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the Viet Kieu Returnees and Vietnam*

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Ms. Vu Thi Hang

Abstract

Vietnamese residing abroad (Viet Kieu) have the transnational connection with Vietnam. Looking at this connection, the paper aims to explore what is the perception of nationalism in the Vietnamese residing abroad on the government policies welcoming them back to Vietnam aiming at those who have experiences in the Information and Technology sector (ICT). Based on the data from in-depth interviews with a group of Vietnamese residing abroad who already returned and working in the ICT sector, the paper illustrates that nationalist connection has stronger influences ICT overseas Vietnamese to return. The article also explains their decision-making process to return as nationalists and recommends a potential approach for Vietnamese policymakers to create effective policies to attract talent and resources from the Vietnamese residing abroad to strengthen the national ICT development objectives.

Keywords: nationalist, Viet Kieu, Vietnamese residing abroad, returnees, diaspora.

1. Introduction

There are about 4 million *Viet Kieu* living in 103 countries and territories all over the world [1] and as many as 400,000 of them educated or highly skilled in various majors [2]. For example, according to the Vietnamese Social Culture project, there are 40,000 Vietnamese intellectual participating in this project. 65% of them are computer scientists, 15 % are engineers, 20% in the social sciences and humanities. Especially, there are a lot of *Viet Kieu* working in ICT sector. For instance, 10,000 of them are working in Silicon Valley now [3].

Recently, there is an evidence of interaction between the returning of *Viet Kieu* and the government policies to attract them. It is recorded that there are 500,000 visiting times of *Viet Kieu* every year [4]. At the same time, the government has been carrying on a package of policies to attract talent in the ICT sector from the *Viet Kieu* community. It is important to see what the determinants for *Viet Kieu* to return are, in order to readjust the policies to be more effective and efficient. Moreover, with the critical history of fleeing out of Vietnam in the past which caused by the anti-communist sentiments, they still returned as nationalist motivations, while Vietnamese government is still practicing Communism and remaining in power shall be explained.

The article starts with the history of *Viet Kieu* and their perceptions on the connection with Vietnam to see whether nationalism in this group existing in any form. Later, by comparing between their determinants of returning and the way government welcome *Viet Kieu*, the paper clarifies the interaction between the policies and *Viet Kieu*. Based on this interaction, the article highlights the role of nationalism in *Viet Kieu* group in determining the decision to return of *Viet Kieu* and how the government policies should utilize this feature is recommended.

To make it clearer, the nationalist perception in this paper is the way government looks at the *Viet Kieu* in the connection of having the same origin who are considered as inseparable of the Vietnamese. In policies, the government illustrates that this nationalist perception is the patriotic connection which should be enhanced to connect more and more people to

contribute to the development of the country. From the *Viet Kieu* working in ICT sector, nationalist perception is the core values of family, religion and the political reason to flee out of Vietnam which construct the identity of the *Viet Kieu* abroad.

2. National Identity of the Vietnamese Residing Abroad (*Viet Kieu*)

2.1 *Viet Kieu* migration

The fall of Saigon can be said as one of the biggest historical events for the outflow of Vietnamese people. These people, who were related to the US side, left Vietnam under the protection of the US and the US's alliances.

There were almost one million people who were mostly refugee left the country from 1975 to 1995. They are also called 'boat people'. They are refugees and some of them were asylum seekers. Until now, they became the communities of Vietnamese Diasporas all over the world (Kuyper, 2008).

Another source of Vietnamese migration overseas is the labor export source since 1980s. During this time, Vietnam had the important change due to the *Doi Moi* reform. Going along with this were a lot of inequalities and the demand for jobs. The Vietnamese government had to run the program called 'international labor cooperation' (Dang, 2003) to send labor to communist countries and ASEAN market. However, during this program, there were numerous obstacles due to the fall of Soviet bloc. Therefore, there were lots of people had to return. The rest of them stayed and even re-migration to find a better living opportunities. Those people mostly stayed in Germany due to the attractive labor policies. Until now, this group becomes one of the biggest Vietnamese communities in Europe (Kuyper, 2008).

It is also important to mention the group of scholars went to communist countries for the education purposes (Tran, 2011). There are a large number of people stayed in the host countries instead of returning home. Those people are also the important skill resource of the Vietnamese overseas communities which is the subject for the current policies to attract talents of the Vietnamese government.

It is clear to see there are different groups with different backgrounds of migration. The group of refugees who left Vietnam due to the political reason might bring the anticommunist sentiment, but the labor group and the educated group not surely do.

Even there are some papers researching on the identity of *Viet Kieu* and addressed on the identity of anti-communist sentiment, and this anti-sentiment may extend through generation, groups of migrations, but the identity among different group of *Viet Kieu* should be analyzed. Due to the limitation of this paper, it is only assumed that one of the identities of *Viet Kieu* is the anti-communist sentiment as the reason for them to leave the country (Dorais, 1998; Dorais, 2001; Thomas, 1997).

2.2 Nationalist perspective on the Viet Kieu identity

One important link among *Viet Kieu* and between *Viet Kieu* and Vietnam is the personal relations with family and friends (Dorais, 1998). It is explained as the impact of Confucianism in Vietnam which is not only important in the genealogy but also set the ties between individuals and the sites of ancestral graves (Thomas, 1997).

The culture of *Viet Kieu* is the family value that constitutes the social and moral institutions (Dorais, 2001). This core value differentiates them from others. At the same time, it is clear to see the *Viet Kieu* transnational community seems to consist amount of networks of relatives and friends who are not only in the host country with them but also all over the world and of course, in Vietnam. They tend to maintain regular relations with their relatives as a tradition and the way to feel the sense of belonging.

The origin of this core value is the Confucianism's impact on the Vietnamese. Confucianism addresses on the tight connection between individuals and their roots because this is why each person was born and raised, inherit all the good and overcome all the worse. This foundation is also the reason why individuals are always trying to find the link between them and their ancestral graves (Thomas, 1997).

For overseas Vietnamese, this conception defines their sense of belonging with their country, as the '*nha*' in Vietnamese language which means house, husband, wife, or family. '*Nha*' is in the link with '*nuoc*' which means the country, the countryside, the landscape, the family,

the village, the community, and the country. Therefore, from the private relationship like husband and wife, to the broader relationship like children and family, to the biggest relationship is the individual and the country, everything is coherent as the whole (Sutherland, 2012).

The perception of consisting with a particular place in the country makes it difficult for those who think of leaving. Even in the modern consciousness of Vietnamese people today who live in cities, even they left their original villages for some generations, but they still mention it as the origin and part of their identity. This explains the enormous sense of being separated from the 'home' in the *Viet Kieu* community. Being apart from Vietnam, it is not only the geographical separation but also the separation between the individual soul and their ancestors' places (Sutherland, 2012).

For those who left the country because of the political reason, political regime of Vietnam became the reason for their separation. They express their distress on the Communist regime. However, the political challenge is not the same as their nationalism. Nationalism and their perspective on politics are independent and together shape the *Viet Kieu* identity. In short, it can be said the identity of *Viet Kieu* is the family value, the religious belief and the anti-communist sentiment (Tran, 2011).

3. Migration and Return

The determinants of individual migration are reviewed here by four branches of explanation. Firstly, neoclassical theory explains the return movement of people based on the wage differentials between host countries and home countries, including personal experiences of migrants in terms of earnings in the host country and their expectations when returning home. The theory also discusses that the flow of people is not only due to the flow of workers from labor abundant to labor-scarce countries, but also the flow of investment capital from capital rich to capital poor countries (Douglas, 1993). Therefore, the returning migrations can be finding the opportunities of employment and investment in home country as well.

The theory also addresses on the individual characteristics and social conditions or technologies that can lower the migration cost. This is also the reason to increase the net return of migration.

This theory can explain the group of Vietnamese asylum seekers who fled the country in the past, but cannot explain why *Viet Kieu* returned with motivations which are not economic intentions. For instance, the second generation of Viet Kieu returned to Vietnam to explore and understand their roots (Dorais L. J., 2001).

Therefore, theories to explain the determinants for *Viet Kieu* returning to Viet Nam should be broader than this. The new economic of labor theory treasures to explain the decision of returning as a collective act in order to not only increasing expected income, but also decreases risks, constraints that related to market failures (Stark, & Levhari, 1982; Taylor, 1991). The theory analyzes a particular type of return migration called ‘calculated strategy’. Those people have got successful achievement abroad and return home. It states that ‘when these migration-related goals are achieved, there is no reason for migrant to remain abroad and hence the decision to return (Stark and Levhavi, 1982; Stark, 1986; Cassarino, 2004). The migration-related goals can be the higher incomes, enhancing human capital, increasing savings. The theory also mentions another motive of return migration which is the relative deprivation. This means the purpose of migration is not only to increase their incomes but also their relative incomes. In terms of return migration, it states the relative deprivation decreases when the duration of migration getting longer. Therefore, the chance to return home is increasing (Taylor, 1991; Quinn, 2006).

This theory can explain the temporary migration or the talent mobility rather than the permanent migration. The groups of skilled labor or rich people have the strategic way for their own development. This theory can explain the flow of *Viet Kieu* who returns because they can see the opportunities to invest, and set up companies at the current time. This theory addresses on the flexibility and the careful consideration of migrants who move due to their personal interest driver rather than the emotional or cultural concepts such as nationalism.

To fulfill this gap, the transnational theory defines one of the main determinants of returning is the strength of family ties. It is also said that people who intend to return to the homeland more likely to invest in their place (Gmelch, 1980). In this theory, the second determinant of returning is the preparedness of the migrant. It is defined by the willingness and readiness to return. According to Porters, one of the common ways to prepare for the returning is to visit the home country regularly (Portes, 1997). The transnational theory explains most of the aspect of *Viet Kieu*, especially for the group of whom who went to other countries due to the political conflict. This group of people is also the main object of this article.

Finally, social network theory approaches from the connection between migrant and his/her social and institutional network. This way of analysis explains the process of readjustment into the country of origin and this process requires a particular of time due to the difference experience of migration before (Boyd, 1989). This theory can explain the re-settlement of migration in the new place. Human are the sophisticated beings. In the case of a Vietnamese who fled Vietnam when he was 15 years old and then he settled in a new country for the next 30 years, at the age of 50, he returned to Vietnam. He in the 10s is different from him in the 30s or 50s. Therefore, this theory can explain the way people go out, return, and re-settle in a long and sophisticated process. By seeing at the network, the theory can explain how well a person can adapt to a 'new' home.

Based on these theories, it is clear to see there are a lot of factors determining the decision to return the host country, from the economic reasons such as enhancing income, investing capital to non-economic reasons such as national sentiments or family ties.

4. The Determinants to Return: Results from In-depth Interview

To get more insight, the field trip for this research was conducted in four weeks, from July to August of 2016 in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

The qualitative and selective interview was used based on the practical considerations. Returning to Vietnam is a process involving lots of concepts and sensitivities. Therefore, a range of open questions were used in these interviews.

The contacts were collected through personal network and by approaching them directly in the public events or their offices. To add more insights, interviews and programs about returnees who went to Vietnam are also utilized. Those interviews are authorized by the governmental media agencies.

All the interviews were in Vietnamese because both interviewer and interviewees are able of using Vietnamese fluently. Therefore, there is no gap in understanding the concept linguistically.

There are six interviewees and all of them are working in the ICT sector as skilled worker, entrepreneur, expert and investor. Entrepreneur (E) run a small business and takes all the risks and rewards of a given business venture, idea, or good or service offered for sale. They are commonly seen as a business leader and innovator of new ideas and business processes. Investor (I) is any person who commits capital with the expectation of financial returns. Expert is a person who has a comprehensive and authoritative knowledge or skill in ICT sector. Skilled workers (SW) are those who achieved the ICT bachelor degree and above [5].

The limitation of these interviews is that these six people are unable of representing the whole complex *Viet Kieu* because each generation, each region, and even each type of occupations in ICT sector has different characteristics. Therefore, this fieldtrip results are reflecting those six people only and can be generalized to those who have the similarities with them.

According to the literature, there are two groups of determinants to return which are economic and non-economic determinants. From the interviews, in the group of ICT returnees, there are three main determinants which are economic interests (means setting enterprise opportunities, market, high demand in ICT services and products), non-economic determinants which is the nationalist connection (sense of belonging by the family connection, the expectation of contributing to the development of Vietnam) and the alternative factor which is defined not by their intention such as the family's demand him or her to be around. This is part of the Vietnamese culture. However, in the case the returnees are unable to negotiate, it is the forcing factor.

Table 1: Determinants to return

Personals	Determinants to return			Level of skills		
	Economic interest	Nationalism	Other (forcing factors, etc.)	SW	E	I
A	X			X		
B		X		X	X	
C	X		X			X
D		X	X		X	
E	X			X		
F		X			X	

Source: From the interviews

As a fast develop ICT industry in Asia with young population and high rate of computer and smartphone usages, Vietnam becomes an attractive place not only for investing but also developing career in ICT sector. Overseas Vietnamese also see these opportunities and 50% of the interviewees emphasize on the economic determinant. However, all of the respondents have the optimistic expectation for the future of ICT industry in Vietnam. From the neoclassical perspective, these people do not see specific wage differentials; however, they see the economic opportunities that can bring them benefit. The new economics of labor explain this determinant from the aspect of not only increasing income but also decreasing the risks. Investing in a developing ICT market, of course, expose investors and entrepreneurs to face risks but going along are a lot of opportunities and the open environment for developing market. This can be considered as the advantages over disadvantages that attract people to return.

In addition, more or less all the returnees went to Vietnam see the economic interest in ICT sector and even economic determinant is not their main motivation to return, they still find the way to engage and develop in this young and optimistic to develop like ICT industry.

In detail, all the entrepreneurs (B, D, F) returned with the nationalist determinant. This is the interdependence between economic interest and nationalist motivation. For these entrepreneurs, returning is a way to tighten the national connection by contributing to the development of the ICT sector by setting their enterprises, creating more jobs for local

Vietnamese, sending services to the market. Furthermore, explaining for their return to setting up enterprises, young entrepreneurs have advantages comparing to the other markets like the US. One of the key reason is the competitiveness is lower.

In the group of workers (A, B, E), part of them are young educated Vietnamese overseas (A & E). They explain that the working environment and organizational structure in Vietnam is less competitive and they have advantages and being respected to work for Vietnam agencies because of their English capacity and foreign education background. From this, they returned because of the economic determinant which is always in the scale, if the place like Vietnam ICT market gives those more benefits, they will return.

On the other hand, it is clear to see 50% of the returnees return because of the nationalism determinants. In the interviews, they explained the nationalism determinants here are the family connection, the intention to contribute to the development of Vietnam. This is totally relevant to their cultural background and core value.

Furthermore, I argue that nationalism associates with entrepreneurs the most comparing to other types of ICT people which determines their return even they tend to take more risks than investors who only face the capital risks. The explanation would be the entrepreneurs' advantages of having competitiveness in terms of abroad education, foreign languages, networks which are already explained in the new economic theory of labor if they return to home country rather than staying in the host country where these advantages are not functioning.

In the forcing group of determinants to return, there are two types of them, one is due to the family at home and the second one is the not-enough-capacity to compete in the host country. The second is due to the economic incentive driver that the talent tends to move to the place where they can be more convenient to find a job, and get a good income.

In this determinant, the transnational theory explains very clearly that the nationalist connection is the strong motivation to return even there are a lot of difficulties. This theory seems to look at the economic determinant as the independent factor while people are the complex being. If looking at this situation through the theory of social network, there are a

group of people still ‘researching’ and adapting to the new environment in Vietnam. This group of people takes time to examine themselves and the environment. Due to the advantage of timing, the policies can attract this group of people if the policies can show them the benefits to stay.

In short, both economic interest and nationalist connection play very critical role in the return decision of *Viet Kieu*. However, those decisions are tend to be personal rather than the results of policies’ effects. To see whether policies can influence the decision to return, the next part will look at the efforts of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in reconciling with *Viet Kieu*.

5. The Political Reconciliation from the Social Republic of Vietnam

There is a change in the political perspective on the Vietnamese residing abroad which is described through public policies. The late 1990s marked the changing view of the state because of the awareness of *Viet Kieu*’s economic role. The government had been kept sending positive messages to overseas Vietnamese to attract them to invest in Vietnam and support the national development. State’s view on overseas Vietnamese is imaged positively in the media with the purpose of encouraging highly-skilled *Viet Kieu* to return, especially to professionals, scientists and businessmen. ‘Resolution 36’[6] is the most important milestone in the government policies toward overseas Vietnamese.

‘By considering the overseas Vietnamese an inseparable part of the community of Vietnamese nationality, the Party, the State and the Government of Vietnam have adopted open policies and measures to facilitate their return for visiting families, doing business and developing cooperation in science, technology, art and culture[7].’

The Resolution also stated that this image of the overseas Vietnamese is concreted through all ‘organization, political system, and Vietnamese citizen’ [8]. In the National Congress IX and XI, the Party claimed ‘Vietnamese who reside overseas are inseparable part and a resource of the Vietnamese nationality; are the main factor in contributing to the foreign relation, bilateral and multilateral friendship(s)’; ‘Servicing and supporting the overseas Vietnamese are the duties of the whole polity system and all the people’; ‘there will be

more policies to support the overseas Vietnamese to return, visit the homeland, engaging and broadening more activities in terms of culture, education, training, science and technology, production, entrepreneurship, etc. that will dedicate to build the good nation'; 'focusing on developing the potential human resource of the overseas Vietnamese' [9].

Until now, the biggest state organization in connecting *Viet Kieu* and the state is the 'National Committee for Vietnamese Living in Foreign Countries' (*Ủy ban nhà nước về người Việt Nam ở nước ngoài*) which is a unit under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There is the official media channel for *Viet Kieu* called *Que Huong* (Homeland). This magazine plays a communicative role between Vietnamese policy-makers and overseas subjects.

The changing terms to call *Viet Kieu* illustrates the changing perception of the state. Name evokes identity and sometimes even can embrace the political motive. Overseas Vietnamese are officially called 'Vietnamese people living in foreign country' (*Người Việt Nam ở nước ngoài*). However, the most common name is *Viet Kieu*. There are a lot of intimate terms to call overseas Vietnamese such as *dong bao*, *Viet bao*, *kieu bao*. Those names are the borrowed words from Chinese languages which are considered respectful and appreciative. 'Bao' means cells. While 'Dong bao' means people who have the same cells, same parents; 'Viet bao' means having the same Vietnamese cells, blood to blood, flesh to flesh. *Kieu bao* is more specific and used by state leaders in different social and political context. It particularly point at overseas Vietnamese and raise the nationalist sentiment of *Viet Kieu*. Those three terms all want to unite Vietnamese and Vietnamese-rooted all over the world with the same cells and paying the patriotic feeling for the source country. Furthermore, according to (Tran, 2011) those terms tend to raise the nationalist sentiment to soften the mistrust between them and the communist state in order to get the benefit for Vietnam's nation-building in the post-reform period.

The social perception of *Viet Kieu* is also changing positively. Most of local Vietnamese think *Viet Kieu* are more 'modern', 'educated', and develop in a more 'advanced environment' than local them (Tran, 2011). On television, *Viet Kieu* are pictured as economic heroes who return to help the nation-building development; whereas, the documents about the perception of *Viet Kieu* returning home illustrate both positive and negative sides. The *Viet Kieu* thinks that there is a gap in modern knowledge between them and local Vietnamese.

This is one of the reasons why parts of them don't see them as a Vietnamese (Tran, 2011). To them, returning is a way to understand the root rather than to mingle due to the mind set of counter-identity. They do not want to destroy their own 'psyche'. However, the main contribution from *Viet Kieu* to the development of the country is recognized as the dedication of the expatriates. In general, the perception from state, local Vietnamese and *Viet Kieu* to overseas Vietnamese is positive.

In the effort of approach to *Viet Kieu* group, the policies to reconcile the political conflict in the past and promote nationalism in general open more opportunities for people who want to return to contribute. It creates the good impacts for those who have the anti-communism sentiment and draw the attention of *Viet Kieu* population in defining their identity as part of Vietnam.

However, the policies have not play a political role in the motivation of people to return because as analyzed in the previous part, most of the decisions are very personal choices. The policies are just supporting the flow of returning rather than critically direct people to return.

6. Conclusion

While ICT workers have the universal knowledge which allows people to move flexibly, the *Viet Kieu* working in ICT sector still decided to return thanks to the nationalist connection. For those who returned to Vietnam, anti-communist sentiment is no longer the obstacle. The form of nationalism in the Vietnamese residing abroad is also significant in the sense of the cultural and religious core value rather than the political consensus. As long as the Communist Party of Vietnam welcomes and open opportunities for talent, they are willing to return to contribute.

It is clear to see the connection between the diasporic *Viet Kieu* and Vietnam is strong thanks to the sentiment connection. In the group of entrepreneurs, the nationalist connection is the key determinant for them to return. Even they are the ones who face the most risks in doing business in ICT sector; they find their progress basing on the advantages

of working in home country like English skills, foreign education background, and abroad network.

Making programs or policies for political reconciliation toward *Viet Kieu*, Vietnam created more convenient environment for *Viet Kieu* to return, but it is only the facilitator, not the incentives to attract talent from the *Viet Kieu* community.

In short, the return of *Viet Kieu* is based on three main factors which are political reconciliation, nationalism, and economic interest. The crucial point is that all returnees went back Vietnam with the interdependence between the economic interest and the nationalist connection.

What the government had done is to reconcile the strong contrasting perception of communism and anti-communism. Incentives in ICT sector which the government offer is insufficient because of the returnees' independent determinants to return. Therefore, the interaction between the returned *Viet Kieu* and policies is still limited in the economic aspect.

7. Recommendation

Firstly, since nationalism is the main determinant of entrepreneurs to return and they find advantages of themselves in Vietnam, Vietnam should pay more attention to enhance the connection with the entrepreneurs group who are willing to take risks, run business, and overcome challenges which are all important for a young and fast developing ICT sector like Vietnam.

Secondly, the mobility of talent is not simply a geographical moving but also the reallocation of talent, possession, and even sentiment. With those who already have the connection with Vietnam, the mobility of returning back to the home country is a not difficult choice. However, every talent needs to have the environment to develop. Public policies can create a good legislative environment and incentives package for those who willing to return to work and take part in the development of the country as well as the active government agencies to reach out and welcome potential returnees.

Thirdly, political environment is important because it is not only the foundation to create the development conditions for the country, but also set up the accountability. Giving more opportunities to engage policy actors, citizen and subjects of the policies is the good way to enhance that accountability.

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In line with the University wide restructuring, in 2015, the Institute underwent a major revamp to include 3 more area studies institutes namely Indian Studies Centre, Russian and CIS Studies Centre and ASEAN Studies Centre. With the consolidation of these 3 new area study centres, the institute therefore renames Thammasat Institute of Area Study (TIARA). The institute will continue what it do best, to continue producing high quality academic excellence and hope with the new restructuring, the institute will be able to achieve more in the coming years.

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About

Master of Arts in Asia-Pacific Studies Program (MAPS)

Master of Arts in Asia Pacific Studies (MAPS) program is an up and coming area study based master degree in Thailand. Focusing on Asia Pacific Studies, MAPS is a multidisciplinary graduate program that helps interested students to have an in depth understanding of this dynamic region. With a strong foundation of academic curriculum and high quality facilitators across all academic backgrounds, Master of Arts in Asia Pacific Studies will guide students through the disciplines of Politics, Economics, International Law and International relations to give a well-rounded understanding of Asia Pacific. These advanced courses offer a more in depth examination of questions and problems specific to the Asia Pacific region. Our graduates go on to pursue careers in academia, business organisations, government and wide array of organisations, both local and international.

Our students will also have the chance to familiarise with the academic settings in a sense that through their thesis course, student will be exposed to all kinds of academic scrutiny such as thesis defend and comprehensive thesis writing course. Nearing to the end of the program, student will be given a chance to showcase their hard labour at an International Conference held specially to facilitate the students learning curve. In the end, the works that they put their heart and soul into will become the pride of the program as each one of them, despite their different backgrounds; can come up with a thorough and deep analysis of particular research program concentrated on Asia Pacific and finally contribute to the literature on Asia Pacific Studies.

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