietnamese-Americans.
In sum, this paper seeks to redefine transnationalism in the context of political refugees, probing the ways in which this unique category of migrants engages in the actual and affective aspects of transnationalism. It also investigates the generational distinctions in the phenomenon of blocked transnationalism with a focus on how the curtailment of first-generation transnationalism by external and psyche constraints influences the transnational engagements of the second-generation.

**Viewing blocked transnationalism through actual & affective ties**

The literature on transnationalism has been differentiated into two distinct schools of thought. On the one hand, there is the perspective advocated by Alejandro Portes, Luis Guarnizo, and Patricia Landolt (1999) that conceptualizes transnationalism as a form of practice or actual ties. By their definition, the transnational domain is narrowed down to include “…activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation” (219). The connotation is that transnationalism only occurs in the actualization of cross-border linkages – most likely, in the form of direct contact – through observed and enumerable practices (e.g. visits back home, remittances, and contact with kin living there). Grassroots projects can include construction and support of schools and roads in one’s hometown or funding of annual scholarships for underprivileged students.

On the other hand, scholars such as Nina Glick Schiller (1995) and Peggy Levitt (2004) offer another perspective that conceptualizes transnationalism as a process. They see transnationalism as manifested not so much in the actual cross-border activities of migrants but instead, in the lived experiences of being a “transmigrant” who is defined as an “immigrant whose daily life depends on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders.
and whose public identity in configured in relationship to more than one-state” (Glick Schiller et al 1995: 48). Process includes the affective ties – real or imagined – that immigrants maintain that are both behavioral and psychological. This could include commemorative events that celebrate the Fall of Saigon in 1975, a community ban against the Vietnamese-American flag, or a protest against purchasing goods made in Vietnam. The concepts of actual versus affective transnational ties are analogous to the conceptual distinction of “ways of being” versus “ways of belonging,” respectively, as put forth by Glick Schiller (1995).

**Previous Empirical Findings**

In terms of the empirical basis of transnationalism, past research shows that not all immigrants are transnational, and that in actuality only a small number participate (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). This is especially true for the second generation, children born in the United States to immigrant parents. One of the first quantitative studies by Portes and associates (2007) was the Comparative Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project (CIEP) which compares three first-generation immigrant nationalities. Results showed that married adult males take part in transnational activities more frequently, and that education leads to increased trans-border involvement. The “acquisition of U.S. citizenship does not significantly reduce transnational participation and years of residence in the US increase transnational activities” (2007). Empirical studies seeking to measure second generation-transnationalism ask if the maintenance of homeland ties is either part of the migration experience in which only immigrants partake or if it transcends the generational boundary to affect the lives of their children. Most studies find that the majority of the second generation are not actively engaging in any transnational practices (Kasinitz, 2002, Rumbaut, 2002) and that levels of transnational involvement decline rapidly between the first
and second-immigrant generations (Boyd, 2007). Specifically Ruben Rumbaut (2002) finds that in his San Diego sample, the level of transnational attachments, whether affective or actual is quite small across diverse national origin groups-- always fewer than ten per cent (89). Similarly, Phillip Kasinitz and his associates (2002) find in their New York sample, only a minority of cases of sustained commitment to parental homelands among the second-generation. Even studies based on ethnographic as opposed to survey data yield parallel findings. In her study of Guatemalan immigrant children living in Los Angeles, Cecilia Menjívar (2002) finds that there are “only few opportunities and spaces that may foster the children’s ties to the communities of origin” (17). As such, she finds that the second-generation is not nearly as inclined as the first to remain linked to the origin communities. How this plays out for children born to refugee parents has not been explored in-depth as the aforementioned studies tend to not draw a distinction between voluntary versus forced migrants.

Thus, this body of literature brings to bear several important questions including: What are the determinants of transnational activity? How do the first versus second-generation maintain transnational engagements – namely, in the different forms of transnational engagement, whether actual or affective? If transnationalism for the second generation is a rare phenomenon, then can we describe who does participate? Extant research has examined these questions from both micro- and macro-level perspectives. Of particular importance in investigating the phenomenon of blocked transnationalism are the roles of religion and the origin state, whereby the former offers a conduit for carrying out homeland engagements in spite of the institutional and bureaucratic barriers erected by the latter against transnational activity. On the micro-level side, Rubén Rumbaut’s (2002) analysis of survey data finds that religiosity is a potential predictor of transnational ties. Rumbaut speculates that religious participation fosters the
transmission of ethnicity and ethnic socialization from the parent generation to that of their children (2002). On the macro-level, state actions and policies also have the potential for influencing second-generation transnationalism. As Menjívar argues in the same study cited above, “the nation-state, through its policies to limit movement across borders, is still a powerful actor that leads immigrants and their descendants to focus on the host countries” (19). In other words, the political bureaucracies and institutional structure are able to dampen—or, block—transnational engagements of the second-generation. Conversely, they can also strengthen them in other ways. In the case of Vietnam, the state’s view of emigrants has evolved from “traitors” to “those living far away from the fatherland” to “our Vietnamese abroad” (Dang Nguyen, 2005). This coincides with political-economic changes since the introduction of market reforms (2005).

**Varying Contexts of Exit and Blocked Transnationalism: The Vietnamese Case**

The Vietnamese-American population is internally diverse; the context of exit tells a complex story of immigrants with varying levels of human capital, experiences, and memories of Vietnam. Many endured dangerous conditions leaving Vietnam, waited for years in refugee camps in Southeast Asia, and spent years in prison before their departure. Others were intellectuals and the exiled elite of the former Southern regime.

For various periods and waves of migration, their context of exit tells a compelling story of people’s relationships with Vietnam. The first wave of Vietnamese to the US began in 1975; those who left, mainly ex-military, government officials arrived via US-government sponsored programs and came from relatively privileged backgrounds (Bloemraad, 2006). An estimated 19.5% of the first immigrants had a college education whereas in general 1% of the population of South Vietnamese had a university education. Linguistic isolation, economic marginalization and
the loss of their country led most Vietnamese to turn to their ethnic community for support (Bloemraad, 2006, Zhou, 1998).

Between 1977 and the mid 1980s, a second wave of Vietnamese refugees left Vietnam; approximately 2 million people fled aboard small rickety boats and this wave came to be known as the “boat people.” The second wave “began as a result of the new government’s implementation of political, economic, and agricultural policies, as well as persecuting those who were affiliated with the former Southern government in prison and re-education camps” (Bloemraad, 2007). Congress also passed the Refugee Act of 1980 to assist Vietnamese refugees, which greatly decreased restrictions on entry to the US. The closing of businesses owned by ethnic Chinese and nationalization and redistribution of land created a mass displacement of ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam. (ibid). Thus, the Vietnamese of the second wave came from diverse backgrounds compared to the first. Many Vietnamese faced imprisonment if they attempted to emigrate. These attempts resulted in jail time and many tried escaping by land by walking through the jungle into neighboring Cambodia and into Thailand. The successful boat people reached refugee camps in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong (Bloemraad, 2007). From those camps, many were admitted to the US, Australia, Canada, and other third countries.

A third wave of Vietnamese migration dates from the mid 1980s when many Vietnamese immigrated under a variety of policies based on family reunification and on economic motivations. Over 300,000 Vietnamese were admitted to the US under the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) (Zhou, 1998). Set up by the United Nations, the ODP allowed those who could prove familial ties and evidence of working with US companies or the military to immigrate to the US. The 1989 Humanitarian Operation Program (or HO) was an agreement between the US
State Department and the Vietnamese government, which allowed former political prisoners to be resettled in the US. Between 70,000 to 80,000 people immigrated to the US under the HO program. Many of these immigrants spent years in reeducation camps and prisons subject to torture and psychological abuse.

For the Vietnamese, the relationship of the state with the Diaspora is somewhat tenuous, altering throughout the years from one of cautious engagement to greater openness (Small, 2008). While the refugee population residing overseas comprises only three percent of the Vietnamese population, despite its size, in 2009, they contributed close to 10% of the country’s GDP. Recognizing its Diaspora as a resource in terms of business and to provide links to the international community, the State since the late 1990s dismantled the two-tiered pricing system for non-Vietnamese as well as abolished the five-percent tax on remittances. Government programs especially since normalization of US-Vietnam relations have attempted to woo overseas remittances and the skill set of the second generation\(^1\). The Committee for Overseas Vietnamese in Ho Chi Minh City estimates that each year between 350,000 and 400,000 Vietnamese expatriates return. Typically when visiting they bring anywhere between $2000 to $5000 in cash and gifts. The total for remittances in 2009 was estimated to be 10 percent of GDP (2008). This is very different in comparison to the early 1980s when overseas Vietnamese were restricted from travel to Vietnam, as well as viewed with suspicion and distrust as defectors to the state (Sidel, 2007). Policies such as dual nationality, a visa waiver program, and housing purchases make it easier for overseas Vietnamese to invest in Vietnam. Special organizations such as the Overseas Vietnamese Business Association and government branches at the national,\(^1\)

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\(^1\) It is also important to remember that transnational relationships are not uni-directional. The Vietnamese State actively encourages overseas investments and philanthropy, as well as cultural exchanges for youth, objectives which second-generation organizations are also committed to. See CPV Politburo’s Resolution 36/NQ-TU.
provincial, and local level deal specifically with Overseas Vietnamese affairs. State-sponsored delegations also visit Vietnamese overseas to explain homeland opportunities. The policies implemented by the government had varying responses from the Diaspora due to history and memories of war.

Despite the government’s encouragement of investment from the Diaspora, foreign direct investments are concealed by the informal nature of joint ventures with family members and friends who remain in Vietnam (Sidel, 2007, Small, 2008, Thai, Forthcoming). There is still a lingering fear and distrust of the government, as one Vietnamese university professor declared: “it’s the fear of Communists. People are still uncomfortable of doing business here because many Viet Kieu believe the government will decide to nationalize.” As one lawyer explained, “There are members of the community who are still very passionately anti-Communist and who view any normalization of relations with Vietnam as a betrayal of not only their ideals, but also of all the soldiers who died defending a democratic Vietnam.” Social connections and ties to the home province are the most common way people invest using their relatives’ names despite loosening restrictions.

The nature and intent of community associations has evolved throughout the years. Originally this included the immediate focus on integrating and helping newly arrived immigrants, and sometimes plotting revolutionary change and repatriation. Now, many mutual assistance associations focus on integration efforts of elderly Vietnamese-Americans and the second-generation. Scholarship donations and fundraising for the construction of schools and scholarships in Vietnam have become more visible as anti-government sentiments wane as the Diaspora has spent nearly thirty-five years rooted in the US.
A new generation of political activism has emerged where Vietnamese-American groups are less interested in revolutionary change and more willing to patiently engineer peaceful change. Many groups function as either transnational advocacy networks hoping to effect change in Vietnam through legislative advocacy, or as political groups using means such as protest and demonstrations that are very much tied to local politics in the enclave.

A quiet but growing number of economic and business organizations in the Diaspora are slowly emerging despite people’s tendency to engage in business on an individual basis. Chapters of the Vietnamese-American Chamber of Commerce operate in several areas of high ethnic concentration. These groups, if active, try to maintain an apolitical stance to appease the conservative members of the community.

**Methodology:**

**Data Collection in the US**

Data collection included the creation of a national database of Vietnamese-American organizations, interviews with organizational leaders in the US and Vietnam, administering a survey to US organizations, and interviews with various governmental ministries in Vietnam and overseas Vietnamese committees, as well as field observations of projects in Vietnam. The data includes both qualitative and quantitative components. Due to budget and time constraints, the focus of this study is three areas of the United States: Orange County and Santa Clara County, California, and Harris County, Texas. The states with the largest number and concentration of Vietnamese immigrants are California and Texas (US Census, 2010). Lion Plaza and the newer Grand Century Plaza in San Jose in Santa Clara County are the cornerstones of the northern California Vietnamese community. Little Saigon, a bustling commercial belt in Orange County,
serves over 200,000 Vietnamese with a large concentrated number of Vietnamese-run enterprises and small businesses. Phuoc Loc Tho or Asian Garden Mall is assumed to be its center. However, the area spans across multiple cities in Orange County including Westminster, Santa Ana, Garden Grove, Midway City, and Fountain Valley. Table 1 provides information on the basic social, demographic and economic characteristics of Vietnam and Vietnamese immigrants in the US.

A database of transnational organizations in the three geographic areas listed above was created via local Vietnamese language business directories, the GuideStar database, Melissa DATA, and discussions with informants by email, phone or in-person. A directory of 632 organizations was compiled with most organizations being hybrids that focus both on domestic and overseas projects in Vietnam. The organization types include economic/business, professional, hometown associations, ethnic/cultural, political, religious, and other (Table 2).

Field observation included visiting enclaves in California to speak with leaders of the community, ethnic news media, Vietnamese consular officials, as well as attending organizational activities. The organizational activities included two protests in California, a trade forum with the California-Asia Business Council, fundraising dinners, and visiting temples to speak with members. Vietnamese celebrations such as the New Year or Tet festival in Orange County provided a venue to speak with many organizations and student groups. Following the methodology of Portes and Zhou (2012), the organizations were not chosen at random but rather
as emblematic of their principal types: at least five years old with one or more projects in the home country which later could be monitored during fieldwork in Vietnam.

The results were analyzed by first stratifying the organizations based on type. The organization characterized itself during the interview as a hybrid or one of the following types of organizations: political; economic/professional; social/cultural; hometown; alumni; and religious. Then, the organizations were split into first and second-generation organizations; the data neither identified the age at migration nor a particular immigrant cohort. The definition of a second-generation organization refers to organizations in which sixty percent or more of their board members or permanent members are second-generation immigrants, born in the United States. These groups ranged from a Lions Club, which sponsors mobile eye clinics in Vietnam, to pro-democracy youth groups advocating for Vietnam to be re-instated on the list of Countries of Particular Concern for Religious Freedom. Tables 3 and 4 present summary statistics and examples of what we have classified as second-generation organizations.

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Insert Table 3 about here
Insert Table 4 about here

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Between January 2009 and January 2010, surveys were conducted with eighty organizations. Field visits to the site to interview and speak with recipients of aid partners in Vietnam for selected projects were also conducted. The survey used a closed-ended questionnaire with a few open-ended questions.

**Data Collection in Vietnam**
The methodology uses a dual perspective: organizations interviewed in the US were also interviewed in Vietnam. Fieldwork in Vietnam took place between July and October 2009, focused on interviews with selected US transnational organizations and governmental agencies involved in overseas Vietnamese affairs at the national, provincial, and local levels. Interviews with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other relevant ministries in Hanoi were conducted, as were interviews with provincial departments in Hai Phong, Hue, and Ho Chi Minh City. The research methodology included: site visits with 14 organizations interviewed in the US, in addition to quasi-governmental organizations involved overseas such as ALOV, the Association for Liaison for Overseas Vietnamese. Interviews included organizations both registered and not registered with the government. Interviews used a bilingual survey instrument translated into both English and Vietnamese to interview leaders of selected organizations and government officials in Vietnam to understand how projects take place on the ground. Interviews with government affiliated organizations and agencies included face-to-face interviews with officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the National Committee for Overseas Vietnamese in Hanoi, Hai Phong, Thua Thien-Hue, and Ho Chi Minh City, and National Assembly Members. The Association of Liaison with Overseas Vietnamese, an organization operating under the Fatherland Front and various People’s Committees and the

2 Organizational development in Vietnam is growing because of changing attitudes towards international organizations; while Vietnamese American NGOs are not well represented among registered NGOs, the strength of Vietnamese American NGOs in general lies in their ability to gain the support of local partnerships and local governments. Throughout the 1990s the number of INGOs working with Vietnam has increased from approximately 86 registered NGOs in 1992 to approximately 500 registered INGOs today. The director of PACCOM said in an interview that Overseas Vietnamese NGOs account for only 5 to 7% of all registered INGOS. He also noted that most “Vietnamese American NGOs have smaller projects like for sums of US $2000 or $3000. The strength of Vietnamese-American NGOs is that when they implement projects- 70 to 80% have the support of local partnerships. (VUFO 2003b 'Lessons Learned from a Decade of Experience: A strategic analysis of INGO methods and activities in Vietnam 1990-1999'. Hanoi, Vietnam: NGO Resource Centre, --- 2003a '10 years of Partnership between Vietnam and International NGOS'. Hanoi, Vietnam: NGO Resource Centre.)
Department of Finance and Investment, and other mass organizations in Hue and Ho Chi Minh City were interviewed in order to understand how directives operate at the provincial and local level.

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Insert Table 5 about here
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Quantifying Actual Transnational Ties by First- versus Second-generation Organizations

The strength of transnational ties measures cross-border connections that go beyond the occasional trip home or sending of remittances to the habitual and enumerable engagement in homeland activities (Guarnizo, 1994). The series of descriptive tables below measure the following indicators which operationalize actual transnational ties in quantifiable terms: the socio-demographic composition of the membership base of these organizations; the organizational ties which constitute the transnational networks connecting the immigrant associations and Vietnam; and the various activities and objectives of these organizations.

In the Vietnamese case, the nature of transnational ties, unlike the Latin American cases studied before (Portes, 2007), is not formally institutionalized, although there are myriad organizational linkages, of which many are informal3. Rather, for both first and second-

3 Another important theme that emerges from our quantitative results as well as interviews is the informality of transnational exchanges, as practiced by both the first- and second-generations. There is still lingering mistrust about Vietnamese banks and other transfer arrangements, and so collective and individual transfers are significantly underestimated (SIDE, M. 2007 'Vietnamese-American Diaspora Philanthropy to Vietnam', Philanthropic and Global Equity Initiatives. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. page 4). Consequently, because of the informality of ties, estimates of remittances and philanthropy to Vietnam are under-reported (ibid). Religious organizations are the most popular conduit for charitable giving and examining religion as a tool of development should be furthered explored. It is commonly pointed out that these social remittances potentially serve as an important tool for development in Vietnam through the creation of small and medium sized enterprises and building infrastructures in hometowns by improving quality of life. PORTES, A., WILLIAM HALLER, AND LUIS E. GUARNIZO 2002 'Transnational Entrepreneurs: An Alternative Form of Immigrant Adaptation', American Sociological Review, vol. 67, pp. 278-298. Future research should examine the role of migrant-owned businesses in Vietnam in the context of blocked transnationalism.
generation Vietnamese organizations in the US, projects are generally carried out through personal networks of family and friends. The existence of these organizations challenges the hypothesis that political refugees and asylum seekers, as well as their descendants, experience blocked transnationalism. Both first and second-generation find different ways to interact with Vietnam. First-generation tends to be more informal working with hometown associations and religious groups compared to the second-generation. The second generation uses their human capital to create more formal ties with Vietnam through government channels. However, the forms of transnational practice for both first- and second-generation may be less institutionalized than what is common for ‘voluntary migrants’ (e.g. labor and entrepreneurial migrants) with the exception of the undocumented.

Conversely, second generation organizations focus on both national and local development, instead of regional and local ties. Second generation organizations are more likely to interact with local and national governments, and their members travel to Vietnam much more frequently compared to their counterparts in first generation organizations (e.g. over half of the members of second generation organizations visit Vietnam at least 3 times per year). Nearly forty-four percent remain in contact with central, local, and provincial governments compared to less than fifteen percent of first generation organizations. Second generation organizations rely more on hiring Vietnamese nationals to implement projects and the aid of local government – given their regular contact at all levels of government as well as other non-profit institutions – and they rely less on monetary support from the co-ethnic community. The domestic activities of the second-generation organizations include an emphasis on culture camps focusing on retaining Vietnamese culture through language or artistic expression for the second generation. Participation in mainstream NGOs and educational summer trips where young adults use accrued
social and cultural capital to travel and teach in Vietnamese universities is common. Those second generation youth that return through business organizations include internships at large multi-national firms such as Intel or legal exchanges with international law firms.

First generation Vietnamese often lack exposure or experience with organizations in Vietnam; organizational development in Vietnam is highly regulated in comparison to the US. Before Vietnam’s liberalization, most associations and organizations operated informally or were a branch of the government. Many organizations still operate under the Fatherland Front such as the Women’s Union and the Youth Union:

From the late 1950s in the north and 1975 until the mid 1980s in the south, Vietnam’s political-economic system had little room or opportunity for people to form voluntary organizations. Only since the late 1980s and the new renovation policies did the government in 1992 and especially after 1995 provide more enabling regulations on how organizations should be established ((Kerkvliet et al., 2003).

Changes in Vietnamese society since the late 1980s have resulted in a more open space for international NGOs to operate, and second-generation organizations take advantage of this liberalization. Between 1992 and 2010 the number of international NGOs increased from 183 to 800 as governmental restrictions relaxed. Thousands of small informal grass-roots organizations exist on the ground in partnership with local communities but are not recognized by the government. One member of a first-generation political organization explains:

I definitely commend the organizations that are able to work in Viet Nam, as there is a lot of red tape, corruption and hoops to have to go through. Many of
these groups are working with the communist government, and I am sure that the government of Viet Nam is not necessarily too fond of these groups either, but they allow it (independent organizations) for one reason or another.

Compared to the first-generation’s staunch opposition to collaborating with the Vietnamese state, the second-generation who grew up in the US holds a very different conception of civil society. Under a democratic model of state-civil society relations, the second-generation perceives the Vietnamese state as a partner in their various national development projects, however, cognizant of their parents’ past. One second-generation lawyer explained:

Many of us grew up in the States and we view history from a different perspective than from our parents who still have a lot of resentment towards Vietnam. In that sense, we try to balance our interests. We try to stay very non-controversial.

Most second-generation volunteers noted that their parents are supportive of their transnational work; despite this, it often created sources of conflict albeit minor in their relationships. A young second-generation woman who volunteered with an international organization shared:

When I returned home, the first thing my dad said was ‘Why do you sound like a Communist- because I was based in Hanoi- ‘Your accent has changed’- meaning that I no longer had the Paris by Night twang…I think he has a lot of pride and a lot of fear and misunderstandings about how Vietnam is - modern Vietnam- and the Vietnam that he left. I would never invalidate his feelings- there is a lot of pain still for him and for our community. I realize that I’m in this weird in between- a no man’s land -where he and his friends think of Vietnam in a certain way. For some members of the community, I talk about it
very candidly – about my work but I don’t talk too much about homeland politics.

The legal organization that the first interviewee belongs to sponsors overseas judges and attorneys from Vietnam to the US and a fellowship program that allows second-generation law students to work as summer associates in Vietnam. Another second-generation NGO successfully implements newborn care initiative models accepted by the government into national programs. The second generation then finds itself in a unique position of balancing respect of their parents’ wishes and memories of Vietnam and forging their own understandings of a country. Historical memory still transpires to the second generation who grew up hearing stories of war and how their parent’s journey to the US- the realization of freedom and democracy that these youth capitalize on with their acquired understandings of state-government relationships is not mired in their own experiences of war but creates an impetus for action and service to a country that remains part of their identity and history in the US as youth of color.

Regardless of either first or second generation’s relationship with the state or historical memory, religious groups have proven to be important actual and practical resources for both first and second generation organizations to operate in Vietnam. Forty-four percent of second-generation organizations and thirty-three percent of first generation organizations remain in regular contact with religious institutions in Vietnam; religion tends to operate and be legitimized as an institution that is not part of the government, and garners trust from the Diaspora who maintains ties through religious leaders. Buddhist temples in Vietnam are linked to temples in the United States. A small yellow registry of all the Vietnamese temples is published annually listing Buddhist temples in the US, Australia, Canada, Norway, and New Zealand. One Abbott explained that he is frequently contacted via email by temples in Vietnam requesting
assistance—monetary typically—for building temples or disaster relief. Religious leaders from Vietnam also visit Vietnamese-American temples and churches to request support for various projects. Other projects include funding orphanages, building houses and schools, and libraries. One monk took $10,000 in cash with him on a visit to give to his home temple in Central Vietnam to build a library. Another Buddhist monk described how he travels to Vietnam to visit various temples and passes as a local travelling monk. He takes money from his temple Northern California and donates to projects that he sees needs the most help.

**Making Sense of Blocked Transnationalism: The Affective Transnational Ties of the First and Second Generation**

The previous section describes the actual cross-border characteristics and behaviors of first and second-generation organizations. This section aims to complement the previous by explaining transnationalism as an emotive process rather than enumerated cross-border activities that characterize actual ties. While all organizations serve a role in fulfilling a need for affective ties, not all organizations engage in actual cross-border activities. Transnationalism, when understood as affective ties, describes the lived experiences and connections – real or imagined – that immigrants maintain with the homeland. These ties have been described in literature as “ways of being” (Levitt, 2004); the difference here is that we discuss this lens through the eyes of refugees and their American-born children. These ties moreover are both at the individual and collective level. In the Diaspora, this includes celebration of Black Friday- April 30th commemorating the fall of Saigon in which second-generation Vietnamese are given black ribbons to wear at school. Alters in homes and the celebration of *dam gio* (ancestor worship) occurs transnationally remembering the dead as well as flags and organization protests reinforce and create cross-
border identities and memories. How individuals think and understand these events and their sentiments towards Vietnam is what is understood as the emotional and psychic spaces that immigrants inhabit whether conscious or unconscious. Moreover, living in ethnic spaces reinforces these ties and identities; local radio stations broadcast the news of incarcerated human rights activists and the newspaper lists important dates in Vietnamese history. Patrons re-visit the same garden found in Central Vietnam in the shopping mall when purchasing groceries and war memorials dot the landscape in parks and strip malls. How do transnational social spaces in the ethnic community and organizations play out for immigrants and their children in the context of blocked transnationalism?

Many first-generation organizations embody a focal point and tool for empowerment remembering and reimagining Vietnam. Members are able to reassert and retain their former social status. Never is this more apparent than in the case of military alumni who don garb and re-enact ceremonies where the previous social order and social esteem is reproduced and relived. Many former political leaders of the Southern Vietnamese military amass a cult figure status and a quasi-celebrity following. Similarly, Vietnamese hometown associations reproduce former social hierarchies from the village level. Distinguished guests include former community leaders at fundraising dinners. Special parking lot space is given to the leader and names are announced at the beginning with their former position of notoriety in Vietnam or current status in the US (e.g. political leaders, former principals). Organizationally, these groups provide a community of remembrance for re-imagining history. Examples include celebrations such as enacting events from Vietnamese history such as the 39 AD Trung Sister revolt where two sisters organized a national rebellion against the Chinese which ultimately failed but inspired other rebellions. The ARVN Rangers- a special military group annually don their former military garb and maroon
berets to celebrate particular events at various war memorials in Orange County. Another event included a nation-wide film screening of an independent film titled “The Truth about Ho Chi Minh.” The screening toured various cities with high concentrations of Vietnamese including Garden Grove, San Jose, Jefferson, and Houston. During a screening in California, several hundred men stood to salute both the American flag and the former Southern Vietnamese flag—with voices raised singing the national anthem of the old regime.

For the children of immigrants, affective ties characterized by the sense of distrust or historical memory experienced by the first generation as described in the previous section wanes, however, is not ignored. Rather, second-generation members are sensitive and acknowledge their parents view and experience of history while forging their own understandings of Vietnam:

Many of us grew up in the States or were born here and we view history from a different perspective than from our parents who still have a lot of resentment towards Vietnam. In that sense, we try to balance our interests. The previous president was in a situation of upsetting a lot of people when we helped organize a state-wide trade mission with a Vietnamese delegation. We later tried to participate in another Vietnamese community event for Tet (New Year) and we were stopped. We would be invited to attend so long as the president retracted his statement and apologized. It puts us in a difficult situation.

Controversies within the community for conducting outreach to Vietnam often cause intergenerational conflict as illustrated above between organizers in the community. Many second-generation experience and acknowledge a very different Vietnam from their parents.
Though they may not have experienced first-hand the details of their parent’s forced departure, the stories and recollections of many second-generation paint a picture of how they see their parents’ assimilation process and how they relate to Vietnam. As one second-generation member who lives in Vietnam describes:

My parents were really poor when they first came to the US- my dad has always done a little bit of everything- he’s been a gardener, delivered pizzas, at a sugar processing plant- when we first arrived, several families lived together in one apartment. My mom was a lawyer in Vietnam and used to having servants. I think it was hard for her when she first came- she had to learn how to cook and wash dishes- I remember her complaining about how fragile her hands were- how pretty they used to be. When I describe to my mom Saigon, she often doesn’t believe me- I can buy Levi’s jeans, eat KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), and watch CNN. She only talks about the Communists taking everything.

Struggle and sacrifice, while watching their parents assimilate is a narrative common to the identity of the Vietnamese American second-generation, as they are for the children of immigrants from other nationalities (Alumkal, 2003, Wu and Chen, 2010); their identities are told and reconstructed as understanding the dislocation of their parents however albeit an open attitude to Vietnam. While they see their parents as forced or pushed out, they find themselves in the unique position of the freedom to move between transnational spaces compared to their parents. Psychic fear and historical memory often cloud the beliefs of how the first-generation can engage on an actual level with Vietnam- in many interviews in San Jose – among hometown associations there is still a fear of being detained at the Vietnamese airport upon arrival. This is
surprising given that nearly 500,000 return yearly to visit and travel agencies selling tour packages and familial remittances are ubiquitous in the community (2008). The inter-generational transfer of historical memory then is evidenced by the second generation’s respect for their parents past and also their desire to learn about modern day Vietnam, and their psychic position to more freely move back and forth.

Trust and support from the Vietnamese community then is of less importance for second-generation organizations which are able to use their knowledge of civil society in the US and abroad to interact at various levels of government and garner support from multiple spheres of influence compared to the first-generation. First generation organizations, from our sample, also identify the national government as a significant hindrance in Vietnam (58%) while no interviewed second-generation organization shared this sentiment. Despite this, both first and second-generation organizations avoid discussion about distrust towards the government (50% of respondents refused to respond to the question). One interview with the newly elected Chamber of Commerce president described the community as follows:

The Vietnamese community is fragmented. Those who are leading the business and professional organizations are the 1.5 generation who speak English fluently. My parents would have never thought of opening and going into business with people other than their family. That’s what makes our generation different. As the new president I see that our generation knows how to work better together as a team. There is a saying in Vietnamese that the Vietnamese people are like crabs in a bucket—all crawling on each other trying to get out. We are resourceful, strong, hard-working, but we will step on each other to try to make it our way. This new generation because of our education is different. We can work together
as a team. If you look at the old president, he was a leader--he was the one who made the decisions. He was the ‘cult figure’ and was larger than the organization itself. I’m part of a team that works together. Vietnamese people in the business community are hush-hush about doing work especially in Vietnam. We don’t want to talk about it. Nobody talks about it, but we all know it’s going on. This information needs to be kept quiet. I’m going to have protestors outside my shop and I don’t want that. We stay away from politics. Most people would rather not join an organization and just go in with a close group of friends or family.

What the informant describes above can be viewed as a form of “reactive blocked transnationalism” as performed by second-generation organizations. Whereas the first-generation is reluctant to assert their ethnic identity and sense of co-ethnic solidarity, in addition to openly discussing their transnational ties, the second-generation are resolved to do the opposite. Many second-generation organizations that work with the Vietnamese government maintain a stance of neutrality where homeland politics are not a focal point of their organization. Many first-generation organizations because of their placement in the community still face social pressure if working in Vietnam openly.

This type of ‘open’ transnationalism practiced by the second-generation is in large part, a reaction to the ‘covert’ transnationalism practiced by the first-generation. In so doing, the second generation is actively promoting a revitalized Vietnamese-American identity as well as publicly engaging with business leaders and officials back in Vietnam. One second-generation business leader described his decision to open their Chamber of Commerce to members in Vietnam and to negotiate with the new US consulate. He said his mission was to bring free enterprise to Vietnam and that “it’s time to move forward. This is a Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce and
I don’t want to place my American citizenship above my loyalties to Vietnam. The opportunities in Vietnam are immense, so why not take advantage?” Second-generation members describe the transnational activities as opportunities especially with market-reform- they capitalize on their language and cultural fluency to work for international businesses or opportunities for entrepreneurship. Another second-generation who works for a development agency in Vietnam described his involvement out of financial necessity: “Given the economic climate in the US, I would be able to use my college degree the way I can here. I can contribute to the socioeconomic development of the country- my work in Quang Nam (a province in Central Vietnam) means that I can help people directly through microfinance and housing initiatives planning with local government officials and project funders.” This recent interest and opportunity structure is mirrored in the policy of the Vietnamese government where recent policy seeks to attract the “gray matter” of the second generation4.

The sentiment of the Vietnamese Diaspora towards these organizations is mixed but becoming more open- as one first-generation monk said “some older people say that we are helping the Communist blood to flow but really we want those to have education to have a voice on how people will change their society. Change can only happen through education. Vietnam is not a poor country. I want to show the world that Vietnam is not a poor country but one very rich

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4 Several of these national policies include: 2003: Fund for persuading the Overseas Community initiated by Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Projects include language training for overseas youth, exchange programs, conferences on investment opportunities, and information/culture exchanges; 2004: Politburo Resolution 36- The resolution aims to “attract overseas brainpower to the cause of national development and build a satisfactory mechanism of incentives and rewards for overseas experts to return home.” This act encourages “overseas Vietnamese to invest and do business in Vietnam by expanding distribution channels for Vietnamese products and to build new business and investment relations with foreign partners”; 2007: Visa waiver program: 5 year Visa for overseas Vietnamese to enter and leave the country without restrictions. This includes both first and second-generation. 2009: Dual Citizenship for both first and second-generation immigrants.
in culture.” First-generation organizational leaders often say that they feel that they are Vietnamese and their goal is to help Vietnam, whereas second generation interviews also couch their experiences as being Vietnamese and a search for identity: “Growing up, my parents never talked about Vietnam. We weren’t allowed to buy anything with the label ‘made in Vietnam.’ I came here to see it for myself, to see where my parents came from.”

**Conclusion: How can we re-define blocked transnationalism?**

Both generations find ways to participate transnationally. Their commonality is that most of these ties are informal existing between organizations that operate underground in Vietnam or through umbrella organizations, or religious groups. The openness of the second-generation to admit to working with the Vietnamese government is a key difference in their affective ties at the national and local levels – most project implementation requires support from local authorities so this occurs nevertheless in both cases. On a practical level this occurs because the second-generation lack transnational social capital to enact projects directly. Instead, the second generation relies more on external agents like government or religious organizations in Vietnam because they do not have the personal ties that the first-generation has. First-generation attachment to hometowns and experiences of war naturally influence the type of organizations they join and form. Changes in civil society have allowed a more open space for international organizations and the second generation capitalizes on this (see Sidel, 2008 and Kerkvliet, 2003 for a discussion on civil society).

There is a difference in how the first generation and the second generation practice transnationalism for both actual and affective ties. Members of the first generation organizations oscillate between varying experiences of civil society- experiencing both war before 1975
Vietnam and current Vietnam. The second generation who have only recently come of age know Vietnam’s recent opening space to independent organizations and NGOs. Their hesitancy in openly admitting ties is understandable. The concern of the first-generation transnationalism is tied to development projects often connected to specific former identities and links in their home provinces. The second-generation connects to Vietnam on a national or regional level – their identity is one of being Vietnamese- and Vietnamese-American- awareness between North and South exists- but the sentiments and meanings of this imaginary border are not fully actualized. The second-generation are more willing to work with State actors and engage in national development in Vietnam as a whole rather than favoring local attachments. In terms of actual ties, second-generation use their accrued human capital and psychic freedom to engage with Vietnam moving transnationally with greater ease.

The above revitalization of Vietnamese-American identity can be couched as reactive transnationalism. For refugees, the second-generation are able to inhibit both spaces more easily than their parents. This blockage in affective ties for the first-generation sometimes results in inter-generational conflict albeit often in micro interactions. The ability of the first and second generation to share memories and experiences in Vietnam occurs. For a small segment of the first-generation population- Vietnam will never be an open place. For many Vietnamese who engage in transnational philanthropy, a sharp distinction between helping “fellow Vietnamese at home” and the government is affirmed. Religion operates in a third field not related to government and given support from both generations. For the first-generation, religious organizations operate in a trusted field outside the government. For second-generation, religious groups in the US provide a means of learning about the culture and a strategic network for both generations to send aid and learn of development opportunities abroad.
First-generation organizations face more extant pressure from the community in the US. First, the more open transnationalism practiced by the second-generation is often due to the fact that activities of the first-generation are subject to greater scrutiny by the community. The second-generation is less subject to enforceable trust that occurs for the first-generation—the organizational resources of the second-generation often come from outside the community. The social networks and ties of the first-generation are linked more to the enclave and ethnic community being dependent upon it for support of its organizational activities. Second, first-generation’s historical memories of war and civil society in Vietnam prior to 1975 create an imagined Vietnam different from the second-generation. Second-generation are more likely to openly work in Vietnam albeit keeping a respect for their parents. An inter-generational transfer of memory exists for the second-generation who acknowledge their parents struggle to assimilate and forced migration, but for this select group that are active, it does not deter them from their cross-border work.

This is not a human capital argument – members of both first and second-generation organizations have higher than national averages in terms of income, education, and language fluency compared to their Vietnamese-American counterparts. Involvement in Vietnam reaffirms previous identities and social status of first-generation that capitalize upon their social networks in their ability to actualize projects and glean respect in their home countries. Second-generation lack these social networks but create them through the government and other institutionalized means. There is overwhelming evidence that cross-border relations occur in spite of the context of blocked transnationalism for political refugees. Utilizing the perspective of actual and affective ties shows that actual ties for both first and second generation Vietnamese is far from limited.
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